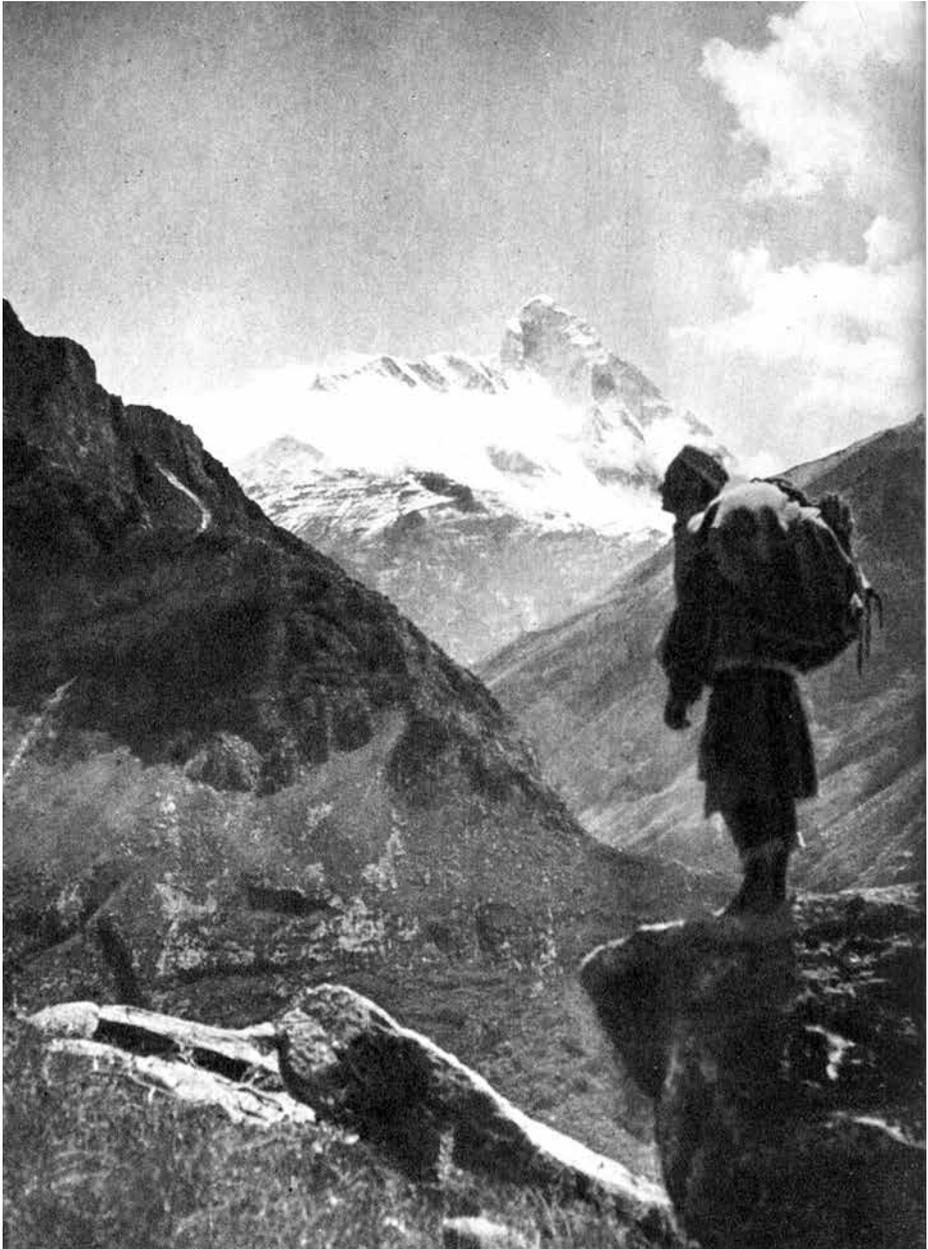


THE ASCENT  
OF NANDA DEVI

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H. W. TILMAN



The shrine of the goddess:  
First view of the mountain from Rishi valley

# THE ASCENT OF NANDA DEVI

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H. W. TILMAN



TILMAN

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## Foreword

*John Porter*

I FIRST READ *THE ASCENT OF NANDA DEVI* as a teenager in high school. It was one of those books that fired my urge to climb, and to find a way to create my own adventures, such was the power of the storytelling and the enormity of the feat achieved by that small Anglo-American party in 1936. The first ascent of Nanda remains one of the greatest mountaineering achievements of all time. The 1936 party was a small but strong team of seven climbers supporting each other with carries high on the mountain after their small band of Sherpa became ill. Despite illness in their own team, Tilman and Odell reached the summit after many weeks, overcoming difficulties at the extreme edge of their experience. The fact that the mountain was climbed during the monsoon storms makes it even more remarkable. And true to the exploring spirit of the day, the expedition came out of the Nanda Devi Sanctuary by a completely unknown route.

