

## **We are the Pilgrims**

### **Mountain Ranges and Temples of Garhwal**

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Harish Kapadia

*Shreya (10 years) started walking behind me and without losing breath narrated the story of a handsome prince and his golden apples. The prince was looking for the apples which were hidden under a throne over which a huge bird sat. The prince managed to reach the throne, and forced the bird to fly. By the time the prince discovered those golden apples, we were on top of the pass.*

We were climbing a steep but well-made trail to Deoria tal near Okimath.

“My name is Jaishankar,” said a man with a smart moustache. “I live in this area and am visiting this lake after a long time with a guest.” We sat down under a small canopy made for just such a meeting and exchanged light banter and some information.

His friend called, “Come on Jim, it is time to go.” Jaishankar was an orthodox Hindu name, while Jim was truly British. Looking at the query in my eyes he replied, “I am called Jim after the famous *shikari*, Jim Corbett. I am an official *shikari* linked with the forest department. When there is a leopard or tiger who turns man-eater, my team is called to eliminate the beast. We try to sedate and shift the animal, but if not, we kill it.”

“This is the Corbett area, as you know,” he added.

We were to meet many such non-pilgrims visiting the area. Following a regular pilgrim trail along with these experiences made us pilgrims too, though of a different sort.

The area encompassing the middle region of the Himalaya, contains oft visited ancient temples and villages. Of particular interest is the trail known as the ‘Panch Kedar’ (five temples of Kedarnath or Shiva) that has been followed by the faithful for hundreds of years. Much has been written about them, more so in vernacular literature. These temples are situated in different valleys so using them as

