

IN FAMOUS FOOTSTEPS

A trek in Central Garhwal and Kumaon

HARISH KAPADIA

If we stop, we stand rooted like great mountains
If we walk, we sail through life.
We remember you at each step
and in doing so make you immortal.

THUS GOES A COUPLET. The caravans to Tibet sang it in the praise of Madhosing Rawat. He ran a tea shop between the Unta Dhura and Jainti Dhura passes on the famous Tibet trade route. Carrying wood in this barren terrain from far away Girthi, he served food and tea to the caravans. Trapped between two passes in storms, many were saved by this labour of love. His legend is still embalmed in traditional song.

In the area of Central Garhwal and Kumaon memories of other explorers also linger. Many famous names have visited the area from the earliest of times and left behind many 'ballads' of exploration by way of articles and books. We decided to follow in some of their footsteps and re-live their adventures. And in doing so we hoped to revive their memories along with many legends of these areas. Many small legends in the religious area give an insight into the simple faith of these simple people. These too are immortal, being handed down for generations.

While the earlier travellers had a long trek to reach Malari, we reached there by a motorable road comfortably via Joshimath. But nothing else had changed much, a sleepy village, mostly drunk by early evening, with small eating *dhabas*. At the outskirts was a giant walnut tree supposed to contain *chandan* (sandalwood) and it gave that flavour to the walnuts. The motorable road goes ahead till '8 point' — 8 km. ahead, where it crosses Girthi. But at first we planned to follow the Dhauri ganga (Amrit ganga valley).

Amrit Ganga Valley

It was on 11 June 1988 that our little caravan left Malari for Gamsali (3300 m) a famous stop on the way to Kamet (13 km). Here the Amrit ganga, draining the 40 km. long Bank Kund valley in the NW meets Dhauri. We went up the Amrit ganga valley to its head as it turned and twisted in various directions. At the head of this valley lies the Gupt Khal (5760 m), crossing

