

Sahyadri mountain range

11 November

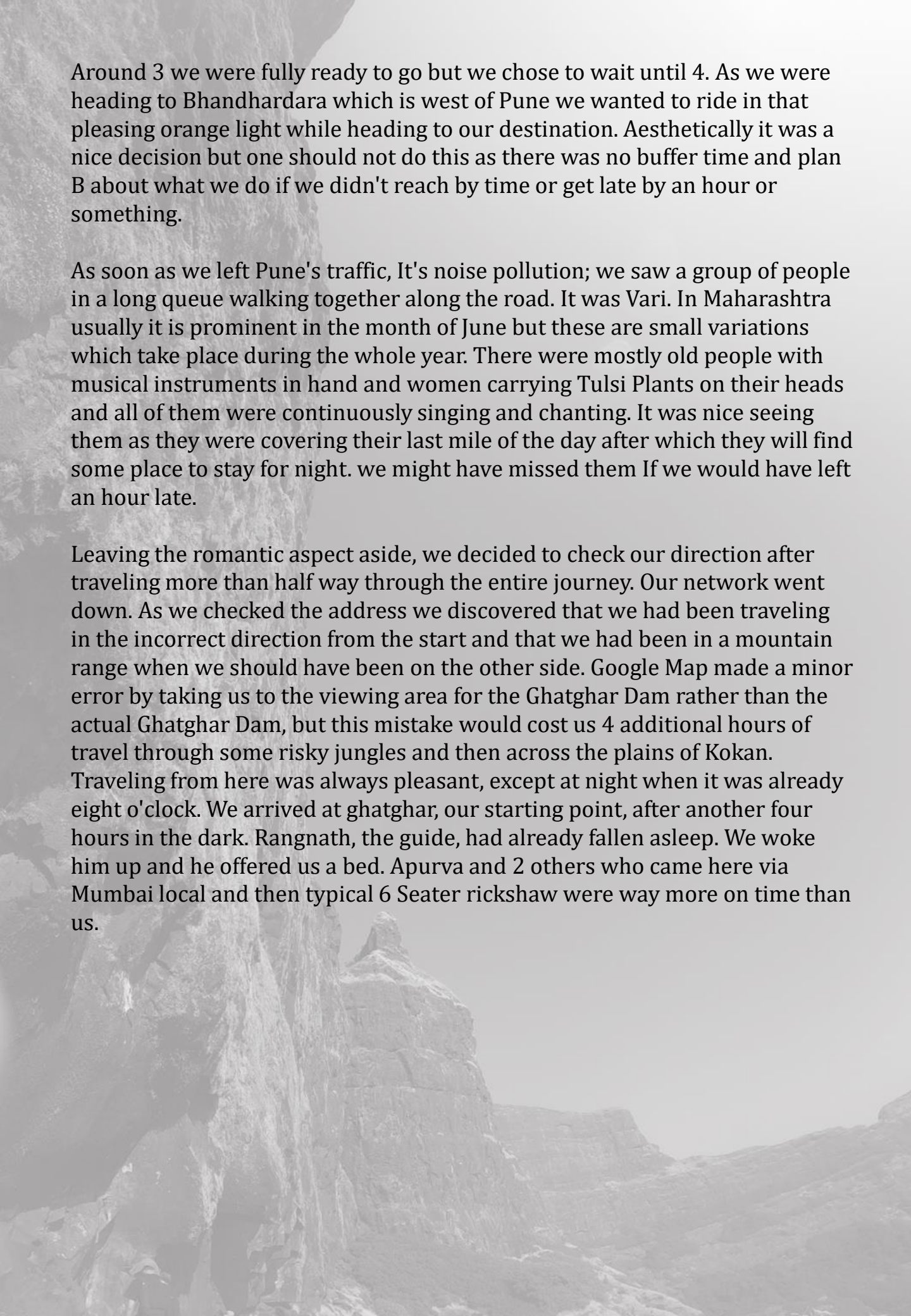
On the 11th in different cities 5 of us were packing bags. We were all excited and a bit scared. It was quite surprising for us that the journey that was being planned for more than 8 months is actually working out. Finally Shyam, Apurva and 3 of our other friends were ready to join us.

