

## RESCUE ON DEVTOLI, 1974

By HARISH KAPADIA

IT was a cool morning and as the first rays of the sun entered the Nanda Devi Sanctuary, I was being tied to an improvised stretcher and carried on strong shoulders of our Garhwali porters. The route was narrow and full of scree. I had to keep my eyes closed all the time, or else, with the wobbling, I would feel as if Nanda Devi towering over us was falling on me. All the time I was shouting in pain, but the porters were told to ignore my agony and continue. This was the only way they could have carried me. It was six days since I had fallen in a crevasses on my way back from the first ascent of Devtoli (22,270 ft—6788 m.) and injured my left hip. After months of planning, we had succeeded in climbing this remote Peak in the Nanda Devi Sanctuary and it was in the fading evening that the goddess chose to wake up in defence at this violation of her sanctity. My painful ride was over at the Base Camp and I was installed in a red tent on a huge grassy plateau to wait for the helicopter to rescue me. Boga stayed with me while others started the return march. My thoughts then would have defied a psychiatrist. Neither the golden sunsets on Nanda Devi nor the roar of the Rishi Ganga mattered to me now. My thoughts centered around the helicopter and in my day dreams hundreds of times I escorted the helicopter into the Sanctuary. A flutter of the tent flap, noise of a stove or a distant roar of an avalanche would wake me up, hopefully searching the sky. It was night and I had my usual heavy dose of sedatives to relieve pain. My thoughts lingered on and I remembered those none too distant days when we had happily started our mountain adventure.

Ours was an experienced team of six climbers from "*THE MOUNTAINEERS*" Bombay. We were all climber friends and proved to be the most ideal number for climbing and enjoyment. Subhash Desai had climbed the virgin Peak of Chaudhara (21,306 ft.—6510 m.) last year. Mahesh Desai had three expeditions to his credit and had crossed Bagini pass. Zerxis Boga had been to Tharkot and Bethartoli Himal expeditions, while Dilip Sardesai



had been on two treks and was a member of the Chaudhara expedition. Deepak Sahkari, a final year medical student was to look after our health. I had been on 5 expeditions, having climbed three peaks and was to lead the team. Moreover, three of us had been in the region before, which was an added advantage. "Appetite grows with what it feeds upon, not by waiting"<sup>1</sup> wrote H. W. Tillman in his account of the first visit to the Nanda Devi Sanctuary in 1934. This was exemplified by our expedition, as it was possible to go to these mountains after years of groping around them.

Our peak lies at the southern most point on the inner wall of of the Sanctuary. It is on the south-south-west ring of peaks in line with Maiktoli and Mrigthuni (6803 and 6855 m. respectively). It is at the junction where the ridge from Devistan joins in the south, the ridge between Maiktoli and Mrigthuni. So it stands overlooking the Sanctuary on the east, Trisul Nalla in the west and Sunderdhunga-Tharkot directly, below to the south. It could also have been approached from Trisul Nalla, but we chose to enjoy the Nanda Devi Sanctuary as well. We called our unnamed peak 6788 m. 'Devtoli' after a mixture of Devistan-Maiktoli.<sup>2</sup>

We were at Rishikesh on 20 May. A day of hectic purchases followed in the intense heat and we reached Joshimath with 1½ tons of luggage on 21st evening.

Here, we had our second hurdle. We were shunted back to Gopeshwar—the local headquarters—to obtain the inner line permits. There they promptly told us that it was a mistake and that the permits would be issued by the authorities in Joshimath alone. We came back only to be told that the S.D.M. had just gone to Badrinath. We rushed to Badrinath, the S.D.M. signed the permits and we travelled back all night by trucks to reach Joshimath the next day by noon. We had lost 4 days to obtain a small piece of paper called a permit, which, to our great disappointment, nobody checked anywhere. However, the delay was more than compensated, since our Sherpas, whom we had given up in wake of the rail strike, joined us here.

