

## TEMPTATIONS OF KEDAR

HARISH KAPADIA

**'D**ON'T YOU GET tired of fumes and pilgrims?' my friends always asked me, whenever I planned a trip to the pilgrim centres of Garhwal; namely Badrinath, Gangotri, Jamnotri and Kedarnath. I had been to the former three but the last one had not been visited by me. So there we were, on our way jostling with the pilgrims, along the Mandakini towards Kedarnath.

These pilgrim areas have been visited by the faithful for hundreds of years. Much has been written about them, in vernacular literature also. As a young person every Indian aspires to know about it and is attracted towards it. But as a trekker I was always fascinated by the variety of opportunities these valleys offered. These temples are situated high in the different valleys. Using them as a base, a lot can be done in the surrounding ridges, peaks and valleys.

First the 'fumes', there were none. A comfortable taxi ride of 6 hours dropped us at Gupta Kashi, our first destination. From the lovely bungalow, we saw the gathering clouds and enjoyed the fine temple nearby. We were in the Mandakini valley. A little below us, the Madhyamaheshwar ganga joined the Mandakini and all these waters join the Ganges.

### **Madhyamaheshwar**

Eric Shipton and Bill Tilman will always remain linked with this valley. Though pilgrims visited this temple, NE of Gupta Kashi, it was brought to the notice of the western world by the exploits of these two in 1934.

---

Starting from the Satopanth glacier near Badrinath, they planned to descend to this valley in 4-5 days, with their Sherpas. After forcing their way through a sheer ice wall they faced some of the thickest forest. As they hacked their way through and crossed and re-crossed many streams, they ran short of food. They struggled to live on bamboo-shoots, but had to compete with bears, for bears also love the shoots. The situation was near hopeless. Finally, one afternoon they dimbed up a ridge to have their first glimpse of a village. The Sherpas were joyous. But Tilman greeted the site with a typical dry comment, for which he was well-known: 'We shall be down in time for tea', to which Shipton merely stuttered "Thank heaven for that!"

In fact, Shipton and Tilman were trying to explore a legend. It was said that, many hundred year ago, the priest at the Badrinath temple crossed over a pass in one day to the Kedarnath temple to perform puja, serving both the temples on the same day. It was believed that there could be a pass joining the temples, known to the priests. Shipton and Tilman decided to investigate this by crossing from the nearest low point with near disastrous results. Their trip exemplifies the difference between knowledge and legends or facts and fiction.<sup>1</sup>

But since reading about the trip, my imagination was always excited about visiting this valley. Two trekkers from Bengal were lost here in 1986 trying to reverse the Shipton-Tilman route and were presumed dead. Hence we did not plan any heroics but wanted to simply to investigate the upper reaches. But we were summarily defeated in the purpose by the untimely rain and fog. Not that one minds that, for the temple and its surroundings are beautiful.

As the legend goes, Shiva was chased by Pandavas of the Mahabharata fame. To run away from them, he assumed the form of a bull. When the Pandavas discovered this, they held the bull-by-the-tail. Shiva buried himself at Kedarnath with only his shoulder visible. This 'shoulder' is worshipped today at Kedarnath temple. Other parts of the bull emerged at four other places, including the centre at Madhya (centre) maheshwar (a name of Shiva). But geographically two rivers flow here. From the north Markand ganga, and from the south Madhyamaheshwar ganga, on the two sides of the hill on which the temple stands. Hence the explanation for the name could simply be; 'Shiva temple on the hill in centre of two rivers'. 'What is the significance of Madhyamaheshwar temple?' my companion Jehangir, a Yoga teacher from Bombay, was inquiring with the only priest at the temple. After narrating two different stories, the priest inquired with Jehangir how

---

1 See *Nanda Devi* by Eric Shipton, part 4, 'The Second Crossing of the Watershed (Badrinath-Kedarnath).'



to reduce his belly! Each to his own profession. Thinking of the route we had come up, it was a wonder that the priest was fat.

