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## NANDA DEVI JUGGERNAUT

HARISH KAPADIA

**A***FTER THE FIRST JOYS IN VICTORY* came a feeling of sadness that the mountain had succumbed, that the proud head of the goddess was bowed. With these simple words of veneration, H.W. Tilman and Noel Odell completed the saga of finding a route to the summit of this charismatic mountain. They were standing then on the highest point in the British Empire, 'where the sun never sets' (The independent Kingdom of Nepal and Kashmir contained all the other high peaks known then, including Everest and K2). It was not without reason that Nanda Devi was held in such awe, for since in 1883, it had humbled at least eight attempts to reach its base.

The twin peaks of Nanda Devi (7816 m) and Nanda East (7434 m) stand majestically in the centre of a ring of peaks. Looked at from any angle, the Nanda Devi peaks stand out distinct and beautiful, particularly as the first and last rays of sunshine always caress their summits. Hugh Ruttledge who had made an attempt to reach the foot of the peaks described the Nanda Devi Sanctuary in a letter to the *London Times* in 1932 as: *A seventy-mile barrier ring on which stand twelve measured peaks of over 21,000 ft which has no depression lower than 17,000 ft except in the west where the Rishi Ganga rising at the foot of Nanda Devi draining the area of some 250 square miles (800 square kilometres) of snow and ice has earned for itself what must be one of the most terrific gorges in the world.*

The Sanctuary of Nanda Devi is remarkable for its unique wild grandeur. Even more remarkable is the veneration that this peak holds in Hinduism, the folklore behind it and the tributes it has received from some of the finest pens in mountaineering literature. The Sanctuary and the high peaks of Nanda Devi are the major barriers between the cold Tibetan winds and the Gangetic plains of India. Without the Sanctuary to absorb the main thrust of the icy winds, Tibetan winds would have stripped the Gangetic plains, the granary of India, barren. No wonder the peaks are worshipped as a Goddess with some impressive folklore built around them. The name, Nanda Devi itself means; 'the Bliss Giving Goddess'.

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*Fold-out 2*  
*Photos 11 to 24*



*Article 9*

(Harish Kapadia)

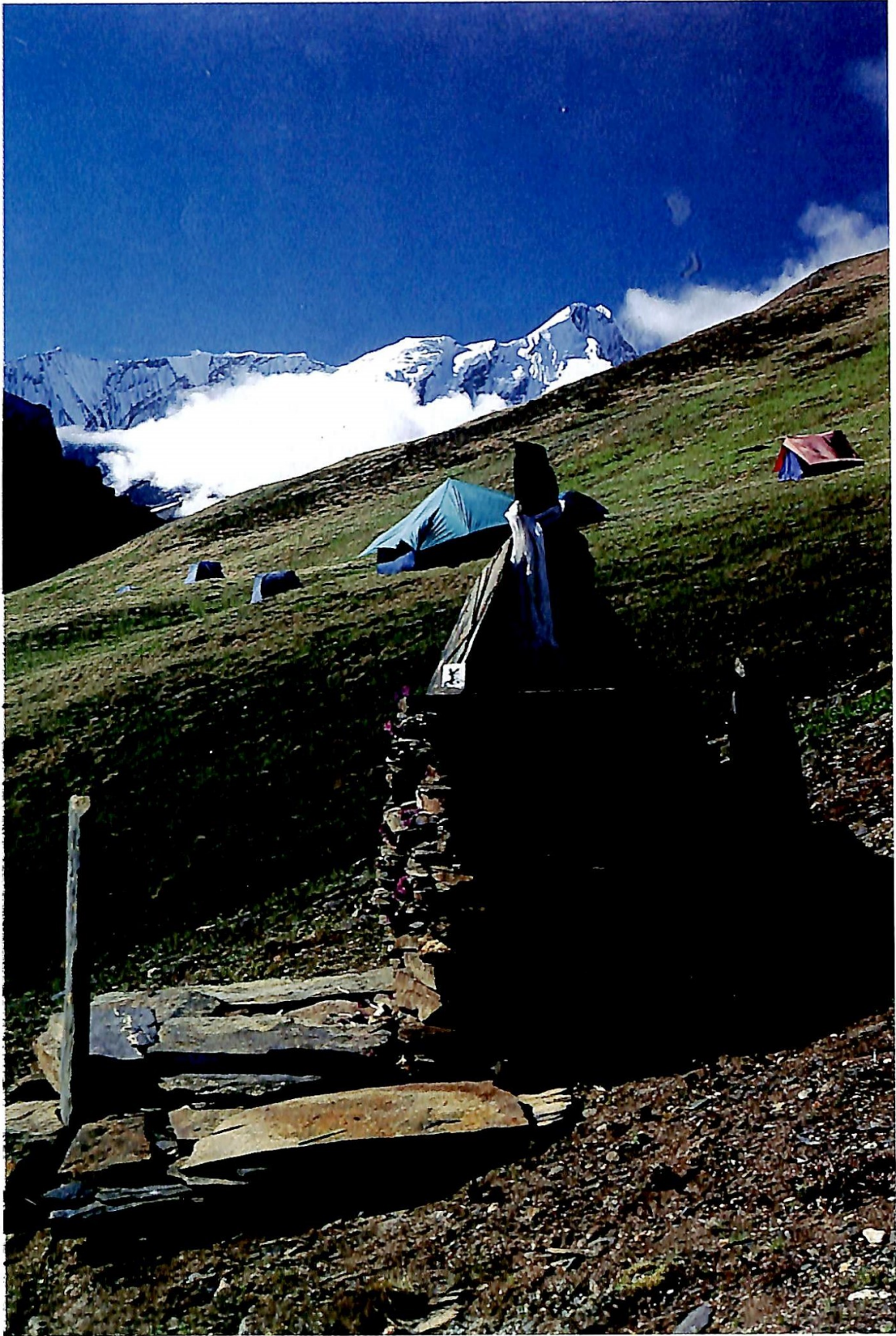
14. Climbing above Rishi gorge to inner Nanda Devi sanctuary.