It was drizzling when we reached Lata, our last road head, on the afternoon of 25 May and camped on the roadside. Our porters, Kedar Singh, Bhim Singh, Jagat Singh and the rest, were

<sup>1</sup> H. J. Vol. VII, 1935, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> We are also proposing this name to the Survey of India, through official channels, as it sounds most suited to the surrounding region. (Suggestion has been subsequently been accepted by the Survey of India.—*Ed.*)



waiting for us with Mangal Singh and his goats to carry our luggage.

We were off early next day in drizzling rain with about 150 goats and 22 porters carrying our loads. The route climbed steeply 5000 feet to Lata-Kharak, just above the treeline. Next day morning, we had a clear view of Bethartoli Himal (20,840 ft. 6352 m.), Nanda Ghunti (20,700 ft.—6309 m.), Hathi Parbat (22,070 ft.—6727 m.) as we continued our climb further to Durashi pass (14,000 ft.—4267 m.). It was a steep tricky route covered with patches of snow. The other side of the pass was even worse, as we went down over across to this alp of Durashi. A gentle climb to Malathuni pass (14,000 ft.) next day and we had the first glimpses of Nanda Devi. It was still early in the morning. The sky was brilliantly clear. Dunagiri and Hanuman on the east had a hallow of sunrays around them. To the south, Devistan, Trisul and Bethartoli glittered in the morning light. Below, Dibrugheta alp nestled among a thick forest of pine, fir and birch, eagerly awaiting our arrival. So we ran down. The camp was pitched in the thick forest. Next day saw us climbing again a 1000 feet, just above tree line, to have a grand view of the region around and by the end of the route we were descending to camp across the Rishi Ganga at Deodi. Above Deodi our route was along a thick forest of rhodedendrons and bhoj trees. At the junction of Trisul Nalla and the Rishi, we had first views of the Rishi gorge. We built a small bridge across the Trisul Nalla and by afternoon we were at Ramani at the foot of the gorge. Goats cannot go any further, so we sorted out the luggage, rations required for the return journey and buried them safely nearby. We made two lots of the remaining luggage. All the equipment and food for about 10 days were to go up first and the balance was to be ferried later on.

The Rishi gorge looked very steep and frightening from here. There is a faint track all along now, but it requires constant concentration and balance, if you slip, there is nothing to stop you from going into the Rishi Ganga about 3,000 feet below. The route, a mixture of rock, scree and grassy turfs resembles trekking in the western ghats around Bombay. The route from Ramani climbs rather steeply, at first under an overhang and then on mixture of grass and rock. It then follows a dry stream upwards, leading to steep grassy slopes again. One reaches a huge cairn, which marks the end of the first part of the climb for the day. Looking back, we had an excellent view of the cur-



tain wall' of Malathuni and peaks of Badrinath region. Now the real ruggedness of the gorge starts, as the route traverses over rocks and scree with one side exposed to the Rishi Ganga now about 15,000 ft. below. You keep on jumping over rocks, climbing up and traversing on a very narrow track. You reach a small open ground, 'Bhujgara' on the 'Mid-day Camp' as Tillman called it, rather too soon. We reached early, before noon, but there was no way of camping further. This is not a very inviting camp site, camping on scree slopes and our tents had to be pitched far away from each other.

We started early and at first had to cross a snow filled gully. The gorge was getting narrower. By about 9 a.m., we were at the base of 'the slabs'. Here we had to fix ropes extensively. You take a sharp turn and climb a scree slope. Then traverse about 500 feet first under an overhanging rock and then over a huge rock face with all sloping rocks, on which you can get only undercut as hand holds. We had fixed ropes on each of these sections and thank God that it was sunny, as with snow or rain, they can be almost impossible to negotiate. We took 2 hours to cross the slabs. Now we were really in it. The north side of the gorge was absolutely steep and presented a grand sight. We found the remains of winter snow on the sides of the track. Rishi gorge would be a tough proposition anytime before the third week of May, when it is snow bound. We reached the base of 'Vaikunth Gully' (ladder to heaven). This is a steep rock staircase leading halfway to a huge rockwall and then traversing. The final climb was rather steep. Suddenly Nanda Devi opened before us, presenting a stupendous bold front. Our camp was at Pataalkhan (13,000 ft.—3962 m.) which the early travellers called 'Pisgah' camp, "the promised land of the Sanctuary". But, we were to discover at the cost of our tired feet next day, how very long the promised land was.