— Nilgiri Parvat 6471 m

— Rataban 6166 m

— Ghori Parvat 6708 m

— Hathi Parvat 6787 m

— Phalanga Parvat 5773 m

— Oti ka Danda 5782 m

— Barmal 5879 m

— Kunti Bhanar 5895 m

— Lampak 6181 m

— Tirsul 7074 m

— Hardeol 7151 m

— Bharte Khunta 6578 m

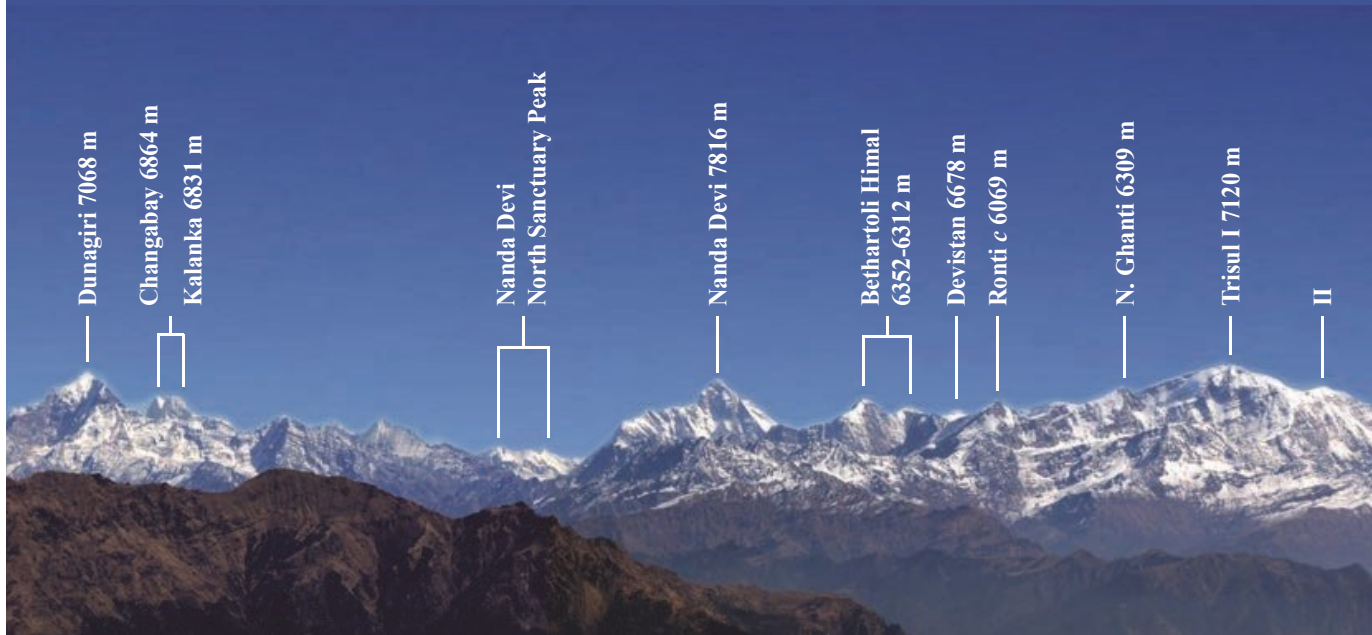
— Kedarnath 6940 m

— Kedar Dome 6831 m

— Sumeru Parvat 6331 m

— Kharcha Kund 6612 m

— Yeoubuk 5933 m



— Dunagiri 7068 m

— Changabay 6864 m

— Kalanka 6831 m

— Nanda Devi  
North Sanctuary Peak

— Nanda Devi 7816 m

— Bethartoli Himal  
6352-6312 m

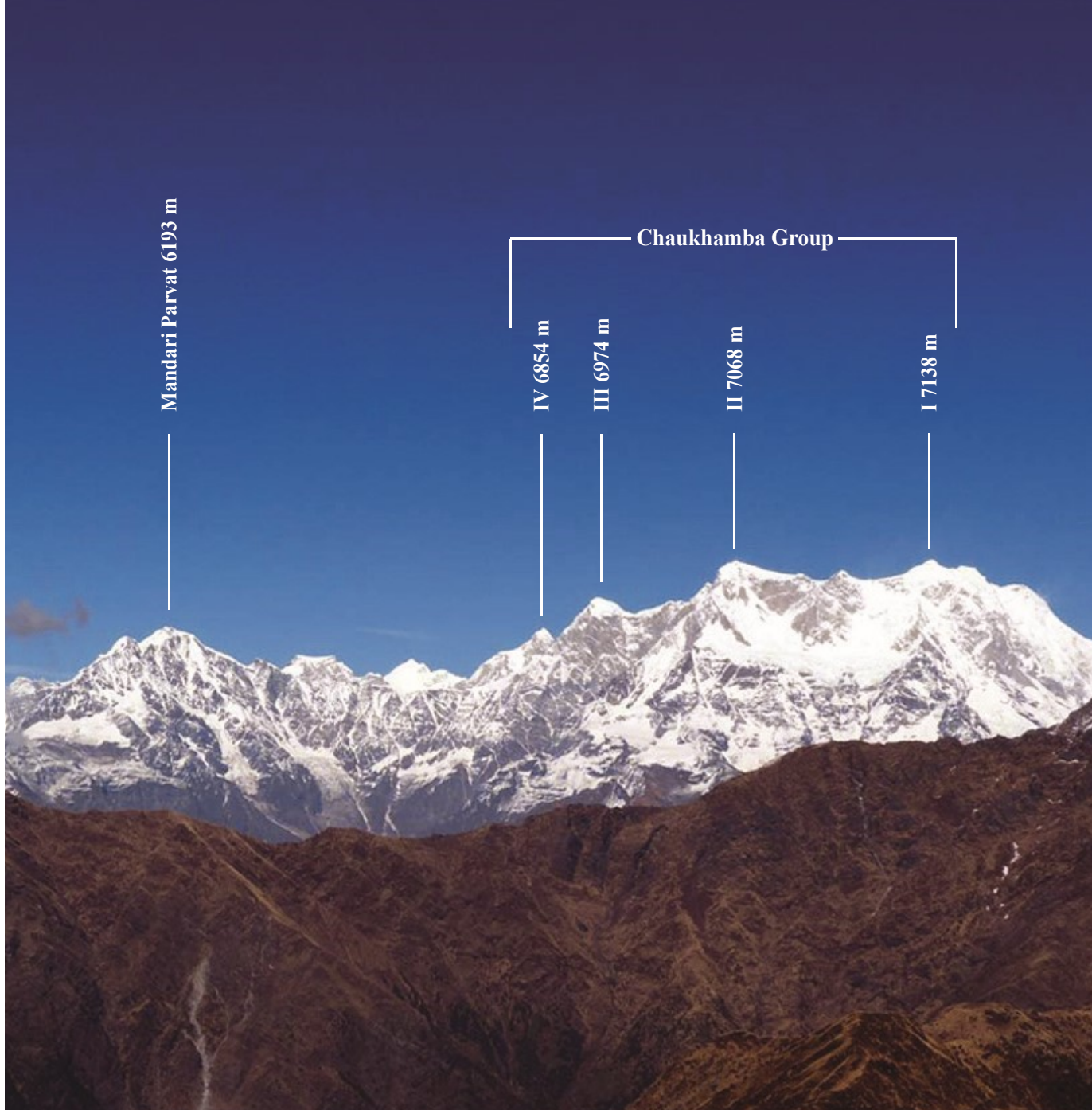
— Devistan 6678 m

— Ronti c 6069 m

— N. Ghanti 6309 m

— Trisul I 7120 m

— II



— Mandari Parvat 6193 m

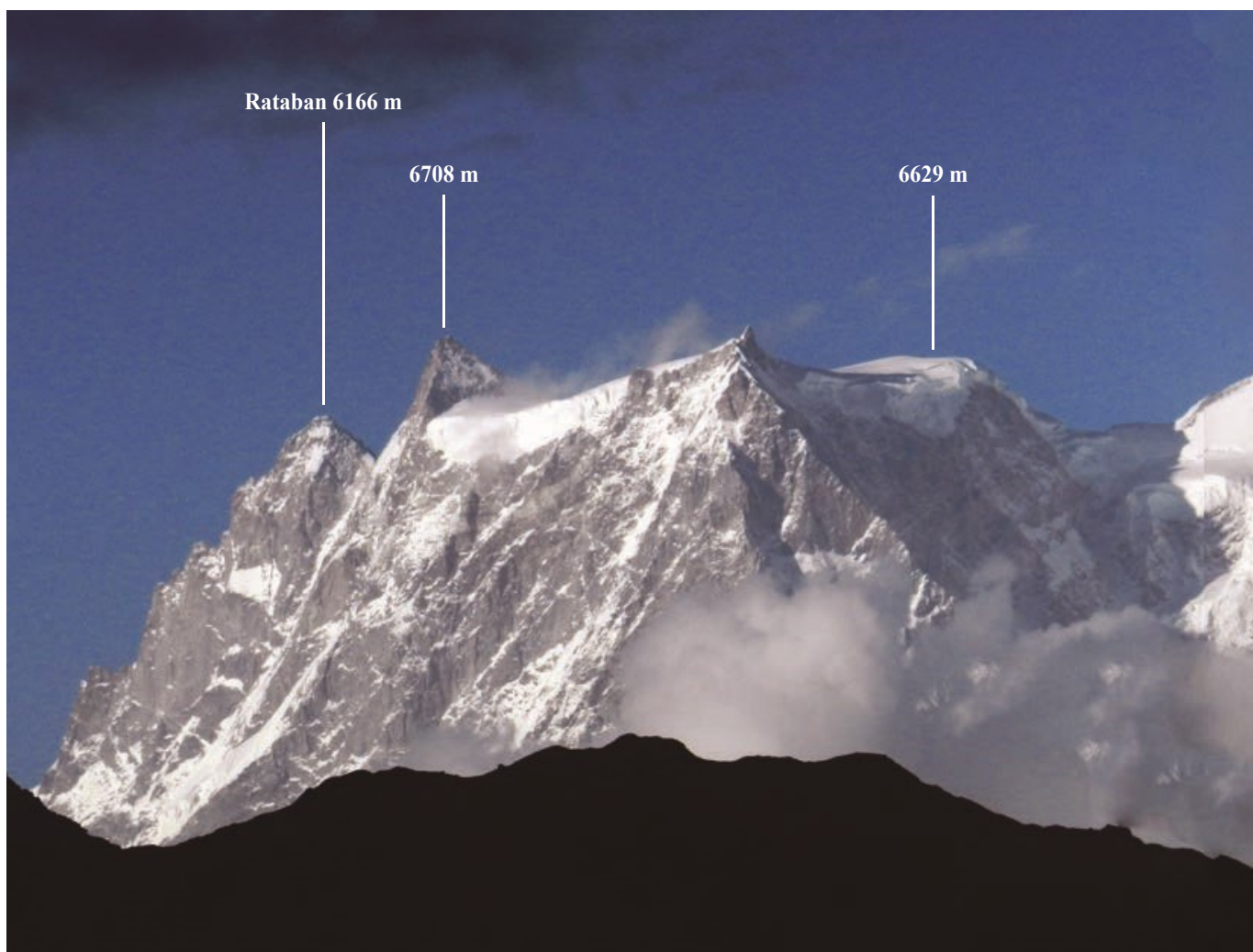
— IV 6854 m

— III 6974 m

— II 7068 m

— I 7138 m

Chaukhamba Group



Ghori Parvat West Face

base, a trekker can look forward to a magnificent experience in the surrounding ridges, peaks and valleys. I have always been fascinated by the variety of trekking opportunities these valleys offer. But, given the fact that these popular pilgrim trails are very crowded whenever accessible, I had earmarked them for a more appropriate age.