In the eighty years since the ascent, there have been many better known ‘Himalayan breakthroughs’, such as the first ascents of Annapurna and Everest, the South Face of Annapurna, and increasingly during the 70s and 80s, bold, lightweight ascents of very difficult routes alpine-style, such as the Scott, Boardman and Tasker route of Kangchenjunga and most recently, Ueli Steck’s solo ascent of the South Face of Annapurna. But what makes the 1936 ascent totally unique is the totality of the achievement. It was so much more than just a story of getting to the summit of a big unclimbed peak.

At 7816m (25,643ft), Nanda Devi is not only the highest mountain entirely within India, it is also one of the most sacred and beautiful. It is remarkably steep on all sides, rising 3300m from its base both from the north and south, making its profile of steepness similar to that of K2. But getting in to K2 is easy compared to getting to the bottom of

Nanda Devi. The peak is defended on all sides by rings of mountains of between 6000–7000m. It took nearly fifty years for explorers to force a way into this sanctuary. After three failures to penetrate the mountain's defences, one of the early pioneers, Hugh Ruttledge, described the attempt to reach the sanctuary as more difficult than going to the North Pole. Success in reaching the beautiful inner sanctuary of meadows, lakes and glaciers was achieved finally in 1934 by Tilman himself with his good friend Eric Shipton. They forced a route up the 10-mile long Rishi Ganga which involved some difficult rock climbing.

Himalayan climbing was still in its infancy in 1936. Climbers had been higher on the north side of Everest and on Kangchenjunga, but no one had climbed such a difficult and dangerous mountain. The way climbers recorded their achievements and their relationship with nature was very different from today. Failure was more common than success and was seen as potentially more fulfilling. As Tilman writes: 'The splendour of the mountain is undimmed or even enhanced, and the writer can be trusted to see to it that the honour of man is, at the lowest, not diminished.' The journey was always more important than the arrival, and it is the descriptions of the journey as much as the climb that make this an enthralling book.

Going back to read the book again after more than 50 years, what struck me was the richness and thoroughness of the writing, the use of wry humour and modesty in the telling of every aspect of the adventure. The starting point for Tilman's style is reverence, reverence for the mountains, the people, the culture and religion and for the pioneers who came before. The opening chapters help explain why Garhwal is felt by many to be the most beautiful region of the Himalaya, and how the Goddess Nanda took sanctuary on the summit of the mountain to avoid being ravished by her father's murderer. Ironically, Tom Longstaff, who wrote the original foreword, and had himself failed to penetrate into the sanctuary, wrote: 'climbing this peak would be a sacrilege too horrible to contemplate.' But it was to Longstaff that Tilman offered the chance to write that foreword. Longstaff accepted because despite his earlier doubt, 'news of success filled me with delight. A laconic telegram reached me in Shetland: "two reached the top August 29": no names. They had deserved the honour: here was humility not pride, and gratitude for a permitted experience.'

The first plate in the book shows a porter standing on the gateway to 'the shrine of the goddess' with Nanda Devi behind. This was taken very near the spot where our small 1978 Changabang expedition shared a camp with our porters. I can imagine the porters with Tilman clapping, dancing and singing the night away as ours did 42 years later. They were in the presence of their goddess. When reading Tilman, we find the same sense of reverence.



## Foreword to the First Edition

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*T. G. Longstaff*

**I**N THE OPINION OF COMPETENT JUDGES the achievement narrated in the following pages is the finest mountain ascent yet made, either in the Himalaya or anywhere else. It so happens that, besides being very difficult, Nanda Devi is also the highest mountain that has yet been climbed to the top.