*Article 9*

(Harish Kapadia)

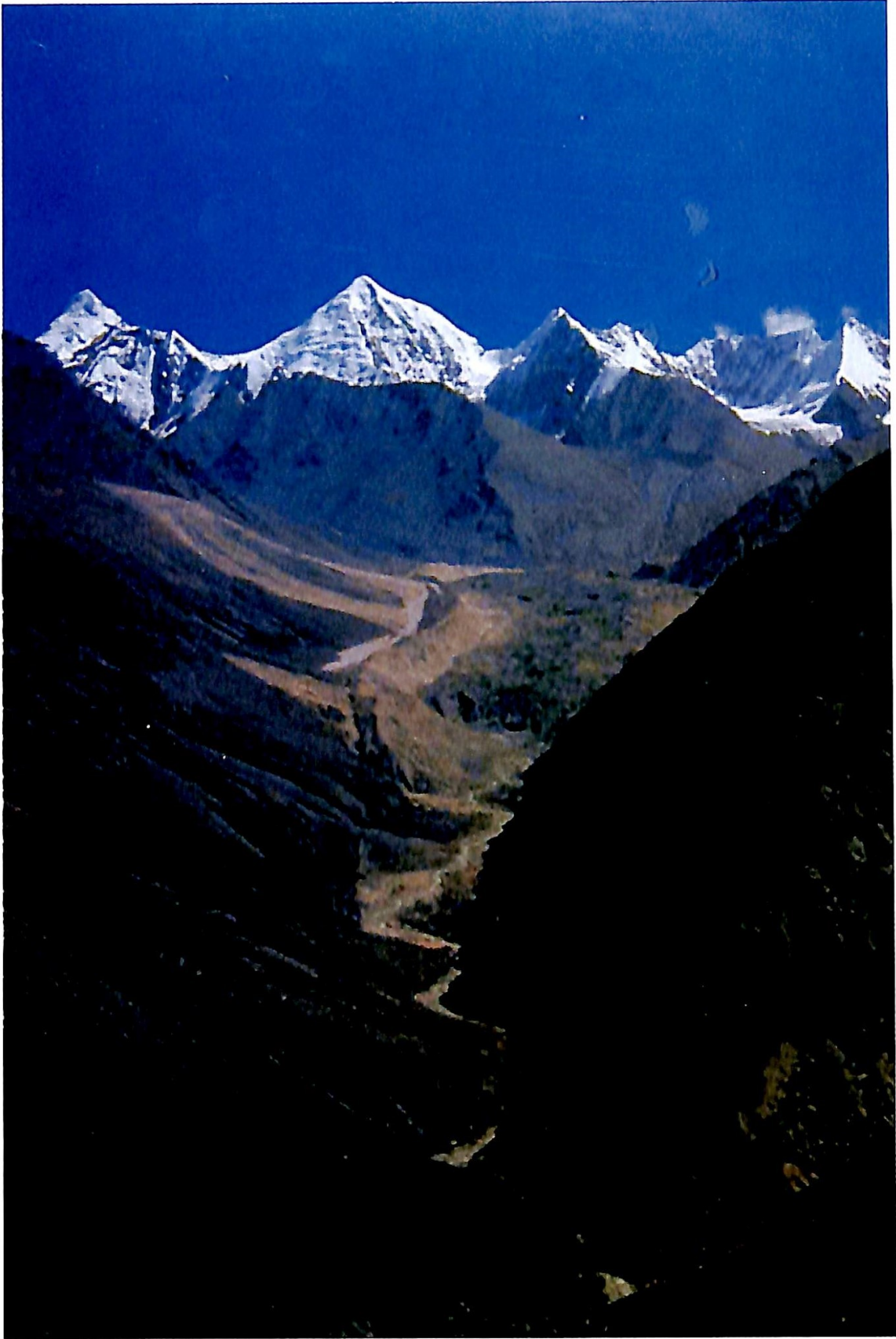
14. Climbing above Rishi gorge to inner Nanda Devi sanctuary.