THERE comes a time for dwellers in the Indian subcontinent, when they have climbed their own particular Everests and are no longer young enough, or perhaps wealthy enough, to take part in a large-scale expedition to one of the few remaining 8000-metre peaks, but when the urge to spend their holiday in the high places is still insistent. For such as these there are still literally hundreds of mountains between 18,000 and 22,000 feet which are accessible



Hathi Parvat West Face, close-up from Bansi Narayan

without grandiose arrangements for stores, porters or equipment. I have long since reached this age and perhaps a few memories of such moderate mountains will be of interest to some readers of the *Himalayan Journal* who are approaching this stage in their life.

*Moderate Mountains for Middle-Aged Mountaineers* by R. L. Holdsworth.  
- Himalayan Journal, volume XXV, p 85

Over a few years, I have visited some of these temple trails with family and friends. In ancient days, the sages established these temples at the said places with great thought and purpose. It's true that the sanctity of these places draws thousands each year, but the grandeur of the surrounding high mountains provides a backdrop to these temples



Bansi Narayan Temple



Berthatoli Himal

which can definitely attract many more trekkers and mountaineers.

### **Kedarnath**

The Kedarnath temple (3600 m) is situated in a bowl-like valley, surrounded by a ring of high mountains. If you look away from the temple and the crowds, a majestic range rises within about four km to its north. They are the great south faces of Bhartekhunta (6578 m), Kedarnath (6940 m), Rock Tower (6150 m), Sumeru Parvat (6350 m) and Mandani Parvat (6193 m) ending in the great Chaukhamba massif (6954 m). These south faces provide some great climbing to challengers. The Italians were active here in late 1980s. The first two peaks climbed here were Kedarnath in 1988<sup>1</sup> and Rock Tower in 1990<sup>2</sup>. Both the climbs were achieved on the second attempt, after their first attempts had failed in the previous years. Many peaks situated on the watershed with the Gangotri glacier in the north of Kedarnath were climbed by approaches from that glacier. Kedarnath

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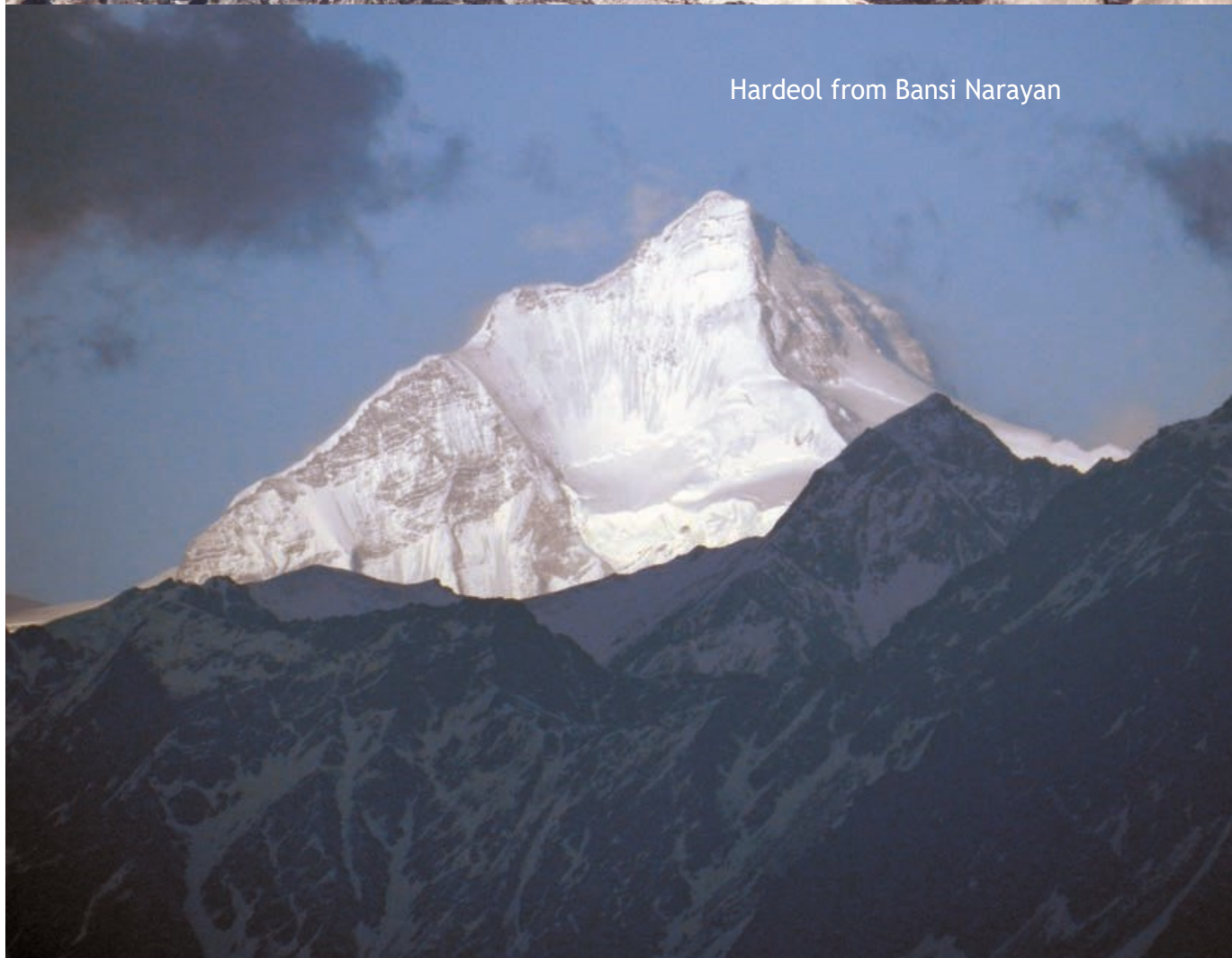
1 G. Mandellin, *H.J.* Vol. 45, p. 45, p. 186