We were all trapped due to frequent lockdowns, online exams etc and were far from being into nature. It was a blessing as this was finally happening as for a very long time plans were either canceled or at least compromised on a few days. There was a need for all of us to move out of the cities, breathe in some fresh air and stay away from the screen. This time it was more fun and productive as we chose to stick to the plan as well as kept it updating and making it better.

Pair of clothes, some safety equipment, basic camping material and ready to eat food was packed. It seems less and manageable but once it is all piled up in one bag it is hell of weight and specifically when it is the mountaintop you are aiming at. It was Rohit's idea to carry 4 bags since we were 5 people, so that 1 of us can always relax, turn by turn. We found this trick really helpful in an emergency as walking free of luggage just for sometime boosts energy. We checked our bikes, made it ready and kept one puncture kit handy.

12 November

We had a long and good sleep till eleven in the next morning. It was going to be the longest sleep for our next 8 days. We said goodbye to our good fluffy mattress, AC in our room. Took a shower and with the same grace said bye to them. At around 12 noon me and Rohit went out to collect some important material for the trip: extra memory cards, batteries and stuff.



Around 3 we were fully ready to go but we chose to wait until 4. As we were heading to Bhandhardara which is west of Pune we wanted to ride in that pleasing orange light while heading to our destination. Aesthetically it was a nice decision but one should not do this as there was no buffer time and plan B about what we do if we didn't reach by time or get late by an hour or something.

As soon as we left Pune's traffic, its noise pollution; we saw a group of people in a long queue walking together along the road. It was Vari. In Maharashtra usually it is prominent in the month of June but these are small variations which take place during the whole year. There were mostly old people with musical instruments in hand and women carrying Tulsi Plants on their heads and all of them were continuously singing and chanting. It was nice seeing them as they were covering their last mile of the day after which they will find some place to stay for night. We might have missed them if we would have left an hour late.

Leaving the romantic aspect aside, we decided to check our direction after traveling more than half way through the entire journey. Our network went down. As we checked the address we discovered that we had been traveling in the incorrect direction from the start and that we had been in a mountain range when we should have been on the other side. Google Map made a minor error by taking us to the viewing area for the Ghatghar Dam rather than the actual Ghatghar Dam, but this mistake would cost us 4 additional hours of travel through some risky jungles and then across the plains of Kokan. Traveling from here was always pleasant, except at night when it was already eight o'clock. We arrived at Ghatghar, our starting point, after another four hours in the dark. Rangnath, the guide, had already fallen asleep. We woke him up and he offered us a bed. Apurva and 2 others who came here via Mumbai local and then typical 6 Seater rickshaw were way more on time than us.

13 November

Early morning around 8 we all woke up, took bath and we were good to go around 8. We started from the foot of Samrad Village. Samrad had some interesting and a variety of modern as well a lot of vernacular houses with vibrant colors made of a variety of natural materials that we got to know from the locals. Passing through the small lanes of the village, protruding members of the timber, steel stopped at our eye level. Children on the swings of their verandah, morning chores of the locals, coexisting animals running around, smoke from the bhakris (Indian flat bread) being cooked on the chulas of almost every house, variety of sounds in the background that felt soothing to our ears and smell of freshly *Saravlela Angan* brought us our memory back from our home towns. The whole habitat, though not planned by an individual but a collaborative effort of all the villagers, has beauty of its own. Density of the houses started decreasing as we headed towards the mountain leaving behind the village. A few friendly dogs trailed us for a distance before we crossed a beautiful stream of water. It was a very distinct experience overall.