*Article 9*

(Harish Kapadia)

15. Chaubata camp in the inner Nanda Devi sanctuary.



*Article 9*

(Steven Berry)

**16.** Peaks of the Nanda Devi north sanctuary.

The humility and veneration of the first climbers was perhaps missing with later visitors to the Sanctuary. The inner sanctums were opened for unrestricted flow of visitors in 1974. Within 8 years there was so much pollution, cutting of trees and damage that the Sanctuary had to be totally closed now till 2002. (During these years five expeditions visited the Sanctuary, two of them from the defence forces, which climbed the main peak<sup>1</sup>). It was therefore imperative that the effect of this closure should be observed, especially as the new state of Uttaranchal was interested in knowing the state of the Sanctuary.

The Indian Mountaineering Foundation decided to send a multi-disciplinary expedition to the Nanda Devi Sanctuary in May-June 2001. Finally, our expedition consisted of 3 trekkers and mountaineers and 4 scientists to trek into the inner Sanctuary. We were asked to study specifically the following points:

- Whether any further destruction have taken place since closure of the Sanctuary
- Whether the total closure has been beneficial to the growth of natural resources
- Whether the closure has been total or there have been several encroachments or
- Whether the Sanctuary's fragile environment is now strong enough to allow some trekking and climbing activity.

Based on the report of our team, a 'Management Plan' could be formulated by the IMF and the Uttaranchal Government.

We travelled by train with Gurdial Singh who was one of the earliest climbers to have visited the Sanctuary. He was forthright in his advice and finally ended with a little twinkle in his eyes; 'I envy you all. Have fun and try to save Goddess from further destruction.'

The day we reached Joshimath, one of the screws in my specs was loose and I could not find any optical shop to fix it. Finally I located a small shop selling watches with a friendly looking owner at the desk chewing *paan* (beetle-nut). I showed him the problem. Listening to a radio, he looked around for a tool and repaired it in no time. I offered to pay for the services. He simply extended his hand and murmured. 'just shake hands'. I was back in the friendly land of Garhwal!

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1. The first team was from the Indian Army engineers in 1991, followed by the team from the Indo-Tibet Border Police (ITBP) in 2000. Both these teams climbed the main summit and the Police team lost one climber on the mountain. Immediately following the ITBP team was a British trekking group (see article in the present HJ) and our team sponsored by the IMF. Following us, in October 2001 was a large Indian Army team from Garhwal Rifles which climbed the main peak and Dunagiri apart from clearing much old garbage.

### Diwan Singh Butola

We travelled to Lata village where we had discussions with local *Pradhan* (village headman) who bargained for a better rate for porters. While negotiations were on I visited the village and looked for the legendary Diwan Singh Butola.

Diwan Singh has a place in the history of exploration of the Nanda Devi Sanctuary. Today he is possibly one of the few persons alive who were with the first team of Shipton and Tilman in 1934 which explored the route to the Nanda Devi Sanctuary. He may be old, 95 years of age, but was certainly alert and energetic.

With a sense of humour, he narrated several experiences. He had carried load for the 'two Angrez' (as he called Shipton and Tilman team) and stayed at various camps en route when Shipton and Tilman explored routes. He reached Sarso Patal and returned with them when the monsoon arrived.

When they returned to the Sanctuary after the rains, they did not take any locals with them, as the plan was to descend across the Sunderdhunga chal to the south. Amongst his companions with the 1934 team Diwan Singh remembers Ang Tharkey and his ponytail well. For his efforts, in 1934 he was given a Re.1 Victoria Silver coin and a 'metered' Pressure Cooker. He sold both these for Rs. 500 and used the money for his own marriage, he added with a laugh.

He continued going with other teams later to the Nanda Devi Sanctuary and other areas. He was with the French team (1951), which attempted to traverse the two peaks of Nanda Devi. The French killed too many bharals and birds en route to the base camp, which according to Diwan Singh was *chhejan*, a bad omen. The two summiteers perished on the mountains. He remembers the various American expeditions (in mid-sixties) too. 'Many Americans came looking for gold in the Sanctuary. They went in with huge boxes.'<sup>2</sup> (He had carried one of the boxes). He felt that the death of Nanda Devi Unsoeld on the Nanda Devi peak was ordained. The goddess was displeased.

I asked him whether he required any medicine. With a laugh he said, 'can you give any water to dry wood? At this age no medicine will work on me'.