Starting from Gupta Kashi (1480 m), we had descended to Kalimath (6 km). From this ancient temple, dedicated to the goddess Kali, it was up-hill all the way. We trekked on a broad path to Raonalek (8 km), and stopped at Ransi (1980 m — 6 km) for the night. Next day, through some lovely pine forests, the route descended to Gaundar (1400m — 6 km). Here, to the north, was the nala and the valley through which Shipton's party had descended in 1934. Ahead was the steep climb of 1900 m in one continuous slope. In a 10 km climb, we crossed Khandar (2020m 3 km) and Nanu (2330 m — 2 km) to reach Madhyamaheshwar (3290 m — 5 km). All along the route we could get food, and tea shops were aplenty.

We stayed in comfortable quarters near the temple. But as we climbed up to Budha Madhyamaheshwar (3500 m — 2 km) clouds gathered and we were denied the supposedly close and excellent view of the Chaukhamba group. From here a *gaddi* track leads to Kashni tal, a lake at 4730 m. Many other trekking routes are possible from here. A little above the lake some of the various gullies would lead a qualified party across the watershed to the Panpatia Bank and the Badrinath valley. This route was heard of by the locals and, perhaps, Shipton's party was one valley to the north (Satopanth Bank) of a possible crossing.

Towards the east, Maindgalla tal and Pandosera (5120 m) are visited by the shepherds. Crossing a small watershed ridge one can descend to Rudranath which is another temple of Shiva and has an exit to the south.

For two days near the temple we observed the rituals. Two assistants looked after the washings and all the preparations for the simple worship. Our friend the priest then made an appearance for the *aarti* and did the final perambulations, the activity certainly not enough to keep him physically fit! Jehangir showed him some Yoga *asanas*. When we left, we were firmly convinced that the priest may rise spiritually but would not reduce an inch at the belly!

### **Kedarnath**

Back at Gupta Kashi we travelled by taxi to Gauri Kund, the starting point for the Kedarnath temple. Filth, crowds and noise accompanied us for 14 km upto the temple. With so many *dhabas*, pilgrims and sadhus on the way, a trekker can be cheated off. At every 100 m or so a sadhu sat wishing you *Jai Kedar* (Hail Kedar). But this was the ploy to draw your attention to give alms to him. As the day progressed, the sharpness of tone of the 'Jai Kedar' could clearly tell you how much his earnings had been for the day.



But at Kedarnath (3600 m), if you look away from the temple and the crowds, a majestic range rises within about 4 km, running from east to west. There are great south faces of Bhartekhunta (6578 m), Kedarnath (6940 m), Rock Tower (6150 m), Sumeru Parbat (6350 m), Mandani Parbat (6193 m) ending in the great Chaukhamba massif, (6954 m). These south faces would provide some great climbing to the challengers. The Italians are active here. The only two peaks climbed here are: Kedarnath in 1988 (G. Mandellin, H.J. Vol. 45, p. 45, p. 186) and Rock Tower in 1990 (Stefano Righetti, H.J. Vol. 48, p. 182). Both the climbs were achieved during their second expedition, after their first attempts had failed during the previous years. Within one day of availability of supplies, some serious climbing can be undertaken with Kedarnath temple as a starting point.

On 31 August I climbed up to Vasuki tal (4300 m) on the west. It was a beautiful tarn but its importance to the mountaineers lies in the opportunities it offers nearby. Numerous peaks between 5400 to 6000 m and cross country routes to the Dudhganga and Chorabari glaciers are very tempting. Not much has been done here and, except for army trekking parties, the climbers have not explored it. A lot can be done here in a short time; if you can tolerate the pilgrims, as my learned friend would put it.

#### **Bhilangna valley**

About 10 km before Gauri Kund a route bifurcates from Sonprayag to Triyugi Narayan. A beautiful temple nestles here. A well-trodden trekking route adjoining Bhilangna valley joins here.

Almost a decade ago in October 1982, Geeta and myself had landed here. The Bhilangna valley draining the river of the same name, is a beautiful and relatively unspoilt valley between the Gangotri and Kedarnath shrines. The entrance to the valley is from Gamsali and Ghuttu, reached by bus, 194 km from Dehra Dun.

In two stages of 10 km each the track reaches Gangi (via Reeh). This friendly village has a spectacular view. But something is strange about the people here. Due to the close community and inter-marriages, many seemed queer. Ahead, the track proceeds via Kalyani to Bhelbagi and finally to Bhumka, the last camping ground before the Khatling glacier.