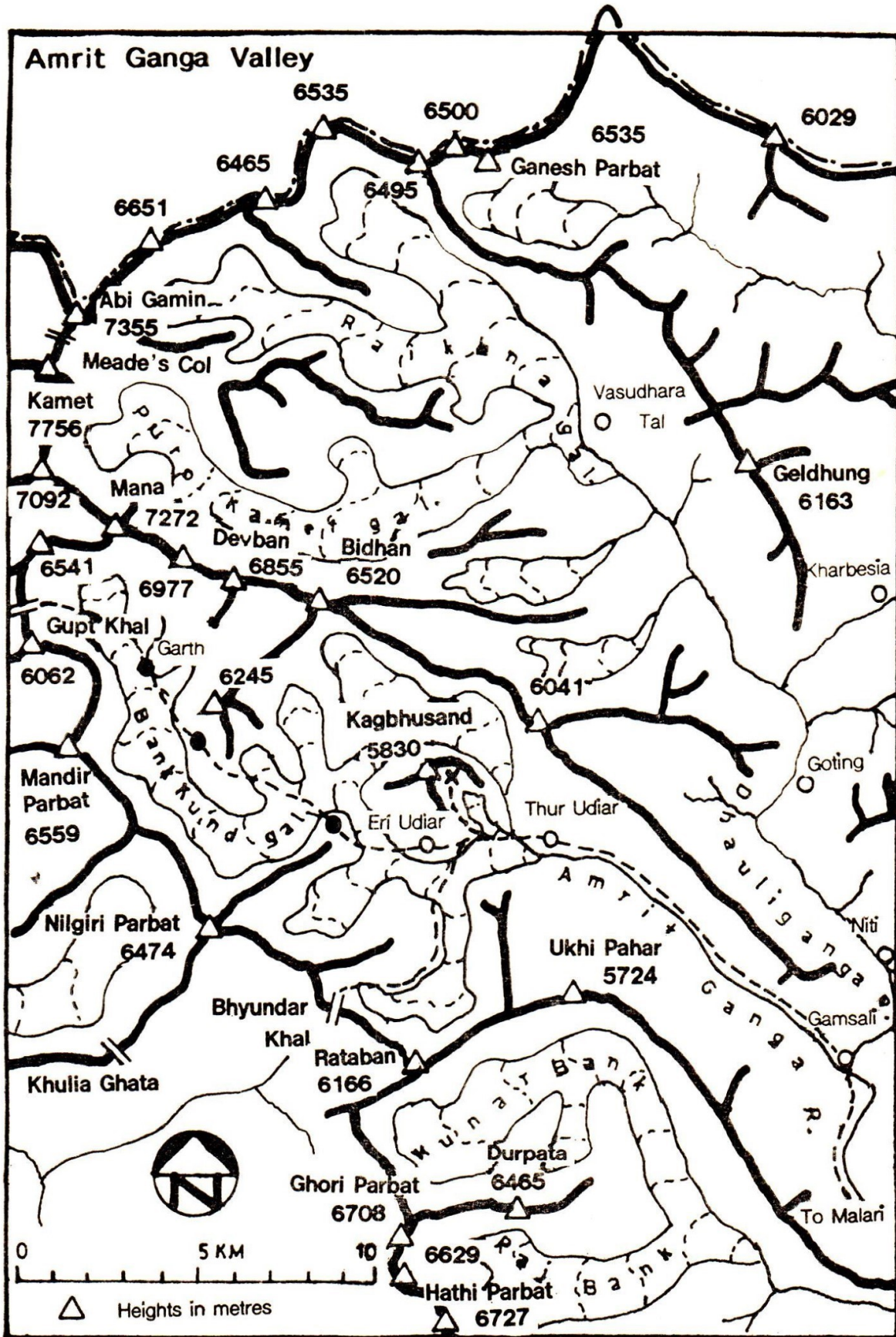
Photos 12 to 19

over Alaknanda valley into Mana village. This famous pass had been suspected by A. L. Mumm in 1907, who named it secret pass as it cannot be seen till the last slopes.¹ The successful Kamet expedition sought it in vain in 1931.² It was first crossed in 1937 by the surveyors R. C. A. Edge and R. Gardiner. Later in the same year Frank Smythe and P. Oliver used this pass on their way to the first ascent of Mana peak. This pass has been now reached a few times from the Alaknanda side to attempt Mana peak. Very few parties have crossed it from the Bank Kund valley. It is also known as 'Zaskar Pass' as it lies on the dividing line between the Great Himalayan and Zaskar ranges.

Going up the Bank Kund valley we reached Dumsain, a flat open maidan with a clear pond. Lord Badrinath, it is said, was eating food here when he saw a dead bull, pointed out to him by a big bird 'Bampa'. He felt very upset and broke into tears. His *aansu* (tears) rolled down into the pond turning into stones. Round pebbles are still to be found here. However, Badrinath went away to settle in the Alaknanda valley and Bampa was settled near Gamsali (village Bampa).

'For my part I would not readily exchange the exotic gardens of a Moghul Emperor for a sight of these little plants that lift their starry heads close to the eternal snows'.³ Thus wrote Frank Smythe of a ground between Thur and Eri Udiar where we established ourselves on the 12th. It was an idyllic camping site. A natural rock garden with flowers, turf, a small waterfall and a rivulet flowing in the centre. In fact now we were to follow his travels. Smythe had climbed up in the NW to the Devban plateau and climbed Pk 6435 m (later named Bidhan Parbat) and Devban (6853 m). Then going up the valley he reached Gupt Khal. He traversed over a c. 6600 m (21,500 ft) peak to climb Mana, finally reaching Badrinath across the pass.

We decided to divide ourselves to follow in three different directions. Allwyn and Harish left for Gupt Khal. 1 km ahead was Eri Udiar (cold cave) a bleak place. Going across the glacier to the right bank they reached Bank Kund lake (4380 m) 6 km. It was a most beautiful site with turquoise blue water and soft green grass around. A variety of chirping birds and a backdrop of an icefall made it a perfect setting. Next day after a 3 km climb on the moraine ridge, rubbles of the glacier had to be crossed again to the left and after a long day a camp was made below Garh (4870 m), 10 km, and on the next day they stopped on the glacier (5440 m) 6 km. On 17th they were ready to leave at 2 a.m. but a short hail-storm delayed departure till 7 a.m. The glacier was now flat. Behind rose the huge slopes of Nilgiri Parbat (6474 m) another 'first ascent' by Smythe in 1937. As they turned, Gupt Khal revealed its secret for the first time. It was a prominent de-



pression. As they came nearer they could see some figures on the pass. An exchange of shouts finally established that it was an Indian army team on a recce of Mana peak. Helped by their fixed rope on the final steep 200 m, the pass was reached at 11 a.m. (5760 m), 5 km. It was great fun exchanging notes at high altitude and an invitation to lunch at their camp on the Alaknanda side had to be reluctantly turned down. The terrain seems to have changed a lot since Smythe's time. The 21,500 ft peak to the north of the pass was a steep rocky pyramid. It cannot be used now, like Smythe did, to reach the upper plateau on Mana peak (7272 m).* Mandir Parbat (6559 m) in the south had a steep dome of a temple with ice-flutings. Not an easy proposition. The view across to the west was closed hiding Nilkantha and Chaukhamba. The party returned to base on the 19th after one camp.