Next day, we sent down all except 3 porters from Pataalkhan to Ramani for carrying the remaining loads through the gorge. While the rest of us ferried loads to Base Camp. It was a very tiresome route, which went up and down over scree and boulders till one takes a turn to the south to enter Sarso Patal or the Sanctuary grassy lands. But yet there is no end to it. We did not make it to the Base Camp site that day and dumped our loads a short distance before. It rained heavily in the afternoon and it was six weary gentlemen walking back to the 'Pisgah' Camp. Our porters had arrived from Ramani bringing the total



gear.

3 June dawned clear and fine. We started early and with all our luggage established the Base Camp by noon. Porters were paid off and we were sixteen only. We were at 14800 ft. near a huge level ground. Rishi Ganga was about 1000 ft. below. Immediately on the east, was the huge rockwall of Nanda Devi towering above us—to the south was Cream Roll (21,640 ft.—6596 m.), Nanda Khat (21,890 ft.—6611 m.) and Sunderdhunga Col (18,110 ft.—5520 m.). About two miles further to the south, was the meeting point of the two glaciers, south Nanda Devi glacier from south-east, which leads to the Nanda Devi Base Camp, and the south Rishi glacier coming from the south. Above the latter lay our peak along with Maiktoli. Nanda Devi turned absolutely golden in the setting sun.

Next day was absolutely clear. Boga and Subhash with Sherpa Nim Dorke and Kedar Singh left early to open a route to Advance Base Camp. Within 2 hours they reached the meeting point of the two glaciers. They proceeded south along the true left bank of the glacier. They could avoid the moraines by climbing the slopes near the bank. It was a long march and they established ABC at 16,000 ft.—4877 m. on a small open rocky ground. It was a wonderful place with excellent views of Nanda Devi (25,645 ft.—7817 m.) and the Sunderdhunga Col. They started back and had the first taste of what we came to call the 'Matinee Snow'. Invariably, every day at about 1 p.m., the weather would become cloudy. By 1-30 p.m. it would start snowing with strong winds touching a height of almost a blizzard. It would subside by 3 p.m., leaving lots of snow. Evenings were always very clear. We noticed that this happened every day without fail.

While the ABC party took rest, all of us ferried loads next day. We reached ABC at noon, had lunch and waited for the storm. It came and subsided on time and then we walked back. We made this a regular pattern of our movements.

On the 6th, Doctor and myself stayed at Base Camp, while all others occupied ABC. On 7th, we also moved to ABC with the rest of the luggage. We calculated that we had sufficient supplies of food and fuel to sustain a determined assault. Boga and Subhash had gone up the very day and established Camp I at 18,000 ft.—5488 m. on the glacier. They reported that after traversing further on the slopes beyond ABC, they descended on the glacier and then climbed up over small crevasses to Camp I. We discussed our plans in the evening. Next day, Mahesh



and Dilip were to attempt Sunderdhunga Col opposite ABC, which did not look too difficult. I would ferry loads to Camp I with the porters. The day after, on the 9th, Boga, Subhash and myself were to occupy Camp I for the first attempt.

However, the next day dawned ominously with an overcast sky and we postponed our start till 8 o'clock. But it took a turn for the worse and we spend the day at the Camp. As a result, we scrapped the attempt on Sunderdhunga Col and all of us ferried loads to Camp I on the 9th, as scheduled. Three of us were comfortably settled, enjoying some fantastic views of Nanda Devi, while the others returned to ABC.

