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The Dhaul Valley, Niti Pass, and Bara Hoti

The Age of Exploration

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The Dhaul valley in the central Garhwal is surrounded by a ring of high and famous mountains. Kamet and Abi Gamin are to the west, Ganesh Parvat to the northwest. Bara Hoti, the area which saw conflict in the 1962 India-China war, is in the northeast. Several passes in the east complete the cirque.

It has a long history of exploration by the likes of Frank Smythe, W. H. Murray, and Alexander Kellas. It is also chased with old trade and pilgrimage routes to and from Tibet across the Niti pass. In the last few decades, the valley has largely remained out of bounds owing to security concerns. But the permit situation has eased now. Taking advantage of this, three of us, Kanu and Rama Pomal and I, visited its upper reaches and trails in the summer of 2014 and studied the history of the valley. This is an account of our travels and other exploration in the area.

William Moorcroft

The age of Western exploration of the Himalaya and Tibet started in earnest in 1811 with a daring journey by William Moorcroft. He trained as an apprentice to a surgeon from Liverpool, studied veterinary science in France, and eventually set up a practice as a horse veterinarian in London. His work patenting improved horseshoes brought him to the notice of the East India Company, for whom he began to buy breeding horses.

In 1807 he sailed for India, and by 1808 was appointed to various posts in Bengal and Bihar. He obtained permission to make a journey to the Himalaya to buy new strains for horse-breeding and to investigate the possibilities of wool trade with Tibet.¹ Moorcroft was accompanied by Hyder Young Hearsey, an Anglo-Indian explorer. Disguised as fakirs, they called themselves Mayapori and Hargiri. At first they followed the Ramganga river from the plains to its source. Then, following Captain William Webb's route along the Alaknanda, they reached Joshimath

¹ Mason, Kenneth, *Abode of Snow* (E. P. Dutton, London: 1955), pp. 65-66.

- an achievement in those days. Proceeding further, they entered the Dhauli valley and crossed Niti pass to Tibet. They were the first Europeans to cross Niti pass, although not the first to cross into Tibet, as the missionary Jesuit Fathers had crossed Mana pass to Tibet a decade earlier.² Moorcroft became the first European to reach Manasarovar after Ippolito Desideri in 1715. Later he went on to explore Ladakh and Kashmir.³

Tom Longstaff

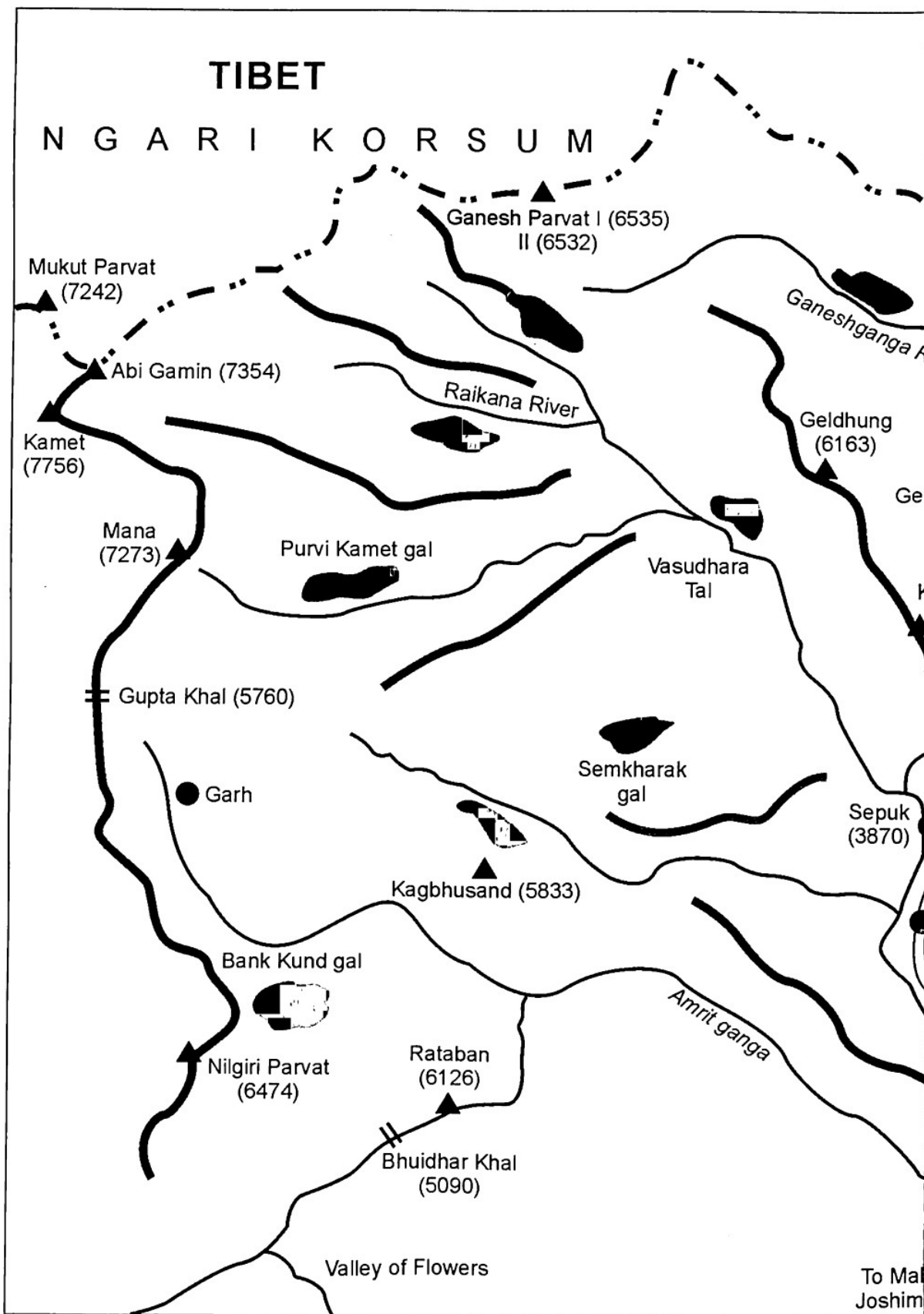
In 1907, the British explorer Dr Tom Longstaff arrived in the Dhauli valley with his Gorkhas, whom the Niti men called 'Katara-dar' (knife-bearers), as they carried their traditional curved khukris. Longstaff was keener on exploration than on climbing in the Dhauli valley. A fortnight earlier he had explored the Nanda Devi Sanctuary and made a fast and first ascent of Trisul (7120 m) - at the time, the highest peak ever climbed. He crossed into Tibet via the Niti pass, reached Manasarovar, and almost climbed peak Gurla Mandhata (7694 m), thus achieving both exploration and climbing.

