

STORY OF THE NANDA DEVI SANCTUARY

The Abode of the Goddess

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 set' (The 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 the 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'.

Peaks of the Nanda Devi Sanctuary

There are several famous peaks on the rim of the Nanda Devi Sanctuary. From the east the wall of the north Sanctuary has peaks like Latu Dhura (6392 m), Deo Damla (6620 m), Mangroan (6568 m) and Rishi Pahar (6992 m). The Sanctuary wall turns west from this junction and leads to Kalanka (6991 m) and Changabang (6864 m). It ends at Dunagiri (7066 m).

Towards south stand the small but difficult twin peaks of Bethartoli Himal (6352 m) and Bethartoli South (6318 m). Further south is Trisul (7120 m). The wall thence turns east and leads to Mrigthuni (6855 m), Devtoli (6788 m) and Maiktoli (6803 m). Then across the depression of Sunder-dhunga khal stands Panwali Dwar (6663 m) and Nanda Khat (6611 m) to complete the circle. The Sanctuary wall is divided into the 'inner' and 'outer' Sanctuary and these peaks stand on these walls. In the central dividing ridge stand the Devistan peaks.

Nanda Devi Peaks

The twin peaks of Nanda Devi stand tall and aloof from other peaks of the Sanctuary. Rising steeply from the South Nanda Devi glacier they rise more than 3800 m. The south ridge falling from the main traverses above 'the Coxcomb' and

has since been the main feature of this face (A feature of rock seen lower down was named 'the Coxcomb' and the normal route climbs over this.) The valleys surrounding the peaks contain four glaciers. The two at foot of the peaks on either side are called the Nanda Devi north and south glaciers, while the glaciers in the valleys further south and north are named the Rishi glaciers. Between them they drain about 380 square kilometres of snow and ice.

The Main peak stands entirely inside the Sanctuary and is inaccessible because of current restrictions. The East peak stands on the eastern wall of the Sanctuary and its south ridge falls to the Longstaff Col.

Seen from the north the faces of both the peaks look even more formidable, offering no easy route. Due to the valleys being more open in the north the peaks are seen to rise like two towers, linked by a ridge, with one fore-summit. The most striking pose of the twin peaks is seen from eastern Kumaon where both peaks are seen in a joint profile, looking strikingly beautiful, specially at dawn and dusk

Both peaks are connected by a ridge almost 2 km long, nowhere less than 6700 m. The ridge has a notch in the centre which is difficult to traverse.

Trek into the Sanctuary

It takes 8 days to reach the base camp of Nanda Devi on the south side. The Rishi Ganga forces its way through two gorges. The first one near Lata village cuts off possibilities of any easy approach. Hence a route was explored over two intervening ridges—the Dharanishi and Malathuni. Shipton and Tilman called them, 'the Curtain Ridge'. Near the second gorge of the Rishi Ganga a route was explored over precarious rocky terrain. The approach to the inner Sanctuary will always be difficult. It follows the following route: Lata, Lata Kharak, across Dharanishi pass (4267 m) to Dharanishi alp, across Malathuni pass (4270 m) to Dibrugheta alp, along the river to Deodi, Ramni at the foot of the gorge, Bhujgara half way through the gorge and Patalkhan across the main difficulties of the gorge. 'The Slabs' is the first of the difficulties where downward-sloping rocky slabs barely allow a precarious crossing. A narrow staircase of stones ahead cuts across a huge wall. One has to be careful for one slip and the person would plummet thousands of feet down the gorge. It is aptly called 'the Vaikunth seedi' ('the staircase to heaven') by the locals. If you climb up this, you reach the heaven of the Nanda Devi Sanctuary, if you fall, you reach the heaven anyway! Patalkhan is the first halt in the Sanctuary. From Patalkhan, the route descends to cross the south Rishi Ganga to enter the north side of the Sanctuary. The base camp is generally established near Haj Tal.