During this period Milind and Sher Singh had gone up to Bhyundar Khal (5090 m) opposite our camp. Keeping in the centre of the southern moraine coming from Rataban, they turned west. By 11.50 a.m. they were looking across the last crevasse on the pass, 7 km. In the early days, this was the entrance to the valley. C. G. Bruce, A. L. Mumm and T. G. Longstaff crossed this pass from Bank Kund to Bhyundar valley in 1907⁴. According to Longstaff this pass was probably crossed by Richard Strachey in 1848 and by Edmund Smythe in 1862. In 1931 after climbing Kamet, the entire team crossed over from here followed by Capt Birnie later in the year. Smythe came over in 1937, naming the Bhyundar valley as 'Valley of Flowers'. In 1947 T. H. Braham⁵ and in 1954 Gurdial Singh⁶ crossed it. Now it is being crossed quite often. It is as much an easy passage as it is historic.

The other historic triangulated peak is of Kagbhusand (5830 m) guarding the entrance of Devban plateau. It has graceful shoulders supporting a delicately soaring peak. The top has a shape of *Garud* (eagle) whose other name is Kagbhusand. This peak is seen from a little above Gamsali, from Gupt Khal and even from the Girthi gorge. Thus it was an ideal triangulated point for the surveyors. A *garud* was listening secretly to Vedanta being recited by a sage at Kagbhusandi tal (near Bhyundar valley). He was caught and cursed to be frozen as rock and all the crows were cursed to die, leaving their wings there. On 7 July 1931 on their way back from the first ascent of Kamet, Shipton and Holdsworth attempted it to within 300 ft of the top, with difficult ice and rock work. Not to be outdone, Shipton paired with Nima Sherpa next day and managed to reach the top. Shipton called it 'severe' but he had climbed 5200 ft each day to accomplish it.⁷ Only one more ascent is achieved on this in 1970 (by the Indo-Tibet Border Police).

*The Indo-USA armies expedition however followed the same route in autumn 1988.

Arun and Muslim established two camps on the SE side. The route climbed up a steep grassy slope to a depression below an icefall. From the left of it the upper Bank Kund plateau was reached. However, the peak rose very steeply here. No way could they figure out how Shipton had dashed up in a day. Perhaps the terrain has changed beyond recognition. Finally a day of bad weather helped them to make up their minds to give up and come down. They did not find the dead crows either! With this we wound up our camp and retreated to Malari on the 22nd. Now three members were left for the major part of trip. Allwyn and Milind visited Valley of Flowers from the west linking it up with the Bhyundar Khal. Dr V. N. Desai trekked on the lesser known pilgrim trails to Bansi Narayan (4135 m) Rudranath (3610 m) and Tungnath (3680 m). This 100 km trek went through thick forests. Shipton in 1936 had descended from Satopanth glacier and had an anxious time in these thick woods infested with bears.⁸ It was more remarkable for the fact that Dr Desai was 70 years and with a lone porter who was 60!

Girthi Ganga Valley

Girthi Ganga originates from two glaciers, both flowing north at first, west of Unta Dhura. Girthi east valley is broad, drains the glacier at the foot of Nanda Gond and its waters are black. Girthi west valley drains the glaciers at the foot of Kholi (6114 m) and Chalab (6160 m). From a narrow and highly crevassed glacier milky white waters gush out. Then it flows westwards forcing a way through the gorge to meet Kio gad at Girthi Dobala and merge with Dhauri at Malari. This gorge was said to be first traversed by Dr Kurt Boeckh in 1893. Next record of its traverse is by the Scottish Himalayan expedition in July 1950.⁹ During their long journey they crossed this gorge climbing Uja Tirche (6203 m) at its entrance. We decided to follow their footsteps and explore the Girthi west valley which had had no visitors. The eastern valley is relatively broad and shepherds visit it.

On 23 June, we left the windy and bleak '8 point'. Following Girthi on its left bank, the route climbed up steeply and traversed across a bad scree patch. Finally it turned to enter the Siruanch valley. Suddenly we were amidst lovely pine, birch and rhododendron forests, one after another. From two deserted houses the route traversed to a camp on a lovely alp. We had an occasional view of Uja Tirche and the Tirsuli wall. The route now crossed the nala to go up 660 m to Dampu Dhar (4200 m) and down to Gangdeopani. Traversing to the right we landed at Johar Kharak. Opposite was Girthi Dobala with Kio gad draining Sumna and Laphthal valleys, near the Tibet border. This was the edge of the

Zaskar range. To the north of Girthi was the dry transhimalayan area. As we entered the Girthi gorge 600 m above the riverbed, Rambha Kot (5395 m) rose steeply opposite us. This intricate looking barren peak stands between Girthi and Kio gad. It is believed that the fairy Rambha pleases the gods here and towards dawn sometimes you even hear bells. It would be an ill-omen to disturb the gods at that time.