'Do you require anything, have any wish? I asked.

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2. He was referring to few hush-hush American teams to the Sanctuary in mid-sixties which were reported to be planning to plant a nuclear-listening device on the summit. Locals were told that they were looking for gold in the Sanctuary.

'Only thing remains is death, dying in the warmth of the great Himalaya where I have lived my whole life'. He had never been beyond Chamoli in the hills and had not seen the plains. The Himalaya and goddess Nanda Devi had given him everything he needed.

### **The Problems**

The negotiations for rates were over but as the expedition was ready to move, awaiting porters, the *Pradhan* of Lata village came with a 'resolution' on paper and a printed receipt book. He wanted us to obtain a 'permit' from him and wanted us to pay Rs. 5/- per day per person as fee to enter the Sanctuary. We refused to do so as it would set a wrong precedent for all other villages to follow and only the Uttaranchal Government or its representatives are authorised to issue any permit and collect money. After long arguments, the porters went on strike and refused to carry luggage for the expedition. This seems to be a new and threatening development in the Himalaya. The villagers were not wrong in their demands too for they were promised a lot when the Sanctuary was closed first, but nothing was done. They feared that when the Sanctuary opens to trekkers and climbers again the main benefits would go to outsiders and they would be left in lurch again.

I had a job to do so I spread the word with other porters, some of whom I knew from my previous two visits, about the large amount of cash I was carrying for them to earn as portage on the current expedition and I threatened to return home with the goodies. Temptation was name of the game and the 'principles' could not last against such a large one. After few hours, *Pradhan* and porters returned, lured by the money they were to earn.<sup>3</sup>

### **Chhino – Jhapto**

A movement in the name of 'Chhino - Jhapto' literally meaning, 'Grab and Take Away' was started in July-August 1998 by the villagers of Lata. This was a protest against the closer of the Sanctuary since 1982. The idea was to take over the grazing land and forcibly enter the reserved forest for grazing/cultivation and collection of medicinal herbs. According to them when the Sanctuary was closed in 1982, the villagers were promised alternative grazing rights in the forest division of Badrinath section. Unfortunately, even after almost 20 years their plight was not attended to.

During the protest, many villagers gathered at the Lata village and climbed up to Lata kharak, Dharashi and crossed into the core area of the

3. All future expeditions and trekking teams are advised that no such permits and payment is required to be made to any villages in this area for visiting Nanda Devi Sanctuary.



Sanctuary at Dibrugheta. Their plan was to camp in the forest reserve for months in a relay and break rules of the National Park. Later while trekking in to the area we could read the slogans written by them on the rock walls and trees. The Government in response had sent the District Magistrate for negotiations. When these failed, a contingent of Police Armed Constabulary (PAC) was sent but the villagers could not be stopped. However, after about a month, the protest fizzled out and villagers returned back from the prohibited area.<sup>4</sup>

### The Trail

With the problems now behind us we started on the famous trail to the inner Sanctuary of the Nanda Devi. We climbed from the roadhead to Lata village (2 km) on a well-cemented track. The famous Nanda Devi temple was situated above the village. After offering prayers, we followed a broad foot track to Belta Kharak and next day, to Lata Kharak. The trail zigzags up the steep slopes through beautiful forest. On top of the ridge, we came across a forest hut that had been built in 1995.

The footpath ends at Doni Dhar. A narrow trail led us to the Dharanshi pass, a name given by Shipton and Tilman. The map calls it *Barf kina dhar* (ridge of snow). Across the pass, one has to descend and traverse across the Satkulas (seven nalas). From the last nala one can descend to the lower Dharanshi camping ground. However, the present route climbs steeply up the last nala and traverses for 3 km to a higher plateau called Rani khola. Our third day's camp was established on this ground. Ahead, we had to cross the second famous pass, Malatoni<sup>5</sup> (garland ridge). We reached the pass, which is under the Malatoni peak, after traversing a distance of 2 km. This was what the explorers had named 'the Curtain Ridge'. We saw Nanda Devi briefly from here. The trail descended more than 1000 m to an open green ground of Dibrugheta, named after god 'Dibru'.

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#### 4. Chipko

This area has a history of protests related to forestry rights. In the past the well-known *Chipko Movement* originated from the area. The Chipko movement (literally 'hug the trees') was started from the village Reni which is situated at the entrance to the Sanctuary, by Ms Gaura Devi in 1976. The village women embraced trees to prevent the forest contractors from cutting it. This became a well-known idea and received much coverage the world over. She was given a medal and some money. Later Sunderlal Bahuguna (Tehri Garhwal) and Chander Prasad Bhatt of Gopeshwar entered the movement and took charge of it. Ms Gaura died in 1996 and today Chipko movement is not active.

