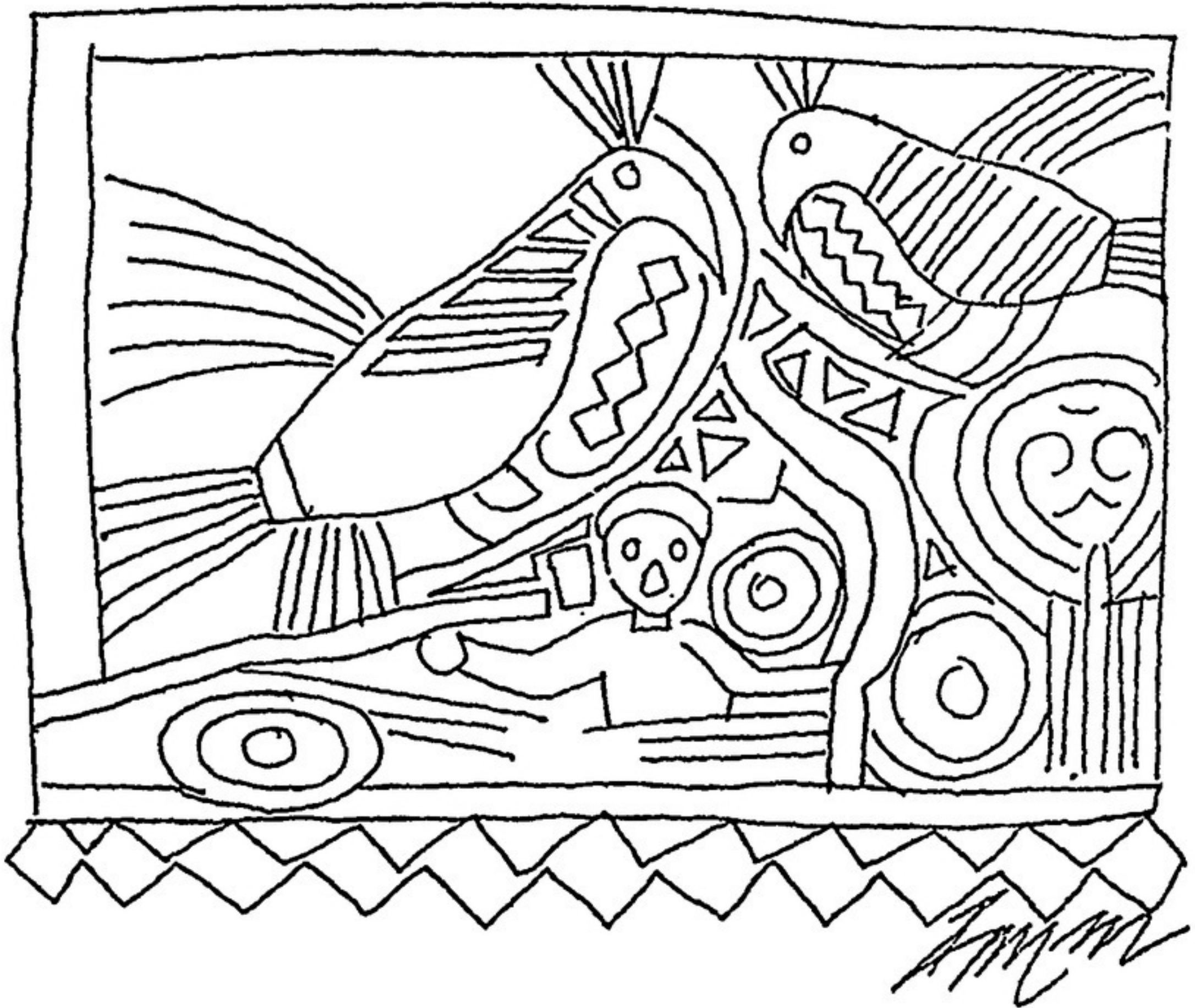


Duryodhan Temple, Osla

The Valley of Kauravs

R,N, PASRICHA

A BOUT thirty years ago travel in the Himalayas was more difficult as compared to now. Then one had to walk for days together. Now roads and fast moving vehicles have reduced distances, but travel in the interior and to the snows still requires walking and a lot of preparation. One has to hire



Bird motifs on a wooden panel, Duryodhan Temple, Osla

porters and carry food and tents. When Climbers and Explorers Club organised its Himalayan Adventure Trail to Har-ki-Doon and invited me to participate, it took away all my worries. I had only to walk to their office for a bus lift to Dehradun and thence to Netwar in the valley of the river Tons.