2 Stefano Righetti, *H.J.* Vol. 48, p. 182

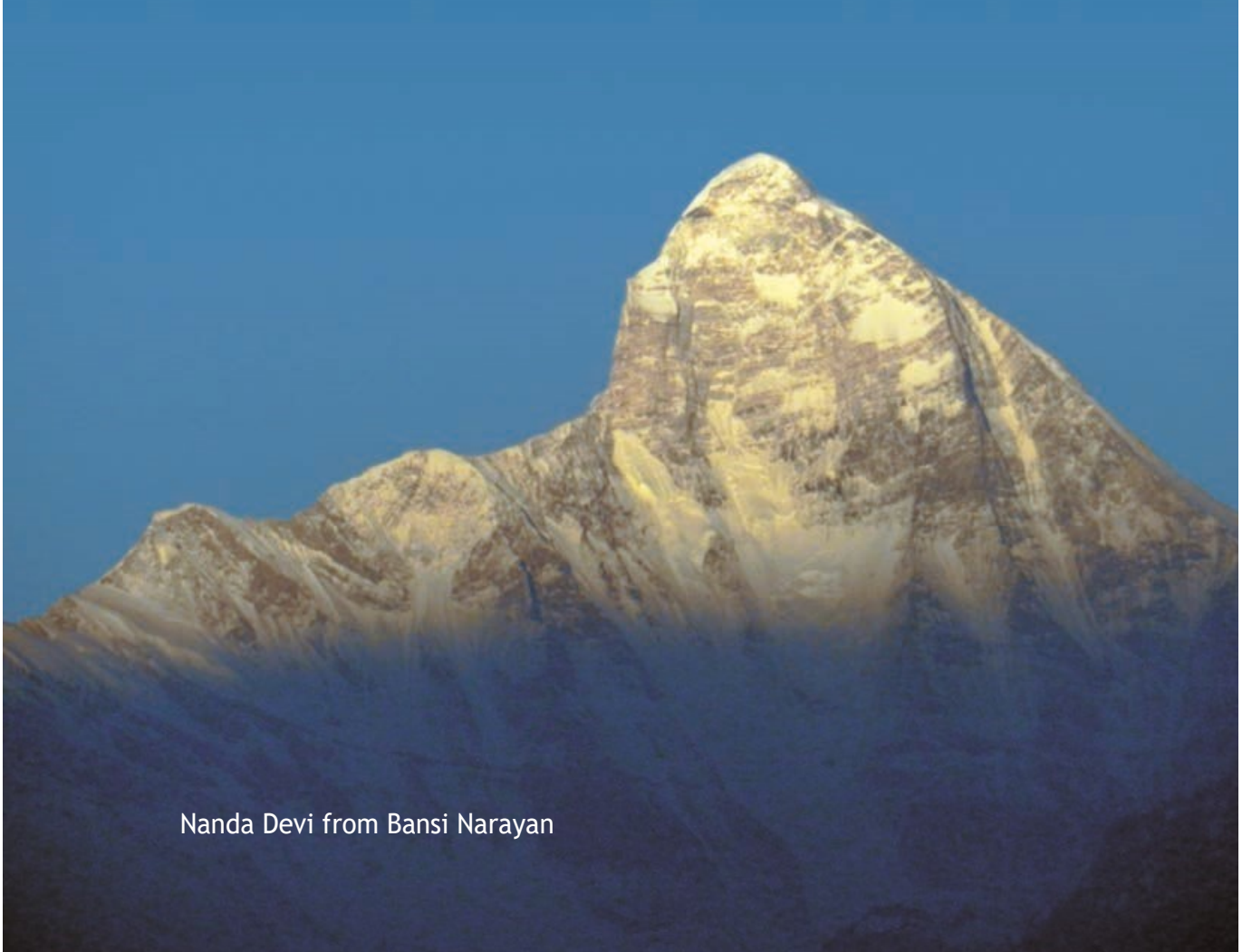
Dunagiri, Kalanka and Changabang



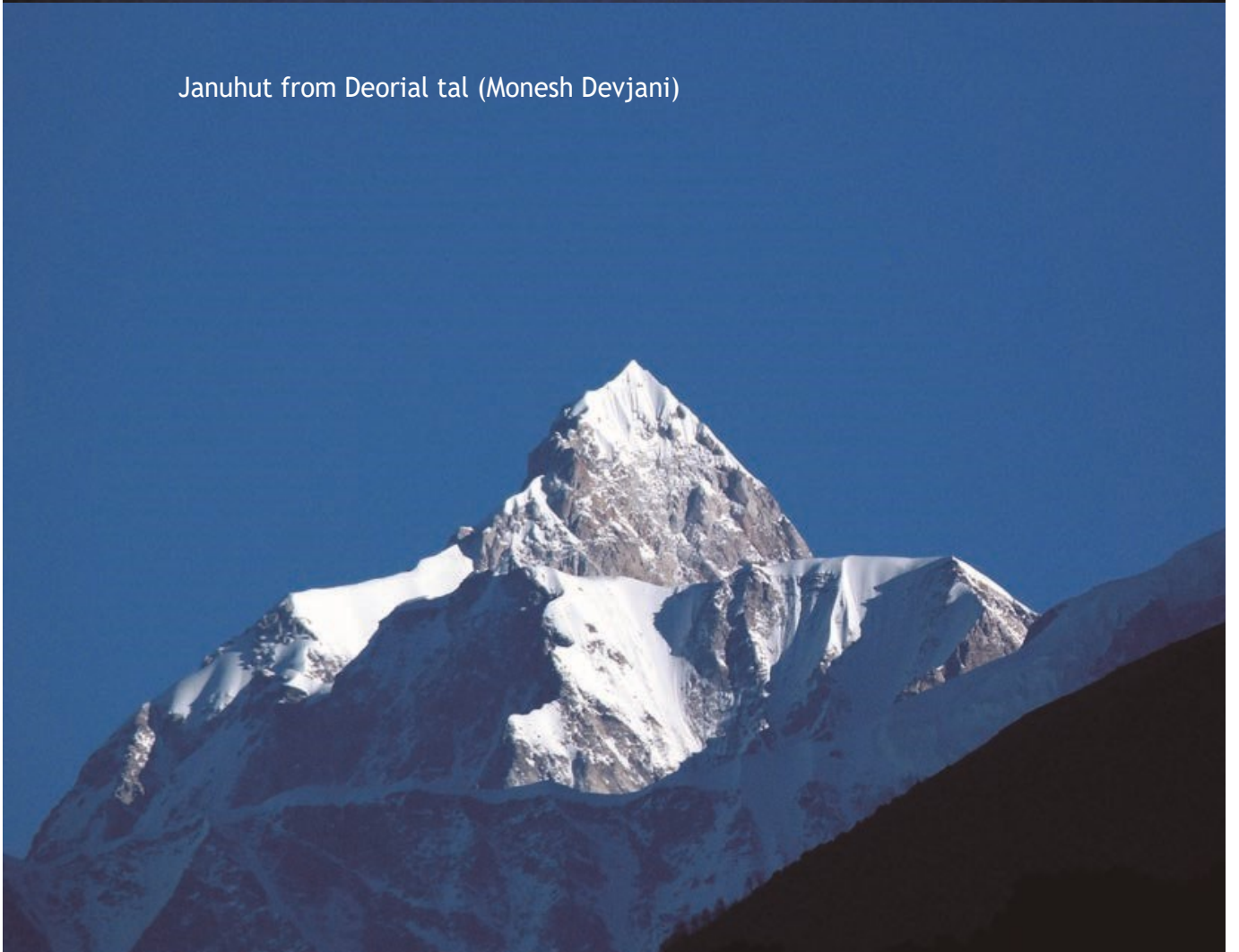
Hardeol from Bansi Narayan







Nanda Devi from Bansi Narayan



Januhut from Deorial tal (Monesh Devjani)

valley can also be considered as the centre for serious climbing, as it lies within a day of availability of supplies.

We did a short trek up to Vasuki tal (4300 m) on the west of the valley and camped amidst a field of Brahmakamal flowers. It was a beautiful tarn, but its importance to mountaineers lies in the opportunities it offers nearby. Numerous peaks between 5400 m to 6000 m and cross-country routes to the Dudhganga and Chorabari glaciers lie here.

There are trekking routes to cross the watershed to the Bhilangna valley from the Kedarnath valley. You can go across Masar tal to descend to the Bhilangna valley, or do a cross-country traverse to cross Auden's Col to the Gangotri valley. For an easier trek, one can follow the trail from Triyugi Narayan in the lower valley and cross over to Panwali Kanta which is renowned for its grand views.<sup>3</sup>

We spent the evening at the temple - a group of sadhus sitting within the precinct were awaiting alms. I happened to get into a conversation with a young sadhu, who had been coming there every season for many years and seemed very aware of the geography of that area. The temple bells started pealing loudly and this young sadhu's superior gave him angry looks. I pressed a hundred rupee note into his hand for his knowledge and company, but his superior, now gave me an angry look as if asking 'why not me?'

An excited companion had once remarked that if world class facilities were built in this valley, like hotels, helicopter services, well-marked trails and so on, the Kedarnath valley could be a competitor to Chamonix!

### **Madhyamaheshwar**

Though pilgrims visited this temple, which is located NE of Gupta Kashi, it was brought to the notice of the western world in 1934 by the exploits of Eric Shipton and Bill Tilman.

Shipton and Tilman once followed a legend. It is said that many hundred years ago the priest at the Badrinath temple used to cross over a pass in one day to the Kedarnath temple to perform puja, serving both the temples on the same day. It is believed that there could be a pass joining the temples, known to the priests. Shipton and Tilman decided to investigate this by crossing from the nearest low point with near disastrous results. Their trip exemplifies the difference between knowledge and legend or fact and fiction.<sup>4</sup>

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3 Kapadia, Harish. *Meeting the Mountains*, p.124 (Indus Publishing, 2009)

4 *Nanda Devi* by Eric Shipton, part 4, 'The Second Crossing of the Watershed (Badrinath-Kedarnath).'

