
A DAWN IN WINTER

The Legend of Usha

HARISH KAPADIA

THE FOREST WAS full of snow. The snow covered by pine needles crunched crisply under our feet and was an exciting way to walk on. Going up slowly through the forest of pines, then deodars, giving way to birch and rhododendrons was a unique experience. We were the only party in the valley. We were two of us, climbing slowly, chatting briefly all the way and viewing the distant ranges in a cloudless sky. It was intensely cold, a mild breeze also made us shiver. We had to spend almost 18 hours inside tents, once the sun disappeared. It was too cold to venture outside at -20 degrees, especially for our two porters. Whenever the terrain was mixed with rocks and snow it was hell to walk on, for at every step one feared to plunge into a hole. These were the mixed emotions that we felt while trekking in the Kinnaur in the winter of 1996-1997.

The sky was grey and cloudy when we reached Shimla.

'You should have come a week earlier. It was clear for almost two months. Now I am afraid the winter has arrived. You may have trouble'. Our friend in Shimla sounded an ominous warning.

Hesitantly he added, 'Can I do anything for you?'. I could not ask him to interfere with the weather even though he was a respected government official.

My other companion, Rajesh Gadgil was a young mountaineer from Bombay and had decided to take along ropes and other

equipment, just in case we could try our hand at Hansbeshan (5240 m). I had heard of this peak, the highest in the Nachar area, several years ago. It rose on the Gangdari Dhar which divided the Satluj valley with the Pabbar valley in the south. No one seems to have examined it at close quarters. Our other two companions were Kumaoni porters, one of them the evergreen Harsinh. This time Harsinh had brought along a young companion named Dansinh. This young boy had never ventured out of his village and was seeing trains and taxis for the first time. He had a peculiar habit of replying in duplicates. If you asked for tea, his reply would be, '*Han Han* (yes yes) I'll bring it.' We never minded it as long as it was never a *na na* (no no).