At Dehradun, the bus which was to take us to Netwar arrived five hours late. It had hardly taken the mountain road when the sun set. On the way, Lakhwar Dam, which is being built on the Yamuna, an imposing feat of engineering, was a spectacle to enjoy, but the bus journey for most part was through mountains deprived of vegetation, and was monotonous. We reached Naogaon, where Tons river meets Yamuna, around 9 o'clock. Thence the bus drove along Tons through mountains covered with dense woods of conifers. During the day we would have enjoyed the sight of this part of the journey. The night, fatigue and sleepiness did otherwise. But the highlight of the

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Kagat Ram of Datmir
a descendant of Kauravs

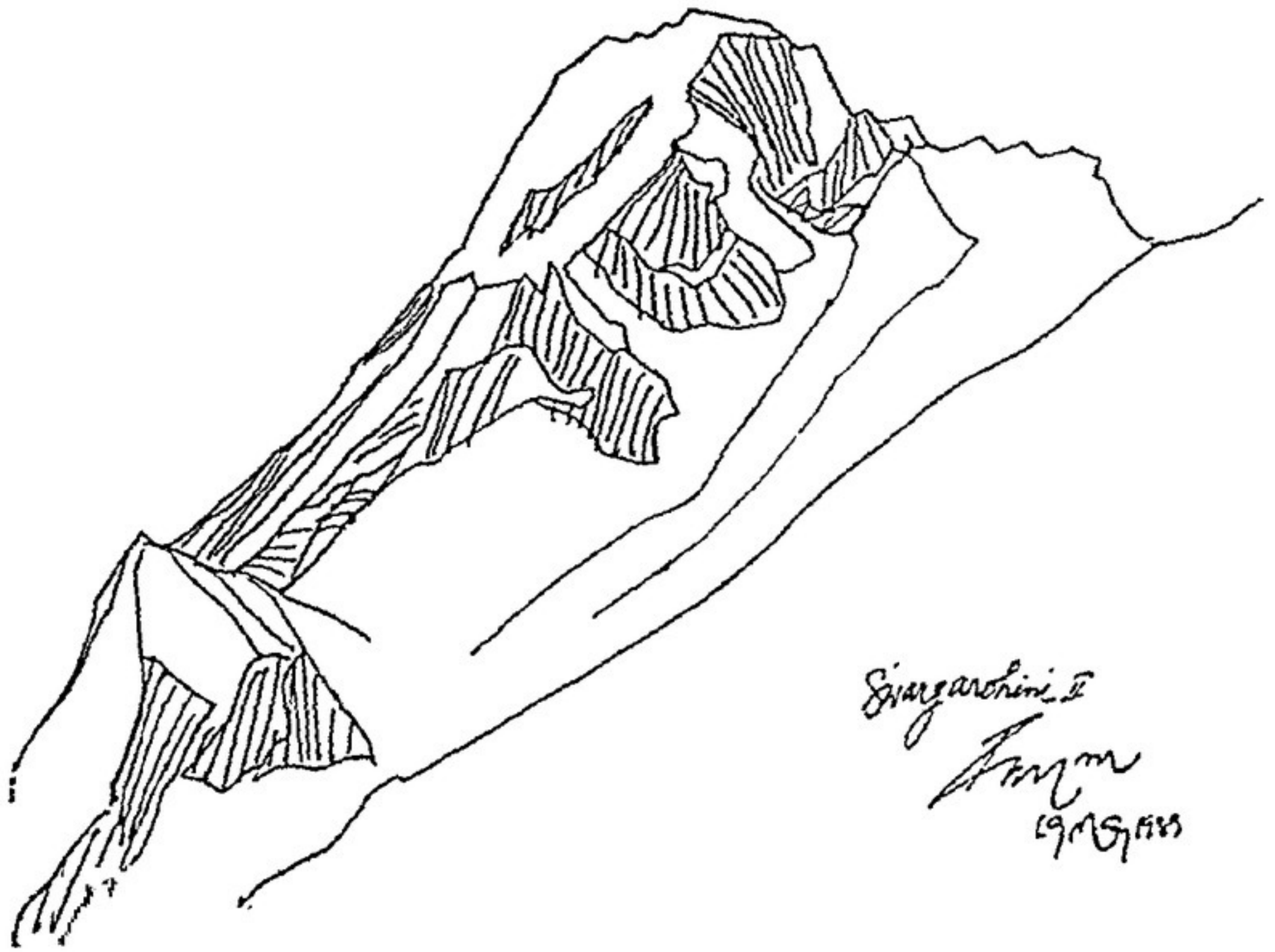
journey was a big jolt around 11 o'clock the driver caused by suddenly applying the brakes. A big Himalayan owl sat in the middle of the road. Dazed by the strong headlight of the vehicle it was immobilised. It was only when we had our fill of the sight that the driver switched off the lights and the owl flew away. An hour later we reached Netwar, where the base camp was set up in the high school on the road side, had a late dinner and went to sleep.