This is the story of a self-sufficing party of friends who provided their own finance and eschewed publicity. Professor Graham Brown, of Mount Foraker fame, was the connecting link between the English and American mountaineers. There was no official leader: but when the moment came for the final attempt on the peak the author of this book was voted into the lead to direct the activities of the whole team. Significantly enough Tilman did not give himself a place in the first party; it was only the unfortunate and accidental illness of Houston which made him Odell's companion on the successful climb. Mountaineers will regret that the chances of the weather prevented others from attaining the summit. But owing to the collapse of the Sherpa porters, and the consequent necessity for the party to carry its own camps up the mountain, this was even more of a 'team success' than most high climbs have been. Every single member shares the honours of this great climb.

Double crowned Ushba in the central Caucasus is the only mountain which I can compare for beauty with Nanda Devi. But the surroundings of the latter are more beautiful even than in Svanetia. Nanda Devi was my goal years before I set foot in the Himalaya. After six visits to the Snows I still believe that Garhwal is the most beautiful country of all High Asia. Neither the primitive immensity of the Karakorum, the aloof domination of Mount Everest, the softer Caucasian beauties of the Hindu Kush, nor any of the many other regions of Himachal can

compare with Garhwal. Mountain and valley, forest and alp, birds and animals, butterflies and flowers all combine to make a sum of delight unsurpassed elsewhere. The human interest is stronger than in any other mountain region of the world, for these anciently named peaks are written of in the earliest annals of the Indo-Aryan race. They are the home of the Gods. For two hundred million Hindus the shrines of Garhwal still secure supreme merit to the devout pilgrim.

The prettiest compliment I have ever received was Tilman's request that I should write a foreword for his book. He knows that I have always believed that Nanda Devi reigned over the most supremely beautiful part of all Himalaya: that only three years ago, in the 'Mountaineering' volume of the Lonsdale Series, I had written that the climbing of this peak would be a sacrilege too horrible to contemplate. I was thinking of the probable self-glorification of man in a 'conquest' over Nature at her sublimest, and of the loss of one more mystery. Yet in the event news of success filled me with delight. A laconic telegram reached me in Shetland: 'two reached the top August 29': no names. They had deserved the honour: here was humility not pride, and gratitude for a permitted experience.

## Author's Preface

A PROPOS OF WRITING BOOKS Dr Johnson's opinion was that 'any blockhead can write if he sets himself doggedly to it'. I should like to alter that and say, 'any blockhead can write a book if he has something to write about'— that I have anything to write about is entirely due to my companions, British and American, to whom I dedicate this book.

The thanks of the whole party are due to Mrs A. E. Browne of Ranikhet for much help and hospitality, and to Messrs E. O. Shebbeare and F. W. Champion for assistance in India.

I have to acknowledge my indebtedness for many facts about Garhwal and Almora to the *District Gazetteers of the United Provinces* by Mr H. G. Walton, and to Mr A. H. Mumm's *Five Months in the Himalaya* for some of the climbing history.

My thanks are due to all those members of the party who generously put their photographs at my disposal: to *The Times* for permission to republish those opposite pages 10 and 104\*, and to the *New York Times* for allowing me to use again those facing pages 24, 162, 180†.

H.W.T.