Route to Camp II was through heavy crevasses and promised difficulties. We tried to push through the loads, but we ran into a huge crevassed field within 200 yards from the Camp. We decided to leave the luggage there. With a Sherpa and 2 porters, I went ahead to open the route while Boga and Subhash waited in support. We had to jump over many crevasses and we proceeded very slowly and carefully in two ropes, belaying extensively. A route through the crevasses on the left was tried, but we had to retrace our steps. We found a ramp on the right which climbed steeply further up. We faced a huge crevasses running across from top to bottom of the entire field. Luckily there was a snow bridge. Ahead was a steep slope of 300 ft. On top of this Camp II was established at a height of 20300 ft. on an icefield. We came down to Camp I by late afternoon. Ferry from ABC to Camp I had arrived on time. Boga, Subhash, Nim Dorje and Jagat Singh occupied Camp II on 11 June while Mahesh joined me at Camp I to form the second summit team. It was remarkable that nobody felt any effect of altitude. The approach march is so naturally spread out as to acclimatize anyone thoroughly.

12 June was a clear day. Mahesh and I started for Camp II making brisk progress and reached the final crevasses by 11 a.m. We could see some strange movements above Camp II. There were three climbers walking down slowly at the edge of a wall with a huge crevasses on the other side. They looked very tired and soon they disappeared behind the wall. What happened to the fourth guy? We got worried and started climbing fast. We were relieved to find Boga, who was unwell at the Camp. He told us that they started at 8 a.m. and ran into a huge crevasse. As wind was too strong, they all came back to the Camp. Subhash with Nima and Jagat started again at about 10 a.m. They must



have crossed the crevasse by now. It all looked very dangerous from here. After sometime, Kedar, Wangdi and myself started in support. Snow conditions were very bad and the afternoon snowfall had also started. But Mahesh and Boga could locate the party higher up and shouted at us to return. We waited at Camp II and by 3 p.m. they returned. They had climbed steadily on the other side of the crevasse upto about 300 ft. below the col between Maiktoli and Devtoli. As the weather worsened, they had to make a retreat from about 21,000 ft. Thus the first summit attempt failed. Mahesh and myself occupied Camp II with Nima and Jagat, while Subhash, Boga and others went down to Camp I.

13 June was bright and clear. We were lucky as the strong wind, which was blowing all night dropped by 7 a.m. We were off by 7-30 and climbed unroped to begin with. Route was well trodden the day before and gentle and this way we could climb relatively fast. We crossed over the crevasse which had stopped them yesterday and climbed steadily on the gradual snow field on the other side. Our our left at a distance were giant seracs which ultimately led to Maiktoli. The view was breathtaking and we made frequent halts to take photographs. Over the Sunderdhunga Col we could now see Nanda Kot and innumerable peaks of the lower Milan and Ralam glaciers. By 10 a.m. we reached the highest point of the previous day. From here on, we roped up. Snow was still only ankle deep but as we neared the col between Maiktoli and Devtoli, it was deeper and the wind increased. From the col, we could see all the southern valleys covered by clouds.

From the col which was about 21,300 ft.—6492 m., Devtoli presents itself as an ice pyramid about 1,000 ft. high with a steep ice-wall abutting a gully between the summit and itself. The summit looked flat but corniced at the southern edges. Facing the strong wind, we started off towards the steep ice-wall. Snow was now getting deeper and made our progress slow. A little above the base of the icfall, we traversed towards the north. It was covered with fresh snow but gave us excellent food and hand holds with hard kicking and little step cutting. We moved cautiously, once at a time and belaying with our ice-axes firmly in anchor. We surmounted the wall and then it was a matter of some snow trodding and we wrote at the summit at 1 p.m.