One of the early visitors here was Dr. J. B. Auden. During his exploratory visit to the Gangotri area he had finally crossed a pass between Gangotri III (6577 m) and Jogin I (6465 m) peaks from Rudugaira Bamak. He descended to the Bhilangna valley. This col is now called 'Auden's Col' and the route was repeated twice in 1983, from both directions (H.J. Vol. 40, p. 168).

On the NW of the Bhilangna valley lies a group of peaks: Kairi (5435 m), Draupadi-Ka-Danda (5724 m) and even an approach to Jaonli (6632 m) is possible. On the NE, via the Dudhganga Bamak one can join the route at Vasuki tal and descend to Kedarnath.

We retrated to Gangi. The old pilgrim route traversed valleys: from Gangotri to Budha Kedar, descended to Gangi, across Bhilangna valley to climb the eastern ridge, locally called Panwali Kanta. We followed this track. Leaving Gangi early morning, we crossed the river on a *pucca* bridge. A continuous and steep climb saw us on the ridge, at Talli, camping without any water-source. We were on the Panwali Kanta. The route proceeds north on this flattish ridge awarding some of the finest views of peaks: Jaonli, Thalay Sagar and others. After a hard day we reached a small depression called Khimkhola khal and turned east to descend to Mugu Chatti and Triyugi Narayan near the Kedarnath route.

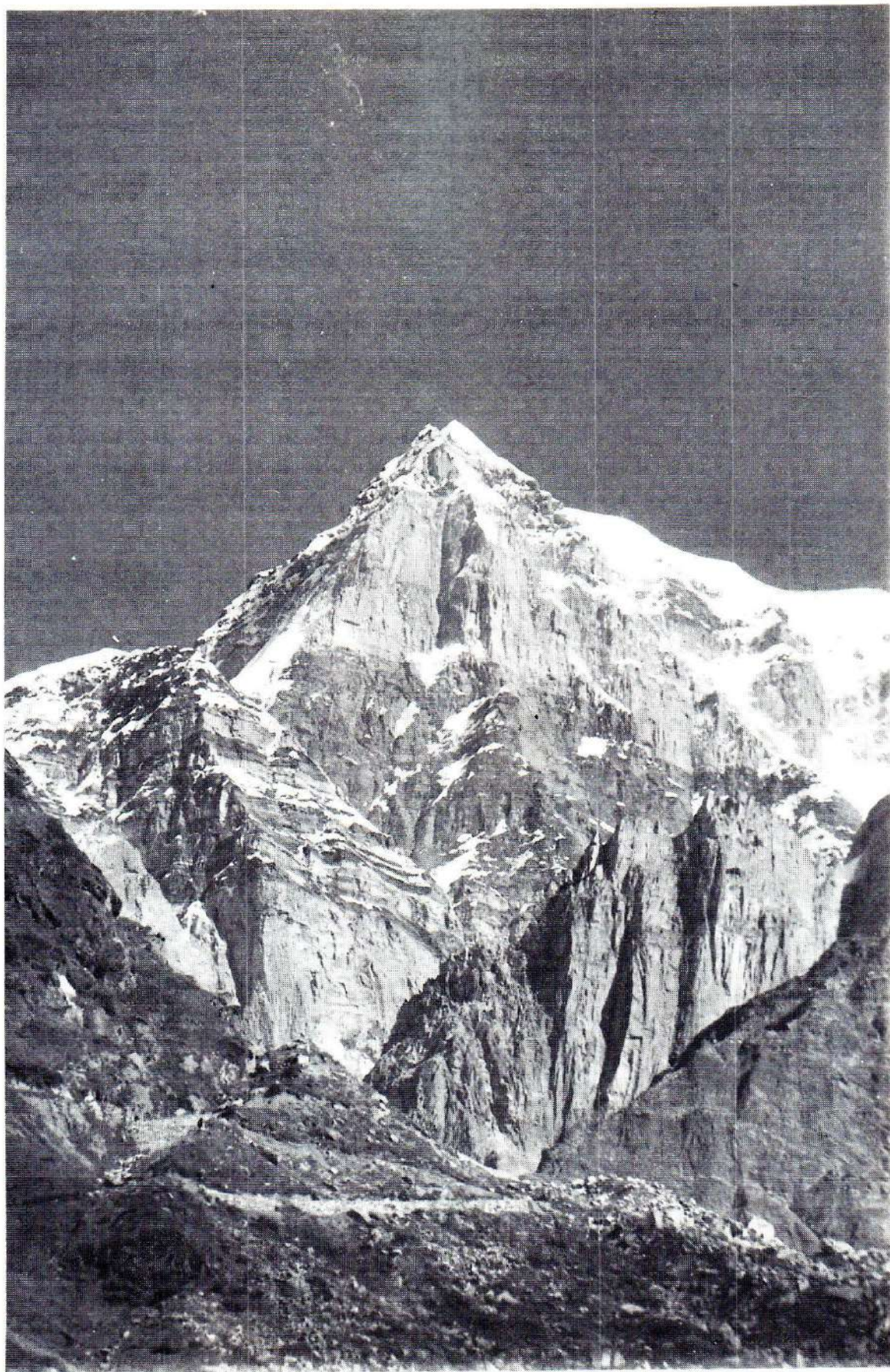
This is just a small selection of the variety of opportunities available for trekkers and climbers in the valleys near Kedarnath. With food and shelter available a trekker can enjoy some fine mountain scenery — if you can tolerate 'fumes and pilgrims'. And if you can say '*Jai Kedar*'.

