

GARHWAL - WHERE THE GANGA FLOWS

Gods decided to descend on the earth as mountains. But the earth asked: "Why do you come in the form of mountains and not in your own form?" and Vishnu answered: "The pleasure that exists in mountains is greater than that of animate beings, for they feel no heat, nor cold, nor pain, nor anger, nor fear, nor pleasure. We three gods as mountains will reside in the earth for the benefit of mankind."

Hindu mythology

Garhwal was carved out of the western areas of Kumaun by the British in 1839, ostensibly for administrative purposes, but really to appease the local rulers of Pauri, Tehri, Chamoli, and strengthen the British presence there. Bounded by the river Tons to the west and the Dhauliganga to the east, Garhwal has a concentration of steep majestic mountains, particularly in the Gangotri region in the west, and boasts of the famous Valley of Flowers.

The sacred rivers of Ganga and Yamuna, originate in central Garhwal, in the Uttarakhand state, the land of gods where the four pilgrimage sites of Yamotri, Gangotri, Kedarnath and Badrinath are located. Seeking spiritual salvation, thousands of pilgrims visit these shrines each year. As early as AD 800, Adi Shankracharya, the Hindu guru who established Badrinath as a pilgrimage site, is said to have set out from Badrinath and crossed the Mana Pass to Gule in Tibet, covering a distance of roughly 200 km.

Gangotri Glacier

The longest glacier in Garhwal is the Gangotri, with two important tributaries, Chaturangi and Raktavarn, to the east. Measuring 42 km and receding fast, Gangotri is surrounded by snow-capped peaks such as Bhagirathi, Thalay Sagar, Kedarnath, Mandani Parvat, Chaukhamba, Swachhand, Satopanth and Bhagirathi. In its centre lie the meadows of Nandanvan and Tapovan, which can be approached from Gaumukh, a treacherous scree-ridden route. The open grounds of Tapovan with its small Hindu shrines and hot springs are a delight to camp in, and the vast panorama of peaks, glaciers and valleys defies imagination. It was here that the sage Bhagirath performed rigorous austerities to bring the river Ganga to earth, whose waters held the power to sanctify the ashes of his ancestors, thus opening the doors of heaven to them. To Tapovan's south, rise the four Chaukhamba peaks, signifying 'four pillars of the earth', and Lord Brahma, the creator of the world. Towards the northeast are Sudarshan Parvat, Yogeshwar and Shyamvarn, named after Lord Krishna, an *avatar* of Lord Vishnu, the preserver of the world. Completing the holy trinity is the Shivaling (6,543 m) to the west, the abode of Lord Shiva, the destroyer of the world.

Shivaling remains one of the most fearsome and challenging peaks, attracting mountaineers from all over the world. This shapely mountain dominates the Gangotri glacier, occupying its centre, and sees thousands of pilgrims every year. First scaled from the west ridge by an Indian team led by Hukam Singh in 1974, several routes to the summit were subsequently explored successfully. In 1983, British mountaineers Sir Chris Bonington and Jim Fotheringham climbed Shivaling West (6,038 m).

Mountaineers have been visiting the Gangotri glacier since 1938 starting with a European team led by Professor R Schwarzgruber which made the first ascents of Bhagirathi II, Chandra Parvat, Mandani Parvat, Swachhand and Shri Kailash. André Roch, the famous Swiss mountaineer, in 1939, successfully climbed Ghor Parvat (6,708 m) and Rataban (6,166 m) to the east of the Valley of Flowers. However the group's efforts to scale the Chaukhamba I ended tragically. Halfway up the north face of the summit, the team was caught in an avalanche that trapped them inside their tents and carried them down, killing three of the six climbers.

Ascents were often marred by accidents, fortunately not all ended disastrously. In 1947, a Swiss team consisting of André Roch, Rene Dittert, a leading Alpine mountaineer, T H Braham, a British mountaineer, and some well-known Alpine guides managed to make an ascent on Kedarnath (6,940 m) after almost losing a team member in an accident. While they were climbing, Sirdar Wangdi Norbu fell and dragged member Alfred Sutter with him. These two fell about 50 m and it was with great difficulty that André Roch and others climbed down to them. Wangdi's left ankle was broken and his skull was bleeding. Sutter was slightly hurt. Night came before they could get Wangdi out and down to camp, so they sheltered him in a crevasse and went back to camp to get help. Next early morning a search party failed to find him and only after he had spent the second night out, the rescue party reached him in a puddle of blood. Thinking that the expedition had abandoned him, Wangdi had cut his blood vessel to bleed to hasten death. He was luckily discovered unconscious but alive, and transported to a hospital in Dehra Dun, miraculously he survived. They continued climbing and made the first ascents of the Satopanth and Nanda Ghunti (6,309 m) near Trisul I in Kumaun.

In the late 1940s, in one of the most courageous treks, a group of four *sadhus* (Hindu ascetics) started out from the Gangotri temple, at the snout of the glacier, and trekked across the high mountain pass of Kalindi Khal (5,947 m) to reach Badrinath, covering a distance of about 100 km. They made this arduous journey unequipped with maps, shoes and modern tents, and took shelter in caves. Only a local guide and their faith accompanied them. André Roch met this party while on his way to Ghor Parvat and Rataban peaks, and impressed by their feat, presented them with an altimeter, which was passed on like a baton to successive generations of Indian mountaineers.