Starting from the Satopanth glacier near Badrinath, they planned to descend to this valley in four to five days, with their Sherpas. After forcing their way through a sheer ice wall, they had to cut through thick forest. As they hacked their way through and crossed and re-crossed many streams, they ran short of food. They lived on bamboo-shoots, but had to compete with bears, for bears also love the shoots. The situation was near hopeless. Finally, one afternoon, they climbed up a ridge to have their first glimpse of a village. The Sherpas were joyous. But Tilman greeted the site with a typical dry comment, for which he was well-known : “We shall be down in time for tea”, to which Shipton merely stuttered, “Thank heaven for that!”

Two trekkers from Bengal were lost here in 1986 in an attempt to partially reverse the Shipton-Tilman route and were presumed dead. Martin Moran completed the route in 1999 - starting from Badrinath he followed the route until Kedarnath temple<sup>5</sup>. It would certainly not have been an easy day for a priest!

The five temples in this area are called *Panch Kedar* (five Kedars) based on a legend of Shiva.<sup>6</sup> “What is the significance of Madhyamaheshwar temple?” my companion Jehangir, a renowned Mumbai yoga teacher, enquired with the only priest at the temple. After narrating two different stories, the priest asked Jehangir how he could reduce his belly. To each his own profession! Considering the route we had come up by, it was a wonder that the priest was fat.

Next day, as we climbed up to Budha Madhyamaheshwar (3500 m - 2 km) clouds gathered and we were denied the supposedly close and excellent view of the Chaukhamba group. From here, a *gaddi* track leads to Kashni tal, a lake at 4730 m. Many other trekking routes are

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5 ‘Shipton’s Lost Valley’, *H.J.* Vol. 55

6 Shiva was chased by Pandavas of the Mahabharata fame. To run away from them, he assumed the form of a bull. When the Pandavas discovered this, they held the bull by the tail and swung him around. Different parts of the bull fell at different places, where temples were erected. At Kedarnath, where his shoulder fell, he is worshipped at Kedarnath temple. Other parts of the bull emerged at four other places, including the centre at Madhya (centre) Maheshwar (a name of Shiva). Geographically, two rivers flow through here. From the north flows the Markand Ganga, and from the south the Madhyamaheshwar Ganga, on the two sides of the hill on which the temple stands. Hence, the explanation of the name could simply be; ‘Shiva temple on the hill in the centre of two rivers’.

possible in the area. A little above the lake some of the various gullies could lead a qualified party across the watershed to the Panpatia bank and the Badrinath valley. Locals had heard about this route. Perhaps, Shipton's party was one valley to the north (Satopanth bank) of a possible crossing.

