
LOST IN THE LEGENDS

HARISH KAPADIA

IN 1934 TWO PROLIFIC EXPLORERS from England reached the Garhwal Himalaya. In fact it was the beginning of an exploration which made them famous. They were Eric Shipton and Bill Tilman, who were trying to force an entry into the hitherto unknown Nanda Devi Sanctuary. In summer that year they discovered a route through the formidable Rishi gorge and deposited some of their food and equipment there. When the monsoon arrived, they returned to Badrinath. Their intention was to spend some time elsewhere and then, as the monsoon withdrew, to return to the Sanctuary to complete their unfinished work.

Once in Badrinath they heard of the Hindu legend about the journey of a temple priest in the Kedarnath valley who crossed a high pass to worship at the Badrinath temple on the same day ! If true, considering the terrain, this would be a major mountaineering feat. Shipton and Tilman, supported by gallant Sherpas, tried to check the validity of this legend with near-disastrous results.

They crossed a difficult col at the head of the Satopanth Bank, to check out the above Hindu legend. They descended the Gundarpongi gad but were caught in between the ice-walls on the upper reaches and were trapped in the thick bear-infested forests in the lower sections. Delayed for many days, they ran short of food. The party had to survive on bamboo shoots in the forest fighting with the bears to gather them. After a saga of survival and hair raising moments, they exited at Gaundar village.

We thought that they perhaps misjudged the route talked about in the legend. They crossed the col at the head of the Satopanth Bank. As per local information and modern maps, there is a high col at the head of the Panpatia Bank in the south. Perhaps this col could be crossed, we thought. This col leads down to Maindagalla tal on the ridge leading directly to Madhyamaheshwar temple, above the valley

Fold-out B, Panoramas B to E

Colour Plates 4-5

Photos 16 to 21

which trapped the Shipton-Tilman party. The legend is perhaps built around this Panpatia col which has direct access from the temple.

A party of two trekkers from West Bengal tried to repeat the 1934 route in 1984, trying to come up the valley from Madhyamaheshwar to Badrinath, perhaps via Panpatia col. They were never seen again, presumed dead in the valley.

We reached Badrinath and met our local friend, a priest. The *Panda* (priest) was a strong man. With a shaven head and a *tilak* on the forehead he sounded like an epitome of knowledge. I inquired with him about the old legend of a priest in the Kedarnath temple who worshipped at the Badrinath temple, after crossing high passes on the same day.

'It may be true, in the days when the earth was flat, that the priest went from Kedarnath to Badrinath'. He straight went into the Himalaya before the days of the tectonic thrust, which supposed to have created the range. 'Now Nilkanth has risen in between, blocking the route.'

He added, 'This place is named *Badri*, after a fruit that can grow only in a flat country. At present there are no *badris* growing here. So once it all this area must have been flat land.'

'But as per the map it looks like an impossible terrain to traverse. A modern scientific world will not believe that it is possible to cross the range at all, let alone on the same day.' I protested.