The route slowly solved itself with a descent of 700 m. There was no water anywhere and finally we were relieved to be camping at Dumpani (3500 m) 14 km.

'The brightest idea that Scott gave to the expedition was, to my mind, the eastward traverse from Malari on the Dhauli to Milam on the Gori by way of the Girthi River. If only we could make it we should thus link two great trade routes of Central Asia, and if only it were not too difficult the route might ultimately prove of value to travellers. From the broader view point, this passage would be of greater importance than the ascents of any mountain, and for that reason we had been puzzled by the lack of records.' (p. 187 *The Scottish Himalayan Expedition* by W. H. Murray).

On our return, in September 1988, we were fortunate to meet Douglas Scott (not to be mistaken for the younger Doug Scott) at Bombay, the originator of the idea. He vividly described the route with an unflinching memory at 77 years. They had crossed eight ravines with many drops and climbs. Nothing had changed, in fact at some places it had become worse. First we ran into Are Gadera a steep ravine full of snow. Afterwards we crossed Sangla Palyo which was a bowl of scree. Ahead came the beautiful Senyarupani alp. But it was getting late when we reached Dudhgarhi — the place of Dhanmaya. Some Tibetan god had crossed over and buried treasure here which inflames the trees. Opposite we could see almost a 'river' of lime-stone totally frozen. We were tired and so we decided to stay here. If we are lucky we may strike the Tibetan treasure too. In 1968 and 1984 a team from Delhi had crossed this gorge. With difficulty they could find a guide Gaur Sing. That too because he was going to Topidunga to look for his lost son Har Sing. Now this lost son came as a porter with us and told us that he had decided to stay at Milam with goats for two years causing anxiety to his family. Malari village boundary ends near Girthi. Some old houses stand as a testimony to their attempts at colonizing the area. All the grazing beyond this belongs to Milam. They come over the pass and spend summer months here. Across the Rambha Kot ridge was Girthi Dhura pass (5079) which led to Raoli on the Sumna-Lapthal route. A leisurely walk of 4 km brought us to Girthi (3620 m) and soon we were to set up a camp in a birch forest.

Attempt on Chalab

The Girthi west valley runs south for 4 km to the foot of Kholi. It bifurcates in a highly broken icefall in the SW to Chalab and climbs steeply in the SE to peak 6210 m. We made a camp (4300 m) at the bifurcation and turned SW. The icefall was a maze and after a day of recce we had to look for alternative. A steep grassy patch led up. We had to climb this 'Bharal Bypass', like its name sake, on all fours. An exposed traverse tested nerves even on fixed rope. I dropped an ice-axe and Muslim dropped his rucksack, conditions of both reminding us of our fate in case of a slip.

The valley opened up a little and following a moraine ridge. C2 was made at 4920 m. But the route ahead was disappointing. There was no way to reach the col to the north of Chalab (6160 m) which was the only route possible to the summit. Arun and Harish tried a circuitous route but it did not go. Muslim and Arun finally tried to go up 'Girthi Top' (c. 6120 m), north of Chalab. After a gruelling 10 hour climb they were stopped at 5960 m. We had to call it off. We had enjoyed and climbed as much as was feasible for a small party.

Across Unta Dhura

Topidunga has a peculiar location and name. Situated in a bowl it resembles an inverted hat (Topi) of rocks. Or it derives the name by a giant rock in shape of a hat, a rare sight for people coming from Tibet. This is an important junction. Route to the south leads to Unta Dhura (5360 m) (to Milam), to the southeast to Jainti Dhura (5592 m) and to the east to Kungribingri la (5548 m) to Tibet. In the north lies Khingri Dhura (5244 m) leading to Lapthal. Thus it has a strategic and isolated position.

Girthi to Topidunga (4200 m) was a day's walk (12 km) via Gangharia where Girthi east joined. We were to follow the trail over Unta Dhura. Until the 1962 war with China, this pass bore heavy trade traffic. Caravans would come from Tibet across Kungribingri la, Jainti Dhura and Unta Dhura in one day. Then they would go down to Dung (4000 m), 14 km, to Samgong and Milam.