Towards the east, Maindgalla tal and Pandosera (5120 m) are visited by the shepherds. Crossing a small watershed ridge, one can descend to Rudranath, which is another temple of Shiva and has an exit to the south. For two days, near the temple, we observed the rituals. Two assistants looked after the ablutions and preparations for the simple worship. Our friend, the priest, then made an appearance for the *aarti* and did the final perambulations. This activity was certainly not enough to keep him physically fit! Jehangir showed him some yoga *asanas*. When we left, we were firmly convinced that the priest may rise spiritually but would not reduce an inch at the belly!

### **Deoria Tal-Tungnath**

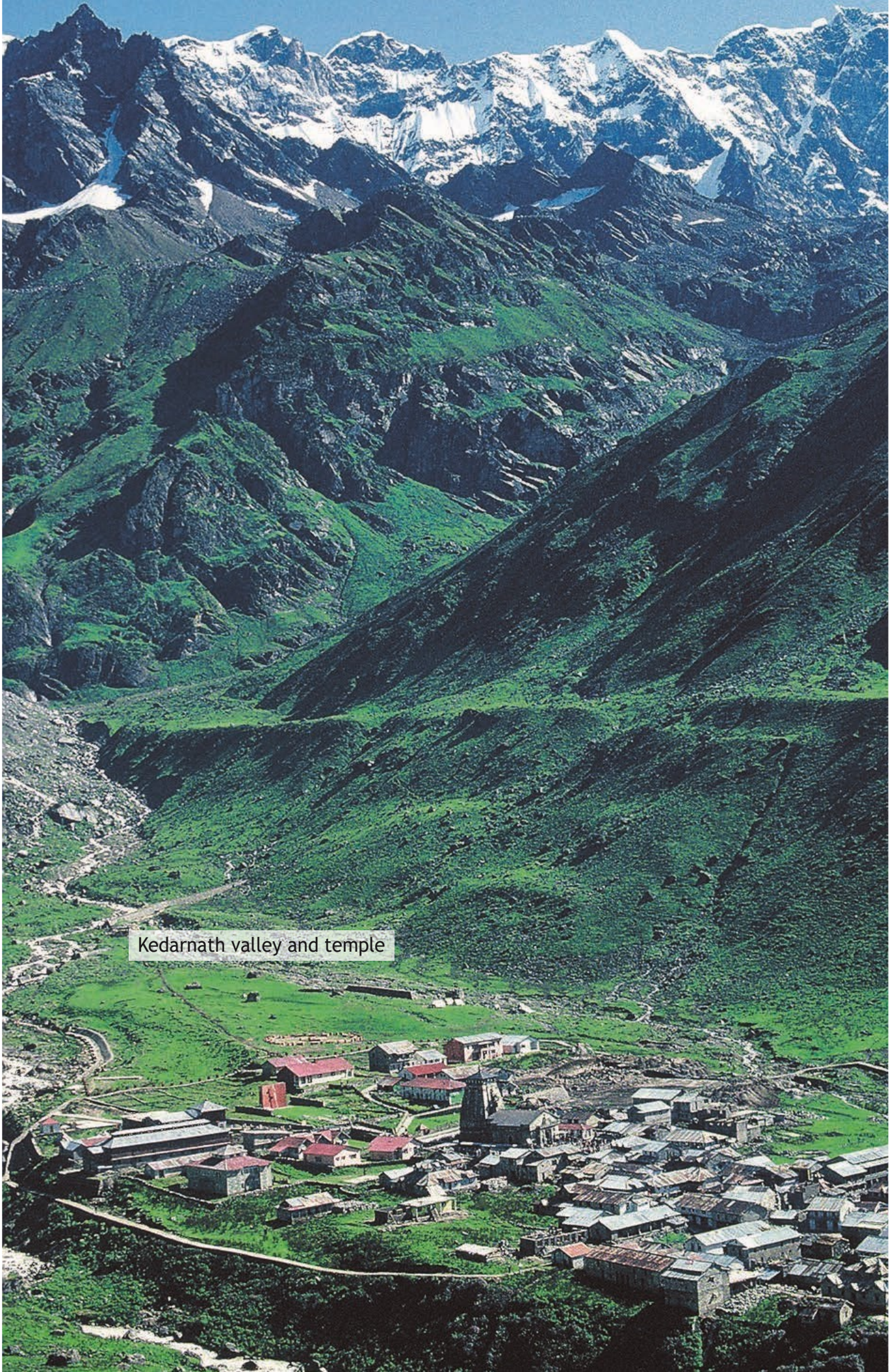
The view that I had missed at Madhyamaheshwar I saw at Tungnath, a few years later. We climbed up to Deoria tal and camped in one of the most beautiful places in Garhwal. In the moonlight, viewing the Chaukhamba peaks reflected in calm waters is a treat. From Deoria tal, the forest department has built a trail from the lake to Tungnath, about 16 km away. If you wish to enjoy a walk in the forest, this is the route to take. We trekked leisurely, admiring birds and trees and after two camps en route, the trail joined the main route to Tungnath from Chopta (3 km). As we camped near the ancient temple a loud speaker was blaring *bhajans*, something you cannot avoid here.

Our eyes, though, were on Chandrashilla ground, about 200 m above the temple. It has an expansive panorama of Garhwal peaks. The panorama is vast and covers almost all peaks of Garhwal. On a sunlit morning in autumn, most peaks of Garhwal and Kumaun are seen from here.

### **Bansi Narayan**

On the trail to Bansi Narayan, I met a tall and strong person approaching us, carrying a heavy load. He was a German 'pilgrim'.

While we exchanged experiences, he said, "I have been to these parts of the Himalaya often. I love the concept of spirituality mixed with mountains. I return here often as Bansi Narayan is a special place.



Kedarnath valley and temple



Peaks approachable from Kedarnath

“Some peaks are not allowed to be climbed as they are declared holy. Some areas are called holy. But, what is not holy in the Himalaya? You cannot separate feelings in the Himalaya at all”. He had imbibed the true spirit of a pilgrim.