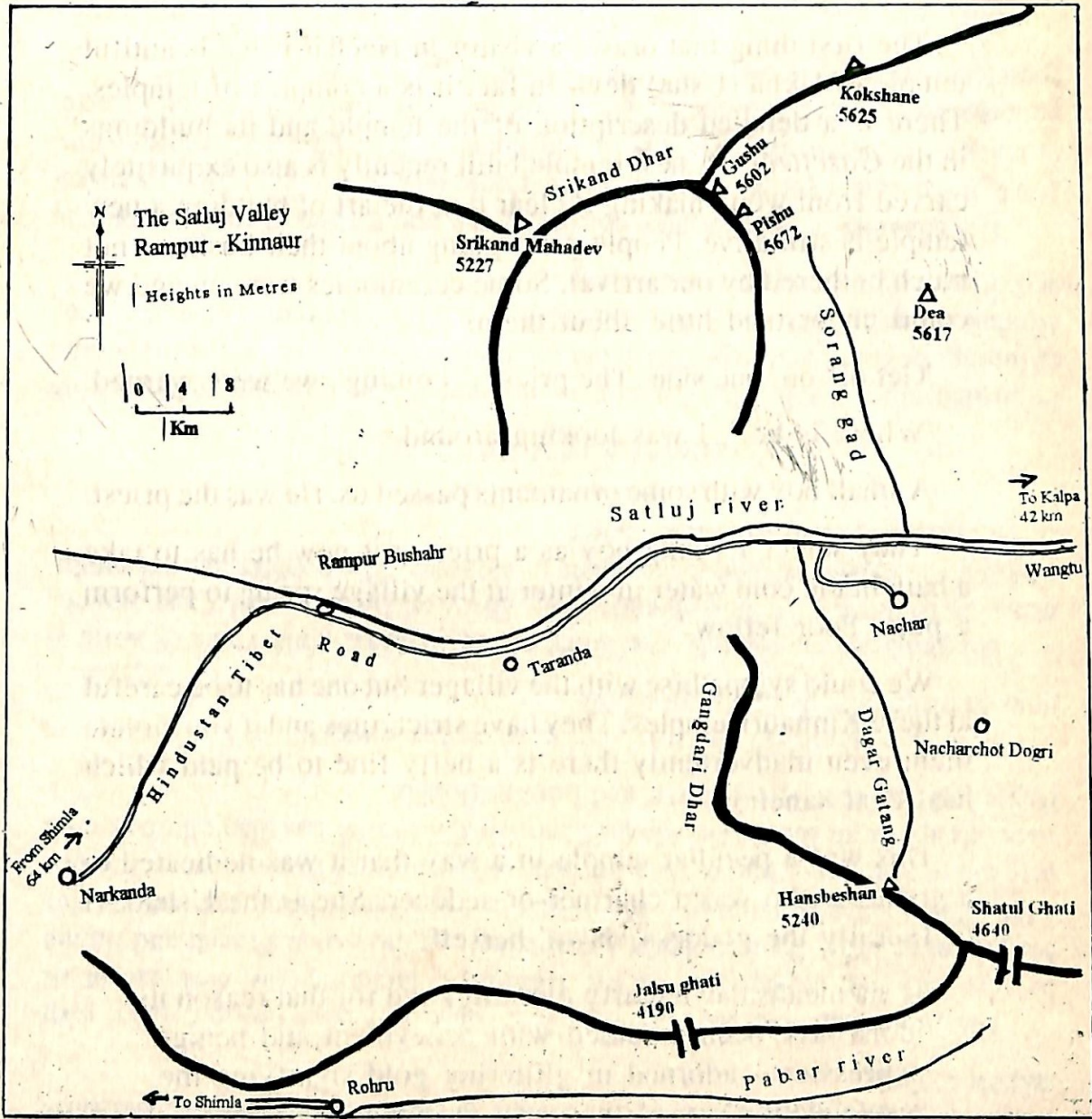
After a night in Rampur-Bushahr on the Christmas day in 1996 we reached Nachar, which was 16 km above the main highway leading from Shimla to Rekonig Peo, the headquarters of the Kinnaur district. Immediately we were charmed by the place. Nachar, originally known as Nalche is situated in the pargana *Athara bis*. It is now a tehsil headquarters. The old Hindustan-Tibet road passed through here and many travellers had passed through this village. Capt. Alexander Gerard in his book¹ mentions Nachar and the thick forest above it. He had also travelled to the south of Nachar, crossing Shatul ghati pass². He visited several other passes in the nearby Pabbar valley, leading to the Sangla valley. Amongst other visitors who wrote about Nachar was Andrew Wilson³. But all had one thing in common to write about the forest above Nachar.

A beautiful forest rest-house and a garden, which was constructed by Mr. G.G. Minniken, the popular Deputy Conservator of Bashahr division stands here. The scenery all around is very beautiful. In the thick forests and rocky glens from this place downwards goral and thar antelopes abound. Black and red bears are also met with, the latter inhabiting the higher and colder portions of the range. The red bear is abundant on the heights above Nachar. Here they are both said to attack

¹ *Account of Koonawar in the Himalaya* (Alexander Gerard)

² *Tours In the Himalaya* (Alexander Gerard)

³ *Abode of Snow* (Andrew Wilson)



and kill sheep and goats, and they are often such a nuisance that the local people vie with each other to kill them. The climate is noted for its delicacy. The musk deer is found in the forest.⁴

The first thing that draws a visitor in Nachar is the beautiful temple of Ukha (Usha) devi. In fact it is a complex of temples. There is a detailed description of the temple and its buildings in the *Gazetteers*. A new temple built recently is also exquisitely carved from wood making it clear that the art of building a new temple is still alive. People were going about their business not much bothered by our arrival. Some ceremonies were on and we could understand little about them.

'Get off on one side. The priest is coming', we were warned.

'Where is he?', I was looking around.

A small boy with some ornaments passed us. He was the priest.

'They select a young boy as a priest, for now he has to take a bath in the cold water in winter at the village spring to perform a puja. Poor fellow.'

We could sympathise with the villager but one has to be careful at these Kinnauri temples. They have strict rules and if you violate them even inadvertently there is a hefty fine to be paid which has legal sanction.