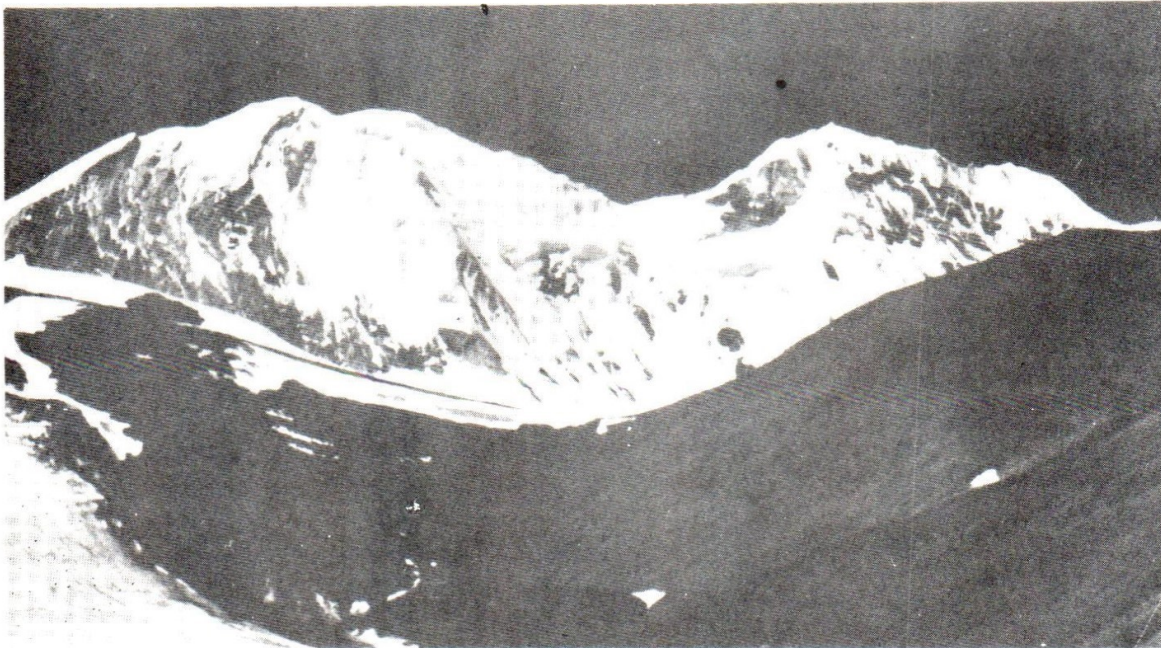
Unta Dhura, has had many visitors. Amongst the available records are crossings by Lt Hugh Rose¹⁰ in 1931, Longstaff and party in 1907, W. H. Murray in 1950 and A. D. Moddie and Gurdial Singh in 1959¹¹ — to mention just a few. On 8 July in brilliant sunshine we were at the ruins of Madhosing Rawat's tea stall, below the pass. The strong winds and bleak surroundings were alleviated only by the grey lake of Gangpani. One can understand why Madhosing is revered even today. A cup of tea here between the two passes would certainly be worth a ballad. The view was also encompassing and one could clearly see Himalaya as a barrier. As we left



16. Looking south from Gupt Khal (5790 m). Peak 6080 m (right), Mandir Parbat (6529 m) (centre) and Peak 6393 m (left).

Article 8

(Harish Kapadia)



17. Nanda Gond (6315 m) on left and unnamed Peak 6080 m on right: Northeast face near Unta Dhura pass (5360 m).

the pass, down to Pari Tal (lake of fairies) we could admire the human effort to cross this barrier. What motivation and efforts would lead caravans of loaded goods across this terrain? The route descended steeply to Dung (4000 m), 14 km, and via Samgong to Milam (3424 m), the meeting place of caravans.

The site of this historic village made us both happy and sad. Once about 500 houses nestled here. Now a few families in ruined houses live a few months in the year. Behind the 'Dudhpani' stream ('stream of milk-white pure water') still flowed but it brought no prosperity. There were heavy rounded stones in a square which were lifted as sport by youngsters. Now with the trade closed, all have gone to the plains and only the ruins stand.