During his second visit to the area, he crossed the Lipu Lekh (c. 5000 m) pass to Tibet. After spending a month of travelling in Tibet, he reached Gyanima Mandi, the traditional market where the Niti men and the Tibetans exchanged goods.. Here, he was laid low by ill-health. After a week of rest, Longstaff started out on a yak and marched in shorter stages. He decided to cross the little known Shalshal pass (4908 m) just south of Niti pass. Kedyar Singh, an influential trader from Niti, offered to assist him. After four days, the party crossed the Shalshal pass to Bara Hoti, which was 'full of small alpine flowers and whistling marmots'.⁴ Here, his Tibetan yak driver deserted him and returned to Tibet fearing that if he carried on to Niti, his yaks would die from the

² Mason calls Niti the best known pass (for explorers as a route to Tibet) while Mana the most frequented pass, which 12 early missionaries had crossed. Mason, pp. 24-25.

³ 'Given his career - and it is here, as he would have wished, that his greatness lies - Moorcroft's character may best be seen as approaching that of the erratic genius. He was indeed obstinate, eccentric and controversial, but he was full of infectious energy and invariably ahead of the times. To anyone responsible for his activities he was an unholy terror but to his friends and followers a guiding light. He should have been safely cloistered in a progressive university rather than let loose on the Himalaya. Empires are created by men of vision but Moorcroft was visionary'. John Keay on the unconventional Moorcroft. Keay, John. *When Men and Mountains Meet*. (John Murray, London, 1977), pp. 18-19.