This was a peculiar temple in a way that it was dedicated to a goddess who was a charmer or seducer. She is the Ushadevi or literally the goddess 'dawn' herself.

Usha means dawn (early morning) and for that reason its idols have been moulded with benevolent and benign expression - adorned in glittering gold signifying the resplendent glory of the early morning. There are, however a number of legends associated with Usha who in a number of Puranic legends is the generic name of the heavenly damsel (Apsara) in the court of king Indra. This heavenly damsel is supposed to be endowed with

⁴ From *Gazetteer of The Shimla Hill States, 1910.*



7-8. Climbing in winter in Kinnaur. The Kand Mahadev range from the Dagar Gatang Valley, above Nachar. Dea (5617 m), (above) and Gushu (5602 m) and Pishu (5672 m).

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(Rajesh Gadgil)



super charms and grace. Her celestial beauty has been considered to be so over-powering that sages and ascetics have fallen victim to her charms through ages.⁵

We started on our journey to locate the charms of Usha above the forest of Nachar on 26 December. The trek climbed steadily and through a very thick forest of pines. The track at first led us to Nacharchot Dogri or Chhotkanda as locals called it. It was the summer village and there were several houses, all locked. Our old guide opened one of his houses and we all settled inside. The sun disappeared by 4 p.m. and like all nights on this trip we had to be indoors or inside the tents till the sun appeared again by 8 a.m. The two of us sat chatting, eating and sleeping.

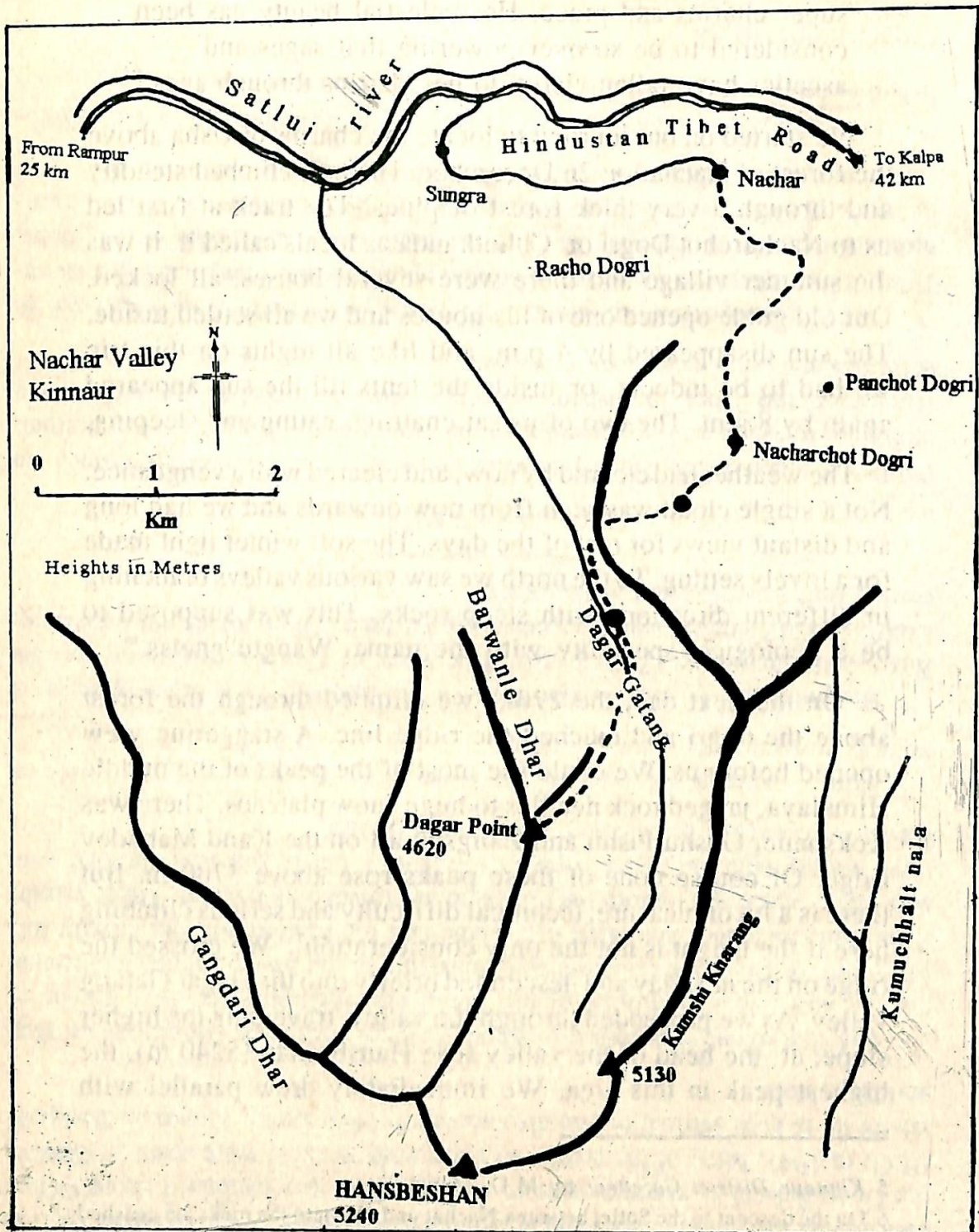
The weather had cleared by now, and cleared with a vengeance. Not a single cloud was seen from now onwards and we had long and distant views for rest of the days. The soft winter light made for a lovely setting. To the north we saw various valleys branching in different directions with steep rocks. This was supposed to be a geological speciality with the name 'Wangtu gneiss.'⁶