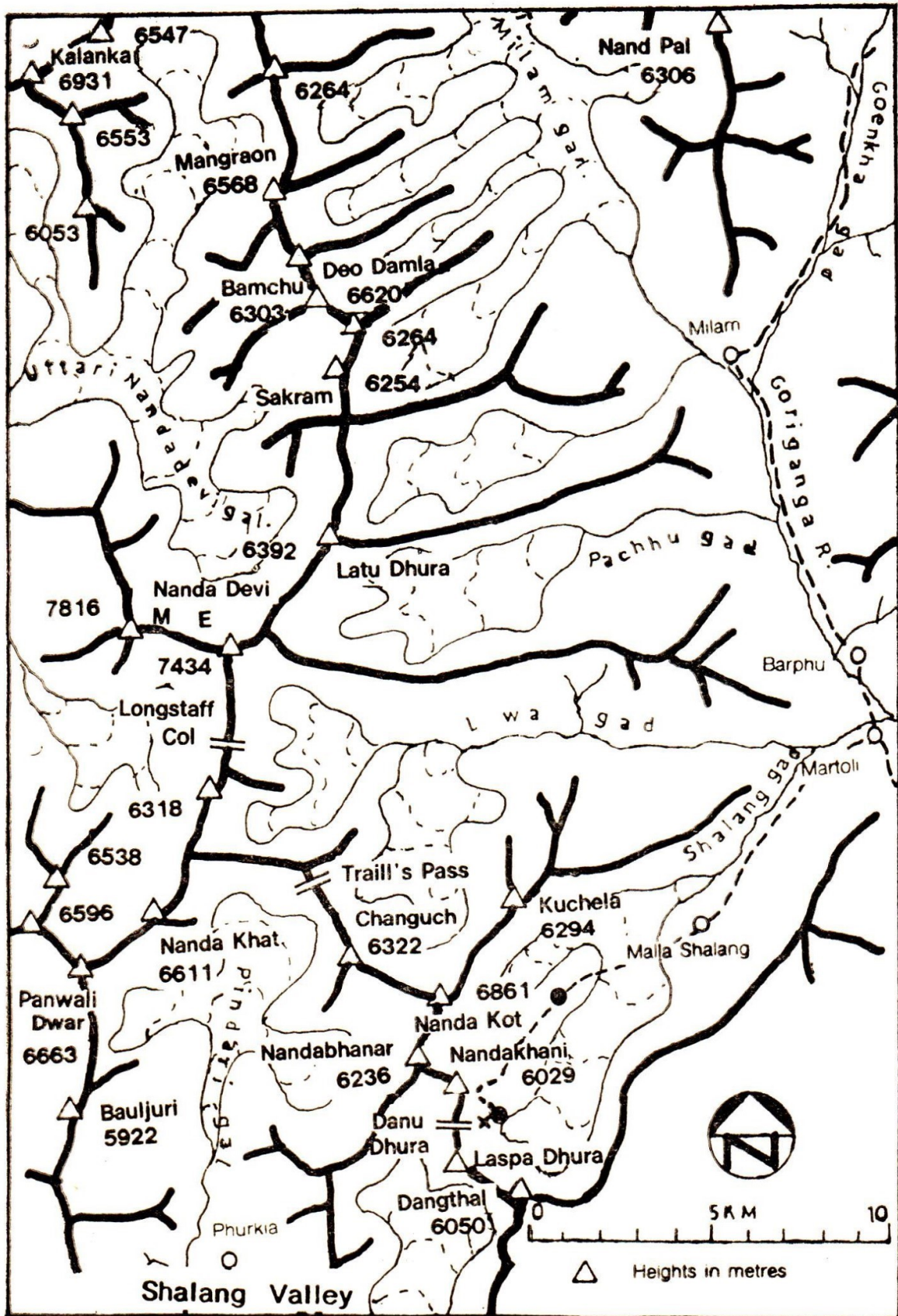
In these ruins lay the stories of the past. Gorkha Kyul is a strong building. It was built of heaviest stones by a Rani (queen) who used it as a protection against the Gorkha invasion. She erected cairns on surrounding ridges which appeared as humans. The gorkhas were kept away and scared for a while looking for the Rani as she roamed in male dress. She washed her face one morning with both hands at Ranikot (where Gori ganga and Goenkha gad meet) little outside Milam. As the tradition goes, a man washes with only one hand while ladies with both. She was thus identified and killed, leaving behind many songs of valour.

In 1950 the Scots had met the missionary L. C. J. Moules (a member of the Himalayan Club). He moved up with the *mawasa* (families) doctoring the caravans. He is still remembered and missionaries are present below. But there are no Christians at all. 'Christ cured with their medicines and now our gods also cure with ours'. So all reconverted themselves, as one villager put it!

9 July was a Saturday. By evening we saw large group of villagers marching towards Milam. They were all coming to watch the popular Hindu religious serial 'Ramayan' on the T.V. Next day the jawans from the border post also arrived to this solitary idiot box within miles. Many had walked almost 30 km to view this. About a decade ago almost 500 goats were sacrificed here at the temple on arrival, one by each family. All this was changed by the swami of Martoli. But still that evening people gathered to look at 'ghera' a circular rainbow around the sun. It brings bad weather.

Danu Dhura

Bad weather it did bring, but after 4 days. We trekked to Martoli on 10 July and camped at the beautiful Nanda Devi mandir. Martoli led to Lwa gad in the west. Dr Longstaff and two guides passed here to reach the famous col on the Nanda Devi saddle, now named after him. The famous Traill's Pass had visitors from Martoli to Pindari valley. The pass reached in 1830 by G. W.