Our expected journey was supposed to take 3 sets of roughly eight hours of walks and treks, interspersed with challenging rock climbing. But in reality, it took an unexpected turn because after the first two hours, the only remaining track involved either a grueling hike or scrambling up hills accompanied by valleys on either side.

9 to 3 was a trek to attain height and we took our first break at Alang. Alang which is the first fort of these 3. It was *Shivkalin* in construction, literally from the times of Maratha rule. It was made of black stone and lime as a binding material but for the water storage they use *shish* that we call lead (Pb). This place has huge water bodies to make it more resilient during war. And strategically the stones carved out from the water tanks were used for construction of other buildings. This place is not a major tourist attraction as per numbers is considered. Even on Sunday there were only 6 of us there. The funds were not distributed, proper maintenance is not in place so we can see only ruins of standing structures over here otherwise most of it was destroyed. Shyam, being the most enthusiastic of all of us, could not resist taking a dive in one of those water bodies while some of us walked over the bund walls and sat in awe of how much cooler the water felt despite the sun being directly overhead.

The black stone over here is at its darkest. It makes it stand high in this context of the yellow rustic surroundings. Ecology of this place is obviously not that diverse as water is scarce. All we could see was a particular type of grass which was dried out and spread all over the landscape.

We took our first break at one Carved cave in the mountain. We kept our bags aside and started looking for water. We found one small stream of water which was collecting water from the mountains. Our guide Rangnath brought us some food and made local drinks for us. While everyone was busy with some or the other thing, Apurva observed a trail of ants heading to the food we accidentally dropped. Such small breaks always help to relax and find something really interesting!

It was so fulfilling that we thought it was time to take a break/stay here itself but we couldn't as we had to go to another peak that is MADAN which is a better option to stay in terms of safety and view as suggested by Rangnath. Madan is said to be the hardest of these three and these three are the hardest in Maharashtra so we can say in the second half of the day with sore legs and tanned skin we were heading towards the hardest trek of Maharashtra! Trek started with climbing down a little bit towards the North face of Alang. That time we figured it out that if we would have got up early and reached Alang by 12 we would have saved ourselves from harsh heat as anyways our next part of the trek is on the North face which is shadowed by Alang itself.

After a small walk, Rangnath stopped and dressed us up with legit trekking instruments. They were indicators that it is not going to be sweet and safe anymore. We were given briefs about mountain rappelling and then climbing. There are two spots on Malang fort where one can't go without gears and safety supports. At one point you have to rappel down the black Rock that is around 3-4 floors high if not more than that and then after a walk of another few hours we got to climb the straight rock and to save us from falling into the deep valley we had ropes as support.

It was the first time for all of us. We're a bit scared but excitement was at its peak. He taught us how to make knots and then we took the jump. After doing both of these activities everything seemed pretty easy. Half an hour later we reached the top of Malang and realized that we had arrived at the ideal moment. We had half an hour for sunset by the time we set up tents, collected some water and went up to catch the setting sun. The scene held our attention. Facing the sky we could recall the words of Christopher Benninger which back then encouraged us to confront the Sahyadri Mountains.

“My own pursuit for architecture was rekindled in the vast Sahyadri Mountains, in nature, where trees meet the sky, a place of unencumbered horizons, where nature dominates each possible view. There is compelling beauty in the profusely barren hills of the dispersed environment, haunting in its solitude – not a solitude filled irreverently with the urban glamour of disposability. The ever-present mountains tenaciously project fantastic architectures of shade and form. During the hot season they offer no shade from the restless sun. During the monsoon they offer no protection from the storm unleashed. In such a setting one cannot hide in fashions. The mountain cast cool shadows over villages, over lakes, across rivers and vast territories. Each shadow points to another.....”

(Reference - Letters To A Young Architect: Christopher Benninger.)