*Seacroft*

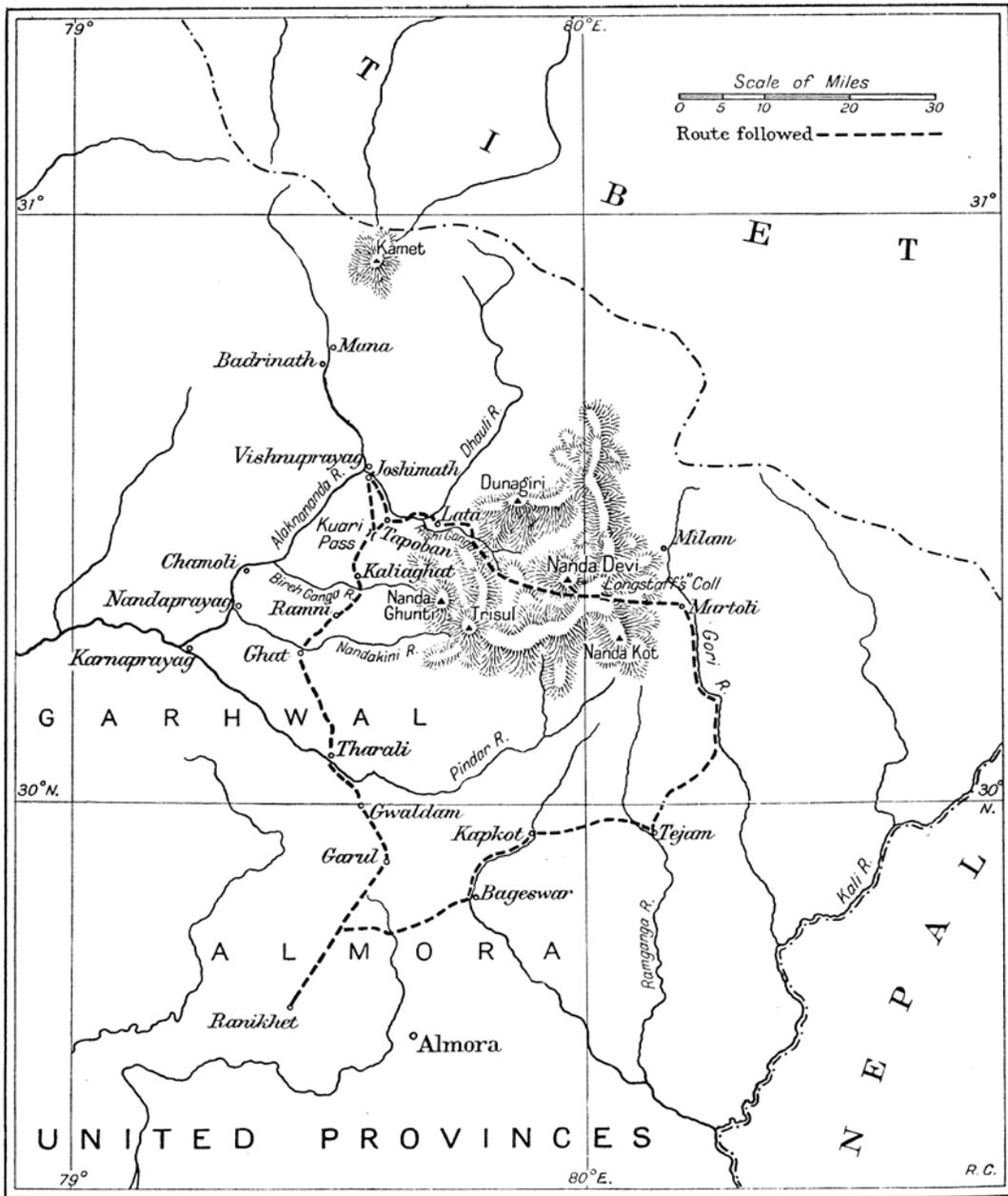
*Wallasey*

*March 1937*

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\* Photos 3 and 15 in this edition

† Photos 5, 29, 30, 34 in this edition



Map 1: Expedition Route

# MYTHOLOGICAL AND GEOGRAPHICAL

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IT IS QUESTIONABLE whether the story of a successful attempt on a new peak will be as acceptable as a story of failure; at any rate to lovers of mountains or to those who know one end of an ice-axe from the other. These will perhaps be more inclined to echo the words of David's lament and cry, 'Tell it not in Gath, publish it not in the streets of Askelon.'

If an account of the climbing of Everest is ever written, I take leave to doubt whether it will be as widely read as have been the stories of successive failures. For, say what one may, when the summit is reached some of the mystery and grandeur surrounding a peak hitherto untrodden by man is lost; and a book recounting the fall of one of the giants will be bought—or by mountaineers more likely borrowed—with misgiving and read with loathing. But so complex is our make-up that the pleasure which success brings far outweighs any remorseful pangs, and friends, even mountaineering friends, congratulate the triumphant party sincerely instead of damning them heartily. And, as if that was not enough, pressure of various kinds results in the members of the expedition putting on record their experiences so that all may profit by them, and the invincibility of yet another great mountain is thereby imperilled. Perhaps when the millennium dawns, of the writing of books there will be an end, at least of mountaineering books; if there are then any unconquered peaks remaining, come what may, successive generations will think them still unconquered to the end of time.

Stories of unsuccessful climbs are in a different category. The splendour of the mountain is undimmed or even enhanced, and the writer can be trusted to see to it that the honour of man is, at the lowest, not diminished. But having now hinted at the motives impelling the

writing of this account it is time to cut the cackle and come to the 'osses; for it would puzzle a conjuror to explain satisfactorily a habit (not confined to mountaineers) of believing one thing and doing another.