Heaven it is, inside the Sanctuary. Green meadows, with a vast view and the west face of Nanda Devi rising almost 2500 m (8000 ft) from Rishi Ganga. It must have been some experience for the 1934 party who were the first persons to see the inner Sanctuary. For their exit they chose 'the Sunderdhunga khal', the col reced by H. Ruttledge. After an epic and dangerous struggle down to the valley it was suggested that 'no sane mountaineer should repeat this route'. As a testimony to the sanity of mountaineers it remains unattempted to this day.

The first attempt to explore the routes to the Sanctuary was by W.W. Graham (1883), who could not make much headway and his claims to have climbed several peaks, like Changabang, were repudiated. Dr Longstaff (1905 and 1907) was the next explorer. At first with A.L. Mumm and C.G. Bruce he tried to forge a route through the Rishi gorge but was beaten. He then approached from the east and reached a col—he was thus the first person to look into the inner Sanctuary. This col, on the shoulder of the East peak is named after him. Hugh Ruttledge was next, and of the several routes tried by him the most innovative was a possible approach from the Sunderdhunga col in the south, which Shipton and Tilman used to descend from the Sanctuary in 1934.

Early Explorations and Climbs of Nanda Devi Main

Spurred by the article by Hugh Ruttledge, Eric Shipton and Bill Tilman set their hearts on exploring the route to the inner Sanctuary. They reached India in 1934 and in one of the most brilliant explorations in the Himalaya forged a route along the Rishi Ganga, still the only accessible route. Two years later Tilman accepted and Shipton declined the Anglo-American invitation to climb Nanda Devi. Four Americans: W.F. Loomis, Charles Houston, Arthur Emmons and H. Adams Carter, and four Englishmen: Graham Brown, Noel Odell, H.W. Tilman and Peter Lloyd formed a strong party to take on the Goddess, their knowledge and tactics were based on the earlier explorations. Base camp was established on the Dakkshini Nanda Devi glacier and the south side ('Coxcomb') was chosen for an attempt. As higher camps were established sickness and the difficulties of the route affected the Sherpas and members, and the party was depleted in strength. Sherpa Kitar Dorje died of dysentery at the base camp. Going up slowly, without crampons, Tilman and Odell reached the summit on 28 August 1936. In relief, on reaching the summit, and witnessing the beauty of the mountainscape surrounding them Tilman wrote: 'I believe we so far forgot ourselves as to shake hands on it'. The same evening, a cloud-burst caused destruction in the lower Garhwal, attributed to humans violating the abode of the Goddess. Though Tilman did not believe it, it added a fresh chapter into the Nanda Devi folklore.

For the next 14 years this remained the highest peak climbed. Not content with their achievement two members of the party climbed out of the basin by the col ('Longstaff Col') south of Nanda Devi East which Longstaff and two Brocherel brothers had reached in 1905 to the Lawan gad. One more chapter in the Nanda Devi saga had ended, but a lot remained to be done.

Nanda Devi East

Nanda Devi East, which was reconnoitred by Longstaff in 1905, was climbed by the Poles in 1939. Their first attempt on 21 June had to be abandoned as Injung Sherpa fell through a cornice. He was saved by an alert belay by Dawa but it was half an hour before he could be pulled up to the ridge. The shock and the pressure caused by the incident made the party change their mind. Returning to the higher camps after a wait for good weather Bujak and Dawa Sherpa with Bernadzikiewicz and Klaner started for the summit on 2 July. At 7180 m (23,550 ft) Bernadzikiewicz had to give up and he descended with Dawa. The other two reached the summit at 5.20 p.m. and descended to the camp by the light of the moon and in intense frost.

The Traverse

The ridge between the twin peaks is almost 2 km long and nowhere is it lower than 6700 m (22,000 ft) The traverse of this ridge became the next objective for the mountaineers. In 1951 a French expedition led by Roger Duplat undertook this difficult project which ended in a tragedy. They established base camp in the Sanctuary as well as three more camps on the Coxcomb ridge following the route of the 1936 expedition. Another party set up camps till the Longstaff Col from the Lawan gad. On 29 June, Duplat and G. Vignes were sighted a little below the summit of the main peak. They were never seen again. They had a long and difficult traverse ahead of them. The party waited for them for a while before a search was organised. The eastern party cut a route towards the summit, awaiting the climbers. L. Dubost and Sherpa Tensing reached the summit of Nanda Devi East on 4 July, and on their return to the Longstaff Col learnt that two climbers undertaking the traverse had not returned. The base of the mountain was searched but no trace of them could be found. The French returned here in 1975 (with some Indians as a

joint team) to traverse the peaks. They climbed by the Coxcomb ridge to the summit of the main peak and the East peak, but failed to complete the traverse.

