

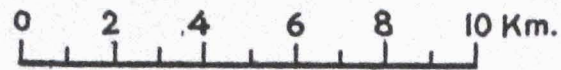
ACROSS GANGOTRI GLACIERS



SWAMI PRABODHANAND ■ SWAMI ANAND

GANGOTRI-BADRINATH REGION

HEIGHTS IN METRES, (1 Metre = 3'-3.37")

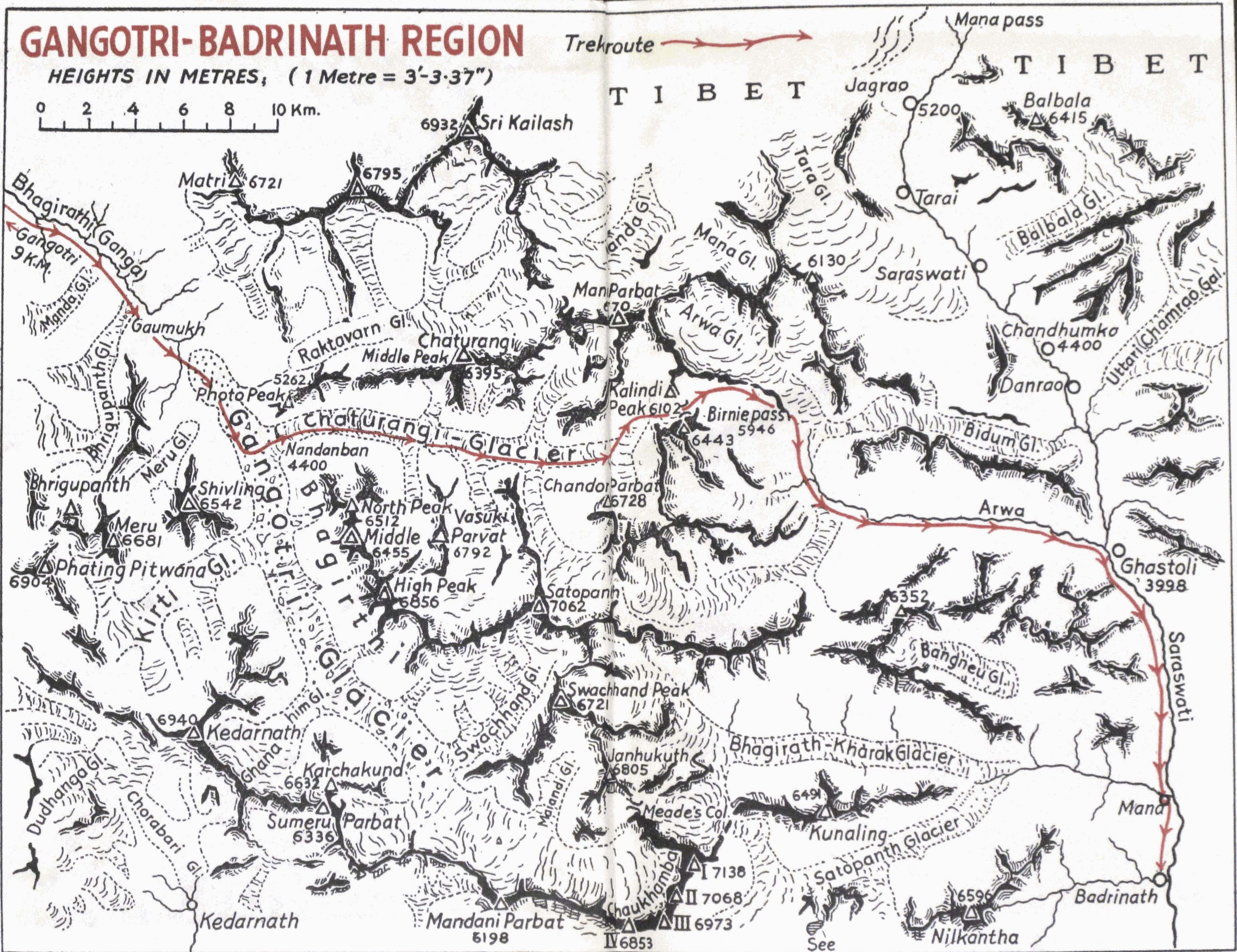


Trekroute →

TIBET

Mana pass

TIBET



**ACROSS
GANGOTRI GLACIERS**



Photo : R. R. BHARDWAJ

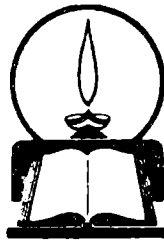
FACE OF ETERNITY

“The concept of bulk, immobility and steadiness according to the *Bhagavadgita* exhausted itself in one word,—The Himalaya. Its Gomukh region of unbounded snows and glaciers which is the source of the Holy Ganga is *sanctum sanctorum* of the Hindu. Here within a radius of 15 or 20 miles, more than 100 snow-peaks, 18,000 or 19,000 feet high, are to be found. These giants of perpetual snows have defied Time for millenniums. They are the very Face of Eternity.”

ACROSS GANGOTRI GLACIERS

*An Account of
Six Hindu Monks reaching Badrinath
from Gangotri across Glaciers in
Garhwal Himalayas*

by
SWAMI PRABODHANAND
SWAMI ANAND



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PREFACE

The material on which the following narrative is based lay with me these two years as a memento of our pilgrimage,—a quaint expedition of six Sadhus across the snows, and perhaps had hardly any prospects of being published but for the labours of Swami Anand whose acquaintance it was my good fortune to make, under the circumstances narrated in the introduction.

These notes made by me during and after the pilgrimage consisted of a bare record of daily events, and could serve only as material. The narrative could never have become readable stuff but for the practised hand of an artist, whom my *Ishtadev* Shiva sent to me unasked in the guise of Swami Anand. It was he who fashioned it into a finished piece of literature. I cannot thank him sufficiently for having taken so much interest in me and such pains in writing out the narrative. Mine has been mere raw material. The art of telling is wholly his.

Besides recording the day's events, my notes contained philosophical and other discussions among the members of our party. These, not being strictly relevant, have been omitted by Swamiji at my request.

To every member of our team my thanks are due. The warmth of one another, even in the literal sense, sustained us during the arduous trek. With our guide Dileep Singh everyone of us has formed an abiding tie of friendship which is much more than ordinary.

My friend and colleague Swami Dayal Dasji was indeed the spear-head of our expedition. But for his spirit of enterprise and organising skill the project would perhaps have remained a stillborn. He bore the brunt of the expedition in every sense.

The members of our party, as explained in the narrative, were ill-equipped Sadhus, without a scientific outlook or modern means of any kind. But our labours will have been more than repaid if this little story of pilgrimage serves to whet the appetite of any of our better circumstanced youth for the Himalayan exploration and bring lustre to the name of India, now fortunately free from the slavery of centuries.

Uttarkashi, 5th October, 1947.

PRABODHANAND

INTRODUCTION

On my return from Gangotri pilgrimage in September 1947, I had to make an enforced halt of several days at Uttarkashi owing to heavy rains. I stayed at a tiny colony of Sadhus whose inmates live on alms and teach Sanskrit to younger monks, or nurse the sick in the neighbouring villages, in a purely humanitarian spirit.

While at Gangotri, I had heard of an Expedition Party of Swiss mountaineers who were camping on the vast plateau above Gomukh (the actual source of the Ganga, 14 miles beyond Gangotri) close to the snow glaciers, and making scientific research. Their attempt, I was told, was to reach Badrinath across the great snow heights and glaciers. It was pity, I felt, that our people should neither have means, nor leisure, nor State aid, nor encouragement from public bodies, for such worthy pursuits ; and I longed to see the position change entirely now with the advent of freedom.

It was therefore a most agreeable surprise for me to learn one afternoon, that one of the monks living in the colony had led, in company with a companion of his, an expedition of half a dozen naked or half-naked Sadhus across some of these very glaciers only a couple of years ago, and had accomplished the whole feat for the ridiculous amount of Rs. 39; in fact, with a bagful of provisions and two small bundles of firewood which they carried on their backs !

I am free to admit that such unplanned achievements are pious or heroic adventures at best, and yield small result for want of scientific knowledge and equipment. Yet they are more than merely praiseworthy inasmuch as the story of their adventure and endurance contains much inspiring material for the better-situated youth of our country.

I hastened to contact this monk. I had seen him for the first time as one of the two tall saffron-robed monks I had met while I was negotiating the worst and the steepest ascent on the Gangotri route near Bhairo Ghati. But though we were both living together in a colony of less than ten inmates for over a week, we had hardly spoken to each other save in monosyllables.

Brahmachari Prabodhanand is a slim Punjabi Sadhu of 43, measuring 5' 9" and wears long hair and a Russian beard. He was educated at Murray College, Sialkot, and he graduated with Philosophy in 1929. He renounced the wordly career in 1933 and took to Holy Orders under Swami Jnananand, the wellknown scientist. For two or three years Brahmachari Prabodhanand taught in some religious educational institutions, but restricts himself to his Sanskrit studies at Uttarkashi for years now under Swami Tapowanji, the most celebrated among the Saints of Uttarakhand.

He spends nearly six months every year at Gangotri where he was once swept away by the torrential current of the Ganga, but was fortunately flung away on the bank about 100 yards downstream and was saved. He is an earnest devotee of Shiva and a deep lover of nature, which lavishes its munificence on the Himalayas with a rare abandon.

When I requested him to tell me all about his journey across the glaciers, he would hardly respond. He was too shy to talk of it. It took me full two days to coax him. At last after some hesitation he unearthed a tiny bundle of papers and produced his "notes" of the trek, scribbled in pencil on the backs and blank margins of some advertising hand-bills ! I had to coax him further to read them out to me as it was well-nigh impossible for my own eyes to wade through them.

The following account has been prepared on the strength of those notes supplemented by a number of personal talks he gave me, and is duly approved and testified by him.

10th September, 1947.