Bansi Narayan is a small and isolated temple at about 3200 m. A huge rocky outcrop next to the temple has several fissures and cracks. When a strong wind passes through those cracks it makes a sweet sound that local shepherds associate with the flute played by Lord Krishna. Bansi (flute) by Lord Narayan (another name for Krishna) can move the faithful here, if one is lucky enough to hear the sound. I was introduced to this place by Dr Vasant Desai from Mumbai, now 97 years old. He had visited this place from Kalpeshwar (another temple in the valley) about 30 years ago, with a guide as old as he. It rained and they slept in an apology of a cave next to the temple. He heard the flute but dismissed it as hallucination. But, when his guide and porter both asked about the sound, he enquired further and was told of this phenomenon by local shepherds.

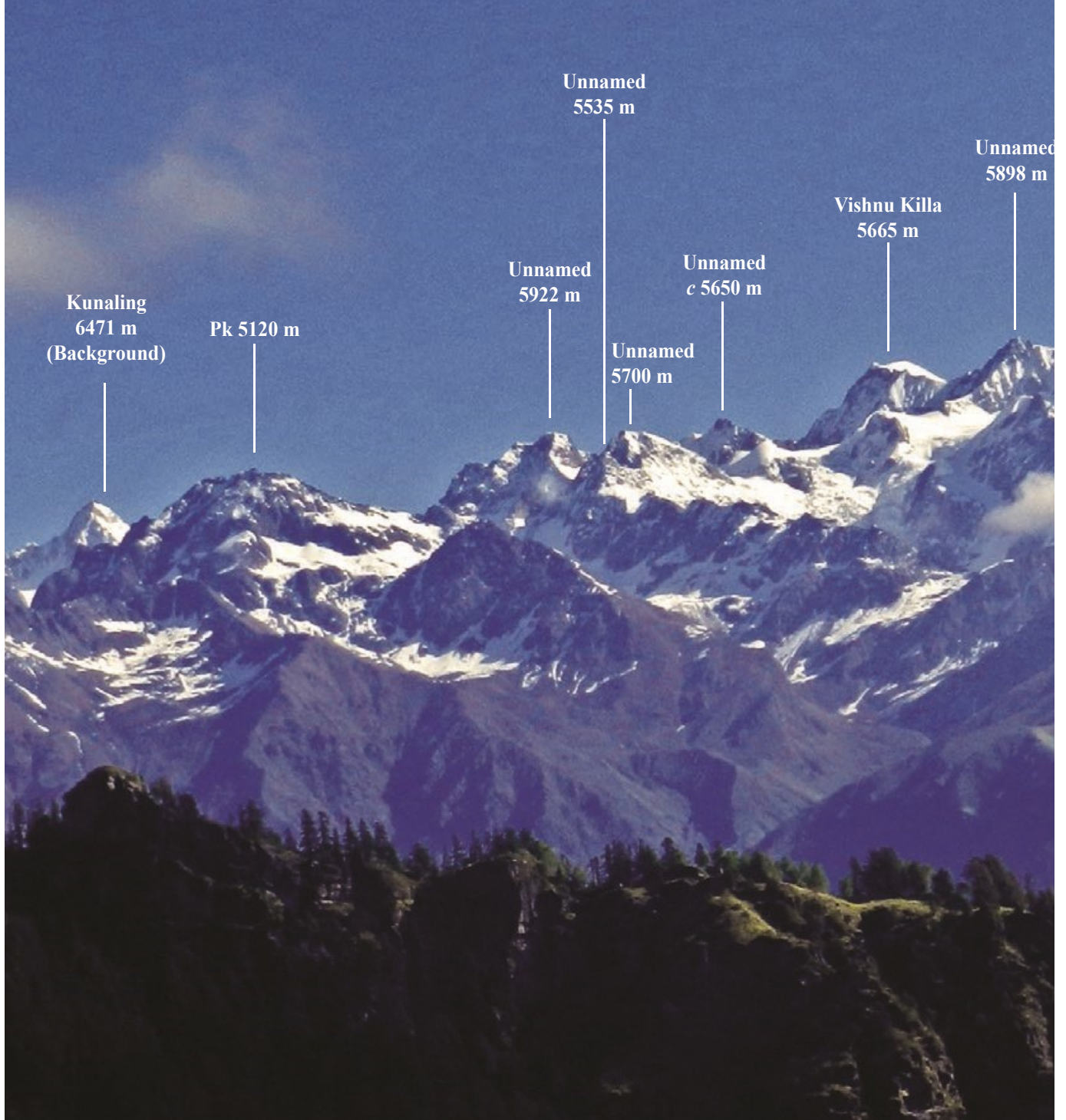
I climbed to this temple from two different sides, each one steep, with different companions, in 2015 and 2016. One of the benefits of growing old is that you have friends plus their children or grandchildren. Climbing steeply from Urgam, my companion was Shanaya, then eight years old. Horses struggled on a steep narrow trail on which she walked effortlessly, telling me about her school life and the walks she had done. I borrowed her youthful energy until we reached the temple!

A year later, I was to climb from Kalgot, having crossed over to this village from Urgam. It was almost 1000 m of steep climbing. Shreya (10 years) started walking behind me and without losing breath narrated the story of a handsome prince and his golden apples. The prince was looking for the apples which were hidden under a throne over which a huge bird sat. The prince managed to reach the throne, and forced the bird to fly. By the time the prince discovered those golden apples, we were on top of the pass.

We arrived at the temple on a rainy day so the peaks were hidden under clouds. As the clouds lifted, Nanda Devi opened up in the blue sky and turned golden. The view of the peaks on each side of Nanda Devi was a joy to behold. To its south, were the twin peaks of Bethartoli Himal, Trisul, Nanda Ghunti, Ronti and the faraway Tharkot. Towards the north stood Dunagiri, Tirsuli West, Hardeol, Hathi and Ghori Parvat and ending with a glimpse of Ratanban. The climbing history of each of these peaks speaks volumes and they are the core of exploration of Garhwal. I did not hear the flute that evening as it was still and not windy. But my young companions had already whispered music in my ears with their stories and the view had made it a special place.