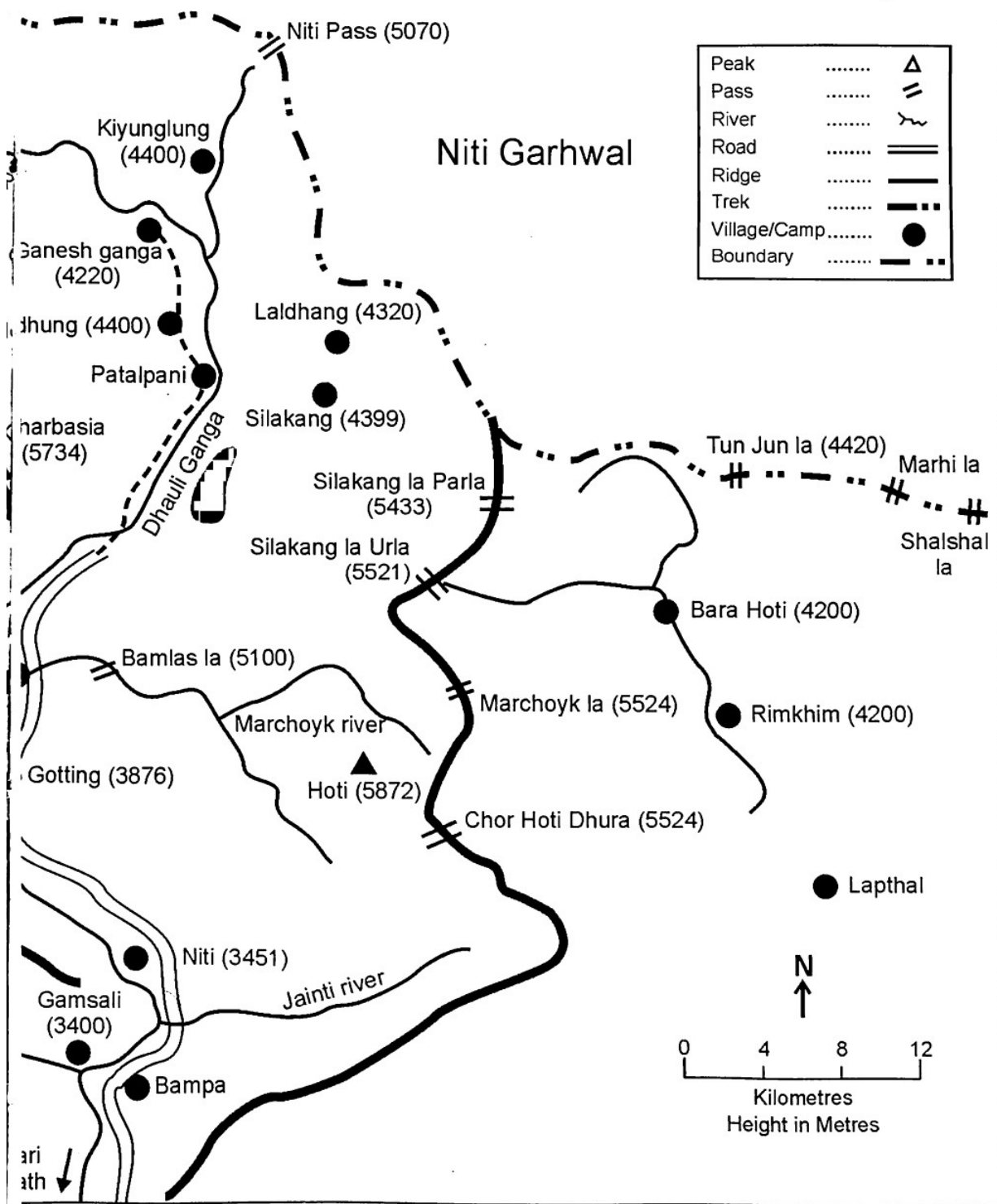
⁴ Longstaff, Tom, *This My Voyage* (London : John Murray, 1950), p. 139.



Dhaul Valley Map

Dhaulig Valley

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heat. This was break of agreement and caused much inconvenience to Longstaff. With the help of Kedyar Singh's son, Longstaff crossed the Chor Hoti Dhura (5429 m), a direct route, to reach Niti village.⁵

Oxygen Experiments

Dr Alexander Kellas, a Scottish climber, was entrusted by the Royal Geographical Society with the task of conducting experiments on the use of supplemental oxygen by mountaineers at high altitudes, with a possible Everest expedition on the cards after the end of World War I. The Society deputed Kellas in 1920 to conduct experiments in the Dhauli valley. He was to go as high as possible on Kamet (7756 m). The Survey of India deputed Major H. T. Morshead to go with Kellas.

The apparatus and cylinders were to arrive in India by June 1920. Kellas therefore made his way to the Niti village by easy stages in July. The programme was, however, seriously delayed by the late arrival of the oxygen cylinders. As the cargo was marked 'high explosives', it was held up by Customs - the border agency was presumably under the impression that Kellas was about to start a private war! The cylinders reached Niti only on 27 August. This delay prevented them from climbing above Meade's Col on Kamet.

Their Garhwali porters were not all they wanted them to be. But they had nothing but praise for the Bhotias of Niti. 'On rock they can climb like goats, while on ice they readily learn step-cutting. It appears very doubtful if the present-day expense of importing Alpine guides can ever justify their employment in future Himalayan exploration.'⁶ These experiments with the oxygen cylinders in the Dhauli valley were eventually extremely valuable in designing the oxygen apparatus for subsequent expeditions to Everest.