SWAMI ANAND

POSTSCRIPT

In spite of my keen desire to have this narrative published, it has lain with me for nearly 14 years. Much water has flown under the bridges since then. Unprecedented progress has been made in Himalayan mountaineering. Giant peaks that repeatedly baffled celebrated climbers for half a century have yielded, and even Sagar Matha (Mt. Everest), the world's highest, has relented.

The route to Badrinath across Gangotri glaciers and Kalindi Pass, which forms the subject of the present narrative, was not unknown and has also been since traversed more than once by teams, both of foreign mountaineers and Indian youths including Hindu monks. The narrative thus relates to no new venture or achievement. Its uniqueness perhaps consists in its having been accomplished by resourceless monks, virtually with no equipment. However, I venture to have it published in order to discharge a debt of honour, rather than to offer any fresh data in Himalayan trekking, or in scientific exploration.

I doubt if this could ever have been possible, but for the keenness, persistence and material help of my close friend Shri Navnit Parekh, whose interest in the Himalayas is well known to lovers of the Himalayas in this country and abroad, and who has himself done much difficult trekking in the inmost recesses of the mighty mountains. Besides finding publishers for me he secured free permission and loan of a number of relevant photographs for reproduction, from Dr. Rudolf Jonas, author, and his publishers Messrs. L. W. Seidel & Sohn, of Vienna, from their book, *Im Garten der Gotilichen Nanda*, to both of whom our profound thanks are due.

I am thankful no less to Shri Sadanand Bhatkal of The Popular Book Depot, and to Shri Dinkar of Messrs Jayanand Khira, Bombay, for their invaluable help in bringing out this book with its present get up, illustrations and map.

My profuse thanks are also due to Shri R. R. Bhardwaj, whose craft holds a unique place in the realm of world photography, for permitting me to use some of his photographs, including the frontispiece. The exquisite photo of Mt. Shivling on the cover is by Shri Navnit Parekh.

Bombay, 6th April, 1961.

S. A.

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HERE HINDUISM WAS BORN

To the Hindu, Uttarakhand, consisting of the districts of Tehri and Garhwal, is what the Holy Land is to the Christian, or what Mecca is to the Muslim World,—a shrine of faith, far older than both of them. It is a vast region of primival forests and stupendous mountains with a three-fold range of eternal snows behind, which is higher than the highest mountains of the world and which divides India from Tibet, the land of Lamas, known to be the second roof of the world.

These mystic, enchanted mountains are the abode of India's gods, her *Tapobhoomi*, the land for achievement of all virtue, hallowed as homeland of her ancient seers and sages. They enclose within their bosom some of the foremost sacred shrines of the Hindus such as Badrinath, Kedarnath, Gangotri and Jamnotri, besides innumerable other places of pilgrimage, confluences of sacred rivers, and holy spots. There is no mountainside and no village or valley that is without some sacred memory or the other, or, which is not associated with some god or demi-god, some celestial being, some sage, seer or saint, some great hero or heroine of Hindu mythology. Here Hinduism was born. Here Valmiki, the world's first poet, unburdened himself in his first metric verse, giving to the infant world a new art of expression called poetry. The great Seven Sages, who form the seven stars of the Great Bear in high heavens, lived here and taught to the world the wisdom, the supreme secret of life, that would overcome death.

The inhabitants of these mountains live in slate-roofed villages in their innumerable valleys and along the mountain-sides, cultivating terraced fields of wheat and corn which are harvested in autumn under a constant vigil against *Bhalu*, the Himalayan black bear, who is addicted to ripened corn and makes shortwork of it. The village

herdsman keeps vigil over him with the aid of his staff having a jingling little cluster of bells attached to it to frighten away the *Bhalu*, or the forest leopard, who is ever on the lookout for a luckless straggler from his herd. Every morning the village cattle file out from their sloping courtyards to graze and roam over the mountain heights returning before dusk by the narrow winding mountain tracks which they have travelled through centuries until it has been inbred in them to go in a single file, ever on the *qui vive*. The instinct persists even on the vast plains of India where no danger threatens.

To these regions of perpetual snows come pilgrims from every nook and corner of India. Bent with years, staff in hand, and a tiny little bundle on the back or on the shaking head, these walking monuments of devotion and faith, humble and ill-equipped, often endure hardships and privations in these mountainous regions under the rigours of inclement weather which may stagger the stoutest of hearts. Treacherous mountain paths and landslides add to the hazardous journey. At such landslides one is often confronted by a precipitous mountainside where a road slice has tumbled down into the rushing, roaring river below, leaving the ends of broken earthstone on both sides over-hanging an abyss between, a single glance into which may cause giddiness. Catwise you have to bypass it by a circuitous climb up the mountainside and then descend again to reach the track in order to resume the journey.

After weeks of tiring hazardous journey on foot and after crossing innumerable streams and rivulets of ice-cold water, the pilgrims reach each of the four great shrines at an interval of days and weeks. Jamnotri, the source of the sacred Jamuna with its hot springs, Gangotri, the source of the Holy Mother Ganga, Kedarnath, the Lord Shiva in the snows, and Badrinath, the Lord Protector of the World. All these shrines are situated at the foot of the ranges covered with eternal snows and which are the source of all the great rivers of north India. The pilgrims at each of these great shrines take a dip in the benumbing waters of the sacred streams rushing nearby and repair to the shrine, anxious to prostrate themselves before the Divine Image.

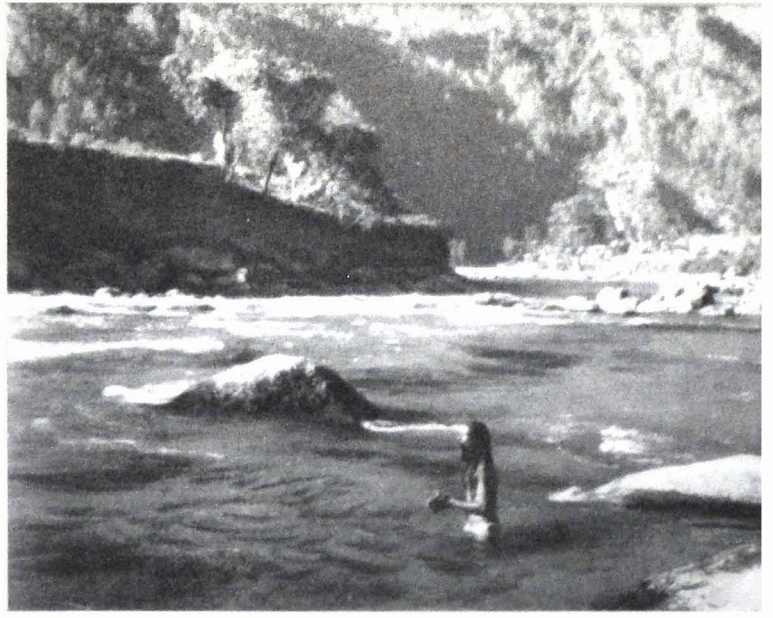
They will then come out and give alms out of their slender

resources and roam about the mountainsides in search of holy men engaged in hard penances in caves. These are often to be found standing or sitting in a single posture night and day through all the seasons year after year under freezing cold and snowfalls, so that they may see God face to face. They will then go to Dharamshalas and rest-houses nearby, where they will cook their frugal fare for the day and rest.

Then under the gathering cold of the afternoon they will resume their rounds of visiting minor temples and abodes of sadhus to return to the Shrine before dusk, in time for the grand ceremony of Waving Lights with which the Presiding Deity is entertained every evening. This to the devout pilgrims is the high consummation of all their devotional urge, of their long cherished dream in life, and tears of joy will often assail their eyes in a supreme state of bliss and happiness which will recompense them for all the hardships endured during the long arduous trek through the mountains.

After spending an odd number of evenings at the Holy Shrine, the pilgrims prepare to return with a heavy heart. At Gangotri, before embarking upon the return journey, they do not forget to fill little jars of brass, with the sacred water from the Holy River at its source. This they must carry home securely sealed for the benefit of those of their dear ones who were unable to accompany them in the holy pilgrimage. They would preserve it as a most precious treasure to be administered to them at the last moments of their earthly journey. To the devout Hindu, this holy water "from the Sacred Cow's mouth" at the ancient shrine of Gangotri is the most blessed of cures for all the ills of life in this world, and a guarantee for a happy sojourn in the next.

S. A.



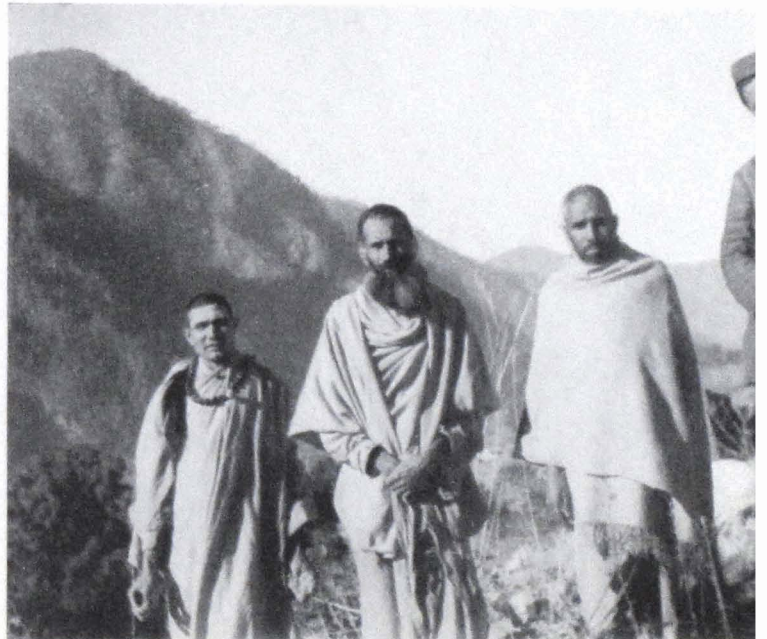
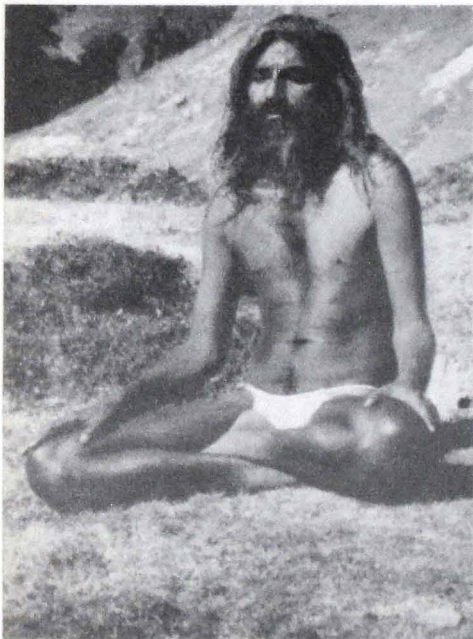
1. *Top left:* Swami Tapowanji, the Patron Saint of Gangotri