There were large flat rocks on the top, on which one could easily find a place to take a good nap. Few of us were already asleep and the last one standing caught the setting sun on camera. After a long sunset, we returned to our camps and helped Rangnath prepare our meals. We ended the day enjoying a nice supper under the sky.

14 November

Early morning the next day, Rangnath woke up way earlier than us and prepared breakfast. While having breakfast he told us that he saw 2 big snakes roaming around our tents last night and it wasn't scary enough until he showed us images as proof and we lost the last shred of sleep in no time. We began to descend after a lengthy tour of the Malang Fort. We questioned Rangnath about the fort's damaged gates as we descended to discover why they appeared to have been blasted down. He explained to us that the Brits destroyed these forts after discovering that they had been used as a hideout by freedom fighters.

After some time, we climbed along the same way to the final fort of these three, Kulang. Of the three, Kulang receives the most tourists because it still has the structures. It also has some attractive doors and a stone water container that is shaped to resemble an infinity pool on the edge of the cliff. Before we ran out of batteries we took a few pictures and started again.

While climbing down we reached a plateau from where we just walked for the next few hours. We kept walking like zombies. By this time we were good friends with Rangnath and he started sharing his experience with us. We discussed our next plan of action with him. As being a local we asked

for his advice and he told us that these places are highly crowded during these days; especially on weekends as there were some festivals going on in Samrad village. Instead there are two places that are less visited and have some nice landscapes. We thought we would figure out our plan once we get connected with the internet. After 4-5 hours of walking we found the first moving body except us that was a cow. Which meant that we had entered the border of the village. It was the last hour of walking and we reached the most important water body of the village which is Hiwala waterfall. It got its name as it is the largest waterfall in the surrounding region which lasts till winters. We took a good long break, soaked our legs and were ready to go back to our starting point.

We arrived there in about thirty mins, and by the time we did, it was already 4. We had a deadline of at least two hours to get to Sandhan Kokan Kada in time for sunset. After taking one more picture with Rangnath, we loaded our belongings onto bikes and started. We all said bye to Rohit as he was leaving for work. We got in touch with residents of the village, asked them about safety and facilities we can find there and then rented tents. It was already dark and we all were totally exhausted. We were late for sunset but the chai was good. We believed that even though we missed the sunset, the sun left its beautiful sky for us.

15 November

That morning we woke up early but we knew these two days were going to be slow and that they were not as exhausting as compared to AMK. There is nothing more exhausting than AMK so we took our time to get ready, 2 of us went for a walk. We all discussed the AMK trek as we never got a chance to sit back and appreciate it. After an hour we all had breakfast and were ready to move. Down the road we started walking towards Sandhan valley. It was my 3rd- 4th time in this place so we didn't ask for a guide but we rented 2 tents as we were planning to stay at the other end. Against the imagination of others the valley was cozy and cold with not much direct sunlight. So to say, the temperature was comfy and the only thing to care about was the trail as it is full of heavy and giant basalt rocks.

After 4 hours of trek we met with a small waterbody. It was stopping the trail fully you have to swim through. Or there was a boat which cost around Rs. 20 As we needed someone to carry our bags from 1 side to another so except Apurva all of us decided to go swimming. It was freezing cold water or it felt so. On the toll of 5 we were on our camping site already. And from previous

experience we set up a tent as quickly as possible. We assigned tasks to the people like arranging wood, setting up campfires, setting up chula. By the end of the day we were all set, waiting for the sun to go down. There was no such sunset point but this whole thing was a soothing experience.

16 November

We woke up late as we knew that anyways the returning route is in shadow. On the chula we made some Maggie and chai. Either it was good or we didn't have any other option. We finished it in no time though we took some time to pack up. Slow packing was not because we were tired, it was because we didn't want to leave the place this soon. We took our bags, cleared the trash we made and then headed back to the valley as we knew the whole route to go back and were not under any pressure or threatened by surprises that we met earlier. We decided to go for a bath during that crossing of the waterbody.