As the summit was corniced, we proceeded on it with always one of us belaying from a distance. Though all lower valleys were



filled with clouds, we got an excellent view. To the north was Dunagiri (23,184 ft.—7066 m.), Kalanka (22,740 ft.—6931 m.), Kamet (25,447 ft.—7756 m.), Devistan (21,910 ft.—6678m.), Changanabang (22,520 ft.—6864 m.) and the Hardeol group. To the west, Nanda Kot (22,510 ft.—6861 m.) was shooting up from the clouds and the north-west was completely dominated by Nanda-Devi main and east. Nearby, on the east, was Maiktoli and on the west, Mrigthuni and Trisul (23,360 ft.—7120 m.). We could see Trisul Nalla with its gentle approaches to Trisul, Mrigthuni and our peak. Bethartoli Himal was covered in clouds. There was only a sea of clouds to the south. We stayed on the summit for an hour. Snow had become very soft and on our way back, we took a direct line for descending to avoid the ice-wall and the col. By 4 p.m., we reached Camp II where the support team of Dilip and Boga was waiting. Some hot tea and we discussed plans. Boga, Dilip, Wangdi and Narain were the attempt Maiktoli next day, which looked quite easy and nearer than our peak. By 5 p.m., four of us started for Camp I, happy and tired. But the adventure was not yet over.

We climbed down about 300 ft. to reach the huge crevasse. Jagat, who was in the lead, checked the snow bridge, about 15 ft. wide and 10 ft. broad. He crossed it with ease and took a belay position. I also checked it, nodded to Mahesh for belay and stepped on it. A little sound, and the next moment I was dangling 30 ft. in the crevasse held by belays from both the sides. The whole snow bridge, which we used to cross all the time, had collapsed totally. Mahesh shouted 'Are you all right? we are holding you'. I looked around. Both sides were overhanging ice-walls. With my 70. kg and a rucksack of 20 kg. the rope was biting on my ribs, constricting my breathing slowly, but surely. I desperately tried to get a foot hold, but to no avail. I shouted up to release the rope from Jagat's end so that I would not get the pull from both sides. Mahesh and Nima tried pulling me up but the rope had cut in about 5 ft. deep in the snow at the edge of the crevasse and wouldn't budge. They started shouting for help to Camp II. In the meantime, I was finding it increasingly difficult to breathe. My extremities were getting numb and I feared that I would be unconscious within a short time. I looked down the crevasse. It was wide and the bottom was of solid ice, covered with the snow of the bridge which had broken under me. It was too painful to hold out any more. I shouted up that I was cutting the rope and jumping about 40 ft. to the



bottom. I figured it to be better than the pain and hanging unconscious at the end of a rope. I threw my ice-axe away so that it would not hurt me. I could remove only the left strap of my rucksack and it remained hanging awkwardly on my right. I had a knife in my shirt pocket with which I cut the rope. The fall was violent and I fell on my left hip and slipped down further about 30 ft. My rucksack was in front of me. I was conscious and shivering wildly, unable to move an inch. Tremendous pain shot up in my left leg. I shouted up to Mahesh, telling him that I had broken my left leg and would need help. Pain and cold were increasing. It was 6 p.m. but still the sun was shining and I could not open my eyes. I heard some voices above as help from Camp II arrived. They threw a rope, but it just could not reach me. At last, Boga, who had arrived with others from Camp II, rappelled into the crevasse. He immediately stuffed my mouth with chocolates and put me in a feather coat. That helped a lot. With two 200 foot ropes, he tied me up with hand loops, immobilising my left leg. Five of them started pulling me: Pain was forgotten in the eagerness of being rescued. I reached the edge of the 80 foot crevasse quickly but near the top, both the ropes had cut in about 15 feet deep in the edges and I got jammed with my hands in the snow. They lowered me a bit. Wangdi came at the edge and started chopping the ice and snow around the two ropes, all of it falling directly on me. I called for another rope, with hand loops, which were passed underneath my hips and with the main rope I was brought to the edge and then with a strong pull on the second rope, I was jerked out, with my face falling flat on the ground in the arms of Dilip and shivering with pain and cold. Boga and my luggage were hauled out fast in the fading evening light. It was about 6-30 p.m. and the whole episode had lasted about one and a half hours. Nima and Dileep with Jagat, who was on the other side of the crevasse, made it to Camp I by 8 p.m. to get help for the morrow. Tents of Camp II were brought down and we camped at the upper edge of the crevasse.