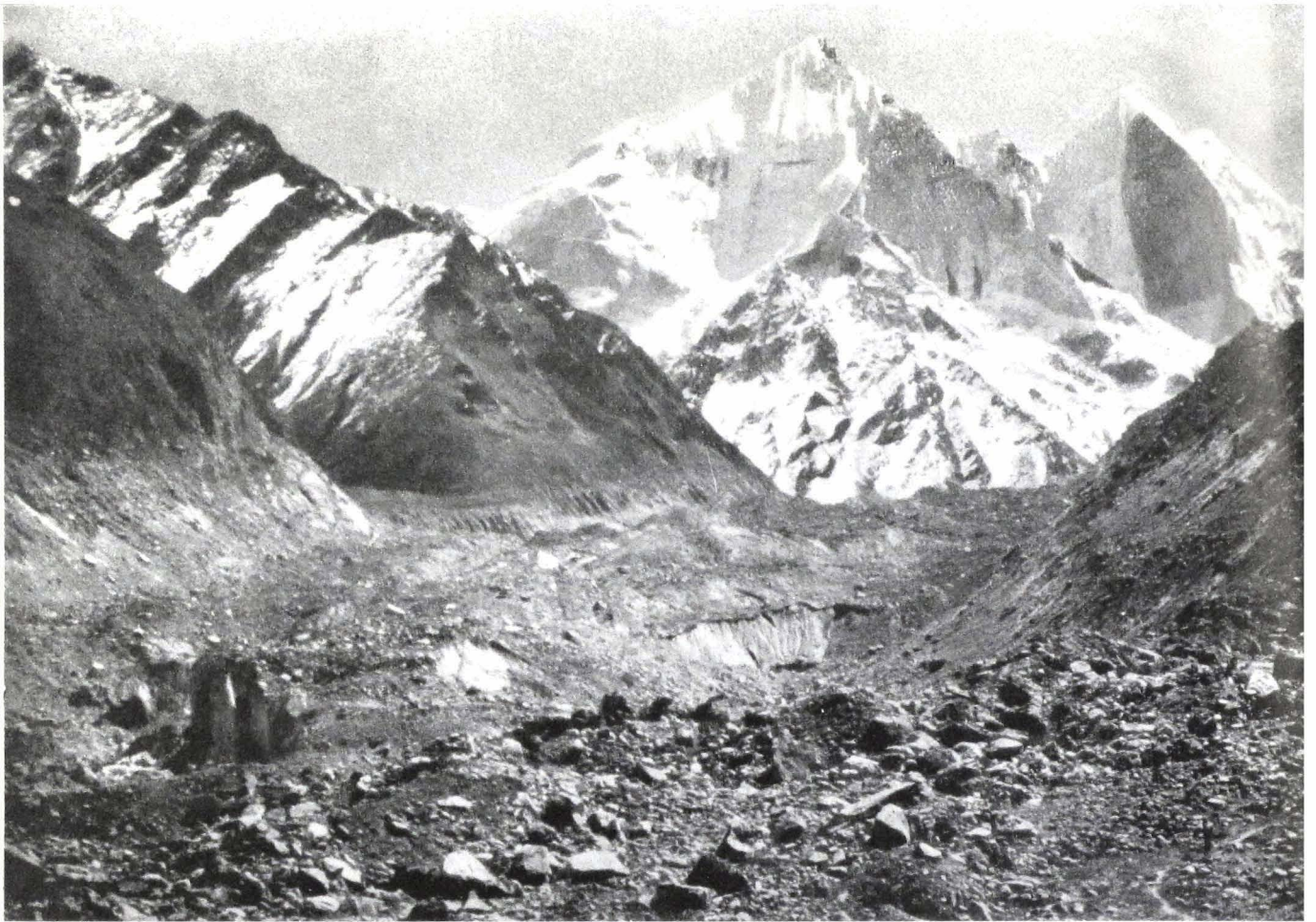
2. *Top right:* Sadhus Worshipping the Holy Ganga

3. *Centre:* The Shrine at Gangotri

4. *Bottom left:* Avadhoot Paramanand

5. *Bottom right:* Our Team,—
Kailas Giri ; Author ; Swami Dayal ; Our Guide





6. Gomukh—Source of the Ganga

7. Another View —The Tunnel, below Gangotri Glacier



**ACROSS
GANGOTRI GLACIERS**

I. THE GENESIS

EVER since taking the Holy Orders in 1938, I have been living at Uttarkashi, studying Sanskrit scriptures under learned sannyasis and seeking company of well-known sadhus and saints. During the five or six warmer months of the year I have to stay at Gangotri where most of these sadhus migrate. By temperament I am a lover of nature, and of the Himalayas with their dense forests, bounding streams and snowy solitudes.

My first stay at Gangotri was in 1938. A German Expedition of mountaineers visited the Gangotri glaciers in September that year. They camped in our neighbourhood for a night. I felt curious and called on them. They all spoke German. Only one among them spoke English. He was an officer deputed by the British Government to accompany the party.

Our conversation was meagre. Nevertheless it set me athinking. "These foreigners," I mused, "embark on hazardous undertakings in distant foreign lands and make valuable contributions to the knowledge of geography and other sciences. They come to our country with similar missions and with the same zeal ; whereas we, who should feel vitally interested, are blissfully ignorant in respect of our own country and its wealth of nature's gifts. How humiliating it is that we should have to learn these things from foreigners ?"

It looked like a passing impulse for the time being. The year wore out without anything happening. The following year an officer of the Geological Survey of India visited Gangotri in July. I was told

. ACROSS GANGOTRI GLACIERS . . .

he had crossed the snows and glaciers beyond Gomukh, in company with a friend some years back, and had reached Badrinath. This made my enthusiasm revive within me with a sudden leap, and I called at the Englishman's tent that afternoon. He was skipping over the pages of some illustrated magazine beside a comfortable fire. He received me with courtesy and offered me a seat.

We plunged into conversation directly. Yes, he had crossed the glaciers above Gomukh some years back with a companion of his and a local guide, but had no plans to repeat the performance ; not because it was an impossible feat, but for the simple reason that mountaineering in the Himalayas was unlimited and there was no point in covering the same ground over again. He would rather choose a fresh mountain peak or pass or glacier every year if he could. In fact he had planned to visit Tibet this year and had waited for his passport for Nelang route for a number of days. He had even sent a special messenger for expediting its despatch but had failed to secure it.

"Englishmen are forbidden to make any excursions in Lamaland, you know," he said with a smile. "I must obey my Government."

"What are your plans now ?"

"I now propose to climb upstream along the Kedarganga and cross over there," he pointed towards a high mountain range to the south, "and making a second cross further on, reach Trijugi Narayan."

"Can I attempt a trek across Gangotri glaciers and reach Badrinath by the route you took ?"

"Why not ? You are hale and in the prime of life. Nothing need be impossible for you. After all, man is six feet taller than the mountains he will climb. Only the will resolute has to be there."

"But," he added regarding my person, "you cannot go there with these bare cotton clothes on. You must have sufficient warm clothing, strong shoes and a pair of goggles. You have to wade through vast unchartered glaciers for two or three days, you know. But that is all. You have to cross *via* Burnie Pass, over 19,000 feet high, and there are innumerable snow fissures and crevasses *en route*." And after a pause he added, "But you need not get frightened."

1. THE IDEA

From that moment my mind was made up. I took my leave after thanking him and with a profound feeling of gratitude. For days I was under the spell of that uplifting conversation, and the Englishman's words rang within me : "You need not get frightened, there is no danger to life. And even if it was so, that should be a further lure for a man like you."

"Only you must have sufficient warm clothing," he had said, "those regions are too cold." ..

But then, "that should be a further lure," "only the will resolute has to be there," the voice within me repeated for days and nights.

I was a penniless monk. Where was I to purchase the warm clothing from ? However, my *ishtadev*, Shiva, was the Lord of the Universe. He would provide for his child.

I sought counsel of a brother monk. My notions of equipment were of course crude. They consisted of some warm clothing and a pair of goggles. That was the limit. Though I had graduated from the Punjab University, I had no idea of any scientific equipment or research, or perhaps for the moment my enthusiasm had got the better of it all and made me oblivious of all mundane advantages incidental to such a pilgrimage.

But my enthusiasm somewhat cooled down when I could get little encouragement from the brother monks around me. A proposition to cross over the glaciers at over 19,000 feet was beyond them, and they ridiculed the idea. Only Swami Tapovanji, the patron saint of our fraternity at Gangotri, sympathised with my aspiration, and his encouraging attitude put fresh heart into me. He questioned me closely and seemed to be satisfied with my earnestness. In the end, however, he advised me to make a pilgrimage to Kailas and Mansarovar in Tibet across the snow-passes as a preliminary. I bowed to his verdict and made the pilgrimage that same year *via* Thuling Math, crossing Nelang Pass in company with Jad caravans.

. ACROSS GANGOTRI GLACIERS . . .