On the next day, the 27th, we climbed through the forest above the dogri and reached the ridge line. A staggering view opened before us. We could see most of the peaks of the middle Himalaya, jagged rock needles to huge snow plateaus. There was Kokshane, Gushu Pishu and Zangshu all on the Kand Mahadev ridge. Of course none of these peaks rose above 5700 m. But there is a lot of pleasure, technical difficulty and serious climbing here if the height is not the only consideration⁷. We crossed the ridge on the next day and descended briefly into the Dagar Gatang valley. As we proceeded through the valley, traversing the higher slope, at the head of the valley rose Hansbeshan (5240 m), the highest peak in this area. We immediately drew parallel with

5 *Kinnaur District Gazetteer* by M.D. Mamgain.

6 'On the descent to the Sutlej between Nachar and Wangtu the rocks are crushed and intruded by pegmatite. Extensive outcrops of "Graitoid gneiss" are seen beyond Wangtu on the Hindustan-Tibet road. To this rock type the name "Wangtu gneiss" is given.' (*Gazetteer*, Mamgain)

7 These areas should be free of any regulations even for international climbers. They very much resemble the European Alps in scale and difficulty and could be very attractive.



the Matterhorn because of its shape and difficulty. Rising steeply from a col it had several faces and rocky steepness. We sat admiring it in the bright sun till the cold drove us inside.

All along we had been discussing the legend of the goddess of dawn, Usha with our guide. Once there was sage named Ahan during the times when even the sun did not shine in the skies. Ahan worshipped the Gods for many years and acquired mystical powers. He could create anything out of dust. Indra was apprehensive of his power so he commissioned the beautiful court apsara Usha (dawn) to descend onto earth and disturb Ahan from his meditation. No sooner she came there was light and beauty all around after a million years of night. But Ahan was not to be taken in. With his powers he created the sun. No sooner than the powerful light of the sun had descended on the earth, Usha had to disappear. Hence Usha, (early dawn) descends to earth after the dark night, and vanishes with the rising sun. The celestial play continues today.

Our camp was on a ledge with a grand view. But from now on the weather grew windy. Even the mildest of breeze brought down the temperature substantially.

'Imagine going up the SouthWest face of Everest in this', said Rajesh as he returned shivering after a brief visit outside the tent. He had a habit of shaking his head vigorously at everything. Sometimes I feared he may lose it if shook it too much, particularly in the cold. And it was confusing for he shook it in the same direction for both yes and no.