Subhash and Kedar came up early next day. They made a sledge of a tent with poles, and tied ropes on both ends. I was tied in the centre with my injured leg remaining up. Pulling me was hard work in the soft snow and heavily crevassed region. At every crevasse they would bring me at the edge, then two persons would jump across. They would lift the sledge a little with the rope and there I would go, suspended in air over the



crevasse leaning heavily on the other side and screaming with pain. We had to cross at least thirty crevasses like this. That day we reached just above the huge crevasse field above Camp I. It was noon and crevasses were too unsteady. So we camped there. The Doctor who had come up to Camp I could not reach me, so some sedatives were thrown across the crevasses. Next day by 6 a.m. we crossed the the danger zone and wound up Camp I. The Doctor joined us here. My painful ride continued till the end of the snow-field on the glacier floor. Now it was a problem of carrying me over the rocks to ABC. The sledge if carried above would fold up giving me extreme pain. Again I was tied up in slings, immobilising my legs. A rope was passed from a karabiner in my waist, across my chest and over the shoulders. A porter would pull this rope over his shoulder with my back and head resting on his back and carry me. Someone had to hold my legs and I would transfer some of my weight with hand supports on persons on two sides. We could hardly go 50 steps like this before either the porter got tired or with the rope on my chest, I found it difficult to breathe. But slowly we crossed the moraine and reached ABC in about 3 hours. The doctor examined me and applied a temporary plaster. The cold nights were painful and sleepless, even with pain killers and sleeping tablets. Moreover, I could not straighten my leg or sleep flat on my back. There was a lot of speculation on what my injury could be but one thing was sure that it was not a fracture!

Subhash and one porter were despatched to Joshimath to request for a rescue by helicopter from Base Camp. He started on the 15th from ABC and went straight down the Rishi gorge to Ramani by evening. From Ramani, he went up and down two passes to reach Lata by late evening, thus covering a difficult march which had taken us nine days on the way up, in just two days. It was a most sustained and dedicated run. Through local authorities he contacted the Indian Mountaineering Foundation at New Delhi, who responded immediately, and a helicopter was arranged.

At ABC, the rescue continued. A small stretcher was improvised which allowed me to sit in the centre with four persons carrying it. It was a very scary thing to sit on as it slopped up and down with heavy jerks. On many steep ascents and descents, I was carried again on porters backs. Progress was naturally very slow. I shouted in pain but they were told to ignore it and con-



tinue. By evening we came at a difficult crossing and Khim Singh who was in front slipped, dropping the stretcher. Pain shot up like a steel bar driven through me and I refused to be carried further that day. The tents were put up and I was left with the Doctor and two porters. Others went down to Base Camp.

On 18 June, another stretcher was made, this was a little better version and it allowed me to sleep in it. Thus after carriage of 6 days, I was installed at Base Camp as the others started the return march. It was a tremendous piece of mountain rescue from 20,000 ft. to 13,800 ft. over most difficult terrain. All the members, Sherpas and porters did a heroic job with calculated calmness in this remote corner of the Himalaya.

It was on the 20th at noon that Boga suddenly came running, shouting "Helicopter Helicopter!" I dragged myself out of the tent and it was the happiest sight of my life. As the helicopter took off, Nanda Devi was hidden in the clouds and my eyes searched towards our peak. Well, Devtoli, "The honours are even".<sup>1</sup>

We rushed through to Joshimath in 20 minutes and then to Bareilly. I was treated at the military hospital for the dislocated hip joint and hope to be kicking again soon.

Others arrived by the usual route back to Bombay. I had an extended vacation of 2 months in plaster with the thoughts of our climb and Nanda Devi Sanctuary to console me. Perhaps, it is a record that from 20,000 ft. to my bedroom in Bombay, I haven't taken a single step on my own feet!

<sup>1</sup>H. J. Vol. XXVIII, 1967-68, p. 112—words by Bob Pettigrew who also had a similar accident on Papsura.