Before leaving for the Himalaya in May, I was asked by an otherwise intelligent man whether it would be summer or winter out there when we arrived. This is mentioned in no critical spirit, but only to show that what one man assumes to be common knowledge may be known only to very few. A banker, for instance, popularly supposed to be without a soul, may know nothing and care less about mountains, but be deeply interested in music or literature; and, conversely, mountaineers may not know the most elementary principles of banking or, possibly, grammar.

To some the Himalaya may be only a name vaguely associated perhaps with a mountain called Everest: to geologists they provide a vast field for the starting and running of new hares; to other learned men, glaciologists, ethnologists, or geographers, the Himalaya are a fruitful source of debate in which there is no common ground, not even the pronunciation of the name; while to the mountaineer they furnish fresh evidence, if such were needed, of the wise dispensation of a bountiful Providence. For, lo, when the Alps are becoming too crowded, not only with human beings but with huts, the Himalaya offer themselves to the more fanatical devotee—a range fifteen hundred miles long, containing many hundred of peaks, nearly all unclimbed, and all of them so much higher than the Alps that a new factor of altitude has to be added to the usual sum of difficulties to be overcome; and withal to be approached through country of great loveliness, inhabited by peoples who are always interesting and sometimes charming. Here seemingly is a whole new world to conquer, but it is a world which man with his usual perversity, flying in the face of Providence, has reduced to comparatively small dimensions: for what with political boundaries, restrictions, and jealousies, the accessible area is less than one-third of the whole. And though European travellers and climbers may grouse about this state of affairs, Europeans are, I suppose, largely to blame. For with the present state of the outside world before their eyes the rulers of Tibet, Nepal, and Bhutan can scarcely be blamed, and might well be praised, for wishing their own people to have as little as possible to do with ourselves.

Main Peak East Peak



Peaks of Nanda Devi from N.E. shoulder of Nanda Kot

*Photograph by Dr T. G. Longstaff, June 11th 1905*

Sikkim, Kashmir, and Garhwal remain open to travellers, though the first two are not without their restrictions; restrictions which we were to experience. Garhwal is a small district almost in the centre of the Himalayan chain and lying about two hundred miles north-east of Delhi. It is divided into British Garhwal and the native state of Tehri Garhwal, but here we need trouble ourselves only with the first, which did not come under British control until after the Nepalese War of 1815. Originally the country was in the hands of a number of petty chieftains, each with his own fortress or castle; the word 'garh' itself means a castle. In the early years of the nineteenth century it was overrun by the Ghurkas, who, not content with this acquisition, extended their ravages down to the plains and thus came into collision with the ruling Power and brought about the Nepalese War. In the early stages of the war we reaped our usual crop of defeats and disasters, but in the end (and up to the present this also has been usual) we muddled through and drove the Ghurkas back within their present boundaries; and, as a slight reward for the trouble to which we had been put, we annexed the greater part of Garhwal for ourselves. It is roughly rectangular, about a hundred miles from north to south and fifty from east to west, and diagonally across the northern half runs the Himalayan chain. In this short section of the range there are two peaks over 25,000 ft., including Nanda Devi (25,645 ft.), the highest peak in the Empire, and over a hundred lesser peaks all over 20,000 ft. To the east lies Nepal, on the west is the native state of Tehri Garhwal, and north is Tibet. The Tibetan border runs on the north side of the highest axis of elevation, the northern slopes of the range merging into the high Tibetan plateau, and south of the range are the foothills running down to the plains of British India. It is noteworthy that the watershed lies near the Tibetan border on the north side of the line of highest elevation, which would naturally be expected to form the watershed. The rivers have either cut back through the range or the country has been elevated since the existence of the rivers.