The following year I was determined to carry out my resolve to reach Badrinath across Burnie Pass,* the route indicated by the Englishman. But the second World War broke out just then and made it impossible for me to make the attempt. In the wake of war all kinds of restrictions came into vogue and any entry or wanderings in untrod frontier regions would have been looked upon with suspicion, and probably banned without ceremony. I hibernated during the war years and could only make, by way of consolation during the interval, a second pilgrimage of Mount Kailas and the Holy Lake by the trodden pilgrim route.

However, the idea of reaching Badrinath directly across the glaciers had gripped me and grown into a firm resolve with the passing of days. I had already shared it with my brother monk Swami Dayal Das Udasi, who had hailed it enthusiastically. He manages a free kitchen for sadhus at Gangotri for some time every year, and is a man of nerve and determination; kindly, capable, resourceful and gifted with a great organising and administrative talent.

2. IT CRYSTALLIZES

I went on reading whatever I could get on the subject, collecting information. I tried to meet every one who knew anything about the two expeditions of European mountaineers and of the Geological Survey. I also collected as much information as I could from the sadhus who lived in these parts more or less permanently and who had considerable experience of the snow-regions and routes. I had known from them, and also from my own wanderings upto a point above Gomukh, that the shepherds of Gangotri and its neighbourhood lived on the vast slopes and plateaux above Gomukh in the region of Gangotri glaciers. They lived there for months without any built shelter or tents in order to graze their flocks. I had also learnt from sadhus and aged villagers that before fifty years or so, many pious inhabitants of the villages near these snowy regions, preferred to make their pilgrimage

*Shown as Kalindi Khal in the Geological Survey of India maps.

to Badrinath across the glaciers and the snow passes and returned home within a week, rather than making a detour of more than two hundred miles through mountains and river valleys, which were much too 'warm' for them, besides incurring expenses which they could ill-afford; also that sometimes the more turbulent and daring among them led foraging raids and committed dacoities on the "other side" and returned home across the snow-passes and the glaciers with their booty of sheep and Tibetan merchandise. I had also seen people living in the cold regions of Gangotri even today preferring to accomplish Badrinath pilgrimage *via* Nelang and Mana passes on Tibetan border, to journeying through the hot mountain valleys of Garhwal. Similarly, I had seen people living close to the snow ranges in Rampur-Bushahar state, and even in Kulu districts, choosing to cross one or two high mountain ranges and reach Gangotri or Jamnotri direct, rather than going by the pilgrim routes up from the Indian plains.

II. WE PLAN

1. THE GUIDE

IN the year 1945, after the termination of the war, we began to plan our 'expedition'. Dayal Swami, who went to Gangotri ahead of me, wrote to me to say that he had secured a local guide,—a young stalwart peasant from Mukhwa, the priests' village near Gangotri,—who had before now accompanied the two Englishmen across the glaciers to Badrinath as their porter. I was happy.

On my reaching Gangotri I saw that our plans were no longer a secret among the sadhus there, and we began to work out the details day after day. Swami Dayal was in such high spirits over the project that he even made a sporting offer to the resident sadhus of Gangotri to say that anyone who wished to join us and, had the nerve to face the hardships entailed, was welcome. Three sadhus from among the more or less permanent resident monks, and a fourth from the plains, expressed their eagerness to join. A fifth one was to go with us as far as the Tapovan plateau, two miles beyond Gomukh, and then return.

2. OUR TEAM

Our team consisted of the following :

- | | | | |
|---|--------------------------|----|------------------------|
| 1 | Swami Dayal Das Udasi | of | Gangotri |
| 2 | Swami Kailas Giri | " | " |
| 3 | Mahabir Das Udasi | " | Jhusi (near Allahabad) |
| 4 | Falahari Mauni | | The Silent One |
| 5 | Avadhoot Paramanand | | The Naked One |
| 6 | Dileep Singh (our guide) | " | Mukhwa |
| 7 | Myself. | | |

SWAMI KAILAS GIRI 35. Sannyasi. Hails from Almora or Nepal side. Lives at Dharali near Gangotri. Spends nearly half the year there. Comes to Uttarkashi for the winter sometimes. Speaks Hindi. Does not know Sanskrit or English.

MAHABIR DAS UDASI, 37. Conducts a Math, known as Kot-Baba-Dayaram, at Jhusi near Allahabad. Visits Gangotri off and on at an interval of two or three years. Is an able worker with a spirit of service. Knows Hindi and Sanskrit.

FALAHARI MAUNI, 36. Is a Bairagi (Devotee of Rama). He probably hails from U.P. Was living in a village on the Ganga about forty-five miles downstream. But stays at Gangotri throughout the year for the last four or five years. He never speaks, and does not wear any tailored clothes. Observes silence always. So nothing more can be known from him about himself.

AVADHOOT PARAMANAND, 35. Formerly stayed at Uttarkashi and at Mukhwa, the priests' village near Gangotri, or at Dharali. He spent a winter at Gangotri. Stays at Badrinath now. He goes about naked with only a six inch rag (kaupin) on. Does not know Sanskrit or English. Speaks Hindi only.

Besides, Swami Hari Prakash Udasi went with us as far as Tapovan only and then returned to Gangotri.

3. QUAIN T EQUIPMENT

We worked out and fixed the quantities of food provisions which we were to carry. The journey was expected to take three to four walking days beyond Gomukh, which is one and a half day's journey from Gangotri. Making an allowance for emergencies it was wise to carry a full week's provisions. The consideration of quantity was a material one for the very valid reason that we were to carry the bulk of our victuals *plus* fuel on our backs, besides one's own personal kit. We therefore fixed the following as provisions to be carried for the entire party :

. ACROSS GANGOTRI GLACIERS . . .

	lb	cost
1. Wheat flour	40	Rs. 10
2. Gram „	10	2
3. Ghee	8	9
4. Rice	8	2
5. Potatoes	10	1
6. Dal	4	1
7. Sugar	8	3
8. Gur	20	6
9. Dry fruit	2	4
10. Tea	8 oz.	1
		Total Rs. 39

Our sole equipment besides these provisions consisted of the following :

7 pairs of improvised shoes made from waste-wool. These were to last for three hours only, and were to be used only at the critical stage in the journey.

2 old ropes. One of cotton and the other made from local jute, each about twelve yards in length.

1 brass pot for cooking.

1 axe (small size).

2 pairs of snow goggles.

Over and above these, each member, except the Naked One, had his own wearing apparel (cotton only) on the body, *plus* two woollen blankets of daily use. Only I had a woollen sweater on. Each one of us also carried his own water-pot.

On 16th July our guide Dileep Singh arrived from his village, and we prepared about 24 lb. of sweet balls (*Besan-ke-Laddu*) with gram-flour, ghee and sugar, for the journey. The loaves from wheat flour were to be baked at the last outpost beyond which no fuel would be available.

4. ON THE EVE

The thrill and intensity grew with the approach of 17th July, the day fixed for our starting on the journey. We had fixed this date in consultation with our guide and also with most of the elderly sadhu residents, who had much experience of the climatic conditions and of their changes in these high regions, and who had blessed our project.

On the eve of our departure we, the seven pilgrims, held a meeting. Swami Dayal Das explained to the group, once more, the risks and dangers of the unusual project and made it clear to them that anyone who wished to reconsider the position was free to do so. None would. He then emphasised the need for strictest discipline, for an abiding spirit of comradeship, a lively sense of humour in face of worst mishaps, and above all, a spirit of devotion and dedication to one's *Ishtadev*. It was unanimously decided that each one of us was to carry his own luggage, maintain his health and spirits, was to keep company under all conditions,—even under sickness or accident; and in the event of any serious mishap, was not to expect his comrades to halt or to carry him back, but was to insist upon their going ahead to reach the goal, himself resigning to the care of Shiva—the Lord of Snows, as did our forefathers of old.

All acclaimed the speech with a hearty response and each one pledged himself to observe the injunctions to the letter.

5. A STRUGGLE WITHIN

Shortly after retiring to my cave that night, I suddenly woke up. I could not have slept soundly. My brain seemed to be whirling feverishly. I began to think furiously. Doubt assailed me. I was responsible for this venture. We were all poor, penniless, ill-equipped, naked or half-naked sadhus. We had no scientific knowledge or outlook, nor modern equipment of any kind; neither a barometer nor a speedometer, nor a pair of binoculars, nor a camera,—not even a pair of snow goggles for each member of the team. Our guide, though a smart, knowing stalwart, was an illiterate rustic. Was it not after all a senseless

. ACROSS GANGOTRI GLACIERS . . .

adventure? I had no doubt crossed the eternal snows twice before now and had roamed in the Tibetan wilds. But then, if any misfortune had befallen, the harm would have been only mine. Here, I was making myself responsible for putting so many promising lives in jeopardy.

And my heart sank within me.

Call it the result of sleeplessness, call it a figment of my feverish brain,—but all this moment, I seemed to have a strange vision. On the unending milkwhite snow a pyramid seemed to be forming itself rapidly, though no fresh snow was falling. The pyramid soon changed into Shiva Himself, the kind compassionate Lord of the Worlds, sitting calm and motionless. In a moment, he opens his eyes and beckons unto me "Come thou who grieve and art laden with doubt; I will give thee rest. I am *Ashutosh*—easy to propitiate. No harm will come thy way. For I am the drinker of all evil."

And He seems to stretch his arms towards me which suddenly turn into white morning twilight!

The struggle within me was long at rest, and I had slept soundly. Shiva Himself had blessed us.

I prayed longer than usual that morning in thankfulness, offered flowers and scented herbs to Shiva and to my *Gurudev*, and placed the returns in my breast-pocket as Lord Shiva's protective shield against all evil and all mishaps during the pilgrimage.