## **Rudranath**

We descended to Kalgot and crossed to Dumak in two days. The trail crossed a nala and climbed towards the Panar Bugial, passing Talli tal (lake) and many beautiful meadows. The forest gradually gave way to grassy meadows as we reached Panar Bugial, to link up with the main pilgrim trail. We woke up to a mesmerizing morning as sun rose over vast grassy and green meadows. The horizon was lined with peaks of Vishnu Ghar range (Home of Vishnu). These peaks are of moderate

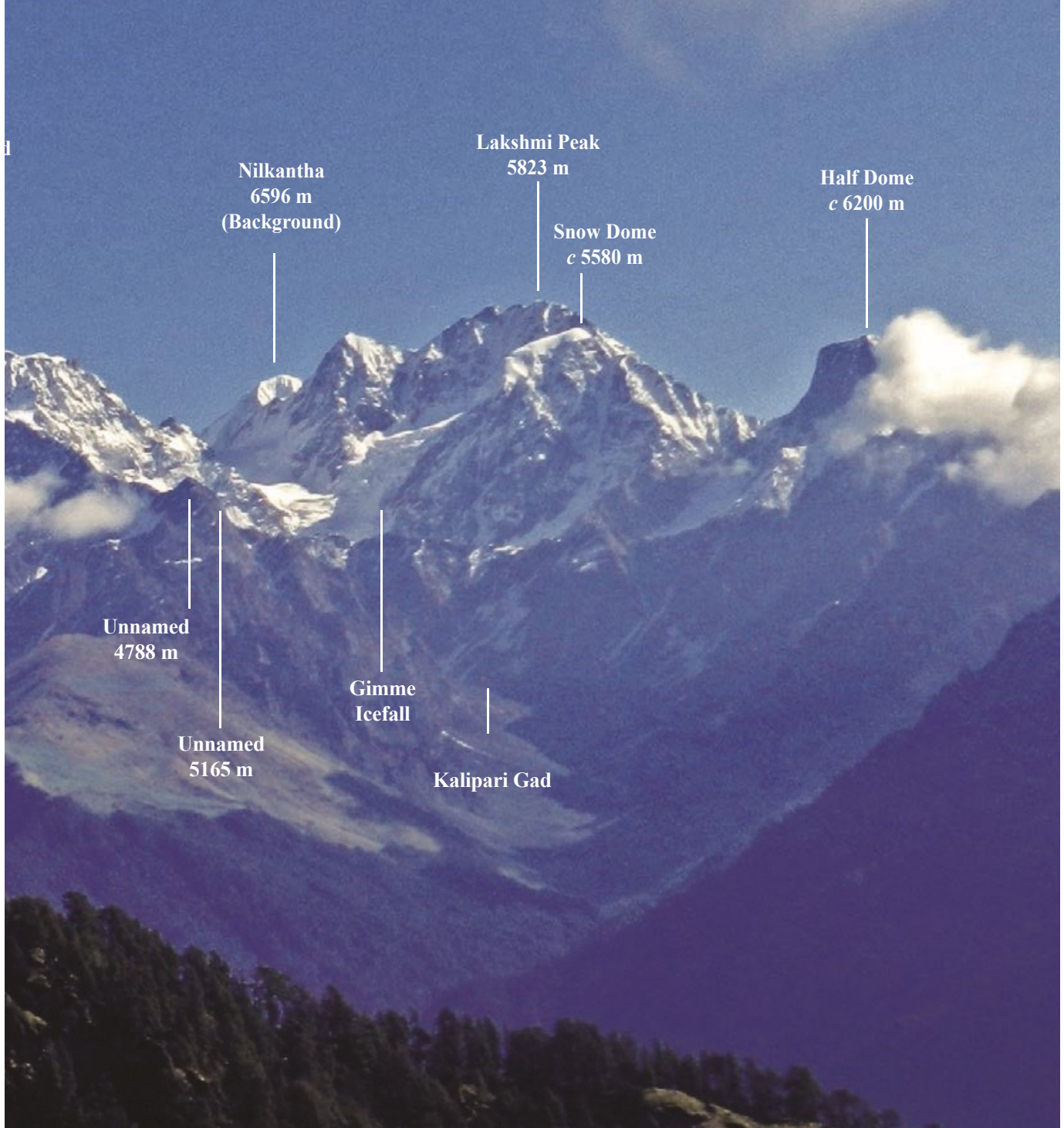


Vishnu Ghar range, viewed from Panar Bugiyal, on way to Rudranath

altitude as Himalayan heights go, but each is a challenge to climb and the valleys are punctuated by steep glaciers. The Chaukhamba peaks and Kunaling stood to our west. Seen behind the range was Nilkanth peak with its long history. To complete the panorama in the east was Nanda Devi and most of the peaks we had seen from Bansi Narayan, but now from a different angle.

The Vishnu Ghar range symbolizes what is left to be climbed in the Himalaya; what I call 'Mountains of the Future'. Climbers, when they





are finished with Everest (will they ever be?) could perhaps seek challenges in these small but difficult peaks. The future had already begun while we were looking at this range - a team led by explorer-mountaineer Martin Moran was climbing the first peak in this range, approaching it via a trek from Bansi Narayan<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> See the article by Martin Moran on his climbs in this Volume. I am grateful to Martin Moran for help in identifying peaks of Vishnu Ghar range, as printed in panorama with this article.

There were many pilgrims now on the trail to the Rudranath temple. One admires their religious fervour and spirit but notices a complete lack of interest in the peaks and ranges. The main temple itself was small but on a ridge at the edge of a valley with vast meadows. Near the temple, there were some white pigeons, supposed to be souls of lucky pilgrims. As we all posed for a photo with the priest; he raised his hand behind our companion Vijay as a blessing. He kept it up for so long that we feared that this blessing would turn Vijay himself into a pigeon! As we descended steeply to the motor road at Sagar, we met pilgrims, young and old, weak and strong, non-mountaineers mostly, climbing only on the strength of their faith.

These areas of the Himalaya with their temples and forest have loads of mountain history and legend. They allow for great views while walking on well-known trails in relative safety. You can seek your golden apples or souls of good people in pigeons in front of some of the highest peaks of the Himalaya. Like pilgrims on the Golden Road to Samarkand.

We are the Pilgrims, Master, we shall go

Always a little further : it may be

Beyond that last blue mountain barred with snow.

*(The Golden Road to Samarkand,  
by James Elroy Flecker, Act V (ii))*

## Summary

Leisurely walks in the stunningly beautiful vales and hills of the Garhwal Himalaya, also famous for temples and pilgrim routes.

### About the Author

HARISH KAPADIA is a well-known Himalayan explorer who has regularly contributed to the *Himalayan Journal*. He is the past editor of the *HJ* and has written many books. He still explores new areas. He is Editor Emeritus of the Himalayan Club.



Trisul from Panar Bugyal