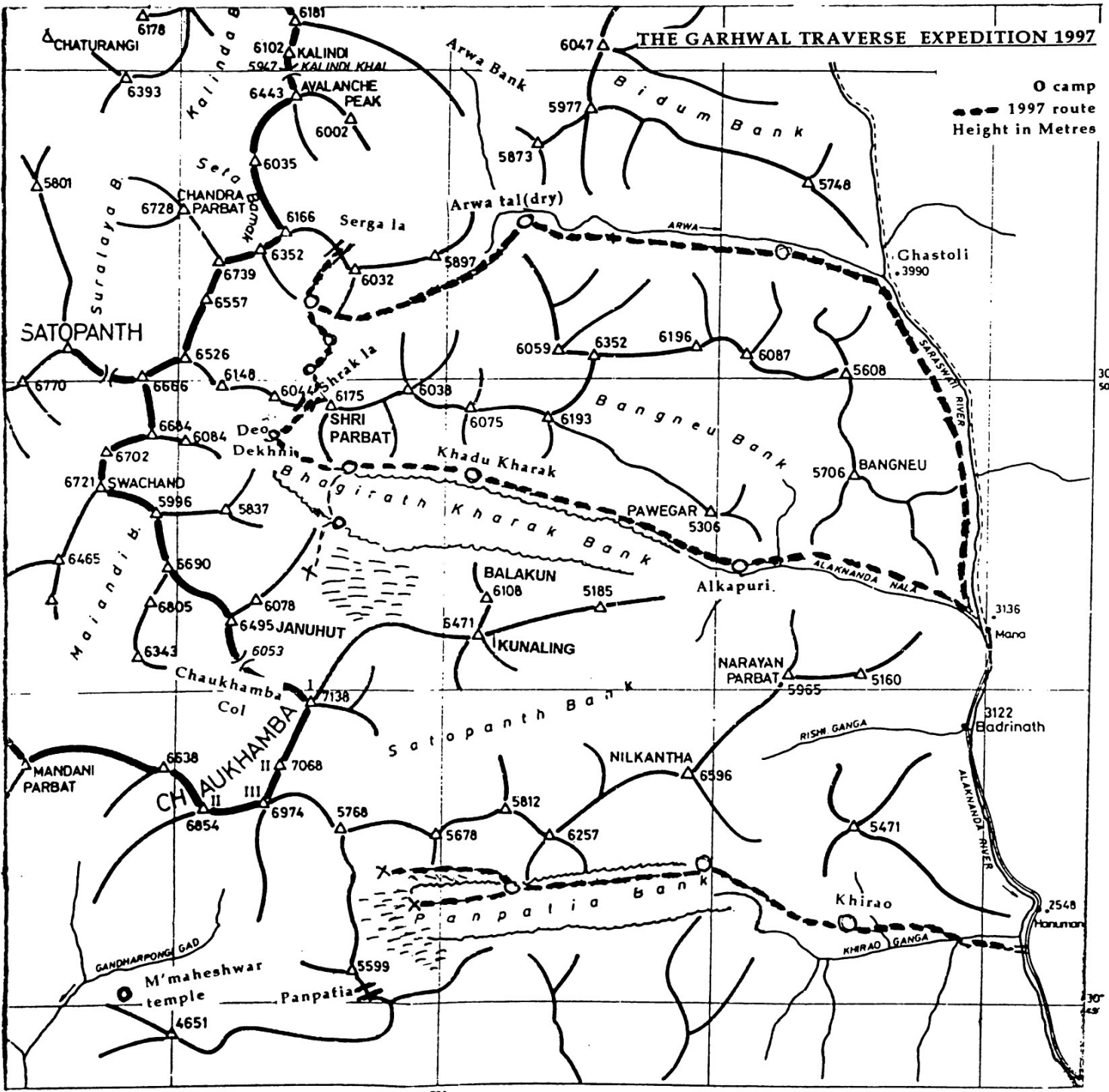
'The story is true. You require faith to believe it. There was a route then and there will be a route now if you look for it.' As an afterthought he added, 'It is for the faithful'.¹

Bells were ringing and it was time to go to the Badrinath temple. I had purchased a special offering ticket of Rs. 51 for a separate entry. But still it was shattering experience — dirt, pushing, and crowds. I could not believe that the young *Rawal* performing the puja knew all about the 'journey' and would lead me to salvation. I came out less faithful than before. We were ready to start in search of the above legend, almost following Kipling's advice, 'there is something lost behind the ranges, go and find it'.

1 There are several stories in the Himalaya which are for the faithful. The wall behind the ancient Yarma gompa in the Nubra valley, Ladakh, is said to be shining with gold in the evenings. When Prof. Dainelli of the Italian expedition 1929, tried to inquire he was told to look at it with a faithful's eye. See 'My expedition in the Eastern Karakoram, 1930', by Dainelli, G., H.J. Vol. IV, p. 46.