III. WE EMBARK

1. LEAVE-TAKING

THE morning was all hubbub and hurry. Everyone was busy preparing his own small kit and with the leave-taking. The wheat flour and the rice were sent ahead of us on sheepback with shepherds to their camp on the plateau. Also the seven pairs of waste wool shoes, which we were to wear during emergency only. Among the odds and ends were also the two ropes referred to already. These were indispensable, we were told, for we would have to tie ourselves with these in a chain while negotiating the most difficult spots in the snows and over the glaciers. Our guide Dileep Singh was ready with the bag of provisions which he was to carry besides his own kit. He was thus to carry a weight of over sixty lb. as against that of between twenty to thirty lb. to be carried by each one of us.

We made long respectful obeisances to all elder monks and sadhus over and over again and invoked their blessings in our difficult undertaking, which they showered on us with all their hearts. Armed and elated with these we left Gangotri at 10 a.m. on 17th July, 1945, in a file headed by our guide and friend Dileep Singh.

A number of monks accompanied us for nearly a mile to give us an affectionate send off and tendered us various instructions and advice, calculated to ensure a safe journey. After much persuasion, they turned back.

Here at the outset let me apologise to my gentle reader if he or she finds in the following narrative more of a bare description of the journey, or of our psychological reactions, than a catalogue of scientific

observations and survey. We were all poor Indian monks, used all our lives to a life of worship, devotion, meditation and self-introspection or the promotion of these, and to frequent pilgrimages of holy shrines all over India. Though, therefore, it is my aim to make of my narrative as interesting an account as possible consistently with facts, I may fail to satisfy the purely scientific or rational-minded. I crave the reader's indulgence for these drawbacks, and beg of him to bear with me.

2. THE LAST BUILT SHELTER

17th July, Tuesday—The way from Gangotri onwards is only so-called. The pilgrim wades through a veritable mass of stones and boulders along the river-bank; and by sighting piles of small stones placed one upon another by pilgrims reassures himself that he has not missed the track. At a few points, portions of bare unsafe crumbling mountainsides and precipices have to be traversed. After these the Bhoj tree forest appears. Here we rested near a crystal clear pool and refreshed ourselves with the sweets we were carrying. Then we resumed our journey.

Unlike most regions above 9,000 feet, the mountains in the Gangotri region are full of thick Deodar jungles. These extend up to two or three miles beyond Gangotri and then they are mixed up with other conifer. The latter extend upto Cheedbasa, the first and last built shelter on this route. It is a spacious structure and can accommodate forty to fifty pilgrims. Further on, the jungles are sparse, though Bhoj trees, even clusters of them, are to be seen in good numbers here and there up to Gomukh itself, which lies five miles beyond Cheedbasa and two miles beyond Bhojbasa. This last is no more than a cave-shelter. The fourteen-mile route from Gangotri to Gomukh is all along the Ganga between deep narrow gorges and climbs steadily. When we reached Cheedbasa (11,830 feet) it was evening.

Here we halted for the night.

There is a dense forest and vegetation around Cheedbasa, and even vegetables such as *Rekcha* and *Churdu* grow wild all over.

They could be eaten after boiling and seasoning dry, the water to be thrown away. *Archa* herb which heals wounds and cures pains and aches, and other incense herbs are also to be found here. On dry snowy heights grows the yellow Brahma Lotus with its mild sweet scent. Innumerable varieties of flowers in all their wealth of colour, blossom on these altitudes in the months of July and August. These mountains are rich in all kinds of valuable medicinal herbs, and if some botanist would camp here during summer, his labours would be more than repaid.

Fire was to burn all through the night here, for hitherto there was no dearth of fuel. Next day or the day after, it will be a different story. Let us make ourselves comfortable while we may.

3. CATERPILLARS

While the fire was burning, I saw some greenish light in the small bundle of fuel which our guide had fetched and brought in. It contained phosphorus. From the window I saw tiny lights of the same hue here and there. I went out and found a variety of caterpillars sitting in coils on stones. Each one had a tiny light on its tail like that of the glow-worm. This attracted worms and flying insects. Thus does kindly Providence provide food for the little world of insects through the agency of Dame Nature.

While I was regarding these caterpillars in the dark, I heard a rustling sound in the bushes nearby. My companion warned me sharply : "What are you doing there in the dark? Come in at once. Don't you hear the movements of the wild bear?" The Himalayan bear is timid and harmless. I had personal experience of this on more than one occasion. But I obeyed and repaired to my corner in the Dharamshala murmuring the poet's lines slightly altered :

*God bids us shine with a pure green light,
Like ye little fellows! glowing in the night;
In this world of darkness we must shine,
Ye in your corner and I in mine.*

. ACROSS GANGOTRI GLACIERS . . .

After finishing our meals which were cooked and served hot, we slept like logs. This was the last built shelter on our route.

4. BHOJBASA CAVE

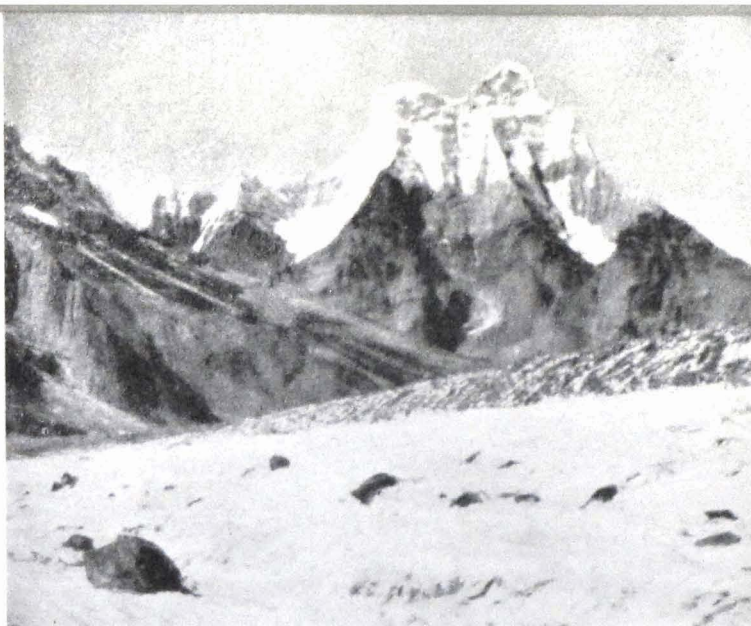
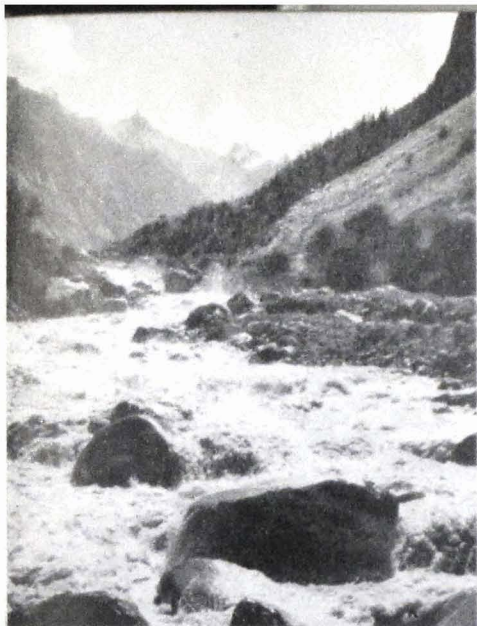
18th July, Wednesday—Morning came as if in a wink. We were all busy, some with packing, others with preparing breakfast. Fog came intermittently and enveloped us. After two busy hours and a breakfast of tea and bread we started. Within a short distance we had to ford a cross-stream which is reputed as troublesome to all who visit Gomukh. The muddy rushing current, coming from the snows a little above and joining Ganga was too strong for us. So we made a pretty long detour upstream right up to the glacier which is its source. It was quite safe to cross here.

The sun rose in clear weather and we soon reached our camping ground 3 miles beyond Cheedbasa. This was Bhojbasa (12,440 feet), so called because of the Bhoj trees here. Their leaves and manifold bark serve as plates at meals or as writing paper on which the ancient Hindu sages wrote. There is no built shelter here but only a cave big enough to take in 8 to 10 persons. It is fairly warm and has a natural chimney at the top which drives out smoke and takes in fresh air. This cave is hidden from the view of the traveller and it is not easy to spot it out.

5. THE SHEPHERDS

The camp of the shepherds with whom we had sent a portion of our provisions ahead was close by, and a boy from them brought us milk. We were to halt here for the day, collect firewood, and cook our food for the day as also for the next three or four days of our arduous trek over the glaciers and the eternal snows. Neither tree nor fuel nor shelter was to be found hereafter.

While some of us were engaged in cooking, others went to collect firewood. We also cut out a few strong walking sticks to help us on the snows and over slippery glaciers, as also in crossing little streams which would benumb the legs and almost freeze them. The food was ready and we had a hearty meal of rice, curry and milk on leaf-plates.