We Arrive in Joshimath

We arrived in the Dhauli valley in June 2014. Much water had flown in the Dhauli since the explorations by Moorcroft. The bureaucracy had tightened its grip. We had to obtain four types of permits: inner

⁵ 'Months later, when staying with Philip Howell, then of the Guides Cavalry, on North-West Frontier, the postman brought me a postal order for six rupees. I never found out what this was for till I returned to Niti with Charles Bruce and Mumm in 1907. It then turned out that it was sent by the Dzongpun of Dhaba as refund for the last day's hire which I had paid; the march his man had burked. Honesty typical of a Tibetan gentleman'. Longstaff, p. 40 .

⁶ Mason, p. 186.

line permit from the local magistrate, and permits from the Forest Department and Nanda Devi Bio-Reserve. We also had to pay fees per day to pitch tents in the area. Besides, permission was required from the local District Magistrate and the Indo-Tibetan Border Police. But the ultimate winner was the demand for a Medical Fitness Certificate for each member and porter. Such as things stood, the local doctor had printed forms to issue such certificates in reams!

Having read about the Dhauli and Niti passes in historical records, we were looking forward to trekking in these remote valleys. No sooner had we arrived at Joshimath than we were told of a proper road leading from Joshimath till almost the foot of the Niti pass. The road was lined with bulldozers, road builders' camps, and taxis plying daily to the 'remote' Niti village. One can now be transported from Joshimath (1875 m) to the foot of Niti pass (4420 m) in just a few hours! We travelled on to Malari (2860 m) in three hours from Joshimath to enter the inner line.

The Girthi Ganga Valley

A little ahead of the Malari Police Check Post was the confluence of the Girthi Ganga with the Dhauli Ganga. Accessing the Girthi Ganga valley still remains a challenge although a motorable road now leads partially into the valley which goes north towards the Bara Hoti. The Girthi Ganga, originates from two glaciers, both flowing north at first, west of Unta Dhura. Girthi, the eastern valley, is broad and drains the glacier at the foot of Nanda Gond - its waters are black. The western valley drains the glaciers at the foot of the peaks Kholi (6114 m) and Chalab (6160 m). From a narrow and highly crevassed glacier, milky white waters gush out. Then the Girthi flows westwards, forcing a way through the gorge to meet Kio Gad at Girthi Dobala and merge with the Dhauli at Malari. This gorge had first been traversed by Dr Kurt Boeckh in 1893.⁷

The Scottish Himalayan Expedition of 1950

There seemed to always be some explorer or other in the Dhauli valley and the adjoining valleys. Moreover, the trade with Tibet kept the passes busy. In 1950, four Scotsmen decided to pay detailed attention to the valleys of the Girthi. Led by the author and explorer

⁷ Murray, W. H., *The Scottish Himalayan Expedition* (J.M. Dent London: 1951), p. 203.



Girithi Ganga Gorge



Looking back Bara Hoti is up the valley on left while climbing to Unta Dhura

W. H. Murray, they roamed these valleys at leisure, climbing peaks and observing the local villages. They were near a village - which they called the 'Metropolis of Surai Thota' - when they met Hartwell, P. Singh and Professor Chowfin of Allahabad University. Singh had a degree in Agriculture from the University of Edinburgh in Scotland. Singh's immediate job was to trek up the Dhauli Ganga to the Niti pass on the Tibetan frontier to test the soil and introduce suitable seeds, potatoes and fruit trees. The Scottish party was happy to learn that potatoes grown here came from Scotland and found the Himalayan potatoes near Niti pass 'white and floury, well formed, and [with a] flavour superior to anything I had tasted in Scotland'. The Scottish party therefore surmised that Himalayan soil must be especially favourable to the growth of potatoes. Indeed, potatoes from upper Garhwal are greatly in demand to this day.

Murray and his team travelled towards the Tibetan frontier. They passed many herds of goats laden with bulging saddle-bags and driven by wool-clad Tibetans, passing south. The Bhotias of Niti were also on their way up the valley to trade with the Tibetan caravans. Each party carried a Singer sewing-machine to stitch



Merging of Kio gad (black) with the Girthi

bags and repair tents. In this remote frontier, the famous British sewing-machine was very popular.

As a young mountaineer I had read the accounts by Bill Murray and Frank Smythe about these areas. In 1988, we three trekkers from

Mumbai had followed the footsteps of the Scottish team and explored the Girthi western valley. The eastern valley is relatively broad and shepherds use it frequently. Turning south from Topidunga, we had crossed Unta Dhura pass (5360 m) down to Milam and the Gori Ganga.⁸

The Amrit Ganga Valley

Going up the Dhauli valley, the first villages are Bampa and Gamsali - both at about 3400 m. They are some three kilometres apart, with the Amrit Ganga flowing between them. The Amrit Ganga, draining the 40 km long Bank Kund valley in the northwest, meets the Dhauli near Gamsali village. Going up the Bank Kund valley on a trail along the Amrit Ganga, is Dumsain, a flat open maidan with a clear pond.