In the morning, we found ourselves amidst pine laden mountains. It was a brilliant day that gave everyone a joyous mood. The group of trekkers that had arrived the previous day left for the next camp to Taluka, 22 kms away while we went for a stroll along the melodious Rupin and appreciated the silence. At Netwar, Rupin coming from the mountains of Himachal Pradesh and creating boundary between Himachal and Garhwal joins Supin, coming from Jamdar Glacier near Har-ki-Doon, and together they become Tons. The old village is situated about

500 ft. below the road on the confluence of Rupin and Supin and is reached across two bridges, one each on Tons and Rupin. In the cluster of houses a very old temple could be spotted from the school play-ground. That evening I made enquiries about the temple and realised that I was in the Valley of Kauravs. It felt strange. The people of other parts of Garhwal, Kinnaur and Kulu Valley talk of Pandavs of the epic Mahabharata with reverence. But here were we in the Tons Valley where people worshipped Kauravs, the "wrong-doers" and built temples in their memory. The temple of Karan, the first born of Kunti by the Sun God, whom she had discarded out of shame, who was unaware of his parenthood and had become an ally of the Kauravs, was nearby. Next day a local came forward to give me company to the temple of Karan. We climbed the bridle path which passed through terraced fields for about half an hour and came to the village called Gaichuan. It was a prosperous village, with big wooden houses, whose windows and beams had carvings of birds, flowers and geometric patterns. Men and women peeped at us from their balconies. In five minutes we reached another village called Deora. There in the centre of the village stood the imposing temple of Raja Karan.

The temple is a rectangular wood structure with pent roofs lined with slates. On the roof was a wooden umbrella topped with metallic finial. The wooden beams and columns were decorated with carvings of birds and animals of exquisite charm, while the temple doors were decorated with etched copper plates depicting birds, animals, reptiles and scenes from the Ramayana. The villagers had nailed coins wherever space permitted. These they had done in thanksgiving for their wishes having been fulfilled by the god. The temple door was however not opened for us. In the compound on the right I spotted six miniature temples which I was told represented Karan and the five Pandavs. After all Karan was also a brother of the Pandavs, therefore Pandavs too deserved a place in the temple. Besides there was a Shivaling, a statue of Parvati and the Nandi Bull in the compound. I sketched the temple and took photographs.

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Outside the temple compound is a ground where every year on the Makar Sankrant is held the festival of ball, the two teams being named Kauravs and Pandavs. The hide of a dead cow is stuffed with stones and earth so that it shapes into a big ball weighing about 8 to 10 kgs. The ball is supposed to represent Ghatotkach, the warrior son of Bhim and Hidimba (the sister of demon Hidimb) whom he had married after killing Hidimb in an encounter in Manali in Kulu Valley. Ghatotkach had been killed by Karan in the battle of Mahabharata and the object in naming the ball Ghatotkach seemed to be to humiliate the vanquished. In the afternoon the ball is worshipped and thrown in the centre of the ground and the players rush to grab it. If the ball falls in the hands of a member of the Kaurav team, it is said that the year will be bad, but if it falls into the hands of a member of the Pandav team, it is taken as a sign of prosperity through the entire year. Once the ball is grabbed, the other team tries to snatch it and take it to his side. But the holder does not relent and is physically pushed from side to side. The



Temple—Pokhu Devta

entire population of the adjoining villages assembles to witness the game. In the mele many members of the teams get crushed. The team which has the ball on its side at the time of the close is declared the winner. All through the game, the village orchestra of drums, pipes and cymbals plays louder and louder.

The villages which fall under the jurisdiction of Raja Karan are administered law and order by him through the priest. His three deputies called Pokhu, Salya and Renuka also help him in his administrative work. Karan goes about his villages once every year when the residents of Deora who accompany him are fed by the villages visited by them.

