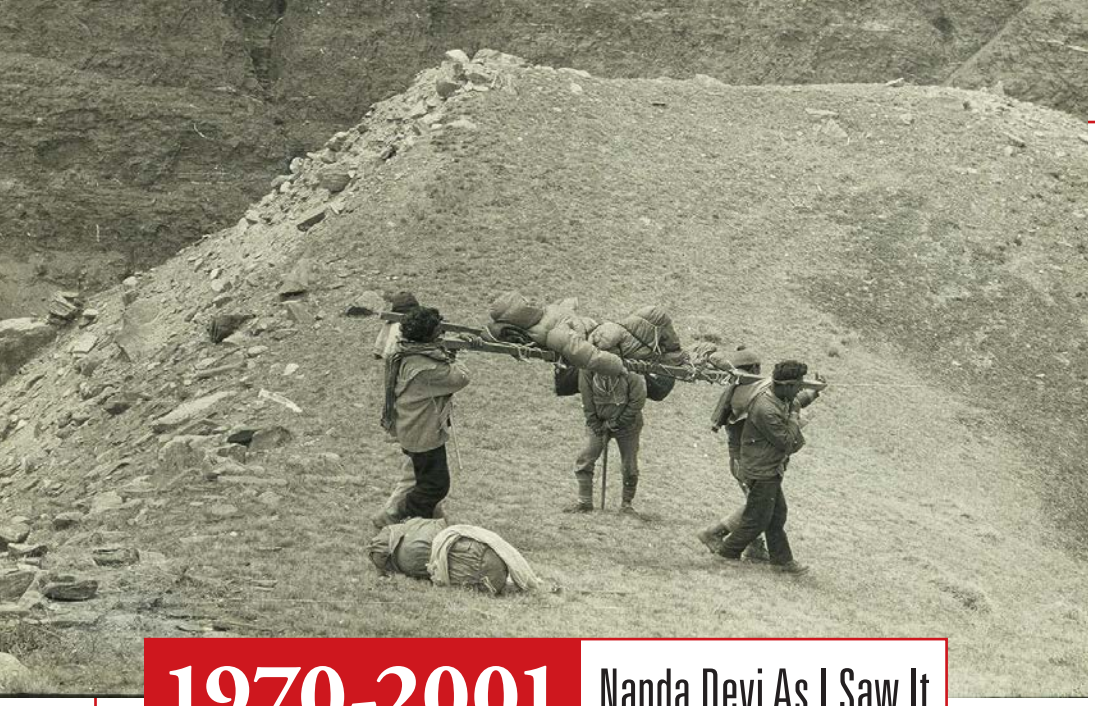

1970-2001 Nanda Devi As I Saw It

HARISH KAPADIA

IT WAS A COOL MORNING of June 1974, and as the first rays of the sun gently warmed the Nanda Devi Sanctuary, porters were tying me to an improvised stretcher to carry me down. The route was narrow and covered with scree, and each wobble induced an agonized scream from me. The porters had been instructed by Zerksis Boga, my companion, to ignore my cries and continue. The best I could do was to keep my eyes shut and count each step forward as a blessing. Just six days ago, my teammates and I were savoring the success of the first ascent of Devtoli, a remote 6788-peak in the Garhwal Himalaya. From the summit, I could see the steep west face of Nanda Devi rise massive and bright in the center of the Sanctuary—like a vision from another world. On the descent, below Camp 2, we had to cross a snow bridge over a huge crevasse. Ahead of me was Jagat Singh, who managed to tiptoe gingerly to the other side, but I ran out of luck. The bridge collapsed, and I was hurtled down the chasm until I hung from the end of the rope, the heavy rucksack still tugging at my back. One of the Sherpa climbers, Nim Dorje, immediately rushed to the camp to fetch rescue equipment, but I knew my ordeal was to last hours.

The bottom of the crevasse appeared deceptively near to me. Since my harness had severely constricted my breathing, I decided to take matters into my own hands, and I cut the rope in hopes of jumping to the snow-covered floor. As soon as my pocketknife touched the taut cord, it snapped, and I fell the rest of the way, landed in a heap and dislocated my left hip. Traditional mountain people believe high summits to be the abode of the Gods and consider the act of climbing them sacrilegious. In the fading light, the Goddess Nanda Devi had chosen to punish me for violating the sanctity of her domain.

A daring rescue operation ensued. Subhash Desai went to Joshimath to request a helicopter, and other expedition members brought me to base camp. At first, they dragged me on an improvised snowboard made from a folded tent, then porters carried me on their backs and finally on a stretcher fashioned out of wooden logs. At base camp, I still had to wait for the arrival of a rescue helicopter. Boga stayed with me to look after my wellbeing while the others started back. The thoughts that filled my head at that moment would have defied a psychiatrist. Neither the golden sunsets on Nanda Devi nor the roar of the Rishi Ganga mattered to me anymore. All I could focus on was the arrival of the elusive helicopter. A flutter of the tent flap, the sound of the stove or the distant roar of an avalanche was enough to jolt me awake and cause me to scan the sky wistfully. At last, on the eighth day after my fall, I was flown out. As the helicopter crossed the Rishi Gorge, I murmured, "Nanda Devi, the honors are even."

After the operation, the doctors suggested that Avascular necrosis (AVN) had set in my hip joint because of the nine-day loss of blood supply to the bone. This diagnosis was extremely distressing: it signaled the end of my climbing career before I felt it had even taken off. I was on crutches for almost two years, tending carefully to the recovery of my joint. My mental resolve to climb was stronger than ever, and the impossible was made possible: I resumed mountaineering with renewed vigor, and the best of my explorations followed this incident. Maybe it was the Goddess's special way of blessing me.