After less than 3 hours of walking we were already back to the base village. It was around 3 o'clock in the evening and as per plan we started looking for transportation as we needed to go to the next base village. After a while we saw one MSRTC bus coming, 3 of us hopped on to it, Shyam and Apurva took a bike ride through the village. By this time 2 to 3 hours of travel became a small distance for us. We then came across a very strange vehicle that had no wheels. It may appear funny, but the person driving it was much funnier; in just a few brief moments, he had us laughing; while at the very next moment a snake crossing the road almost came under our bike.

We reached Ratanwadi before sunset. We had already contacted for a stay but we had to find this man in the village. We couldn't get him on the call but it was easy to find someone in a small village. Raghu handed over a camping field with some instructions to start for the next day. We set up our tents and waited for our food that we were supposed to get from the locals

17 November

Here is another day and another trek. Today's planned trek was Ratangad which is widely known and is one of most famous treks of Maharashtra. Ratangad has a natural rock peak with a cavity in it at the top which is called 'Nedhe' or 'Eye of the Needle' where we set our tents later. This was our motivation to reach the top because it was going to let us see two opposing sides open for viewing. As we were traveling during weekdays we were not much worried about the crowd or route as it is always easy as well as fun to find naturally formed paths with more people using them. We took a guide and started walking from the village. Like every other trek, the first 10-20 minutes we always feel lost and exhausted but get better as soon as we are all warmed up as the view from top is always something that encourages every trekker.

The trek was easy but long. It was long for a solo trekker as most of it is just walking for a long distance unlike AMK which included climbing vertically. Since we were a group it feels as if you are reaching in no time. Though it was hard to get the group moving fast as most of us were exhausted with 5-6 days of continuous walking and due to the same reason we couldn't match Raghu's speed. Since we were planning to stay up and were not in any hurry. After a long walk and longer breaks we got the first glance of the summit. That was the first time in 5 hours I saw smiles on faces.

Raghu knew the place to set the tent. He knew water bodies and he was going to help us cook so we took an appreciation break and went for a small nap as we wanted to stay up for something more interesting tonight. Even though we were slow we reached there before sunset. All thanks to Raghu who was patient with us. All these forts are not yet popular for common people or not one of them that could be planned for a one day trip. And because of this there were no refreshment stalls or shops that served snacks or drinks. We all had to carry our water all the way up or depend on small streams passing by.

By this time setting our tents, arranging firewood and cleaning up the place had become part of the routine and we all knew who was better at what. Without even saying we were already on our duty. We set up all these trekking chores and then as we knew that for the first time we waited for something more interesting for a very long time and that was not a sunset but was - Leonid meteor shower. Something we did know is that it takes place every 33 to 34 years and there is no change that we want to miss it. This year the meteor shower was to be seen active from 6th November to 30th

November, producing its peak rate of meteors around 17 november. Keeping the meteor shower apart, it felt like the result of all our effort was the night that we spent stargazing. The sky was at its best and perfect for stargazing. And no doubt we all argued over which star was which after Shyam showed us a few constellations. Even though we were so tired we tried our best staying up for as long as we could to only know that the meteor shower we were looking for was not visible to the naked eye!

18 November


Waking up early in the morning was difficult as we stayed up late but necessary as we didn't want to miss the sunrise from Ratangad and we definitely didn't. We observed the changing landscape of the foothills from the top due to passing of the clouds. We spent an hour there walking, playing, making some stone piles etc. The guide reminded us of going back. We headed toward the base village. Raghu was leading the group. Apurva and I were at the back making sure everyone was together. We didn't want to miss discussing something amazing that we had recently witnessed. I'd advise you to try walking while admiring the sky and observing the shifting silhouettes of the trees. Make sure not to strike a tree! Being unable to capture this in your camera is both a blessing and the saddest part since you are enjoying the experience so much that so many crucial details simply slip out of your mind.