The traverse succumbed to strong arm tactics by the Indo-Japanese team in 1976, in a most organised assault. After initial difficulties loads were airlifted to base camp by helicopters and simultaneous efforts began on both peaks on 12 May. Both the summits were climbed by 3 June. A camp, 'East 4', was established on the ridge by climbing down the summit. On the main peak, despite the unstable snow and danger of avalanches the south face was traversed to reach the ridge and camp 'West 5' was established. On 11 June Y. Hasegawa and K. Takami climbed the east peak and descended to the camp (East 4) on the ridge. They continued the traverse. There were several overhanging sections on the 650 ft high hump and a knife-edged ridge on the descent. It took them five hours. They reached the camp West 5 late in the afternoon where two climbers met them before leaving by the normal route. After waiting for a day due to a snowstorm the traverse was completed on 16 June and the main summit was climbed, where again two climbers greeted them on the summit.

Other Climbs

In the same year the main peak was climbed by the north ridge, by the Americans. But they had to pay a heavy price for it. This was an expedition organised to celebrate the 40th year of the first ascent. The star of this nostalgic expedition was Willi Unsoeld's daughter, named after the Goddess, Nanda Devi Unsoeld. All that had to be done was for her to climb the summit to yield good copy for the press. But alas tragedy struck below the summit. She died at Camp IV, succumbing to an infection contracted earlier. The grief-stricken expedition members consoled themselves that the girl had merged with the myth ('the goddess has gone to her abode') but the hillmen's Hindu superstitions were further strengthened. A decade later, John Roskelley, a young successful climber of this expedition vented his disenchantment with sentimental motivation adding to the growing literature on the mountain.

During the mid-sixties Nanda Devi was also scene of many hush-hush joint expeditions. It was subsequently discovered, that there were plans afoot to set up some nuclear device on the summit to detect nuclear activities on the Tibetan plateau. A device was left half-way on its slopes when the monsoon arrived. The party returned the next year to find it missing. Many years later there was a hue and cry that the device had fallen into the river and that the Rishi Ganga was polluted. Plenty of political mileage was sought from the 'Nanda Devi affair' by many governments and the peak was in the public eye for all the wrong reasons.

In 1974 onwards the Sanctuary was thrown open to the western mountaineers. There were several noteworthy expeditions to Nanda Devi and the peaks on the Sanctuary wall. A Japanese expedition penetrated the northern Sanctuary, for the first time in 40 years, and climbed its northernmost peaks. The Czechs climbed via a brilliant new route on the north ridge. An Indian expedition in 1981 put the first women mountaineers on the summit while some large army expeditions climbed the peaks though some lives were lost on its slopes. All this put a pressure on the fragile ecology of the Sanctuary. Logs were cut to make bridges, junipers burnt to keep porters warm and there was talk of building a footpath to the inner Sanctuary for the tourists. Local shepherds forged an alternative route into the inner Sanctuary which allowed the herd to be taken into the main Sanctuary for the first time. This was a fine piece of exploration but led to much destruction of flora and the Sanctuary was closed to mountaineers and locals alike. It remains closed till today, depriving a generation of mountaineers from enjoying the bliss of the Goddess Nanda.

There is a lot to look forward to when the Sanctuary is again opened to mountaineers. The west face of Nanda Devi is perhaps the most stupendous rock face that awaits climbers as are many other peaks and routes that are yet to be climbed. For whatever the reason, this abode of the Rishis will always be regarded as the most prized mountain wilderness in the world, one of the natural wonders of the world, as it is sometimes called. After five decades the words of Eric Shipton still ring true: '... in the Sanctuary of the Blessed Goddess we had found the lasting peace which is the reward of those who seek to know high mountain places.'

