

CAVESfor the**uninitiated**

Brian D. Kharpran Daly



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By

Brian D. Kharpran Daly



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Strategic Book Publishing and Rights Co.
12620 FM 1960, Suite A4-507
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DEDICATION

To Sylvia Kharpran, my mother

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

Caving is a sporting activity that is inherently dangerous. Any person undertaking it, especially if inexperienced, should approach it with caution. The publisher and author can accept no responsibility for any accidents, injury, or loss suffered by any reader, however that may be caused.

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INTRODUCTION

The mysteries of caves have for so long been beyond the imagination of man. They were believed to be places where spirits of the dead resided, either as evil and harmful ghosts or as friendly spooks. The Romans believed caves to be the abode of the gods Pan, Zeus, Dionysus, and Pluto; others believed caves to be the domain of dragons, fairies, tokoloshes, etc. For the romantic, caves became a treasure house of wealth, knowledge, adventure, and scientific discoveries. For most, caves were a dread, as they were the Gateway to Hell. Early man used caves as refuge from the ravages of nature and wild animals, and later, in their desire to protect their culture and religion, they used the deeper part of the cave to preserve their beliefs in drawings, which have survived to this day. But all in all, caves have always been an enigma.

It was only as late as the second half of the seventeenth century when modern man began to tentatively probe the eternal night of the dark, unknown, mysterious subterranean world, when in 1689, Johann von Valvasor mentioned a cave-dwelling creature, the now famous proteus of the Adelsberg Grottoes, which are today known as the Postojnska Jama. A hundred years later a description of another cave-dwelling creature—a subterranean crab—was reported. However, it was only during the second half of the nineteenth century when caving clubs began to be established in Europe—in France, Germany, and Austria, and later on in the United Kingdom. Out of those early cave explorers, some of the names that clearly stand out are

those of Dean William Buckland, Edouard Martel, F. Kraus, and Norbert Casteret, to name a few.

The first half of the twentieth century saw more caving clubs spring up, albeit with few members, but it was the beginning of a more serious and systematic exploration and mapping of the subterranean passages. The second half saw improvement in caving equipment; hats replaced with helmets, candles with carbide lamps, rope and wooden ladders with wire and aluminium ladders, and a new method of accessing deep vertical caves or shafts by prusiking or single rope technique (SRT). The beginnings of a systematic and more purposeful order of cave explorations began to take shape, which dramatically leaped into a much higher level, with the carbide lamps giving way to LEDS, the survey instruments of compass, clinometer and tape giving way to the laser Disto X, PDA and the computer software for cave surveying taking a new dimension.

Today there are caving clubs all over the world; at least, where there are karst areas. A better understanding of the subterranean world and its unique eco-system is now emerging. New forms of troglobitic animals have been documented, shedding more light on the evolution of life. Scientists and researchers put active stalagmite specimens to isotropic analysis to reveal the history of the past climatic conditions of the world for a better understanding of what the future climate has for us. The cave with its absolute darkness holds the key to future scientific experiments, especially to life in outer space.

While the rest of the world was marching ahead on the speleological front, India was lagging behind, probably because of lack of karst of any significance, though limestone is extensive throughout the Indian Himalaya. The tiny state of Meghalaya, however, was known to have some potential, as per reports in the Bengal Gazetteer by the British administrators and officers in the early twentieth century. Some of these caves were visited and explored by inquisitive scientists like Shiba Prasad Chatterjee between 1928 and 1932, Knut Lindberg in 1947,

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or resident British Army officers (Allsup in 1934, Roberts in 1949), and other casual visitors like R. N. De (1932) and H. D. Gebauer (1980).

Things were then to change, when in the April of 1992, members of the Meghalaya Adventurers' Association (MAA) took their first tentative forays into the two Syndai caves in Jaintia Hills. Nine months later the same caves were visited by a small group of British cavers led by Simon Brooks. It was inevitable for the two groups to meet in 1994. Since then, a collaborative partnership between the European, American, and Indian cavers blossomed into the most comprehensive and systematic documentation of the caves of Meghalaya under the project "Caving in the Abode of the Clouds."

Today the whereabouts of 1300 caves are known in Meghalaya, with about 825 of them explored to yield a total length of mapped cave passage to 376 kilometers. The potential for the discovery of many more caves is enormous and is an exciting thought for any eager speleologist.