5. In early literature it the pass is mentioned as 'Malathuni'. Malatoni is the correct spelling as on the present maps and used by the local villagers.

By this time we had established camaraderie with the porters who were a friendly lot. I chatted with Dinesh, a local lad who was carrying a heavy load.

'I have appeared for my final school exams and am awaiting results. I thought I must see the Sanctuary about which elders have told me many stories'.

Ultimately, he wanted to be employed in the plains and undertake a government service. Most of the younger lot was educated and were carrying loads out of curiosity. When we paid wages, unlike in the past, all of them could sign their names, some of them in English. If involved in environment protection of the Sanctuary, this educated generation can surely bring a new life to the area. They appreciated the need for protection but pleaded helplessness to do anything in face of stronger forces.

From Dibruggheta, a steep climb through forest led to an open ground followed by a delicate traverse for 3 km. At the end of it, we descended a broad nala to the Rishi ganga river. There was no bridge so we constructed one with three aluminium ladders. Across the river we continued, after a camp at Deodi, on the trail with a steep climb through forest and an easy traverse of about 3 km to Shikari Udiar. This is a large cave where Shikaris (hunters) used to stay. 'Used to stay' are perhaps wrong words to use as we could observe that the trail and caves were well used in recent times. There were signs of poaching, cutting of trees and the area was far from 'closed' for so many years. Our porters also had many stories to tell.

The trail descended steeply to the Trisul nala, which we crossed by a natural rock bridge. Soon we were at Ramani, at the foot of the historic Rishi gorge. This gorge was the key to the exploration of the route to the inner sanctuary of Nanda Devi and it took many years for this riddle to be solved by early explorers. <sup>6</sup>

### **The Rishi Gorge**

The trail climbed steeply, first through rhododendron bushes and then on rocky terrain. From some points, there were good views of the main peak. As the trail turned after a long traverse, suddenly we were at the foot of 'The Slab'. This is a slope of downward sloping rocks where we had to fix ropes. After negotiating it carefully we were

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6. The history of exploration of the route to the Nanda Devi Sanctuary are covered in several books and articles. For a brief coverage see 'Story of the Nanda Devi Sanctuary' in *Meeting the Mountains* (by Harish Kapadia, Indus, New Delhi, 1998).

at the traditional camping site of Bhujgara midway through the gorge.

The trail was now what locals called the '*Tel-mel bat*' (crooked trail). This ended in a pinnacle like feature, which was highly exposed. After a steep climb with fixed ropes, we were again at another famous point, 'Vaikunth Sidi' (Staircase to Heaven) which was dangerous and exposed. No wonder it is so named, for if you climb this you reach the heaven of Nanda Devi, if you fall you reach heaven anyway! Climbing the huge slopes over rocks and juniper we finally reached the top of the ridge; 'The Pisgah' (The Promised Land) and we were inside the famed Sanctuary. The campsite, Patakhana (mine of slabs) was nearby.

### **In the Sanctuary**

From Patakhana we had to cross an exposed slope, where we fixed rope, for one slip can take you to the Rishi ganga. After a large rock fall area, we reached the vast plains of the Southern Sanctuary with excellent views of Nanda Devi. We decided to make our base here, next to a spring, from where different parties would visit various areas of the Sanctuary. This place was christened *Chaubata* (four paths) and a small temple was constructed and consecrated to mark our camp.<sup>7</sup>

From this base camp we had wonderful views of Nanda Devi but unfortunately the famed 'Golden Sunset', only for one evening. Soon everyone was busy in different activities in smaller sub-groups.

One of the first moves was that Suman Dubey had to unfortunately leave next morning by helicopter as he developed high blood pressure. Two scientists, Dr. Sarfaraz and Anand Pendharkar, with a support team, made a camp ahead of Sarso Patal near the confluence of two glaciers; the Dakhini Nanda Devi glacier and the Dakhini Rishi glacier. They spent days collecting water samples, rock samples, observing bharals, birds and other fauna in the Sanctuary. Rupin Dang and his support team had filmed the entire route and the expedition on video and had undertaken many studies on the flora and fauna of the route. From Chaubata, they visited the Southern Sanctuary and higher slopes towards Nanda Dekhni Dhar before returning early on 16 June.

I stayed at Chaubata and organised the construction of a bridge across

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7. *Chaubata* (four paths): Four routes meet here: (a) The route from the Rishi Gorge, (b) route (via Sarso Patal) to the Nanda Devi base camp, Devtoli and Maiktoli base camp, Sunderdhunga khal in the Southern Sanctuary. (c) Route to the North Sanctuary, across the Rishi ganga river to Rishi Tal and all the peaks in the Northern Sanctuary and (d) Route for climbing to the Nanda Dekhni Dhar which crosses into the Trisul nala. This trail was used by shepherds to cross into the Sanctuary.

the Dakhini Rishi glacier so that we could visit the Northern Sanctuary. After great difficulties the bridge was made and team was about to cross over to visit Rishi Tal, a lovely lake in the Northern Sanctuary. However, due to the early arrival of monsoon, this plan had to be given up. The grand finale of our activities was two treks accomplished by Motup Chewang.