THE GARHWAL TRAVERSE EXPEDITION 1997

○ camp
 - - - 1997 route
 Height in Metres



We decided to follow the Panpatia valley to check the legend out. Talking to ordinary people we found that almost everyone had heard of this legend. But they referred to 'Kedarnath' as an area and not specifically to the main temple, which is situated far away. After three days of acclimatisation, enjoying the views of Nilkanth, the team was ready to enter the Panpatia valley on 31 May 1997.

By 4 June the foot of the icefall (4440 m) was reached in 4 easy stages (Khirao village, 2840 m, along the river 3360 m, snout 3860 m, to foot of the icefall). Our intention was to reach the high col (5250 m) to the southwest of the upper Panpatia plateau. Crossing of this would have led to the Madhyamaheshwar temple, via Maindagallatal to Gupta Kashi (Kedarnath).

The icefall was tried via three different routes, each ending in huge crevasse fields which would have required far more equipment to cross. Finally a steep slope to the north, after fixing some ropes, gave access to the higher plateau. However it was observed that to reach the 'Panpatia Col' it was essential to traverse almost 7 km through highly crevasse-ridden ground. Reluctantly the idea was given up. We returned by the same route to Badrinath on 13 June 1997. There was a pass, from Khirao to Kalpeshwar, lower down in the valley. This was the only route which we thought was possible to cross over to the 'Kedarnath area'.

We travelled to Joshimath for rest and rations. We visited Auli, a new ski resort developed above Joshimath. My usual enquiry as to why it was called 'Auli' had a humorous tale. Once two lovers visited Auli and in the mist the lady was lost, never to be found again. The gentleman kept shouting 'Auli Auli' which in the local language means 'come, come'. The tea-stall owner who narrated the story to us added with a grin, 'now we are calling out 'Auli Auli' (come come) to the tourists.'

During their second exploration in 1934, Shipton and Tilman had followed the Bhagirath Kharak bank but were unable to locate the route to cross Meade's Chaukhamba col which was their intention. A side valley leads to this col, which is dangerous to approach via the main valley. They failed to locate this side valley and came to know of it only after their trip by talking to C. F. Meade. Shipton and Tilman crossed a pass north of this valley to enter the Arwa valley and crossed Kalindi Khal to reach the snout of the Gangotri glacier at Gaumukh. They returned to Badrinath by the same route creating another legend of exploration. We hoped to follow this route in the second half of our trip.

We entered the Bhagirath Kharak valley on 14 June. Going past the popular Vasudhara falls, we stayed at Alkapuri (3560 m), Khadu Kharak (4150 m) to settle at lower Deo Dekhni (4400 m), which was a little short of the usual advance base camp of the Chaukhamba expeditions. It was a bleak place, cold and windy and between a moraine. We were looking for camping site when our cook 'John' shouted that he had found a perfect site to pitch a kitchen. Now it was up to us to locate a place to sleep ! He was oblivious to our standing on a bleak ridge, shivering in the cold wind. He, as a cook, always had his priorities right. Anyway that settled the issue and our base camp was established.

Two separate reccees discovered a route to the upper Deo Dekhni plateau (5200 m). Rajesh, Monesh and three Sherpas attempted to reach the Chaukhamba col (6050 m), which was last reached from this side by C.F. Meade in 1912.² From a camp on the Bhagirath Kharak glacier Meade had reached the col in 7 hours in July. However the team found the middle ground full of slushy snow. The resultant waterfalls made climbing very difficult and after a valiant attempt (till 4850 m) they found the going tough and returned to join the main party. They had made a brilliant attempt and reaching where they had was also an achievement in the prevalent conditions.³

The main party in the meantime had established a high camp (5200 m) on the upper Deo Dekhni plateau. Bhagat Peak (5650 m) was climbed on 19 June 1997 by Harish and Ang Nyima Sherpa (John). With 'John' I started for the peak at 7 a.m. No sooner we had climbed a little, John unroped and I thought he went for the obvious morning call. No, he was looking for water, to be collected on our way back so that he could cook better meals ! Again he had his priorities right. We climbed the ridge slowly, enjoying the 'view of Gods' and on our way back John did collect water for kitchen.