There are three main rivers flowing roughly south, cutting through the range at right angles, and between these river valleys are the chains containing the highest summits, forming, as it were, spurs thrown out from the main range. From east to west the rivers are the Gori, the Dhauli, and the Alaknanda. The last two flow into the Ganges, the



Alaknanda constituting one of its main sources, and at the head of all three valleys are high passes leading into Tibet. Between the Gori and the Dhauli lies the range containing Nanda Devi, and at its southern extremity this range bends round to the west towards Trisul (23,360 ft.), and culminates in Nandakna (20,700 ft.), and Nanda Ghunti (19,893 ft.). Some ten miles north of this abrupt westerly bend another spur of approximately equal length branches off, its western extremity marked by Dunagiri (23,184 ft.). Between these two short parallel spurs is a yet shorter one composing Nanda Devi itself, so that we have here a sort of reversed letter 'EC', the short middle stroke representing Nanda Devi, the longer top stroke the Dunagiri, and the bottom stroke the Trisul massif. But that is not all; subsidiary spurs branch off from Trisul and Dunagiri and converge upon the middle stroke, thus almost encircling Nanda Devi with a ring of mountains.

The space between the foot of Nanda Devi and its ring-fence of giant peaks, in extent some two hundred and fifty square miles, contains many lesser peaks and ridges, an extensive glacier system, rock, scree, and, surprisingly enough, grass slopes of wide extent. The whole is known as the Nanda Devi Basin, or more felicitously, the Sanctuary, a name first bestowed on it by Mr Rutledge of Everest fame, who in the following passage graphically describes the unique situation of the mountain: 'Nanda Devi imposes on her votaries an admission test as yet beyond their skill and endurance. Surrounded by a barrier ring, 70 m. long, on which stand twelve measured peaks over 21,000 ft., and which nowhere descends lower than 18,000 ft., except in the West, where the Rishi Ganga river, rising at the foot of Nanda Devi, and the sole drainage for 250 sq. m. of ice and snow, has carved for itself what must be one of the most terrific gorges in the world. Two ridges converging on the river form as it were the curtain to an inner sanctuary within which the great mountain soars up to 25,645 ft. So tremendous is the aspect of the gorge that Hindu mythology described it as the last earthly home of the Seven Rishis—here if anywhere their meditations would be undisturbed.' The Rishis mentioned here were seven wise men, Hindu sages, and they are now said to be represented by the seven stars in the constellation of the Great Bear.

The superstitions, myths, and traditions, relating to mountains, are most of them interesting and some beautiful. The mountains of

Garhwal are particularly rich in such stories, because Garhwal is the birthplace of the Hindu religion, the traditional home of most of the gods of the Hindu Pantheon, and the terrestrial scene of their exploits. Every mountain and river, almost every rock and pool, is associated in legend with the life of some god.

Of the population of Garhwal, the orthodox among the immigrant Brahmans and Rajputs worship the five great gods, Vishnu, Siva, Devi, the Sun, and Ganesh, the elephant-headed god of wisdom. The bulk of the people, Khasiyas, a race of a caste lower than the Brahmans or the Rajputs, but yet generally allowed to be also immigrants from an Aryan source, adore principally the mountain god Siva; while the Doms, less than a fifth in number of the rest and believed to be the aborigines of the country, propitiate the local gods and demons who were in existence long before the coming of the Brahmans and Hinduism. But all, even the hillman such as the Bhotia, who has little respect for things sacred, find a common subject for reverence in the majesty and aloofness of the snowy ranges. At any sudden revelation of one of these giants, the home of one of the deities, coolie and priest alike will fold their hands and with bowed head utter a word of prayer.

Nor is worship at the high places of Himachal, 'the abode of snow' sacred to the Hindu gods, confined only to the nearer inhabitants. From all parts of India pilgrims make their way annually to this Hindu 'Palestine' to 'acquire merit' by enduring the privations of the road, and, by worshipping at the shrines, to receive forgiveness for past sins and assurance of future happiness.