To the north of the Gangotri glacier is the Jadh Ganga valley, the home of the elusive and endangered snow leopard. It was through this valley that Heinrich Harrer, the German mountaineer, passed while making his escape to Tibet from the British internment camp in Dehra Dun in 1944. His story is well told in the famous book *Seven Years in Tibet*. First surveyed in 1939 by J B Auden of the Geological Survey of India, Jadh Ganga was visited next only in 1990 by a two-member Indian team of Monesh Devjani and Harish Kapadia, which covered a substantial area while exploring several valleys and passes en route to climb Trimukhi Parvat East (6,280 m). A few years later, in 1994, an Indian Army team climbed the Trimukhi Parvat (6,422 m). This area has abundant wildlife, specially snow leopards. All the parties visiting this area (1939 and 1990) have mentioned them, and Auden found an abandoned cub and kept him warm in his sleeping bag before releasing him next morning.

Western Garhwal is also known as the 'Gibson territory', a testimony to J T M Gibson, a firm believer in small and friendly expeditions who introduced young Indian climbers during the late 1950s to the joys of mountaineering. Here on the slopes of Kalanag (6,387 m) and Swargarohini I (6,252 m) the sport was kept alive, and young enthusiasts learnt about the flora of Har-ki-Dun and the birds in the Tons valley. The Har-ki-Dun and Ruinsara valleys are famous trekking routes today owing to their easy approach, while peaks in the valley such as Kalanag and Bandarpunch I (6,316 m) continue to be attempted and climbed with regularity.

Valley of Flowers

Frank S Smythe, the British mountaineer and botanist who visited India often and explored the many valleys in the Himalaya. Although he is famous for his first climbs to formidable peaks such as Kamet (7,756 m), Mana (7,272 m) and Nilgiri Parvat (6,474 m), but he will be best remembered for his discovery of the Valley of Flowers.

In 1931, a strong team comprising Dr Raymond Green, Eric Shipton and R Holdsworth led by Frank Smythe scaled the Kamet, which had beaten back no fewer than eight expeditions between 1907 and 1930. It was the highest summit to be climbed at that time. Like true explorers Frank Smythe and his team decided to return through Bhiundhar, a high pass (5150 m) to the south of Kamet, and a more difficult approach than the usual trade route via Niti Pass. After crossing this unknown pass ridden with crevasses, they descended into north Bhiundhar valley, which was in full bloom in the month of August. After the hostile and barren slopes of Kamet, the seemingly endless loveliness of the wide meadows must have seemed like paradise, and Frank Smythe wrote: "To us the Bhyundar Valley will always remain the Valley of Flowers. It is a place of escape for those wearied of modern civilisation. . . . the lover of beauty and solitude could find peace in the Valley of Flowers. He would discover joy and laughter in the meadows; the stars would be his nightly canopy; he would watch the slow passing of the clouds; he would share the sunset and dawn with God."

In centre of the valley is 'Bamani Dhaur' (Cave of Brahmin). Legend says that a Brahmin sat here telling visitors their fortunes and drawing their horoscopes (*kundali*) by observing shadows on the long meadow across the river. A what time and which day the shadow was to be observed depended on the date and time of birth of a person. This meadow is therefore called 'Sri Kundalisen'.

The valley is a celebration of Himalayan flora with some rare species of plants such as Blue Poppy, Jasmine, American Wood Lily and Brahma Kamal¹ and it owes its fame to Frank Smythe, who brought to the world's notice this place of glorious beauty. After his brief visit in 1931, Smythe returned to the valley in 1937 and stayed on for four months, establishing a comfortable and huge camp with regular supplies arriving from Ranikhet. Nanda Singh Chauhan, an 88-year-old man living in Bhiundhar village, fondly remembers Smythe and his well-organized camps, and reminisces how every week Smythe collected botanical specimens and sent them to Joshimath, 40 km from the valley, from where they would begin a long journey to Edinburgh. A hot-house was created in the Botanical Garden of Edinburgh

¹ Full list of flora in this valley and their Latin names are available in *The Valley of Flowers* by Frank Smythe, page 295.

and to nurture these flowers and seeds. Nanda Singh and a few other villagers were entrusted with the job of taking these specimens to the post office at Joshimath. Inspired by the work of Smythe, the Botanical Garden of Edinburg, UK, deputed Joan Margaret Legge in 1939. Unfortunately she met her end here, slipping on lower slopes. A small grave stands in the valley in her memory with a simple inscription; ' I will lift up my eyes unto the hills, From whence cometh my help'.

Nestling near the Valley of Flowers, at a height of 4,150 m, is the sacred lake of Homkund (Lake of Snow), earlier known as Saptashringi. It is believed to be the place where Guru Gobind Singh, the guru of the Sikhs, had meditated in his previous life, and is described in the holy scriptures of the Sikhs, *Dasham Granth*, as a lake surrounded by seven peaks. A gurudwara was built here in Guru Gobind Singh's memory and the lake was re-christened Hemkund (Lake of Solace). The small temple of Lokpal nearby associates the place with Lakshman (also known as Lokpal, the 'protector of the masses'), Lord Rama's younger brother in the epic Ramayana, who is said to have meditated here.

The Garhwal region has long held a strong fascination for many mountaineers, who have come back time and again to its fearsome peaks and glaciers, and its gentle, pristine valleys. Trevor H Braham, a British mountaineer who had travelled widely in the Himalaya and had made some of his finest explorations in Karakoram, Spiti and Sikkim, found himself revisiting this region often. On one of his trips on 15 August 1947, the day India gained independence, he undertook a two-day walking tour from Kalindi Khal to Badrinath, and made the following observation: "No other Himalayan region has provided me with deeper enjoyment. Was this because of strong youthful impressions aroused by the solitude of large glaciers and unspoilt valleys; or had I felt some subconscious affinity with the simple charm of its attractive inhabitants?"² What he wrote about Garhwal rings true even today.

² *Himalayan Odyssey*, by Trevor Braham. (George Allen and Unwin, 1974, Pp. 93-94).