We went up the Amrit Ganga valley as it turned and twisted in various directions. At the head of this valley lies the Gupt Khal (Secret Pass) (5760 m), crossing over to the Alaknanda valley to Mana village. In 1907, A.L. Mumm suspected the presence of this pass and called it the Secret Pass as it cannot be seen until the last slopes of the glacier are reached. Very few parties have crossed it from the Bank Kund valley. It is also known as the Zaskar Pass, as it lies on the dividing line between the Great Himalayan and Zaskar ranges.

One branch of the Amrit Ganga valley leads to the Bhuidhar Pass (5090 m; earlier called the Bhuyandar Pass) and the trail from the pass descends across to the Valley of Flowers. We continued trudging across the Bank Kund glacier for four days to reach the foot of Gupt Khal (5760 m). We

⁸ Kapadia, Harish, *High Himalaya Unknown Valleys* (Indus, New Delhi, 1993), p. 43.



Nilgiri Parvat from upper Amrit Ganga valley



Bank Kund lake in the Amrit Ganga valley

could see some figures on the pass. An exchange of shouts finally established that it was an Indian Army team on a reconnaissance of Mana peak (7272 m). Helped by their fixed rope on the final 200 m, we reached the pass. It was an experience, exchanging notes at that altitude. But an invitation to lunch at their camp on the Alaknanda side had to be reluctantly turned down as returning to our camp in the Amrit Ganga valley would be impossible later in the day as distance was long.⁹

⁹ *Ibid.*, Kapadia, p. 44

Ahead of Gamsali, the Dhauli creates a terrific gorge. A precarious road is built on one side of it. After crossing the gorge is the Niti, the last village in the valley.

Frank Smythe on Kamet, 1931

The route to Kamet peak leads along the Dhauli Ganga. All expeditions to Kamet in the first half of the twentieth century rested in Niti to organise porters and supplies. In 1931, a strong party led by Frank Smythe reached the Dhauli valley and later made the first ascent of the high peak of Kamet. Smythe was enchanted by the lower valley of the Dhauli, and recalled his conversation with General Charles Bruce, comparing it to the Alps.¹⁰

Smythe, a pucca British Sahib, was happy to be in hills, away from conflicts of India's freedom struggle in the plains. He mentioned

We were no longer within range of Gandhi's activities, and, after the insolent stares of Congress Wallahs of the lower hills and plains, it was pleasant to be greeted with a respectful and friendly Salaam Sahib or Salaam Huzoor from the villagers we met on the path.¹¹

Smythe also observed about the people of Niti

At first appearance they seemed a wild, almost ruffian-looking crowd. Their faces had never seen, or their bodies experienced, soap and water. They exuded strong odours of yaks and other things. Their tattered garments consisted for the most part of coarse sackcloth. They walked barefoot or with feet encased in clumsy cloth, Tibetan boots or layers of sackcloth. But their gait was the gait of the hilman - slouching and slow on the level, rhythmical and deceptively fast uphill.¹²

¹⁰ 'I can bear him [Bruce] witness, for the Dhaoli Valley above Malari bears a striking resemblance to the Gastern Thal [in the Alps] only the Dhaoli Valley is on a more lavish and magnificent scale. The splintered rock peaks of reddish granite, of Alpine size in themselves, are mere outposts of greater peaks behind. Half a mile above Gamsali, the Dhaoli Valley narrows to one of the grandest defiles in the Garhwal Himalaya. From either bank of the Dhaoli River the precipices rise smooth and sheer, as though sliced by a titan's knife.' Smythe, F.S., *Kamet Conquered* (Victor Gollancz London, 1932), p. 239.

¹¹ Smythe, p. 96.

¹² Smythe, p. 105.

Frank Smythe and his party trekked at a leisurely pace, interacting with the villagers.

Before leaving Surai Thota we were told of a belief which we were to hear repeatedly in the Kamet and Badrinath districts. When Doctor Longstaff climbed Trisul in 1907, one of his Gurkhas, Karbir by name, who accompanied him to the summit, was questioned by villagers on his return as to the view he had seen from the top. Being somewhat inventive and a mischievous turn of mind, Karbir replied with a grave face that they had seen far over the foothills to the great plain where they could see the cities of Delhi and Bareilly. And then, of course, it was easily possible to see Bombay, and beyond Bombay was the Black Ocean, and beyond that England, and he knew it was England because he'd been there! Thus does folk-lore originate, and we were questioned more than once as to whether we were climbing Kamet in order to see England from the summit.¹³