We men were never beguiled by the charms of Usha (the dawn) - not one morning did we rise to catch a glimpse of her. We knew that Ahan rishi would be sending the sun and warmth, and that seemed much more desirable under the circumstances. Anyway what better excuse did we need than a legend to stay in warm sleeping bags.

'What shall we do now. The snow is too soft to go much further.'

'Yes, many an expedition in the Grahwal in such snowy conditions would have to be called-off or postponed in the hope of better snow conditions.'

'We have no time. Lets try the peak, as far as we can go.'

So on the 30th we started on the ridge opposite our camp. Stone after stone had to be covered very carefully. It took us

almost 3 hours to climb up to the ridge. Rajesh was standing there shaking his head vigorously.

'The peak is too far and if we push it we will be benighted in this cold.'

He may be shaking it, but Rajesh had his head in place all along.

'We must return safely of course. I have no intention of being sacrificed like Banasur before Usha'.

After a session of photography and enjoying some grand views we were on our way down on the other side. We just managed to reach the tents before it was dark and too cold.

Banasur was the another character introduced to us in the legend. Having failed to break the penance and soul of Ahan, Indra decided to exploit his weaker sentiments, like in all humans. This animal instinct was called by the name of the demon Banasur. This demon, representing Ahan, married Usha and thus part of the rishi was seduced. However later he realised his folly and Banasur cut his head off and allowed a temple to be built for Usha (at Nachar) and thus Usha attained the status of goddess.⁸

The next day Dansinh woke us up with 'tea tea'. He was increasing his vocabulary, but always in the twos ! We walked down through the forest, singing and feeling like we were in a holiday resort. The last night of 1996 was spent around a fire at the dogri and watching a beautiful sun set. The first morning of 1997 was red. Why does Usha (dawn) turn red was one question we had on our minds. Back in Bombay, it was Rajesh's grand mother who gave us an answer.

'Usha wears the blood of Banasur on her clothes after his

⁸ In fact there are three temples to Banasur in the area. The *Gazetteer* mentions : 'It is said that Banasur who was a demon and who ruled in Sarahan was slain by God. His three sons and daughter were also slain. The first son became Maheshwara of Shungra (a temple on way to Nachar), the second was Maheshwara of Kathgaon and the third of Chugaon. Their sister Usha became goddess of Nachar. Each Maheshwara and Usha have beautifully built temples in their memories in Kinnaur.'

sacrifice in her honour. After all he was her husband. That's why dawn is red.'

Suddenly I realised the universality of such Himalayan legends. They are known even far away in Bombay, in modern days, by people of different cultures.

We were in Nachar soon and took a taxi to Shimla. The road climbs up steeply to Narkanda from the Satluj river. Early in the morning we could see the first rays of the sun falling on Hansbeshan, 'the peak where the sun rises first'. The peak was isolated and rose sharply in the east and hence justified its name. It also completed the legend for us, for with the arrival of the sun Usha disappeared from the top of Hansbeshan. I will leave it to the first climbers of this peak to catch her !

We walked on the Mall in Shimla, feted ourselves and travelled from Delhi by my favourite train. As we sat in the Rajdhani express hurtling us towards Bombay a total satisfaction enveloped us. 'It was a wonderful trip, the best I have been on.....' Rajesh was telling me with his usual vigorous shaking of head. I could almost hear myself agreeing like Dansinh, *Han Han* (yes yes).

SUMMARY

A two-member team trekked above Nachar, the Kinnaur Himalaya in the winter of 1996-1997, exploring areas in the south of it and following a legend.

Members: Harish Kapadia and Rajesh Gadgil

Period: From 23 December 1996 to 5 January 1997.