Important Events in the History of Nanda Peaks

1883

First explorations by W.W. Graham to find a route to the peaks. His claim about ascents of several peaks on the Nanda Devi Sanctuary wall were disbelieved.

1905-1907

Dr. Tom Longstaff explored several approaches to the inner Sanctuary. He climbed Trisul (7120 m) on the outer Sanctuary wall. Longstaff and two guides reached a high col on the Nanda Devi East peak and were the first persons to look into the inner Sanctuary.

1927 and 1932

Hugh Ruttledge explored the approaches from the south and discovered the existence of the Sunderdhunga col on the southern wall.

1934

The first attempt by Eric Shipton and H.W. Tilman to penetrate the Rishi gorge. They tried in the pre-monsoon period and finally succeeded in the post-monsoon period to reach the inner Sanctuary. They made an exit via the Sunderdhunga col.

1936

The Anglo-American expedition made the first ascent of the main peak of Nanda Devi. H.W. Tilman and Noel Odell reached the summit on 28 August 1936. Two members made an exit via the Longstaff Col to Lwan gad.

1939

Two Poles, J. Klaner and J. Bujak made the first ascent of Nanda Devi East on 2 July.

1951

A French expedition attempted to traverse from the Main peak to the East peak by the connecting high ridge. R. Duplat and G. Vignes were last seen below the main peak and presumed dead. Tensing Norgay and L. Dubost climbed the East peak.

1964

An Indian expedition (Col. N. Kumar) climbed the Main peak.

1965-1968

Attempts to place a nuclear device on the summit of the Main peak.

1974

The Sanctuary was opened for western mountaineers. Changa-bang (6864 m) and Devtoli (6788 m), the northernmost and the southernmost peaks of the inner Sanctuary respectively, were climbed in June.

1975

A Japanese expedition penetrated the northern Sanctuary and climbed several peaks on the northern Sanctuary wall.

A French expedition (Y. Pollet-Villard) climbed both the peaks on 16 June but failed to complete the traverse between the two peaks as intended.

1976

An Indo-Japanese expedition traversed the ridge between the two peaks, from the East peak to the main. Y. Hasegawa and K. Takami traversed the ridge in three days, starting on 11 June.

A commemorative American expedition to celebrate 40 years of the first ascent in 1936 ended in tragedy with the death of Nanda Devi Unsoeld, though the Main peak was climbed by the north ridge, a new route.

1977

Serious eco-imbalances in the Sanctuary reported by environmentalists.

1981

A new route on the Main peak, north ridge to northeast buttress, climbed by a Czech (M. Martins) expedition on 19 September.

An Indian expedition (Col. Balwant Sandhu) climbed the Main peak. Three ladies reached the summit.

An expedition of the Indian Army Para-troopers (Maj. Kiran Kumar) climbed both the peaks but five climbers died during the expedition.

1983

The Sanctuary was closed for mountaineers and locals for environmental reasons.

1993

An Indian Army Engineers expedition climbed the Main peak and studied the condition of the ecology. They recommended continued closure of the Sanctuary.

Approaches to Peaks from Outside the Sanctuary

At present no team is allowed to enter the Sanctuary but any peak on the Sanctuary walls is allowed to be climbed from the 'outside'.

The Nanda Devi Sanctuary stands in centre of the Kumaon and Garhwal valleys. The peaks on the eastern and southern walls are approachable from the Milam (Longstaff Col, Nanda Devi East) and Sunderdhunga valleys (Sunderdhunga Col, Maiktoli) respectively. Peaks on the northern walls are approachable from the Girthi valley (Dunagiri, Changabang) while the peaks on the western rim are approachable from the Nandakini valley (Trisul West face).

This allows for attempts of Nanda Devi East peak (from east, Lawan gad), Changabang, Kalanka (from north, Dunagiri gad), Trisul (from west, the Nandakini valley), and Maiktoli (from south, Sunderdhunga valley). Many other peaks can be thus climbed but not the Main peak.