I left for BC, for a rest. The next day Kaivan and Mingma reached two peaks on the plateau with heights of 5360 m and 5400 m. Both were enjoyable climbs and they returned in about 6 hours.

2 The col was reached by Simon Yearsley in 1995 from the Gangotri glacier during their attempt on Chaukhamba I.

3 Several times have I found this phenomena in my recent travels. What the earlier parties, like C. F. Meade did here, and their timings, do not seem to be possible today. Today it will not be possible for anyone to reach the 'Chaukhamba col' in 7 hours from the Bhagirath Kharak glacier. I wonder whether early explorers were fitter, tougher or the terrain has changed. Or possibly because they had no return tickets booked so had more time, which made them do things faster !



19. Nilkanth, northwest face from Deo Dekhni.

Article 10

(Harish Kapadia)



20. Shri Parvat, from the Arwa valley.

Like us, Shipton and Tilman in 1934, had failed to reach the Chaukhamba Col and had climbed to the Deo Dekhni plateau and crossed Shrak la (5700 m) ('Pass of Rocks') to the north. This pass was reached by us on 19 June (after 63 years). Next day loads were ferried up to it and part of the load was carried across to the other side.

The entire team crossed the pass on 22 June. The pass towards the north had two gullies. The eastern gully led steeply down to the valley floor with some avalanches pouring down through it. The western gully was broad and led down easily to the floor on the Arwa side without much difficulty. However by the time the entire party reached the pass ropes were already fixed and loads lowered into the eastern valley. Clearly we had missed the best advice of Shipton that 'mountaineering is reconnaissance, reconnaissance and reconnaissance.' Almost the entire gully had to be fixed with ropes and as avalanches hissed by narrowly missing us we eyed the easier broad valley which was the correct route. It was late in the evening when, in heavy snowfall, we camped on the glacier (5400 m), luckily everyone in one piece.

We descended to the end of this side valley and in two days' time camped on one of the branches of the Arwa valleys (5280 m). En route we saw two peaks which I will cherish for a long time, Arwa Tower (6352 m) and Arwa Spires (6193 m). Both can test the skills of the best rock climbers. Again following the route of 1934 we entered a side valley and reached the next high col, which we named 'Serga Col' (5840 m) ('Pass of Crevasses') on 25 June 1997. Ahead we could see 'Birnie's col' very temptingly close and far away was Kalindi Khal. The ground between us and the col was full of bergschrunds and crevasses. It may have trapped our large party of 14 persons. Very reluctantly we had to abandon the idea of going ahead. Clearly this was not the year and time for serious climbing of passes.

We camped again on the same branch of the Arwa and descended to what is marked on the map as 'Arwa tal' (4720 m). There is no lake (tal) at this place now. In three days the team returned via Ghastoli to Mana-Badrinath-Joshimath by 29 June 1997.

I met the *Panda* at the conclusion of our trip.

'I hope you found the route to cross the ranges, I was praying for your safety,' he informed me.

I was about to tell him that there was no route as mentioned in the legends. It may have been possible in the earlier days but not now.

He was only half correct. But then I realised that one does not tell a learned priest that he knows only half truths.

So I replied, 'With difficulty it will be possible to discover a route the priest went by.' As Aubrey Menen had written, 'We generally find the truth, but never destroy the simple faith of the simple people.'⁴ And that may be the truth. Some explorer some day soon will discover the route by which it will be possible to cross the connecting ranges. Shipton and Tilman almost did it.

We were tired and looking forward to reaching home. Imagine, after doing what we did, and more, Shipton and Tilman returned to the Nanda Devi Sanctuary to complete their exploration !

Members: Harish Kapadia (leader), Monesh Devjani, Rajesh Gadgil, Vijay Kothari and Kaivan Mistry.

Period: 25 May to 4 July 1997.

Areas: The Panpatia valley, the Bhagirath Kharak glacier and the Arwa valleys, west of Badrinath temple generally, the Central Garhwal.

An expedition by: The Mountaineers, Bombay.