### **Sunderdhunga Khal (5550 m)**

On 14 June, Motup with 2 Sherpas, Samgyal and Dukpu, left Chaubata and reached the Dakhini Rishi glacier where they camped at 4800 m. The next day, they traversed the upper slope, keeping above the glacier moraine and finally descending to cross the moraine. They climbed on the right of the glacier and camped on a small snow plateau at 5000 m. June 16 was partly cloudy and they started early, around 5.00 a.m. First they traversed under the slopes of peak 'Cream Roll', which is to the east of Sunderdhunga col. The western slopes of Sunderdhunga col<sup>8</sup> are broken and avalanched regularly. They emerged a little above Sunderdhunga col on the east and descended to the col at 8.00 a.m. They saw a small clearing for camping on the south of the pass as well as an old cairn, possibly made in 1934.

After half an hour they returned and the descent was quick and they returned to Chaubata the same evening, tired but satisfied. This had been a strenuous outing but they had the satisfaction of clear views and being the first party in 67 years to reach the Sunderdhunga col, after Shipton-Tilman in 1934.

We were poised to enter the Northern Sanctuary when persistent bad weather turned in to heavy rain. On 19 June, monsoon arrived in the area, a couple of weeks earlier than usual. The radio was issuing warnings. As we had to descend the dreaded Rishi gorge on return, it seemed wiser to call off the expedition and return to the Lata village. Very carefully, we re-crossed the difficult sections of the Rishi gorge and we crossed some of the high passes amidst heavy rain, which was a harrowing experience.

### **Nanda Dekhni Dhar**

The rain did not stop our last exploration. Motup, Samgyal and our guide, Kalyan Singh, decided to return across the high col above Chaubata.

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8. In his book *Nanda Devi*, Eric Shipton gives vivid details of reaching the Sunderdhunga col. From the col they descended in the Sunderdhunga valley in the south, a most dangerous descent, which has not been repeated. I could not locate any photos of their route (in the above book or elsewhere) and no reference to any other party having reached this col after them.

This pass connects the inner Sanctuary with Trisul nala and was used by enterprising shepherds to bring the flock into the inner Sanctuary. They discovered several cairns erected by them during 1978 – 1982.<sup>9</sup> By using this route shepherds could bring the herds into the inner sanctuary, which was one of the reasons why the area had to be closed.

They started from Chaubata on 19 June in rather uncertain weather. At first they traversed across 3-4 steep gullies to reach a small nala to Patakhani. They climbed up this nala and camped at 5000 m, having walked almost 7 hours that day. This camp was a little below the Nanda Dekhni Dhar. Views from this camp were vast and exquisite. Peaks of the North Sanctuary, Trisul nala, Dunagiri and distant peaks of Chaukhamba group were visible though Nanda Devi remained under cloud.

20 June was a brilliant day. First they descended a little to cross the slopes of the upper Bhujgara nala and finally reached the col and crossed over into the Trisul valley. The descent was steep, across gullies going south and traversing towards Tridang, the base camp of Trisul. They descended to 4400 m over a few grassy slopes but mostly rocky gullies. They found several cairns up to the lowest point they reached in the Trisul nala, indicating that this was the route used by the shepherds in the past. However on the lower slopes a large section had broken off and they tried traversing on a small ridge for almost four hours, trying to locate a route across the ridge. This would have allowed them to descend to the Trisul nala. However, finding no route, they had to climb back to the col and camp above the Bhujgara nala completing a long day of 12 hours. Next day they started to descend the Bhujgara nala and joined the traditional route through the Rishi gorge.

Their exertions were not in waste. With more time and clear weather, it will be possible to complete this route, from Tridang to Chaubata, by traversing diagonally across from Tridang which is traditional base camp for climbing Trisul. It offers the lower and probably, a less difficult access to the Inner Sanctuary.<sup>10</sup> A team can climb to the Nanda Dekhni Dhar to obtain excellent views of the Inner Sanctuary, without suffering the difficulties of the Rishi gorge or disturbing the Inner Sanctuary. This could be one of the environment friendly solutions for the future of the sanctuary.

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9. The route was discovered by Umed Singh of Reni village. Unfortunately he passed away in 1999 and we could not talk to him about this pioneering effort.