Other General Area References:

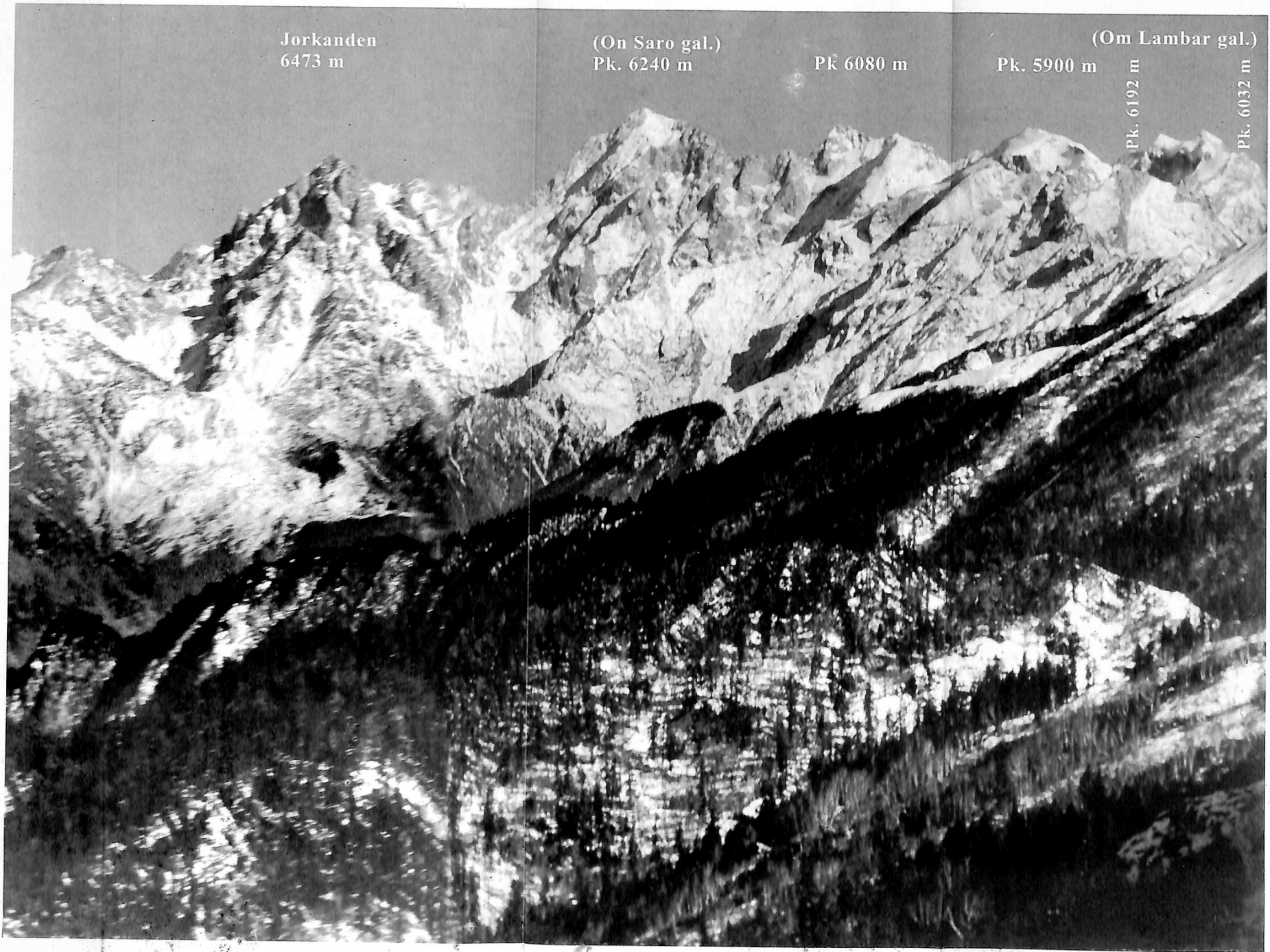
1. *Temples and Legends of Himachal Pradesh*, by P.C. Roy Chaudhury
2. *Kim*, by Rudyard Kipling
3. *Quest for Kim*, by Peter Hopkirk
4. *Peaks and Lamas*, by Marco Pallis
5. *Four Months Camping In the Himalayas*, by W.G.N. Van Der Sleen



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9. Hansbeshan (5240 m), north face.