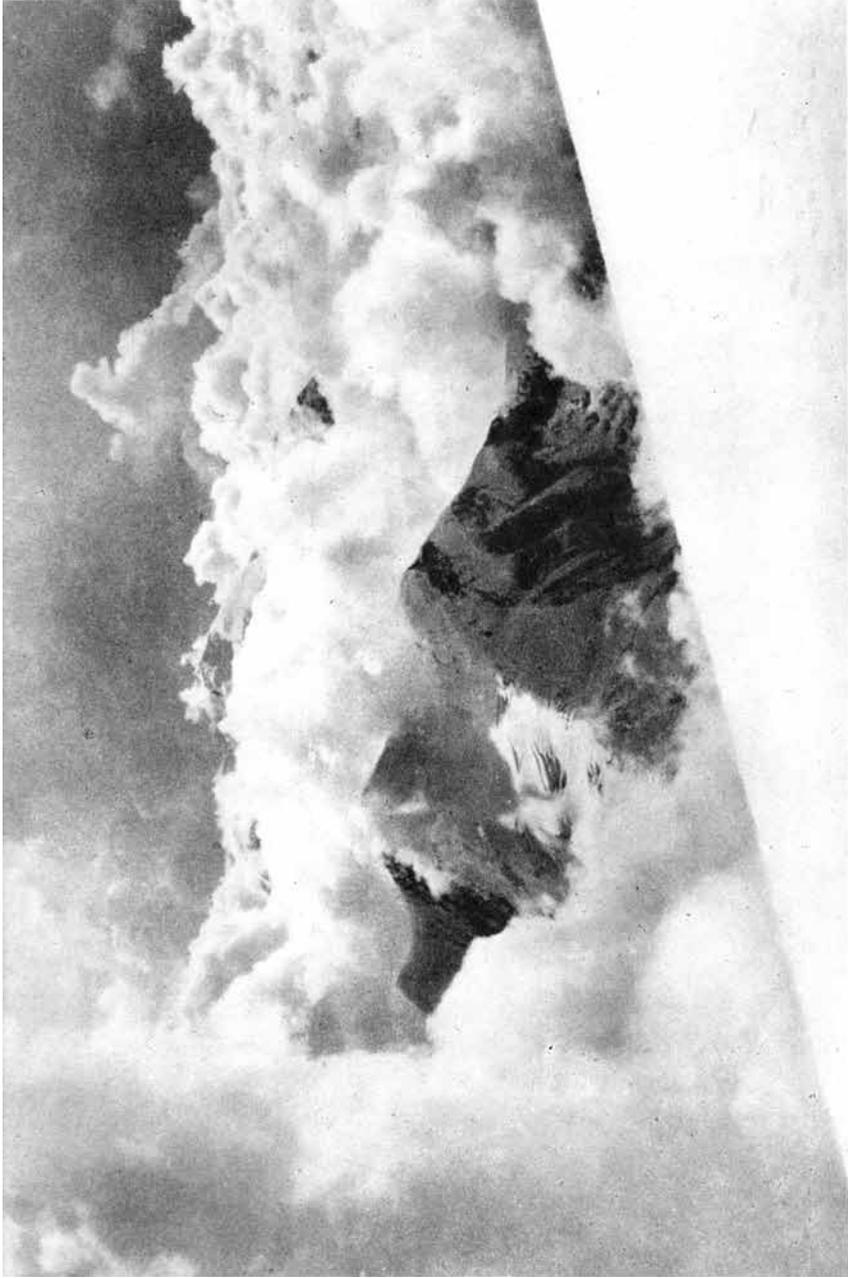
At Kedarnath Siva, or Mahadeo, the god of everything destructive and terrible, is the object of adoration; at Badrinath the temple is dedicated to the benignant Vishnu, and a third famous shrine is found at Gangotri. All three lie amongst the great group of mountains which separate the valleys of the Bhagirathi and Alaknanda, rivers which unite a little lower down to form the Ganges.

At Kedarnath the tradition is that the god in the form of a buffalo took refuge from his pursuers the Pandavas (a tribe of the Dasyus who represent the original black race as opposed to the fair Aryans). For further safety he dived into the ground but left his hinder parts exposed, and a mountain there, in shape something like the less dangerous end of a buffalo, is still an object of adoration. The remaining

parts of the god are worshipped at four other places along the Himalayan chain; the arms at Tungnath, the face at Rudrnath, the belly at Madmaheswar, and the head at Kalpeswar. Together these five places form the 'Panch-Kedar', and to visit them in succession is a great ambition of the Hindu devotee, but one, I imagine, which is not often accomplished. I have in mind particularly Madmaheswar, which lies up a valley that few plainsmen would care to penetrate.