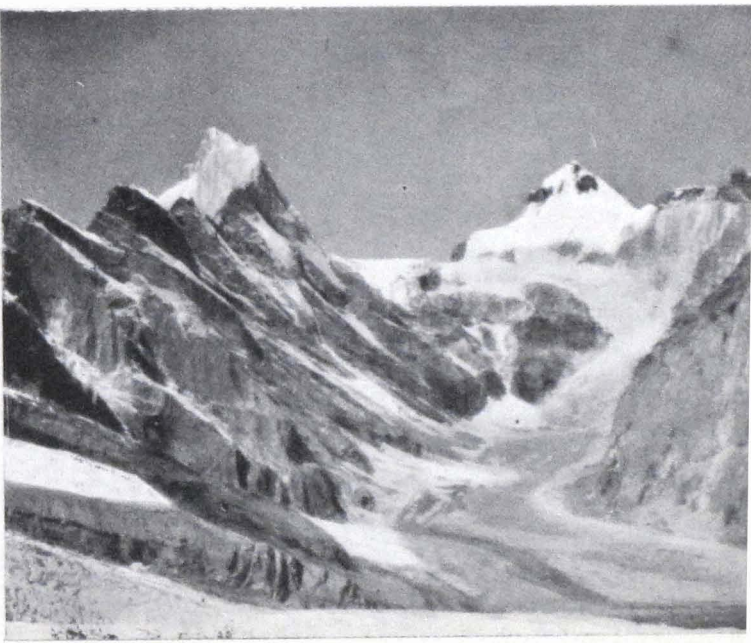
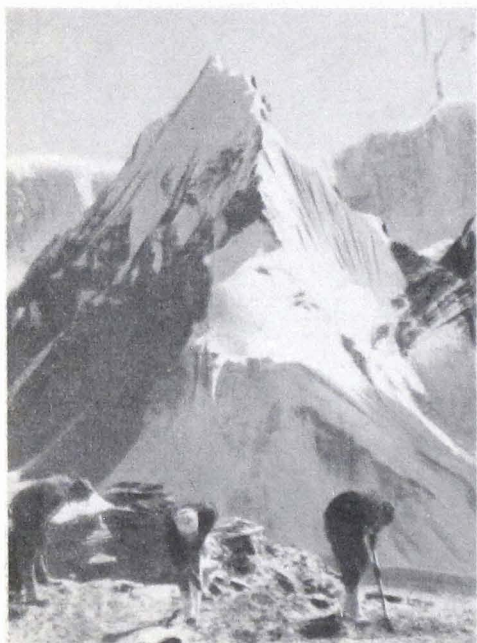
8. *Top left:* The Ganga beyond Gangotri

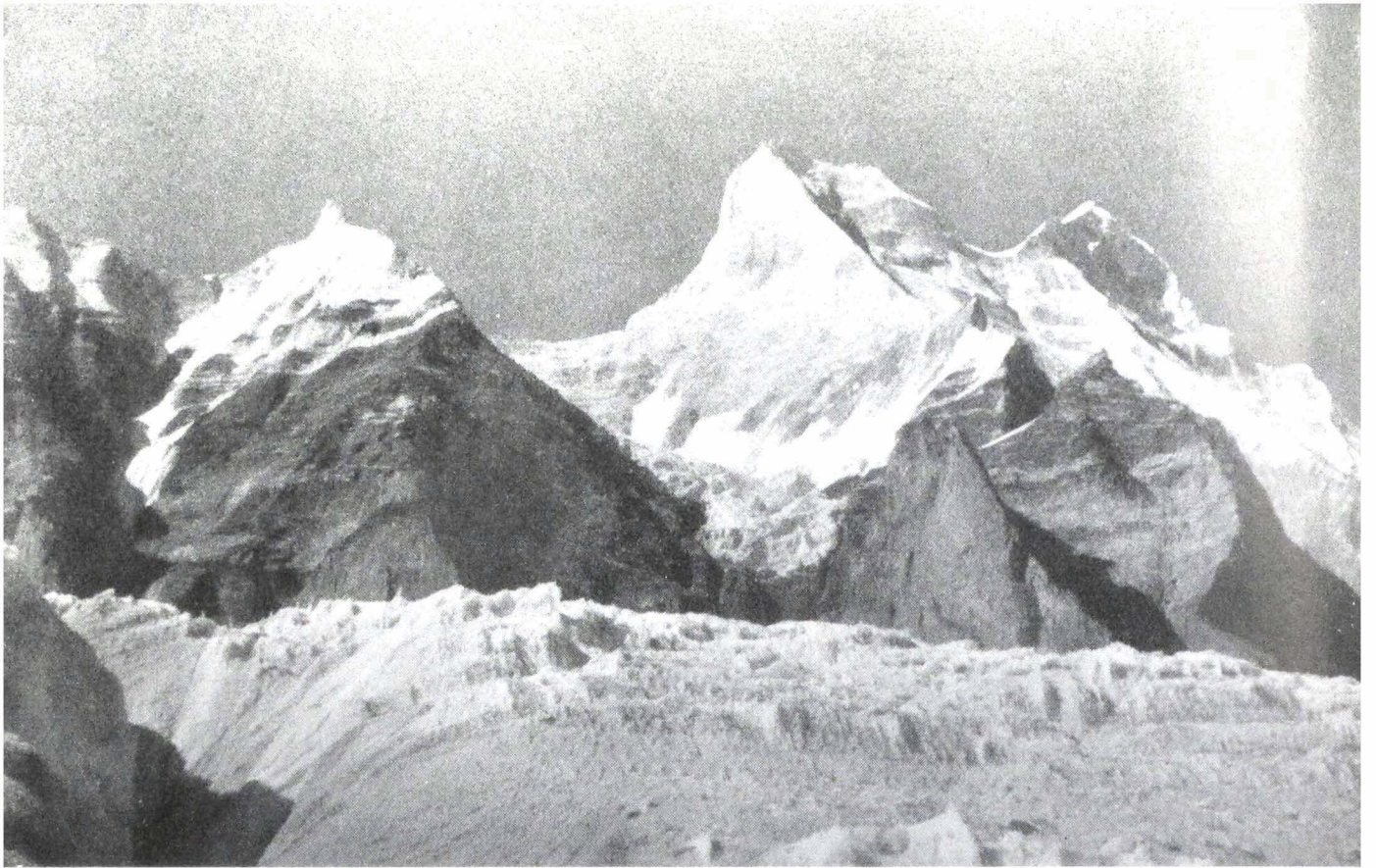
9. *Top right:* The Gangotri Glacier

10. *Centre:* A Confluence of Glaciers

11. *Bottom left:* Vasuki Peak

12. *Bottom right:* Bhrigupanth Glacier, with 3 peaks above





13. Kirtistambh Glacier

14. Seracs on the Glacier



Above 10,000 feet the majestic Deodar disappears and the Birch replaces it. That too disappears above 12,500. The higher Himalayas are treeless, in fact snow-bound, save for about three months in the year.

6. A GIFT

At tea in the afternoon the shepherd boy reappeared with two big Tibetan dogs following him. He had brought a bundle of onions and insisted on our accepting it. "These onions will be of much use to you during your onward pilgrimage, sirs," he said. "They will protect you against catching cold and keep your insides warm. They will help to move the bowels too. Pray, do accept my humble offer. You are holy men, bound on a holy pilgrimage". We could not refuse his loving gift, so I accepted it with thanks. He was happy.

But the evening was fast approaching, and I felt concerned over the boy's return.

"But why did you come at such an hour?" I said, "It will be dark soon and there are bears about."

"I don't fear them," he replied promptly. "Besides, I am not alone." He pointed at his dogs and at the big stick in his hand.

"All the same, you must hurry back," I said. He bowed with folded hands and disappeared whistling, the two dogs following him.

We then sat down to fix up our programme for the following day. It was proposed that we should make only two miles next day and camp just a little above Gomukh, as this would be the last day for cooking our food. No firewood was to be available further up. Having decided this we all went to sleep.

IV. GOMUKH

19th July, Thursday

1. HOLY OF HOLIES

WE prepared and ate our breakfast early and started. We reached Gomukh early enough but did not halt. Most of us had visited it often. Out of the annual pilgrim traffic of about 50,000 pilgrims visiting the holy shrine of Gangotri hardly two per cent dare to visit Gomukh; so difficult is the route regarded. The pilgrim has to negotiate patches of landslides under constantly falling stones and cross rushing streams of biting water. There is no shelter anywhere around. You start from Cheedbasa or Bhojbasa and, after reaching Gomukh and spending an hour or two in hurried ablutions, worship and chanting of hymns in freezing cold, have to hasten back to Bhojbasa before nightfall, often under inclement weather. However, many of the monks who live at Gangotri for six or seven months in the year, visit Gomukh almost annually.

I had visited Gomukh more than once before. The source of the Ganga is below the edge of a mile-broad glacier, several miles in length and touching the outskirts of Kedarnath snows upwards. It lies west of the still greater Bhagirath Glacier emerging from below the giant peaks of Chaukhamba. The Gangotri glacier ends at Gomukh where there is an opening in the edge, a natural tunnel, from which a ten feet wide stream of muddy icy liquid (it can hardly be called water) gushes forth. This is Gomukh (the Mouth of the Sacred Cow, the giver of plenty), the actual source of the Holy Bhagirathi Ganga. It is 13,770 feet above sea level.

The approach to Gomukh is extremely difficult. The actual source is a narrow stream of freezing muddy water from a tunnel-like opening in 100 feet thick fringe of the glacier. In fact, there are two such openings or tunnels. A constant gurgling sound like that of a river in spate, or several engines shunting in a railway yard, is heard from underneath the glacier. One hears the river struggling invisibly but noisily to emerge from the meshes of the glacier.

2. THE GLACIER

The glacier above Gomukh, called the Gangotri Glacier, is some 26 miles in length and is one of the longest in the Himalayas,—a mass of solid ice deposited there before millenniums. It is about a mile in width and has over a dozen tributary glaciers to feed it. The prominent among these are the Raktabarna, the Chaturagi and the Meru.

All these glaciers are a virtual infinity of shapes in small and big stones and an unending mass of murky moraine, silt dunes and rubble. At some spot one comes across crevasses and cracks gaping wide ; at another, one may witness a mass of stone suddenly sinking below the surface and the water oozing out from the sides, forming a new pond of sparkling emerald green water in a few seconds. The snow mountains around shine in striking contrast with the murky looking glacier lying at their feet.

In the hoary past, the Gomukh is said to lie actually at the spot where the Gangotri temple stands to-day, that is, 14 or 18 miles downstream, and that it has receded so many miles during the intervening millenniums.

The Ganga is the mother on whose bosom much that is known to the world as the ancient Hindu culture was nurtured. She has rocked the cradle of the Hindu race and blessed it with peace and plenty through centuries. An enormous engineering feat accomplished by an Indian prodigy, popularly attributed to Bhagirath, is evident at many points in the Gangotri regions. This Bhagirath, like Prometheus, Hercules and

other heroes of Greek mythology, is said to have succeeded after life-long labours in cutting out a way through the labyrinth of countless Himalayan ranges and in releasing the waters of these glaciers to the eternal benefit of the vast plains of India. According to the Hindu mythology, Bhagirath brought the Ganga on earth from the heavens and invoked the great God Shiva for her reception.