Raghu told us about many small spots that only locals knew. Idea popped into my mind that why can't we just look for one more such destination? In our way we didn't know everybody would agree with this but we were ready to go just the two of us. Since at the end of the trek we felt most of us were homesick so we just introduced a proposal and waited for it to be rejected. We were in town before 12 o'clock. We walked to Amruteshwar temple as it was too close. The main highlight of the temple is the temple structure and deity which is submerged under water. The water in the *Kund* was blue, which was just outside the temple. This could have been the main attraction of the temple if it would have been maintained well. We witnessed rice being harvested by the villagers just beside the temple. After a lengthy darshan, we enjoyed a wonderful lunch at an old woman's pantry. She was serving chai-nashta and *Junka* from her little *tapri*. A common Maharashtrian meal is called Junka. While she shared her experience of how she ran the shop we enjoyed observing how gracefully she prepared and served food to multiple people by herself.

As said Apurva and I were going for one more trail, others wished us luck and took a bus for Kasara from where they left. We went to Bhandhardara dam for sunset and this time we didn't miss it. It was the most calm and fulfilling experience of all. We knew that since the last few days were so hectic and which is why unlike other days this time the place felt so much more peaceful and comforting. We summarized the whole trip, took some time individually, to write down some things, scribbled out our thoughts that we never wanted to forget. We discussed things where we went wrong and also things that we really managed well. Something intriguing happened all of a sudden. Shyam abruptly sprang to his feet and gestured towards the mountain ranges we were overlooking. We were aware in some way that we were seated just in front of every fort we had scaled during our journey. But I must thank Shyam for being able to point out that tiny gap at the pinnacle of the Ratangad which made us never forget the moment. We took a good long break and before mosquitos started eating us, we wrapped up and were set to go for our last trail of the trip. It was just 2 of us, so we couldn't risk setting a tent in the middle of the jungle. We almost ran out of our batteries so we got out of this highly rural part and got on the main Mumbai Nashik highway even though it was a bit longer route but we quickly hopped on to one of the hostels, enjoyed the jamming session with some amazing solo travelers and ended our day.

19 November

We woke up as early as 7 o'clock and got ready. Most of our belongings we gave to our group members so we were traveling light and free. After fixing the puncture, we continued riding towards the Kalu waterfall, which was only a short distance from our hostel. On our way we had some famous misal with chai so we were good for another 5-6 hours. Kalu waterfall is one of the tallest waterfalls around and it falls from western Ghats part of Maharashtra to kolan part so it is a wonder in that sense. I have been there before but it was in monsoon and I saw the *Rudra* roop on it. We were there around 10 o'clock and I think one shouldn't be there before that as it is a valley surrounded by tall mountains so there is very little light until 10. We had tried everything in this trip except one thing that we missed on and that was off-road riding. It was a bit hard as the bike was not a mountain bike but it was a thrilling experience.



After crossing hills and rivers we reached a spot from where we couldn't take the bike any further. So we parked our bikes and started walking. It was hardly a 10 minutes walk and we saw a small waterfall coming through this huge valley. Frankly speaking we lost all hope of finding water after seeing this heat but it was worth a try. We saw a small stream of water flowing through these large black stone monoliths. We found the water to be transparent and mesmerizing, so we're happy that we took this path. As soon as I saw it, there was nothing that could stop me from jumping in the fall from various locations and gather some stones. We were determined to wrap up this trip in the finest way. We got back to the main road. From where Apurva took a bus to Kalyan and I started riding back to Pune. It was one of the longest solo rides of mine and I kept summarizing the trip in my mind.

Some of the world's greatest individuals have developed and matured as a result of their travels and experiences. We genuinely believe that encouraging someone to travel is the most thoughtful and greatest thing that we can gift someone. Our greatest treasure is nothing but our experiences. We are grateful that the **Xtreme G2 Trust** gave us the opportunity to travel, arrange, and execute our itinerary.