*Article 9*

(Harish Kapadia)

19. Crossing Rishi ganga on improvised bridge.



*Article 9*

(Motup Chewang)

20. View from Sunderdhunga Khal.



*Article 9*

(Motup Chewang)

**23.** Chaukhamba peaks seen from Nanda Dekhni Dhar.



*Article 9*

(Motup Chewang)

**24.** Eroded route to Trisul nala below Nanda Dekhni Dhar.



*Article 9*

(Motup Chewang)

21. Slope to Maiktoli peak from Sunderdhunga Khal.



*Article 9*

(Motup Chewang)

22. Climbing to Nanda Dekhni Dhar, Nanda Devi peaks behind.



The objective of our expedition was to study and make recommendations on the environment and ecology of the Sanctuary. All along the trail we discussed these issues as well as measures necessary to protect the fragile environment. These have been compiled in a detailed report and submitted to the Indian Mountaineering Foundation.<sup>11</sup>

Being the abode of goddess Nanda the peaks and the Sanctuary is venerated by people and poets for centuries. Environmentalists, scientists (even nuclear scientists), historians, politicians, poachers, medicinal plant gatherers, forest contractors, local residents, activists, government, forest officials, trekkers, agents, and international climbing community – everyone has an interest and views on the affairs of the goddess and its Sanctuary. With her benevolent smile this ‘bliss giving’ goddess blesses all as the juggernaut moves on.

On one of the last evenings in the Sanctuary, we camped at Ramani, on the banks of the Rishi river. Alone in my tent, I could observe the Rishi ganga in spate. The river was rushing faster than the Rajdhani Express (the fastest train in India), roaring louder than any industrial unit and was powerful enough to generate many units of electricity. That sight itself was a *coupe de grace*. The power and divinity of even one river was enough to fight for and preserve it.

This power, I realised, was directly pitted against the power of the human mind. Is this where the conflict was? On the one hand the human mind wants to borrow beauty, peace and power from the Rishi and on the other, the same mind has led to the destruction of the mighty rivers and their environs. But then, an uncontrolled Rishi can also destroy everything in its wake. Maybe the power of the river and the power of the human mind are incomplete without each other. Where do we find the balance, that ‘Golden Mean’ to preserve this mighty river and the Nanda Devi Sanctuary, as well as feed the human desire to borrow from it by visiting such environs? Like in Fritjof Capra’s philosophy, how do we achieve the ‘Tao of Rishi’?

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10. Bill Aitken had crossed a direct route from Tridang to the base camp of Nanda Devi on the same ridge. According to him this was called ‘Nanda Kharak Pass’ and was also used by shepherds. See his book *The Nanda Devi Affair*.

11. Almost 100 page report edited by Suman Dubey was prepared. It is available with the Indian Mountaineering Foundation, offering suggestions ‘towards a management plan’ for the Sanctuary. It is up to the authorities to decide finally about implementation of these ideas. One hopes they have the desire, will and resources to protect the Sanctuary.

## SUMMARY

A trek to the Nanda Devi Sanctuary in June 2001 to study the impact of the closure of the Sanctuary. Sunderdhunga khal (5550 m) was reached after almost six decades. Nanda Dekhni Dhar on shoulder of Devistan peaks was reached.

**Members:** Harish Kapadia (leader), Suman Dubey (deputy leader), Motup Chewang, Anand Pendharkar, Rupin Dang, Dr Sarfaraz Ahmed and Dr M. N. Sharma. Vinit Pangtey, a senior Forest officer, accompanied the team.

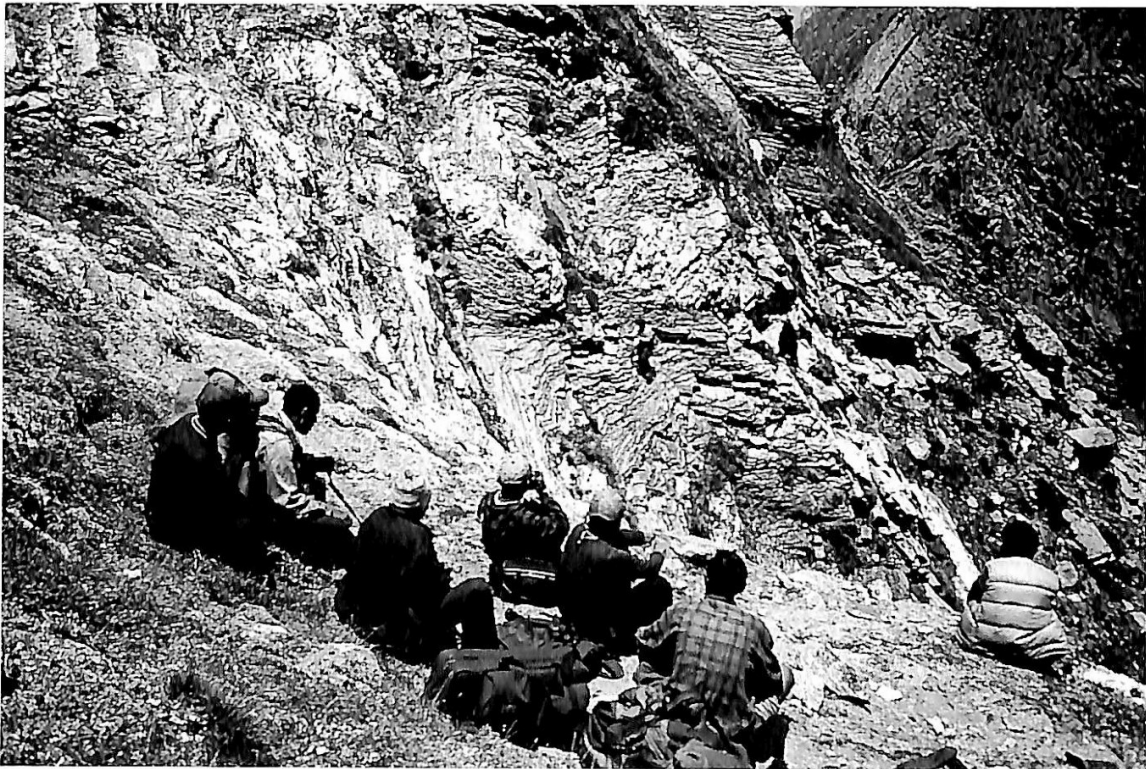
**Sponsored by:** The Indian Mountaineering Foundation.