During our stay at Niti we asked around about this legend, but the present generation, fed on television, looked at us as though we had lost it! They knew where Bombay (now Mumbai) was and what lay beyond the ocean. We also aroused amusement when we talked of another belief mentioned by Smythe. He had heard that a notion existed in the area 'that on the summit of Kamet there is a palace of pure gold tenanted by a powerful god'.¹⁴

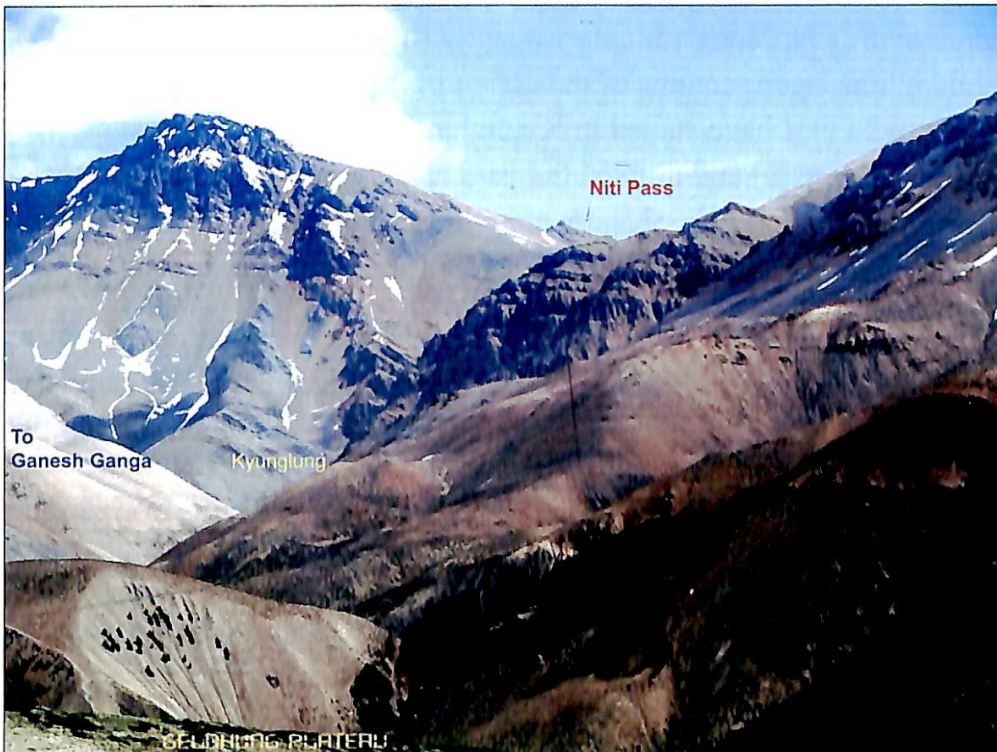
A few kilometres ahead towards the Niti pass was the Gotting valley. It was compared by Smythe to the remote and serene valleys near Everest, as depicted in the paintings of T. Howard Somervell. Today, a wide road passes through Gotting, which has turned into a ghetto of road workers and has a large presence of the defence forces. We stayed here for a few nights to acclimatise, and undertook some walks in the side valleys. Several trails descend from Bara Hoti (4500 m) around Gotting. The trails from several passes, Chor Hoti Dhura (5429 m), Marchoyk La (5524 m) and Bamlas La (5100 m) descend to Gotting. The Raykana river from Vasudhara Tal and Kamet merges with the Dhauli at Gotting.

¹³ Smythe, p. 87.

¹⁴ Smythe, p. 87.