Traill, the first Deputy Commissioner of Kumaon, who in words of A. L. Mumm 'exercised a benevolent and active despotism from 1817 to 1835'. Among other famous parties here were: the Schlagintweits (1850), Ruttledge (1926), Japanese Nanda Kot team (1936), Osmaston and the surveyors (1938), Arnold Heim (1937) and S. S. Khera (1941).¹²

J. C. Donaldson wrote in June 1945 about the 'Possible alternative to Traill's Pass',¹³ In August 1926 after their crossing H. Ruttledge and R. C. Wilson left four Martoli villagers including the famous guide Dewansing Lata. They went over a different route to Shalang gad (SW of Martoli), reaching Martoli in one day. We planned to go up Shalang gad and to locate this alternative to Traill's Pass.

Inquiries with villagers revealed that surprisingly they had heard of this alternate pass from Shalang but not from Lwa. All remembered that Dewansing took Ruttledge sahib across and was rewarded of this alternate pass from Shalang but not from Lwa. All remembered with land and guns. Some old persons had crossed this pass. But without exception, no one remembered the real Traill's Pass.

We went up the beautiful Shalang valley on 12 July. As we camped at Talla Shalang (4200 m) the monsoon caught up with us. It was raining in these parts after 4 years and with a vengeance. We halted here for 3 days with shepherds as company. Young Kalyansing peeped inside the kitchen on the first day and slept the whole day there. Our anxious inquiries about the weather always had a reply from him: *Rook bhi sakta hai.* (it can stop *also*). With this *also* added he always kept up our hopes and despair. So much for the local advice. For 4 days he gave us lectures on 'goat culture' and traditions of shepherding in the valley. On the 16th, Chiring We (6559 m) opened to view in the east, and with hopes we pushed up to Bhadeli Gwar (4600 m) at the foot of the climb. This was the sacred place of 'Danu god'. The god hailed from Danpur, across the pass in Pindar valley. People from Badhiakot (near Rupkund-Pindari trail) come here to worship. It is not without significance that gods travel across valleys and high passes. There had to be a traditional pass here over which people of Danpur crossed and had installed their god.

Philistines may say that we were becoming superstitious like Kalyansing. But true enough, two separate recesses by Arun and Harish revealed an excellent safe route. Moreover there were some giant cairns all along, marking the route. This was 'Danu Dhura' (5560 m). The exact location of the pass was on the saddle between Nandakhani (6029 m) and Laspa Dhura (5913 m) on the western edge of Shalang gad. Above it led to the snow-plateau below Nandabhanar (6236 m). At the SW end a depression led to Sal Changuj glacier and down to Kupi Dhura and Phurkia.

Early on the 17th, the three of us left, climbing 600 m on scree behind Bhadeli Gwar to a giant cairn. A safe traverse on snow led to the bottom of the final climb of 200 m to the pass. It was on scree and led to the flat ridge top. But for us that was the end of the road. By 2 p.m. we were caught in snowfall and had to camp where we were at 5200 m. Next day it deteriorated further and we had no option but to play safe. An unknown high pass on the otherside could have trapped us.

However, we were satisfied about the existence of the pass from this side. Later we could check with photos and accounts of expeditions to Nandabhanar that the pass we saw would lead to the upper plateau.¹⁴ It would descend to the Sal Changuj glacier to Kupa Dhura and Phurkia on Pindari trail. An inviting proposition — to test the strength of 'Danu Dhura'.

As we came down to the shepherd's camp, Kalyansing was singing with rain pouring outside. Something looked amiss with him looking red, in new clothes and a cap. He had taken a bath after 4 months — on one of the wettest days! We went down to Martoli (16 km) and on the Tibet trade route to Bugdiar (19 km) and Lilam (20 km). Gori ganga was in full flood, but the track, work of generations, was solid as ever. As roads were blocked ahead of Munsiary, we trekked along Gori ganga to Madkot. This was a fortress of devils Mad and Ketab. They cheated the gods while making a bridge across the Gori ganga but were rehabilitated. Now only last year that bridge is complete and an alternate motorable road connects Munsiary. The 66 km road to Jauljibi on the Nepal border across the Kali river is unspoiled forest and a treat to walk. It remains to be seen whether this new road and a proposed dam turns the valley into an abode of the devil once again.

As we ended our trek we felt satisfied. Having followed many historical trails, it was a journey into history. And history had not changed here much over the years. As Kalyansing was singing:

'Only two things are missing up here: a ladder to climb up to the sky and a lid to cover the ocean'.

Summary: The expedition followed the four famous treks in Central Garhwal and Kumaon. In 45 days, 315 km high altitude ground was covered with attempts on 3 peaks. It reached 3 high passes and explored one unknown pass, covering 4 river valleys.