3. THE DREAM OF MILLIONS

In the heart of every Hindu the River and the Cow occupy a place which is almost akin to that of the motherland for the westerner. No wonder, therefore, that a visit to this place at least once in one's life-time is the cherished dream of millions from Cape to Kashmir, although owing to its inaccessibility only a few of them realise it, and fewer still are able to reach this hallowed spot, 14 miles beyond the popular shrine. Indeed no attainment in life is regarded more precious. Men of devotion, and sadhus given to spiritual quest, love to linger here for meditation and contemplation. They drink in the enchanting beauty and solitude of this place, on which the great authors of our Puranas and our poets have waxed eloquent. Here are a few graphic stanzas from a celebrated poet in praise of the Ganga, rendered freely from the original Sanskrit of exquisite beauty :

"Shaking the universe, thou leavest the gates of heaven and descendest on the golden snow-peaks of Mount Meru to adore the pyramid of tresses on the great Shiva's forehead.

"Then bounding through ice-clad boulders and tunnels thou gushest forth and rushest to the vast plains of the earth in order to wash away the multitude of world's sins, before filling the ocean with thy waters.

"O Holy Mother! purifier of souls and cleanser of the world! bless us with thy holy waters."

V. THE FACE OF ETERNITY

1. A STONE-SLAB BAKERY

WE left Gomukh to our right and making a detour reached the plateau lying above Gomukh. Here we were to camp for the day. We made an improvised tent of a thick cotton sheet, just a roof of two sloping sides with front and rear open. This tent would serve us against rain or snow-fall. We thus set up our camp on the open plateau. Gomukh was left behind us a little over a mile downwards.

We now set ourselves to work in our camp. It was to be a busy day for us all, as here we had to make final preparations for our trek of the uncharted snows. Some went to collect firewood. One of us found out a slab on which to knead the flour in which a quantity of ghee, salt and roasted spices was to be mixed. We then made loaves of 24 lb. of flour, each loaf weighing half a lb. or more. Having no iron plate to bake, we baked these loaves on thin stone slabs! We had no cooking utensils save a wide-mouthed brass pot in which to cook rice, no lantern and no torch. We consumed a few loaves during the day and rationed out the rest among all to serve each one of us for the whole onward journey, as no cooking of food was possible hereafter. We also set apart two bundles of firewood which were to serve us for making tea over the snows and glaciers. These we were to carry on our backs.

The sun went down soon. We were all tired with the day's work and soon went to bed in our improvised tent. It rained all night in mild showers.

2. WALKING JACK-FRUITS

20th July, Friday—The morning found us in glorious weather. The sky was wholly cleared up, and soon the majestic snow-peaks and ranges were bathed in pink gold. Every one was in high spirits, a bit excited, at the hour for the journey of our dreams having arrived at long last.

But before we start, we must eat, as it is imprudent to walk empty-stomach in the mountains. We were about to sit down for the meal when behold ! Jeetsingh, the shepherd boy, came whistling once again with a pail of fresh milk ! He served it out to us all with much affection and devotion and watched us finish it.

Then we made ready to embark on our momentous journey across the snows. Dayal Swami offered the balance of the flour with us, about 15 lb., to the boy. He would not take it. I pressed him and explained to him that we were only lightening our burden, since we had cooked the requisite quantity and there was no point in carrying the surplus flour, since there were no means of cooking hereafter on the onward journey. At last he accepted it and left us with his usual obeisances.

We distributed seven or eight of these big loaves to each member of the party and made the start. We walked in a single file. Each one with his *Kamandalu* (water pot), stick in hand and pumpkin-shaped baggages to his right and left. We looked like so many walking jack-fruit trees.

Such was the first Indian expedition party of Hindu monks,—barefooted, bareheaded and one or two of them wholly or half naked !

3. TAPOVAN

Our path, though on flat surface, lay through stones and boulders big and small. We trod on among them for over a mile and reached a stream of icy cold water across which lay the vast plateau of Tapovan.

We crossed the stream. The water stung us like scorpions and benumbed our bare legs. After going half a mile further we

reached Tapovan. Our comrade who was to return from Gomukh bade us good-bye here. He wished us good luck and God-speed, and after mutual exchange of courtesies and affectionate leave-taking he left us in order to return to Gangotri. On his way back he could not have crossed the stream we had just crossed, and so we advised him to go considerable length upstream and cross safely.

This Tapovan plateau is a vast tableland at a height of some 16,000 feet above sea level, and is surrounded by snow glaciers. These are the Meru, the Raktavarna, the Kirti and others. The traveller comes across considerable fields of seracs on many of them. This plateau is one of the last outposts or camping grounds on this route, beyond which lies a vast region of unchartered snows, glaciers and giant snow-ranges.

The grass grown on this plateau is scant but much too nutritious, and so the shepherds with their flocks linger here till the heavy snow-falls of the winter start. On one corner of the plateau there is a huge rock which serves as a natural shelter for them. In the months of July and August the whole of this plateau is full of flowers whose wealth and exuberance in colourful variety are perhaps unmatched in any other part of the world. All over the plateau run tiny streams of crystal clear water.

With slight effort this plateau can serve as an aerodrome.

Shivling, Bhagirath, Sumeru, Vasuki, Bhrigupanth, Mandani Parvats, as also Chaukhamba, Satopanth and Kedarnath snow-ranges with a host of other giants vie with one another here. All inspire an unutterable awe. One simply stands speechless and dumbfounded.

The concept of bulk, immobility and steadiness on our earth, according to the *Bhagavad-gita*, reached its limit and exhausted itself in one word,—The Himalaya. This region of unbounded snows and glaciers is, to every Hindu, his *sanctum sanctorum* where, within a radius of 15 or 20 miles, over 100 snow-peaks, none below 18,000 or 19,000 feet above sea level, are to be found in an endless panorama. They defy Time and are the very Face of Eternity.

VI. GLACIERS ALL GLACIERS

1. THE TREK

OUR path now lay along the fringe of the main Gangotri glacier. On our right lay lovely green pastures. To the left lay the great glacier with little pools of glittering water on its bosom. Beyond it lay another one—the Chaturangi Glacier—extending over miles and miles to the north-east. It was this formidable giant along which we were to trudge for full two days. After marching about a mile along the Gangotri glacier we had to cross it in order to reach the Chaturangi. The width of Gangotri glacier here is less than a mile; and although it is all covered with stones of various sizes, it is safe to walk over.

Up to this point I had come twice before. This is called Nandanvan. Its height is 16,500 feet from the sea. The enchanting beauty of this great plateau, and of the glaciers and the green pastures the farthest boundaries of which terminate here, beggars all description.

2. WE CAMP BEHIND A ROCK

On reaching the Chaturangi glacier we rested awhile and refreshed ourselves with sweets and a drink of ice-cold water. We had at least two hours more to march onward. So we pushed ourselves a couple of miles further when lo and behold! black clouds began to gather accompanied by strong wind and rain. It was intense cold, and the biting winds with sharp jets of rain flew into our faces. Every one of us was drenched and shivering. The plight of our naked and half-naked comrades was unenviable.

This compelled us to halt, and we encamped behind one of the numerous big rocks here. We pitched our 'half-tent' without loss of time and covered our comrades with blankets in spite of their protestations.

Fortunately, the storm blew past, and within half an hour the sun began to shine again. However, we could not think of resuming our journey.

The evening came quick. So our guide continued to collect some sheep-dung for fuel and prepared tea with which to eat our bread and sweets in the twilight of the evening. As I have already said, we had neither a lantern nor a torch. After saying our prayers and telling the beads we stretched our tired limbs, close to one another, in our queer little half-tent.

3. HEAVENS AGOG

But I could not sleep. So irresistible was the attraction of the enchanting surroundings that, unmindful of my fatigue I came out of the tent and sat down on a flat stone. I drank deep in the beauty of the glorious scene. The heavens were agog with crowded pageantry of diamond stars and emerald planets. The pale moon in the west was shining bright and pouring its silvery rays on the milk-white snows all round. A great solitude enveloped the earth. Little pools of water were sparkling on glacier-ice here and there under the moonlight. I was in ecstasy. Tears rolled down my cheeks, I knew not why. Perhaps it was the thought of so much beauty and happiness bestowed by God upon man and yet all the wealth of the gift having been lost upon the fellow.

It was till late in the night I must have sat like that on that slab-stone. Then the fog came and engulfed everything. So I returned to the tent and slept till it was day-light.

4. THE MULTI-COLOURED GIANT

21st July, Saturday—The morning had come, but the fog persisted. It was frightfully chill, and we had naked comrades. So we waited. Fortunately, the fog cleared up soon after and the sun began to warm up our chilled limbs. We started after a little breakfast. To our left lay the great Chaturangi glacier along whose bank we were trudging. Numerous little pools of clear water glittered on its broad bosom. To our right were high snow peaks.

We were now fast entering upon the critical stages of our trek. We were slowly climbing. The rarefied air had begun to make itself felt, and our breathing was getting harder. We were advancing at tortoise pace.

Three cross glaciers join the main Chaturangi giant here one after another at short distances. We must needs cross them. The first of them, though small, proved very difficult to negotiate. There was an almost vertical descent first. Our guide dug small niches in the steep slope with the aid of his stick to serve us as footholds, and we all reached the edge of the glacier one by one. The glacier itself was not flat like the big Chaturangi but was camel-shaped! So after reaching its edge we had to negotiate its slippery hump. I grew a bit anxious and worried. But Swami Kailas Giri, who was the youngest of the team with pluck and agility all his own, leapt forward. He headed the file, and making footholds in the hump with our guide's little axe, climbed to the top. With the help of ropes, then, he pulled us all up one by one. There were cracks and fissures on the glacier and we had to walk on the stone covered surface with great caution. The rear slope of the hump was equally difficult to descend. And after doing it up to a point we had to jump to the opposite bank which again was as steep a climb as was the first descent. We did it with difficulty.