Niti village



Niti pass

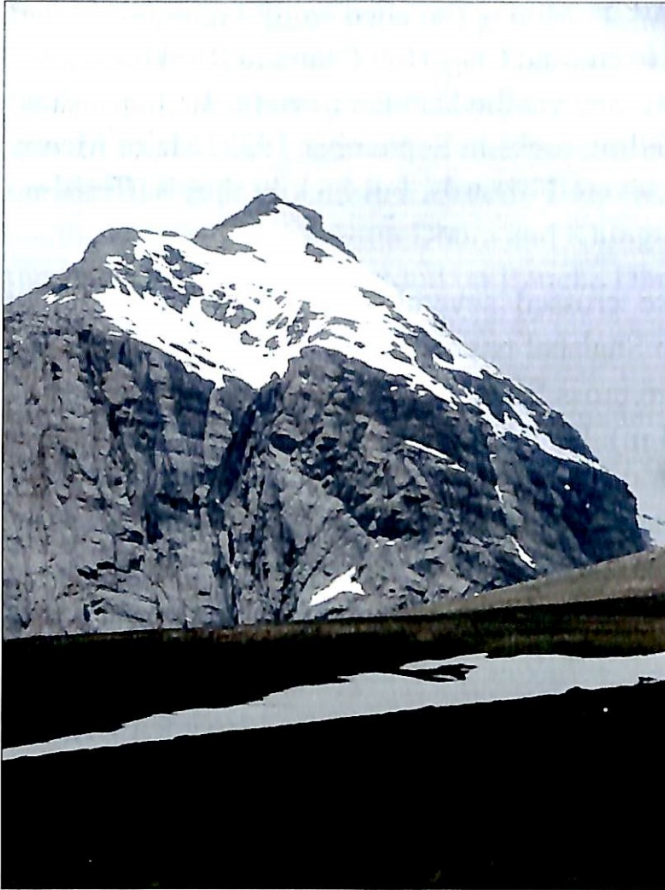


East of Niti pass. Routes to Bara Hoti

The present road ends at Kharbasia (4200 m), a little ahead of Gotting. A steep walk of six kilometres leads to Geldung (4400 m). This was our base camp. In front of us was the famous Niti pass (5070 m). It was a major depression in the long running ridge, and by taking a detour we could avoid all the steep sections of the ascent to the pass. Trading caravans to Tibet in the past have stayed in Kyunglung (sometimes the name is also used for Niti pass) and crossed the pass to camp at Hoti in Tibet. Rising from the plateau was the shapely monolith of Geldung (6163 m).

Swami Pranavananda, a Hindu sage, used this pass in the 1930s to visit Kailash and Manasarovar - as this was the shortest approach to those holy spots. He stayed many months at Manasarovar and has described most of the routes leading there.¹⁵ Niti villagers crossed the pass regularly for trade with the Tibetans. Gyanima Mandi was the nearest market in Tibet for them. Carrying wood and grains to Gyanima Mandi they brought back rock salt. The rich Tibetans were happy to offer diamonds in exchange for large quantities of grains. The trade continued until China took over Tibet in about 1959.

¹⁵ Refer to the book Pranavanand, Swami, *Kailash - Manasarovar* (S.P. League, New Delhi, 1949).



Kharbasia Peak on Geldhung plateau



Geldhung peak

To the west of Geldung was the Ganesh Ganga valley, winding its way to the Ganesh Parvat (6535 m) group of peaks. Two of these peaks were climbed by the Indo-Tibet Border Police teams in the early sixties, soon after the Chinese aggression. They used the approach from the Raykana glacier near Vasudhara tal, possibly to avoid proximity to the troubled border.

Smaller Parties at Bara Hoti

To our south and east was the valley of Silakang La, (5433 m) which led to the Bara Hoti plains. In the 1920s, several trekking parties had visited the Bara Hoti area. They crossed and re-crossed several passes. In

¹⁶ Mason, Kenneth, editor, 'Minor Himalayan Travels,' p. 98 (*Himalayan Journal*, Vol. I, Calcutta 1929).

August 1929, Major G. W. P. Money travelled from Almora to Malari and then up the Dhauli. He crossed Chor Hoti Dhura to Rimkhim (4200 m) and Bara Hoti and returned via the Damjan pass. (c. 4000 m). Eight Bhotias were killed by falling rocks in September 1927. Major Money and his party too faced severe blizzards, but luckily they suffered no casualties.¹⁶

In 1931, Lt Hugh Rose crossed several passes; Balcha Dhura to Laphthal and Rimkhim to Shalshal pass (4908 m). He reached Tun Jun la (4420 m); attempted to cross Silakang la to Geldung failing that he tried Marchoyk la (5524 m). Unable to cross back to the lower valleys owing to heavy snow on these passes, he crossed into Tibet to Sarkia and crossed into upper Garhwal via the Niti pass. He enjoyed excellent views from the passes, particularly of Kailash. These were happy days when no boundaries stopped explorers and they roamed the valleys as they desired.

In 1954, Indian explorer Gurdial Singh and his friends roamed for three months in the Upper Garhwal and adjacent Tibet in an epic journey. He had climbed Trisul with Roy Greenwood in 1951 and now returned to the area of the Dhauli valley, crossing Chor Hoti Dhura to Bara Hoti. They climbed a peak near Silakang la (Parla), going up by the south ridge to the 5431 m summit. They crossed to Tibet via the Tuan Jun la (4420 m). When they reached Kailash, he observed: 'the mountain is beautifully proportioned. A mighty cathedral; it seems to be the creation of some divine architect. No wonder it is considered so sacred by millions of Hindus and Buddhists'.¹⁷

They made their way back from Tibet via the Marhi la (c. 5100 m) to India. The slopes, to Bara Hoti were covered with familiar flowers, rippling streams so refreshing to the eyes, the first view of the Hoti amphitheatre in the mellow afternoon light after three weeks in harsh Tibet welcomed them. They returned via the Marchyok la (5524 m) Bamlas la (5100 m). 'We had returned, intact, to the zone of rose finches, snow cocks, ruby throats, meadow-buntings, and, to quote Longstaff, "to soft airs, warmth, trees and flowers".'