In the evening we went to see the temple of Pokhu Devta in the old Netwar village. Structurally it was no different from the temple of Karan. But once again its doors were closed. So we had to come back after I had made a sketch of the temple and took photographs from outside. Next morning I went there

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again. The morning prayers had been conducted and the temple doors were open. Inside the temple where a Shivling had been installed, a devotee sat narrating his problems to the priest. The priest got possessed. In an incoherent voice he told the devotee that he was not speaking the truth. First the devotee denied it but soon he shrieked aloud, his body and limbs twisted as if some unseen power had grabbed him and he began speaking the truth. The priest asked the devotee to offer a sheep to Pokhu Devta. He gave him *prasad* and promised peace at home. The incoherent dialogue of the two, the agony of the shrieking devotee and the blood spattered altar where sheep are sacrificed every now and then created an eerie atmosphere. It was a ghastly sight which I could not bear and came out. Pokhu's chamber lies behind the Shivling. Pokhu is an attendant of Lord Shiva. He is a terrible god and unrelenting in punishing his erring followers. Therefore incidence of theft in this area is unheard of. The god is not shown to anyone as a look at him will cause the viewer horror. It is for this reason that even the priest worships the god with his back towards him.

Next day I, along with a team of twenty followed the trail to Taluka. The first 12 km walk to Sankri was on the bus route through pine woods. Two kms short of Sankri, I stopped to have tea at a wayside shop. There I enquired about the location of Jakhol where there is the main temple of Duryodhan, the eldest of the Kaurav brothers. Jakhol was about 13 kms away on a bridle path on the other bank of the river. But Duryodhan Devta was up in Kotgaon, a twenty minute walk from the bus road, where the god had gone to meet Kush Devta, on his way back to Jakhol after a pilgrimage to Kedarnath and Badrinath. It was a unique opportunity to witness the Kaurav god and participate in the festival.

I left my rucksack in the care of the shopkeeper and passing through rows of wooden houses and a beautiful jungle emerged in the open space, where God Duryodhan and Kush were seated side by side under a shamiana next to the temple of Kush. The worship by the priests was going on. The entire village was out

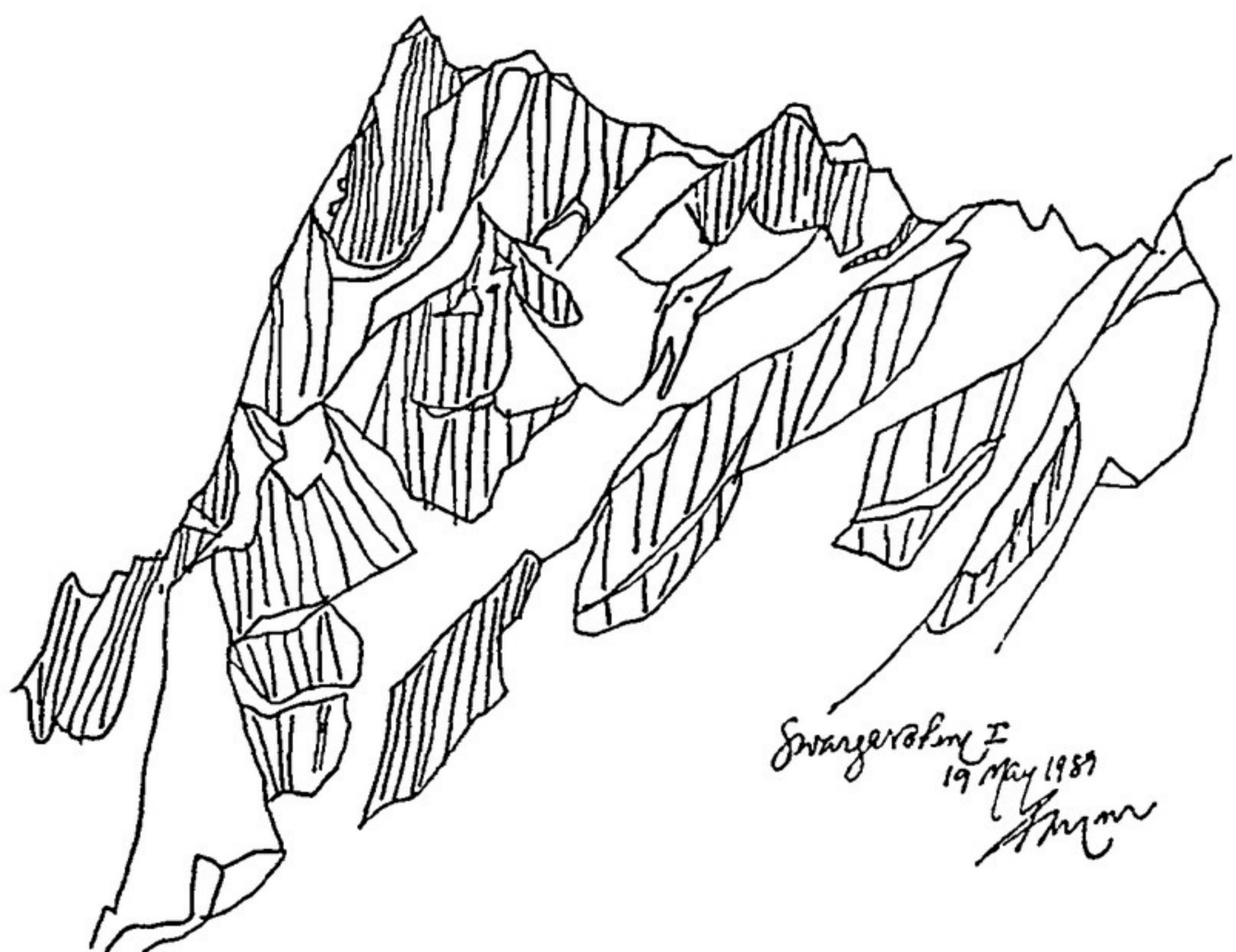
in the open. Women and children were in their colourful best. Drum beats and notes on pipes lent an atmosphere to the festival. In the background snow-clad peaks of exquisite charm stood majestically. People were very nice and offered me a glass of milk in hospitality. They did not object to my taking photographs. After about an hour or so, I traced my steps back to the roadside shop, took my rucksack and walked off. Beyond Sankri, near a waterfall, I met my companions who were having a cool bath, but I stretched myself under the shadow of trees and went to sleep. It was warm, I had walked about 18 kms, had been up to Kotgaon and was tired. The break and the sleep were therefore much needed and refreshed me.