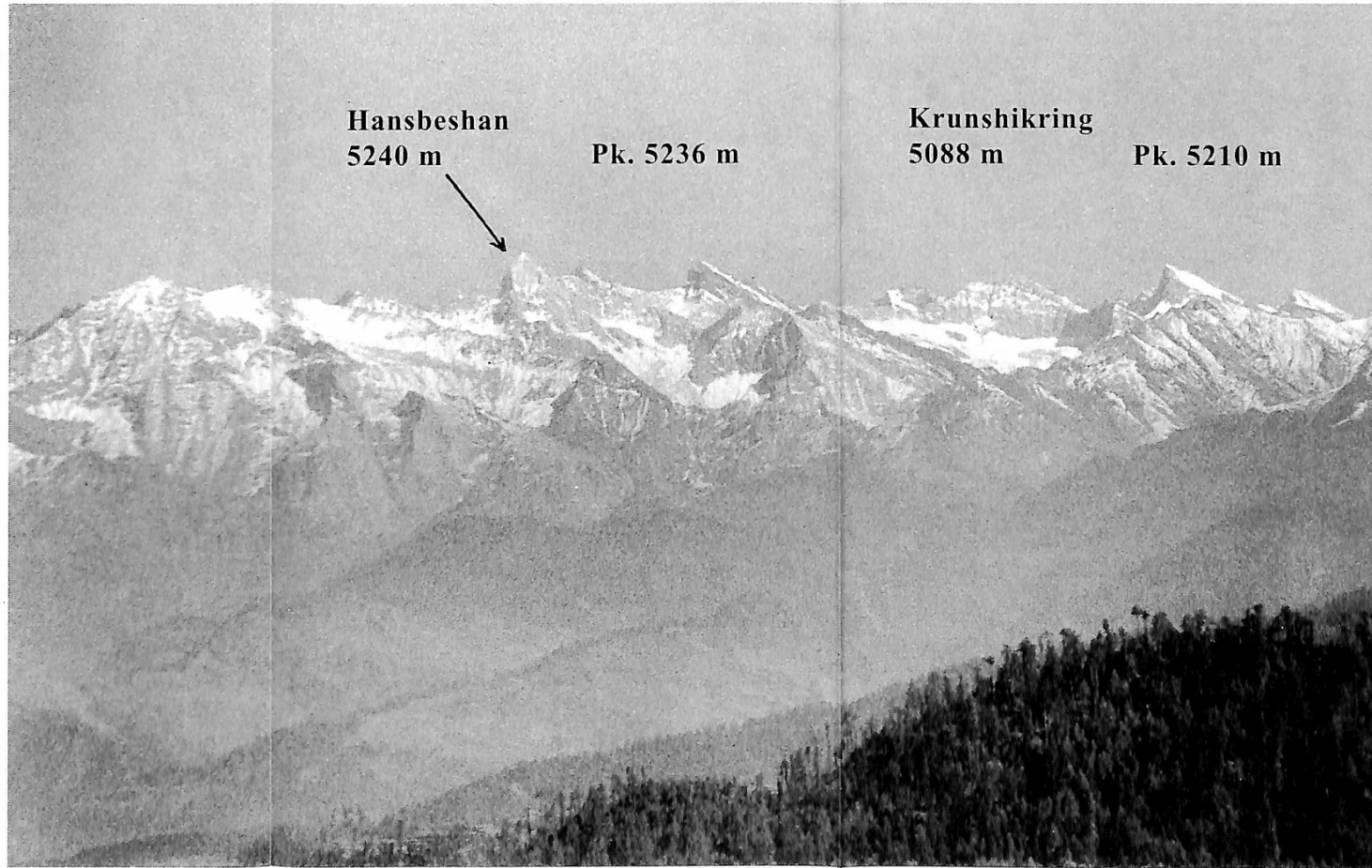
(Harish Kapadia)



Article 13

Panorama A : Peaks of the Kinnaur Kailash range. Viewed from the slopes above Nacharchot Dogri.

(Rajesh Gadgil)



Article 13

Panorama B : The Gangdari dhar, (Kinnaur Himalaya) viewed from Narkanda

(Harish Kapadia)