¹⁷ Singh, Gurdial, 'Three Months in Upper Garhwal and Adjacent Tibet', (*Himalayan Journal*, Vol. XIX, Calcutta, 1955-56), p. 3.

¹⁸ Moddie Aspi, 'A High Walk in the Central Himalaya', (*Himalayan Journal*, Vol. XII, Calcutta, 1959-60).

In 1959, Gurdial Singh returned to Bara Hoti from the south. His only companion, Aspi Moddie, wrote: 'A time comes when a man wishes to have his mountains and enjoy them painlessly. Then there are no summit ambitions, and one is content to see "heaven in a wild flower". This was the aim of this party of two stalwarts. They started from Kumaun in the south, and went across Unta Dhura and Khingur la to Lapthal. Entering the Bara Hoti plains they stood on Bancha Dhura pass (5364 m) on the border, enjoying stupendous view of Garhwal peaks. As they turned their faces to the east, they saw the peak of Kailash. 'There Kailash was, fifty miles away, the only white mountain in a brown land. It had the quality of Shangri-La, a remote and heavenly place'.¹⁸

Theirs was the last civilian party to roam around freely in these areas. In two years' time, both the Indian as well as the Chinese armies started to occupy the area, and no visitors were allowed in the upper Dhauli valley.

1962: Face to Face with the Chinese Army

For the Niti Pass and its surroundings, 1962 was a game-changing year. The India-China war saw the introduction of the Indian army at high altitudes. One of the first defence posts was created at Bara Hoti Grazing Ground (BGG) across the Silakang Pass from the Dhauli valley. Then, in early 1962, the Indian Army received information that the Chinese were planning to occupy BGG no sooner than the snow melted. The BGG is a gigantic amphitheatre at about 4200 m. On its northwest and southwest rims are ridges three hundred to a thousand metres higher than the BGG plateau-floor. But its northeast rim, which forms the international boundary with Tibet (China) is barely 150 m higher than the surroundings, and therefore provides an easy gateway to BGG over the Tun Jun la (4420 m) for the Chinese.

On 27 April, an Indian defence party led by Lt Gen Baljit Singh managed to reach Rimkhim with great difficulty and established a post with the Indian flag flying on the plateau. They disguised themselves as a Revenue Collection Party (RCP), set up to collect taxes for cattle grazing at Bara Hoti - so that their presence might not be called a military occupation of Bara Hoti.

The Chinese army detachment of ten soldiers and 30 laden ponies arrived at Bara Hoti from Tibet on 12 May and attempted to bypass the Indian

camp. The Indian soldiers obstructed their paths, physically blocking their manoeuvring, all the while drawing their attention to the fluttering tricolour Indian flag. After a few minutes of heated gesticulations, the Chinese pitched their tents about 20 m away from the RCP. They got inside a disused graziers' stone-walled enclosure. Sadly for the RCP, the 30 ponies of the People's Liberation Army were the only live stock that even pastured in the BGG - and they refused to pay the revenue!

Though there was no fighting, in a short while the Chinese took possession of the un-held Tun Jun la, named it Hu Ji and set up a post at the site where they had stopped. Since then both sides have consolidated their positions, thus making it difficult for mountaineers and trekkers to visit.¹⁹

Our return

As we returned to Niti, local elections were being held there. Democracy had its roots here too, with posters everywhere, loudspeakers blazing and polling parties travelling. Rich Niti villagers, who migrate to the plains every winter, had returned for a day to vote and there was a festive atmosphere. Thanks to the road, they arrived here in cars and vans instead of on mules. There are telephones, solar lights, and televisions. The road had been a boon for the villagers and the defence forces.

As with many other Himalayan valleys, this one, so remote since its first days of exploration in 1811, has become well connected to the world outside. There are those who might be tempted to call this the end of the age of exploration in the area. But they underestimate the breadth and scope of the mighty ranges this valley is a gateway to. New climbs, further valleys, and greater exploration await here the mountaineers of the future.

Summary

Visit to the upper Dhaul valley in 2014. Recalling history of explorations of Niti pass, Bara Hoti and treks to the Girthi Ganga and Amrit Ganga valleys.

¹⁹ Singh, Baljit, *India Defence Review*, Internet Edition (18 September 2012).

Dhaulig Valley