It was a late lunch in the camp, put up in a jungle by a stream that cascaded down high rocks in the shape of a beautiful waterfall.

In the morning a two-km walk took me to the spot where eight years ago, I had stayed at the Forest Rest House on my way to Ruinsara and Bunderpunch peak. It was bright sun but the woods were dense and the path shady, so that walking was enjoyable. We crossed the Supin over a wooden bridge and after some distance crossed the river again. There was a cool shady place near the bridge where we rested and felt refreshed. Then began the climb, but it was not tiring. There were numerous waterfalls and streams where we drank cool water every now and then and felt refreshed. We reached camp around 3 o'clock, from where we could see Osla village opposite, and a majestic view of snow-clad mountains. Near the camp flowed a stream which worked a corn mill and joined the Supin.

Next day near an imposing waterfall, a little distance away from the camp we could not make out which path went towards Har-ki-Doon and strayed into a jungle. We lost an hour to come back to the bridge, across which the path lead to Har-ki-Doon. Thence it was a steady climb all the way, which combined with the altitude compelled us to take rest every now and then. But first the awe inspiring view of Swargarohini, the peak over which Pandavs climbed to Heaven, and then dense woods and the all-

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rock Har-ki peak kept us enthralled. Small glaciers rolled down the slopes walking on which was fun. About 8 hours leisurely walk brought us to Har-ki-Doon, the Valley of Gods at 11500 feet where views of snow-clad peaks were superb. The Supin welcomed us melodiously, Har-ki I peak was on the right, sheltering Har-ki II behind it, and across a rock bridge over a stream Swargarohini I with a different view, flanked by Swargarohini II and III presented a spectacle of mighty grandeur of the rocky peaks on which snow seemed to cling precariously. It was nearing sunset. The ice on the tip of the peak blushed crimson, the clouds turned orange and the rest was an expanse of silver grey. It was a soul touching moment, it was captivating. Soon everything seemed to turn cold and freezing. Another spectacle awaited us at night. The peaks shone silver bright as the full moon appeared in the sky. We were lured to a sound sleep by the lullabies sung by the stream.

In the morning, we enjoyed a brilliant sunrise over the snow capped peaks, went down the ridge, along the base of



Swargarohini towards Jamdar Glacier, went by pools of ice cold water, drank at the clear streams and felt charmed by the flower studded meadows. And yet another colourful sunset and a moonlit night awaited us at the end of the day. Next morning when we bade good-bye to this heaven on earth, our hearts felt pangs of separation. At Osla camp we had hot lunch and rest. In the evening I went to Osla village where there is another temple of Duryodhan. I had photographs of the people I had met 8 years ago. Some had died. The pictures were received by their sons and daughters. Many children had grown up and were married. But the grand old lady of the village Parvati, who had then posed for me for a sketch, was there with a smile that assured me that at least one of them was still around who remembered me in that far off land.

On the fourth day we were on our way back to Delhi, with memories that will linger for the rest of our lives.