Bigoted followers of Siva or Vishnu visit only the temple dedicated to their respective god, but the great number of pilgrims make the round of as many of the sacred places as possible. Badrinath probably receives the most, and derives from its fifty thousand annual visitors a far greater revenue than that of Kedarnath. Badrinath also has its five sacred places, the 'Panch-Badri', comprised within the Holy Circle of Badrinath, which extends from the shrine of Kanwa to the summit of Nanda Devi, on which there is a lake, the abode of Vishnu himself. The Bhagirathi, which is a lesser stream than the Alaknanda, has a greater reputation for sanctity, but it does not attract as many pilgrims as do the sources of the Alaknanda, particularly the fall of Bhasudara. The temple of Gangotri is ten miles below the place where the Bhagirathi issues from the snout of the Gangotri glacier, a very holy spot called Gaumukh or the 'Cow's Mouth'. It is here that, according to Hindu mythology, the heaven-born goddess first descended upon earth. Water from the river at Gangotri, sealed in flasks by the Brahman priests, is taken to the plains as being of great value.

Of the exact meaning of Nanda Devi, or rather of 'Nanda', it is not easy to get any precise information. According to one interpretation it means the 'Blessed' or 'Revered' Goddess, but if there is anything in a story I was told it means the goddess Nanda. Nanda was the daughter of a Kumaon king (Kumaon is a division of which Garhwal is part, and was formerly a separate native state) whose hand was demanded in marriage by a Rohilla prince. He was refused, and war followed, a battle taking place near Ranikhet. Nanda's kingly father was defeated and the future goddess fled and, after many vicissitudes, took refuge on the top of Nanda Devi. There are two other mountains in the vicinity in which the name 'Nanda' occurs. Nanda Ghunti to the west has already been mentioned and this, I was told, means 'The halting-place of Nanda'; it is only 19,893 ft. high and was probably used as a stepping



Trisul from summit of Nanda Devi

stone to Nanda Devi itself. To the east is Nanda Kot (22,500 ft.), which means 'The stronghold of Nanda', and south is Trisul, 'The Trident', a defiance to any rapacious Rohillas.

Amongst the local natives this belief that the mountains are the abode of gods and demons is less strong than it used to be. In 1830 Mr Traill, the first Commissioner, accompanied by local coolies, crossed a pass between Nanda Kot and Nanda Devi. The story goes that he suffered severely from snow-blindness, which the coolies attributed to the wrath of the goddess, and they affirmed that he only recovered after making an offering at the temple of Nanda Devi at Almora. The story may not be strictly accurate, but only a pedant would have it otherwise.

In 1855 the same route was taken by Adolph Schlagintweit, and of this crossing Mr A. L. Mumm in *Five Months in the Himalaya* related the following. A promise of additional pay and a rich offering to Nanda Devi had to be promised before any coolies could be persuaded to start. On top of the Pass, 'Schlagintweit commenced taking observations but was disagreeably interrupted by three of the hardest men being seized with epileptic fits... A cry rose up that Nanda Devi had entered into them and Adolph, fearful lest the seizure might spread further, took aside two Brahmans whom he had with him, and after pointing out that he had given Nanda Devi all that they had demanded, and that this unpleasant scene was only the result of their own folly in calling on the goddess at every difficult place on the way up, ordered them to put a stop to it at once. This they achieved, partly by prayers, and partly by putting snow on the head of the sufferers, the latter remedy being, in Adolph's opinion, the more effective of the two.'

A later traveller, W. W. Graham, in 1883 had trouble with the local natives when he attempted to approach Nanda Devi by the gorge of the Rishis. His men all deserted, ostensibly on the grounds that the gorge was infested with devils. But in 1934 when Mr Shipton and the writer penetrated the gorge our Dotial and Bhotia coolies evinced no superstitious fears, though they, of course, are not really local men. Some men from the Dhauli valley whom we employed did desert, but I think the devils they feared were more tangible—the devils of discomfort and hard work. In 1936 we took a few coolies from a village at the very mouth of the Rishi Ganga and for them superstition either did not exist or was overcome, and this was the more remarkable because they

came up the Rishi and joined us at the foot of the mountain, unaccompanied by any European.

On the other hand, shortly after our return, a local correspondent of a well-known Indian newspaper published a report to the following effect. In 1936 the monsoon rainfall was exceptionally heavy in the United Provinces and Garhwal, and on August 29th, after a severe storm, the Pindar river, which is fed by the glaciers of Nanda Kot and Trisul, rose many feet and wrought considerable havoc in the village of Tharali; a village, by the way, through which we had passed on the way to the mountain some weeks before. Forty lives were lost, several houses destroyed, and many cattle drowned. It was on the same day, August 29th, that we climbed the mountain and thus provoked the anger of the goddess, who immediately avenged, blindly but terribly, the violation of her sanctuary.