*Article 9*

(Harish Kapadia)

11. Nanda Devi temple at Lata village.



*Article 9*

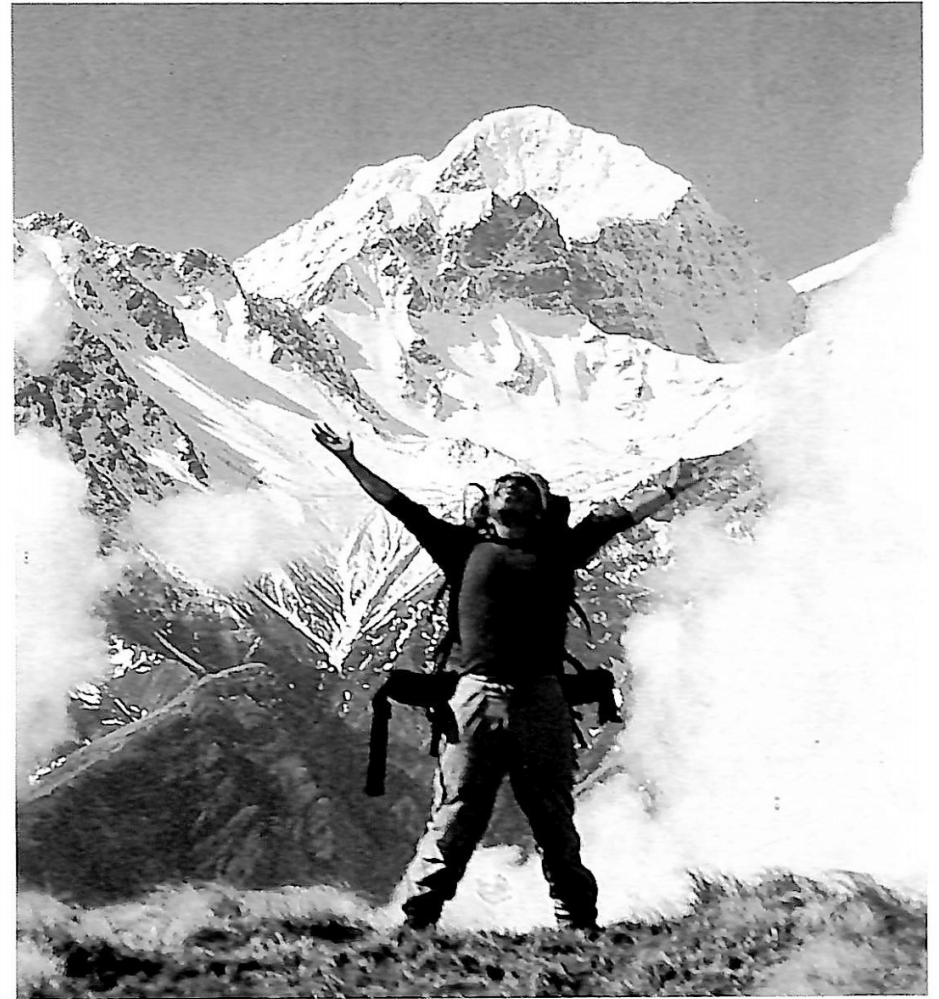
(Harish Kapadia)

12. Crossing 'The Slab' to inner Nanda Devi sanctuary.



*Article 9*

18. Writing on trees at Dibruggheta.



(Harish Kapadia)

17. Bethartoli Himal seen above Lata Kharak.