This book is aimed at the Indian layman and at the youth in particular, to create an awareness of what a cave is, its formation, its intrinsic scientific value, the dangers it poses to the novice, importance of its conservation, etc. It is just a brief guide and is in no way comprehensive and authoritative; it is the first step into the dark unknown world of the underground. The reader would do well, if he or she were to take the step, to tread softly . . . and as he or she gropes further into the dark, to reach out for more advanced reading, training, and guidance on the subject.

Chapter 1

A FIRST CAVING TRIP

The yellow Tata Sumo came to a halt just a hundred meters from the front gate of the Mawmluh Cherra Cements Company Ltd. and parked itself behind some cement trucks; we all got out and unloaded the caving equipment from the vehicle.

There were eight of us including the driver of the Sumo. Daniel, whose love for caves is well known the world over and whose knowledge of caves and karsts is quite extraordinary, was the first to get down. A tall and lean man in his mid-fifties, he is out and out an avid speleologist in his own right, a quiet and perfect gentleman with no unassuming airs.

The other five who piled out from the back of the Sumo were high school students who were on their first caving trip, all of them between fourteen to sixteen years of age. The three boys, Mac, Banri, and Jason, helped the two girls, Dari and Marisa, with some of the extra tackle bags.

I was the last to get out of the vehicle. For someone in his late fifties, I would presume I am still a very fit person. My passion for caves has made me strive for fitness so that I may be able to explore the many we discover every year. Daniel has been my mentor and guru over the years. His enthusiasm has spilled into me and has made me to live, breathe, and dream caves.

We picked up the rucksacks and tackle bags and started on our way. It was a beautiful and lovely sunny December day with no clouds in sight, a perfect day for caving.

Single file, we crossed the river, which in December is easily crossed, and trooped our way for about five hundred meters downstream along the river till we came upon the mouth of Krem Mawkhyrdop, or Krem Mawmluh, as it is more commonly known.

We quickly stripped and got into our caving suits. Daniel and I filled up the generators of the kids with carbide and water and lighted up the lamps. All equipped, Daniel and I were ready to show the kids their first cave.

“Guys,” I said, “we will not be able to enter the cave through the main entrance, as the effluents from the cement works have made the entrance into a very dangerous black quicksand. Do you see the hole just above? That is where we will enter from.”

Daniel quickly trodded into the murky stream, and with his able reach pulled himself up to the cave opening two meters above, where he anchored a small, flexible ladder for all of us to climb up on.

The few ladder rungs were quickly climbed, and we entered into a walking-size passage. Soon we were into thigh-deep water and there were squeals from Dari, Marisa, and Banri as the December water was quite cold. At one hundred meters in I could hear the astonishment and amazement of the kids as we entered the main passage.

“This is big,” shouted Mac, and the other four joined in, supporting him above the roar of the rushing stream.

“Yes, this is quite a big passage,” agreed Daniel. “This passage is about thirty meters wide by twenty-five meters high and is named Feet Up Double Doughnut Passage.”

“Do you see those pieces of wood and plastic bags hanging up there in the ceiling?” I said, pointing up to the roof. “Don’t ever come here during the monsoons. This passage would be flooded right up to the ceiling.”

“Goodness gracious! I just can’t believe this,” exclaimed Dari as they all marveled at the large expanse of space.

At Horn Junction the river continued straight toward the south, which ended in a sump, while we followed the main

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way on to the east into Christmas Canyon, which gradually became more aquatic to a point where the roof drops to form a low, yet wide crawl some twenty meters in length called The Crawly Bit. The cave then changed abruptly in size, becoming once again an impressive canyon passage. We continued southward along this canyon passage, decorated with botryoidal calcite formations (cauliflower stal), and the floor of which is like a Swiss cheese. Soon we came upon a large chamber that contained a forty-meter-high aven that then led to the surface.

We retraced our steps back for two hundred meters or so and turned right to eventually reach Goldfish Pond and another stream-way.

“This is great fun. I am having the time of my life,” said Mac with a smile as he fiddled with his lamp, which was showing signs of going out.

We climbed up out of Goldfish Pond, thoroughly soaked and wet and cold.

“Come on, guys, let us take a breather and sit on this white, soft sand while I fix Mac’s light.” Daniel immediately opened his tackle bag and produced a few lumps of carbide from an airtight container. Taking out a plastic bag, he emptied the spent carbide from Mac’s generator in it. “Always remember not to pollute the cave with spent carbide. It has to be taken out and disposed elsewhere,” he said.

When Daniel had fixed Mac’s lamp and the light was burning as bright as the sun, I asked everyone to sit in a circle and out of reach of each other. “Now, put off your lights and sit still. Do not talk; just imagine you are all by yourself in utter darkness, for just a few minutes.”