References:

1. *Nanda Devi*, by Eric Shipton. (For both the crossings)
2. *Approach to the Hills*, by C.F.Meade (For Chaukhamba col)
3. *Throne of Gods*, by A. Heim and A. Gansser (Climbs on the Bhagirath Kharak glacier)
4. *Kamet Conquered*, by Frank Smythe (Exploration of the Arwa Valley)
5. *Himalayan Odyssey*, by Trevor Braham (The Arwa valley and Kalindi Khal)
6. *Mountain Delight*, by Bill Aitken (For details about deaths of two trekkers from Bengal.)
7. *The Himalayan Club Newsletter 38*. (For details about deaths of two trekkers from Bengal.)
8. *The Himalayan Journal* Vol. VII, page 1, 'Nanda Devi and the sources of the Ganges', by H. W. Tilman.

SUMMARY

A high altitude trek to the Panpatia, Bhagirath Kharak and Arwa valleys in the Central Garhwal in June 1997.

4 *Space Within the Heart*, by Aubrey Menen.



4. 'Arwa Spires' (6193 m) , in the Garhwal.

Article 10

(Harish Kapadia)



5. 'Arwa Tower' (6352 m), in the Garhwal.

Article 10

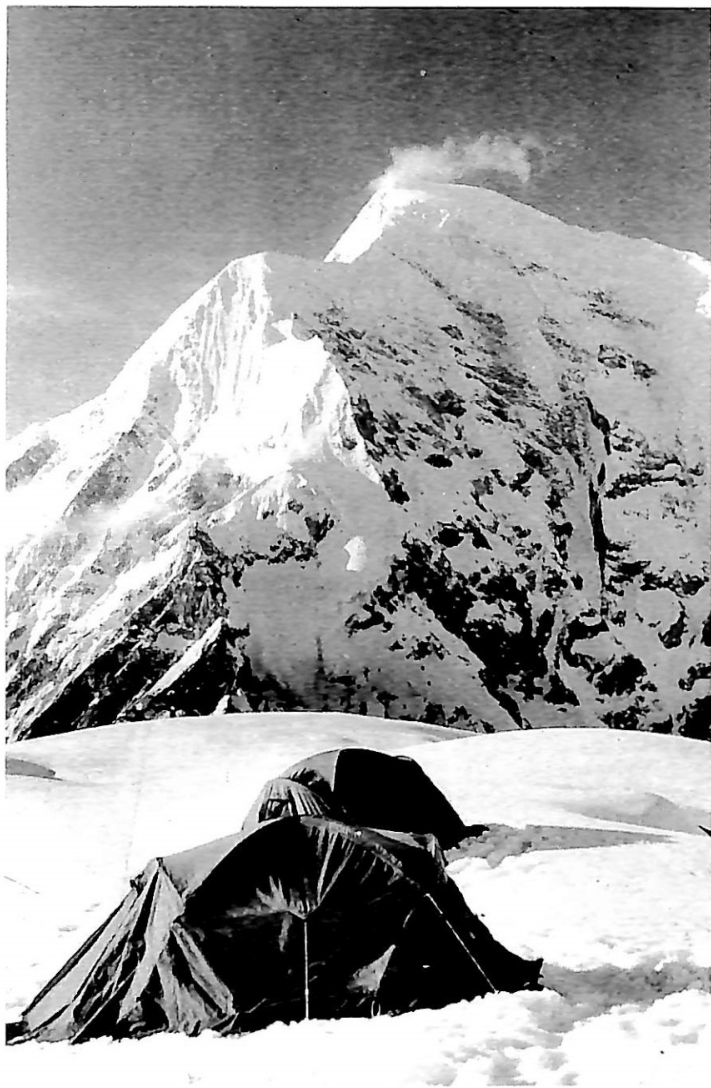
(Harish Kapadia)



6. Lamb Tal with Bandarpunch range in background.

Note 10

(Harish Kapadia)