"APPETITE GROWS WITH WHAT IT feeds upon, not by waiting," H.W. Tillman wrote in his *Himalayan Journal* account of the first visit to the Nanda Devi Sanctuary in 1934. When I was growing up in Mumbai, India, the Himalaya never seemed too far away—a dream of bright snows that beckoned me away from the heat and the crowds of the city streets. Over decades of visiting the region, starting from 1968, my appetite became greatly whetted by the innumerable views of Nanda Devi from the valleys of Kumaun and Garhwal. The sight of its eastern face from a pass in the upper Milam Valley, Birjeganj Dhura, overwhelmed me: the early morning rays of the sun fell across the upper slopes of Nanda Devi, lighting up the summits along the eastern wall in a kaleidoscopic show. Later, on the Tibetan Plateau, when I witnessed the mountain range from the Barkha plains below Mt. Kailash, I understood another reason why we attribute divinity to the Nanda Devi peaks: these high walls clearly stop the cold Tibetan winds from reaching the Gangetic plains, the main food-producing granary of India.

In 1970 I was finally able to plan my first expedition to the Nanda Devi Sanctuary. Our team summited the 7120-meter high Trisul, which Dr. Longstaff's party had first ascended in a rapid push, way back in 1907. We also stood atop Bethartoli Himal South, formerly climbed by a German expedition in 1956, one of the earliest expeditions to this part of Kumaun. On the main peak of Bethartoli Himal, however, four members of our group—Ang Kami Sherpa, Nitin Patel, Gnappa Sherpa and Chewang Phinzo—perished in an avalanche. It was devastating for me to lose friends and face death as a young man. But call of

[Photo] **Select members of the 1936 Nanda Devi Expedition. Back row: P. Lloyd, H.A. Carter, W.F. Loomis, N. Odell, the 1996 *AAJ*, Charles Houston recalled Carter was "big, strong and just a tad clumsy in his early climbing years, but...he became an outstanding all-around mountaineer."**
Charles Houston

the Sanctuary was always overpowering.

At the first available opportunity, in 1974, I went back to climb Devtoli, 6788m, the southernmost peak of the inner Sanctuary. Even after my accident that year, I still longed to return.

But in 1982, the government closed the Sanctuary, partly in view of rampant environmental damage from visitors. There were also rumours of a deadly, plutonium-powered transceiver lost somewhere within the area by a clandestine operation during the 1960s. Nearly two decades passed before I was able to go back. This time, I arrived as the head of a multi-disciplinary expedition, with a geologist, a botanist, and ornithologist and film crew, to ascertain if the natural ecosystem had significantly recovered. We hoped to formulate plans to permit controlled trekking and climbing and to ensure that the fragile Sanctuary could withstand renewed activity. Yet despite the closure, we discovered signs that people continued to exploit the place: well-used trails and recent campsites, traces of poachers and engravings on trees. One element of transcendence remained constant: the Goddess Nanda Devi stood tall and beautiful as always, as she had done so for centuries.

On one of the last evenings, we camped on the banks of the deafening Rishi Ganga that gushed forth with all her might. The power and divinity of one river was enough to fight for and preserve it. I remembered that when the forest department had tried to denude the forest for commercial exploitation in 1976, local women had hugged trees to prevent them from being felled, in the well-known "Chipko movement." But I also recalled how in 1998, the villagers of Lata broke the Sanctuary rules and began grazing animals on protected lands, because the government didn't honor its promise to them to allot alternative grazing lands. Local residents told us that, to stop the villagers, the government sent a contingent of Provincial Armed Constabulary, many of whom were unable to cross the high pass with their cumbersome weapons and loads. In the end, the villagers agreed to transport the gear for them. Eventually, the protest fizzled out as winter was fast approaching.

These contrasting social movements were proof that residents were aware of their responsibilities toward protecting their land and forests, but that they could also become opposed to certain conservation laws in times of economic need. In my view, no would-be profiteer should be allowed to enter this protected region at their whim and fancy to exploit it. But neither could we preserve the Sanctuary by trying to keep the place entirely sealed off as if we could wrap it in plastic for future generations. What then might be the Golden Mean to let people enjoy the simple pleasures of the Sanctuary and at the same time safeguard the place? Our team felt that the best solution lay in empowering all stakeholders to act responsibly to facilitate its conservation. Toward this end, our expedition members wrote a detailed report for the government, with suggestions to reopen the Sanctuary under the strict supervision of Forest Guards. We suggested restricting the numbers of expeditions and levying high entry fees that could be used for local conservation projects. This approach would prevent poaching, ensure employment for villagers and allow the present generation to enjoy. The report was submitted, a committee was formed, meetings were held—and nothing was done!

As I walked out of the Sanctuary, memories flooded my mind: the romance of the history of exploration, the herds of musk deer and long glaciers, the shock of my own accident and the loss of dear friends. I recollected the golden sunrise where the beauty of the Goddess was revealed to me. The perspective of my explorations had changed with age. When I was young, I marvelled at the sheer beauty of the mountains, and I thought of climbing as a physical form of expression of achievement. With age, this pursuit transformed into a more intellectual one, and I wondered at the stories behind the intricate valleys and faces. Now, I admire them for the all-encompassing force that they are. Mountains certainly have the power to conquer one's mind, body and soul. And Nanda Devi had done so for me.