The five minutes or so was timeless. It was like something in outer space.

“Wow! That was an experience I will never forget,” was Jason’s admission. “I was always scared of dark and closed places.”

“Mee too,” exclaimed Marisa. “I felt I was floating in space and time was of no essence.”

“Well, do you all want to go out through the Goldfish Pond or see Gebauer Strasse and get out the way we came in?” I asked.

“We don’t want to go out yet,” everyone shouted. “We want to see more of the cave.”

Daniel, as usual, led the way back up the main passage, and just before we reached the junction with the low crawl, we entered a nice walking-size passage heading in a northerly direction and carrying a good size stream. The passage increased in size and ran for another thousand meters before terminating in a very large aven called The Big Aven.

The kids were all over the place admiring the stalagmites and stalactites and trying to keep away from disturbing the hundreds of bats hanging down from the low ceiling.

“This impressive and beautiful passage is named Gebauer Strasse in recognition of a notable India Cave Explorer who is here with us,” I informed them. “Daniel, don’t be shy and run away,” I hastened to add before Daniel could escape.

“Sir, we are privileged to know you and are proud to be in your company,” shyly voiced Marisa.

“Yes, sir,” joined in the rest.

“We didn’t realize that we were in the midst of such an important and famous person,” chipped in Dari.

“Now, all of you, please call me Daniel and not Sir,” said Daniel, his face flushed with embarrassment.

“Sir, I mean Daniel, sir, I would like to know how these formations are formed,” butted in Marisa.

Daniel looked at her, pleased at the question.

“What you see before you are known as stalactites, stalagmites, and columns. They are formed by the drops of calcium-saturated water dripping from the cave ceiling. As the drop falls, it leaves behind a residue of calcium carbonate on the roof, and where the drop falls on the floor it leaves again some more residue. Over the years, these residues grow and

formed stalactites, which grow downward from the ceiling, and stalagmites, which grow upward from the floor. When stalactites and stalagmites meet over a period of time, they form columns. These formations can grow to immense heights. For example, the tallest stalagmite so far found in Meghalaya is about twenty meters high, found in Krem Chympe, though there are records of much taller stalagmites in other parts of the world.”

The next half an hour was spent exploring the other smaller meandering passages.

“Daniel,” I said, “let’s show them the unexplored bit.”

We crawled more until we emerged into a very small, sandy chamber where right ahead was a very narrow, high rift passage, too narrow for anyone to pass through.

“There, guys, this passage is still unexplored. Maybe some of you could be on the team that will someday explore this section,” I said.

“How could one get through?” asked Jason.

“Well, just look up; do you see that it widens up at the top? So all you have to do is to climb up and traverse along that level,” I said. “The rock is a bit flaky up there, but that shouldn’t be a big problem.”

“Who knows what lies beyond, whether it ends or whether it goes on and on. This is what caving is all about, to see what lies beyond the next corner.”

Fired up by the challenge, they were eager to have a go.

“You will all have your chance,” Daniel interjected. “Today is your initiation into caving. So first of all get the feel of your first cave, observe, and learn. You can tackle that passage one day, but not on your own. Have an experienced caver with you.”

Slowly we retraced our steps back. On the way out we turned left into another passage that runs for 160 meters into a chamber inhabited with a considerable number of bats and aptly named Bat Chamber. Our intrusion caused a big disturbance for the resting bats, and as they flew in circles over our heads, Dari and Marisa ducked and shrieked. We gratefully backed out.

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We were out of the cave in no time and changing from our wet clothes and boots into something dry and warm. Most of all, we were very hungry and thirsty, and the Restaurant at Nongsawlia filled our appetites with hot and spicy haka fried pork chow and two cups of boiling hot tea each.

The journey back home, traveling in the dark through the mist and fog, was uneventful, warm, and sleepy, and everyone was quiet, until Mac suddenly broke the silence. “Bah,” he addressed me. “This is the first time we have been inside a cave, and for me personally, it has been a very exciting and unforgettable day. It has created an interest in me to want to know more about caves and their formation. I would be glad to learn more.”

“I think that goes for all of us,” shouted the others.

“Okay, when are you all free?” I asked.

“We have two days holiday next week, on the 15th and 16th,” informed Dari.

“That will be fine,” I replied. “Daniel and myself will teach you all we know about caves and the basics of caving. Okay? It is settled. If you all come to my house at three o’clock on the 15th we can start our classes.”

That night I presumed they all slept soundly and dreamt of the dark labyrinth of underground passages and maybe of dragons and ghosts lurking at every corner.

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