17. Kunaling from Deo Dekhni.

Article 10

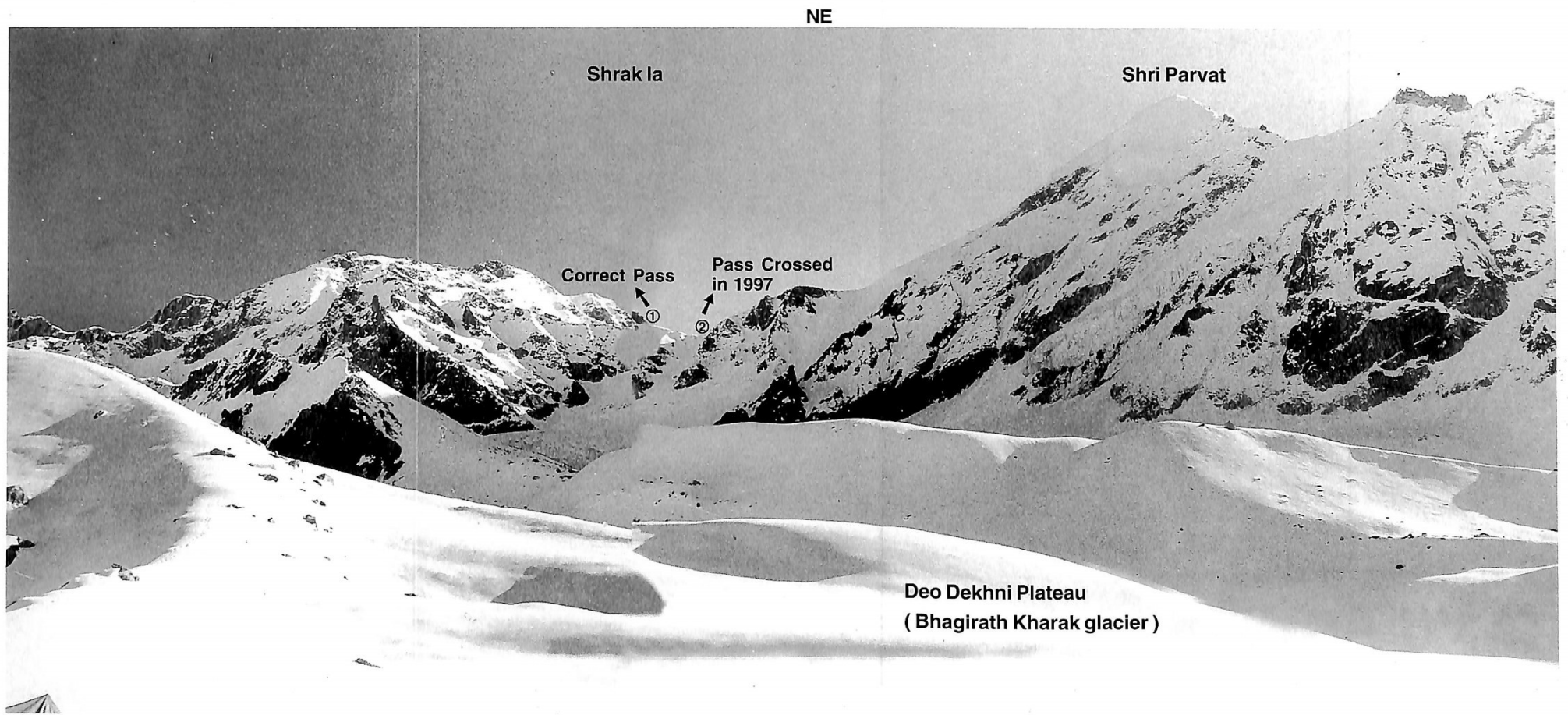
(Harish Kapadia)



18. Chaukhamba Col with Januhut on right.



21. View from the Arwa valley : L to r: Mukut Parvat, Abi Gamin and Kamet (west ridge in foreground).



PANORAMA B : View from Deo Dekhni, looking to Shrak la.



16. The Panpatia upper plateau. The proposed col leading to Kedarnath area is on left.

Article 10

(Monesh Devjani)