Peaks:

1. Kagbhusand (5830 m — 19,130 ft) Attempted till 5300 m by Arun and Muslim, high point reached on 19 June.

2. Chalab (6160 m — 20,210 ft) Attempted till 5700 m by Harish, Arun and Muslim, high point reached on 3 July.
3. 'Girithi Top' (c. 6120 m — c. 20,080 ft) Attempted till 5960 m by Arun and Muslim, high point reached on 4 July.

Passes:

1. Gupt Khal (5790 m — 18,990 ft) Reached by Harish, Allwyn and Har Sing on 17 June.
2. Bhyundar Khal (5090 m — 16,700 ft) Reached by Milind and Sher Sing on 17 June.
3. Unta Dhura (5360 m — 17,580 ft) Crossed by Harish, Arun and Muslim with 4 porters on 8 July.
4. 'Danu Dhura' (5560 m — 18,250 ft) (An alternate to Traill's Pass) Reached up to 5340 m by Harish, Arun and Muslim on 17 July.

The expedition operated along the two major river valleys of Dhauli ganga and Gori ganga. Four of its large tributaries were followed from the mouth to the source; namely Amrit ganga, Girithi ganga, Goenkha gad and Shalang gad.

Members: Harish Kapadia (leader), Arun Samant and Muslim Contractor. (Allwyn Carvalho, Milind Pansare and Dr Vasant Desai joined in the first part).

Dates: From 4 June to 31 July 1988.

Sponsored by: The Mountaineers, Bombay.

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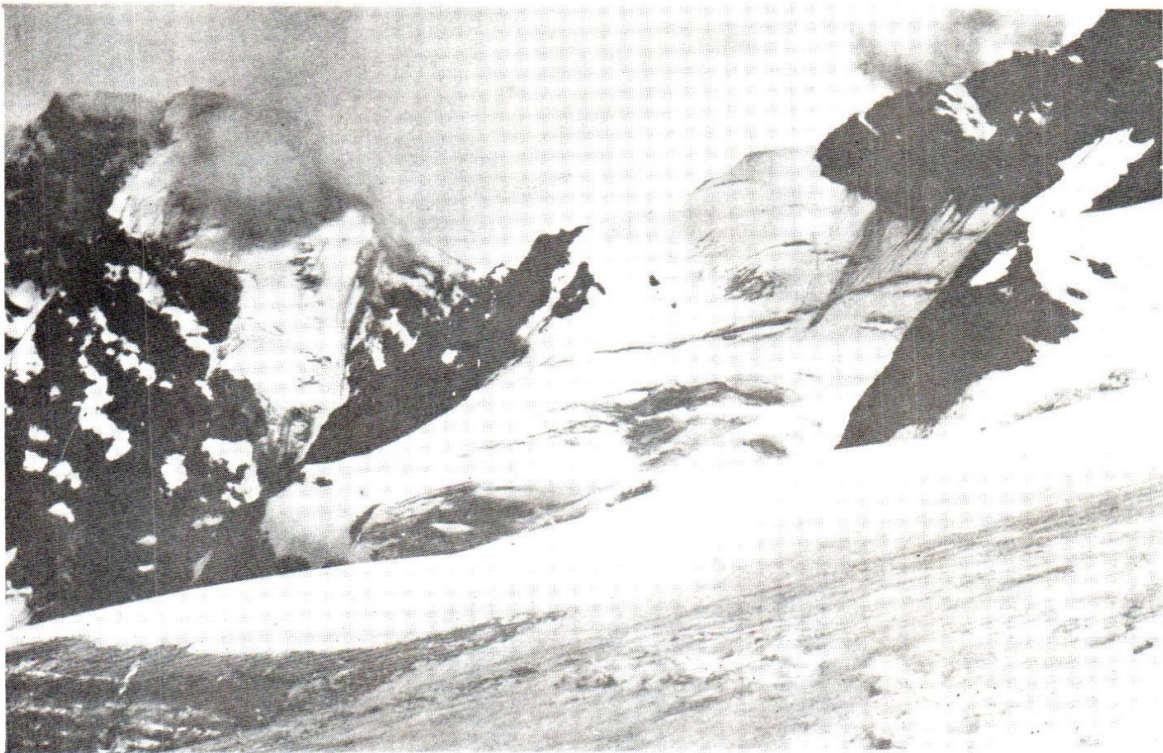




18. Dangthal (6050 m): North face. View from upper Shalang valley.

Article 8

(Harish Kapadia)



19. 'Danu Dhura' (5560 m) — an alternate to Traill's Pass from the upper Shalang valley, looking SW from the last camp. The pass lies on the snow-col off right centre.