**Summary:** Treks and suggestions for the possibilities of climbs in the Mandakini and Bhilangna valleys in Garhwal. Kedarnath and Madhyamaheshwar valleys, visited in August 1992 (Jehangir Palkhivala and the author): Bhilangna valley visited in October 1982 (Geeta Kapadia and the author).

*Photos 45-46-47*

*Panorama E*





47. Bharte Khunta (6578 m), SE face from Kedarnath temple.

*Note 17*

(Harish Kapadia)



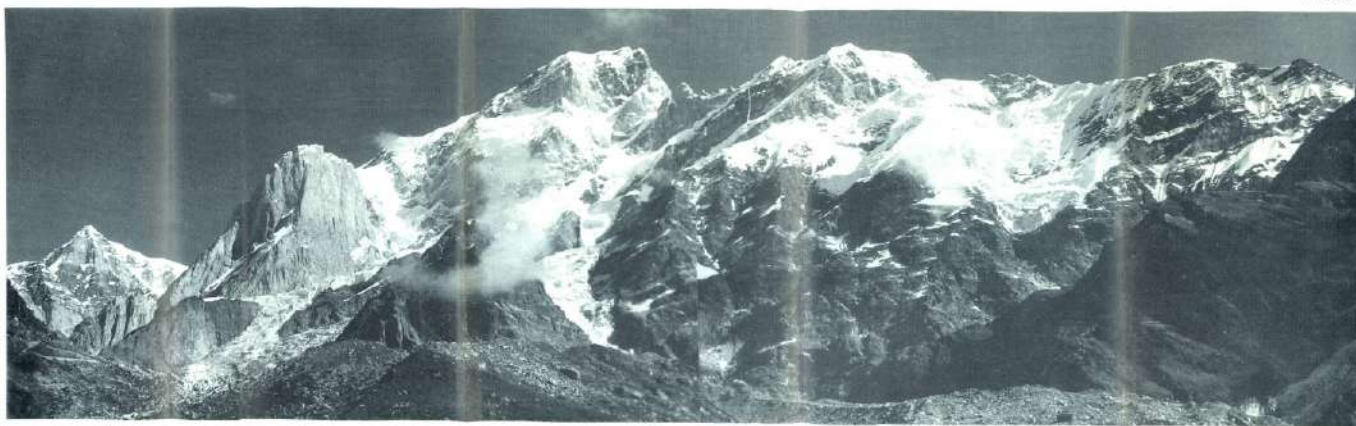
BHARTE KHUNTA

ROCK TOWER

N  
KEDARNATH

SUMERU PARBAT

YEONBUK



PANORAMA F: Gangotri glacier wall, rising above Kedarnath temple. Left to right: Bharte Khunta (6578 m), Rock Tower (6150 m), Kedarnath (6940 m), Sumeru Parbat (6331 m) and Yeonbuk (5953 m), south face.  
(Harish Kapoor)

Now 17





45. South face of Kedarnath (6940 m), from Kedarnath temple.

*Note 17*

(Harish Kapadia)





46. Rock Tower (6150 m), close up from Kedarnath temple.

*Note 17*

(Harish Kapadia)