We were now in a rather narrow valley again, with the vast Chaturangi glacier to our left and a long mountain range on our right. The sun was shining bright, but we were exhausted, half our energy having

been spent up in crossing the first glacier. So we rested awhile on a tiny elevation and refreshed ourselves with dates, nuts and raisins.

Fortunately, the next two glaciers did not turn out to be as tough. The second one, though somewhat bigger, was not unsafe. I was a bit tired. So I transferred the bundle of firewood I was carrying to another friend and rested for a while. Clouds now concealed the mountain sides, and we could not see the peaks from which the glacier was emerging. A tiny stream of crystal water was flowing on the glacier, and a pond lay across on the opposite bank. We wanted to eat but felt no appetite due to fatigue and probably to the high altitude. We had no provision save tea. We had a small ascent to climb in front of us. It had beautiful green grass on its slope and an alluring little surface on top. But we were quite tired and exhausted. Our feet were sore with walking and frequent skipping over stones and glaciers. We were anxious to lie down a little and have a nap. This we had for an hour.

5. BIRDS DO NOT FLY

After this rest we climbed the little ascent and reached the flat plane. This was the last of its kind on this side of the Kalindi Pass. The elevation lay covered with winter snow. It was hard to cross it with our bare feet. Here we saw some birds similar to ducks. They ran away at our sight as far as their feet could carry them. I wondered why none of them could fly, though they had wings. In the plains I could have caught one of them, but on these mountain slopes it was impossible. We meant no harm, but they could not tarry to oblige us! As they ran they made a queer sound. What must be their food in winter here, I wondered. Perhaps they migrate south. Must they be then flying?

Further up we encountered a big rock under which we saw heaps of bird excreta. So we guessed these birds must be living here.

Here we sat down again for a little rest. In front of us was the junction or confluence of the four glaciers of different hues. The name Chaturangi, or multi-coloured, is derived from this fact.

6. WE ESCAPE AN AVALANCHE

We were all so much fatigued that we wanted to suggest a halt here for the night. "Excuse me, sirs," said our wise guide, "no halting here. Yonder is the site for camping," he said, pointing to a spot above one of the glaciers some distance further up. "The two parties of Sahibs who crossed the Kalindi Pass camped there".

"Besides", he continued with an anxious face, "if we halt here, we shall never be able to cross the Kalindi Pass and the glaciers behind it to reach the Arva river-bank by to-morrow evening, which we must. We can never run the risk of spending the night on those treacherous glaciers behind the slopes of Kalindi. So I beseech you all to advance without delaying."

There was no help. We had great respect for our guide's opinion and wisdom. So we started again with wry faces and crossed the remaining third glacier. It was bare, flat and without a single cravasse. Our bare feet got benumbed on its surface and ached frightfully. The other end of the glacier was covered with rubble. We were now wading through eternal snows. The vast expanse of the glacier touched the mountain ranges on both sides.

Our guide now left the fringe and started walking along the centre away from the bank. We followed without demur. But I was curious.

"Can't we reach that camping ground by taking a straight short-cut along the bank?"

"We can do so only at the risk of our lives."

Precisely at this moment we heard a great noise behind us in the direction of the peaks.

"What's that?"

No answer was needed. We saw big boulders of the snow falling from the peaks and covering the mountain side with debris of rocks and snow-mixed rubble up to the very fringe of the glacier along which we were trekking only a few minutes back.

"There you are," said the guide. "Do you see the avalanche over there? You now understand why I changed our course. That spot is almost always risky, and we have to be very careful. It is wisdom to avoid the fringe and to walk in the centre of the glacier here."

We now saw through our guide's wisdom and felt extremely grateful to him for having indeed saved our lives. We had had a hair-breadth escape!

But we had hardly reached half way on the glacier when sooner than we would rub our eyes and see, dark clouds appeared suddenly from behind the peaks and were upon us. Showers and snow followed in quick succession. We tried desperately to reach the camping ground pointed out by our guide, but failed miserably.

Our naked comrade and others who were poorly clad were shivering like the man under an attack of ague. Our eyes and noses began to ooze terribly. Our moustaches were whitened with snow, and our mouths were steaming profusely emanating thick white breath.

Immediate camping became imperative. We hurriedly set up our 'tent' behind a big rock on the inclement glacier-bed, and putting our shivering comrades under it we covered them with as many blankets as we could collect.

We were very thirsty. Where to find water? It was all snow everywhere. I went out in search of a pool. The snow was still falling in tiny flakes. I found out a pool, filled my cup, and tried to drink straightaway without waiting to heat it and make it lukewarm. But in spite of my terrible thirst I could not gulp. I had to sip it drop by drop. I returned to the tent with water.

The cold was simply biting, and I thought of my poorly clothed comrades. My bare head was covered with a 'Gandhi cap' of snow, but I was wearing a gown and was comparatively well-clothed. So I covered my comrades with all the clothing I could spare and made tea with which we all tried to warm ourselves.

7. A NIGHT ON GLACIER BED

Twilight came and the snow ceased falling. The problem now was how to sleep? One of the two open sides of the tent was protected against the cutting winds by the rock, but our tent was pitched on the bare bed of the glacier! It was impossible to have even a dozing indifferent sleep on that floor of hard transparent benumbing glacier ice-bed. Before morning came we might freeze and wake no more!

At last we contrived a device. We gathered a fair quantity of slab and flat stone, with which we paved the floor of our 'tent.' We also piled other stones on the three sides of our tent in order to protect ourselves against the wind.

Thus armed and equipped we made tea again, and with it ate our bread and *laddus*. We could eat but little. So great was the exertion and the consequent exhaustion of the day on everyone. We had consumed one of the two bundles of firewood which we had carried on our backs for two days. The other one we left in balance for the morning tea.

We then stretched our tired limbs and tried to sleep. All our anxious attention was rivetted on our naked comrade. Though he was well covered now, he had shivered and suffered most during the storm. What if he fell ill or developed pneumonia?

From time to time we inquired :

"Are you warm? Are you comfortable!"

'Right royally. I am as warm as at Rishikesh.'

And we felt reassured.

Again and again I tried to sleep, but simply could not. I had not realised the extent to which my energies had by now been spent up. Even our intermittent conversations brought on exhaustion. And though we were lying on our bed and not walking, our lungs at that altitude of over 18,000 feet and in thin air gasped for breath. Everyone was breathing hard, and although we had improvised a stone-pavement

against the direct contact of the glacier, and were also huddling close against one another with knees under our chins in order to keep ourselves warm, the freezing cold assailed us on our sides and we could only doze. Outside, snowing had started again and added to our misery.

Two of us had developed fever !

Though further hardships and misfortunes lay still ahead of us, this was perhaps the hardest night we had encountered during the whole of our trek.

VII. THE PASS

22nd July, Sunday

1. FINAL ASSAULTS

THE day began with a fine morning. A little fog hung above, but it was thin. Our comrades' fever had subsided, and they felt normal. We prepared tea with the balance stock of our fuel and sipped it, but could eat no food. Appetite had disappeared.

Today was to be the final day of our assault on the snows. We must reach the maximum heights on our trek and cross the Kalindi Pass (19,510 feet, with its treacherous northern slopes), beyond which lay our destination Badrinath, within a few miles of easy journey. So we started with 'our heart within and God overhead.'

2. WE THROW AWAY OUR FOOD

The previous day's fatigue was still upon us. And we had still more glaciers to cross and scale still greater heights. Besides, our guide had already warned us that we were to cross the Kalindi Pass together with the treacherous span of glaciers behind it and reach the Arva river at any cost before evening. There was no alternative. So we started with a firm resolve not to look back but to go ahead undaunted, come what may.

And since we needed to eat on the way only for the day, we threw away all the surplus loaves we had, so as to lighten our loads to that extent! The cold was intense, and the hair on our bare limbs stood on end. So when the sun rose over the peaks we hailed it. We sat down to rest for a few minutes.

3. THREE HOURS A MILE

We then resumed our march. Our bare feet were bleeding from scratches and bruises sustained during the two days' trekking. The benumbing cold of the glaciers was aggravating the pain. We continued our march in the middle of the glacier. Little pools and ponds were sparkling on its bosom. Small stream coming from the peaks were flowing and meeting the glacier a little below the spot where we had camped for the night. After walking a short distance we felt warm and hale.

The glacier was now dividing itself into three stretches. One in front and the other two on our right and left. We jumped over a little stream on our left and went ahead by the middle one, leaving alone the front and the right glaciers. This glacier on which we were now walking was a safe one, without a single crack. But though the distance upto the point at which we had to leave the glacier for the final ascent of the Kalindi Pass was hardly more than a mile, it was high noon by the time we reached that point! The high altitude compelled us to halt every two minutes. It was now a vast sea of snow in front of us and all around.

4. A DOLOROUS ASCENT

We were now at the foot of the Pass. Now began the final climb. The approach to the Pass is a dolorous ascent through a steep narrow snow-covered ravine. The slopes of the range on our right were covered with snow, those on our left were bare. From the Pass a glacier had slid to an angle of about forty degrees. We sat here for a while. We had to climb now over the bare glacier. So our guide Dileep Singh made us put on those waste-wool shoes which he had carried all the way. We were then asked to tie ourselves to one another with the ropes in a file at a distance of three yards each.

I had two pairs of snow goggles which must be used now. But we were seven. So I pondered over the distribution. It was only fair that our guide, who was the mainstay of the team, should have the first

preference. In the unchartered sea of snows which we were now to wade through for the rest of the day, he alone could tell us which way to go and how. The remaining pair I gave to my friend Swami Dayal Das who was bearing the brunt of the expedition from its very inception. The rest of us five went without any.

5. EVERY STEP AN EFFORT

Thus equipped we began our assault on the final ascent of the Kalindi Pass. We climbed zigzag and very slowly. It was a low steady pace. Midway in the ascent we came across a few breaches in the glacier snow. So we turned left and were safe. We now untied ourselves and struggled to reach the bare top of the Pass. We breathed hard like the bellows. Every step was an effort. Every third step we paused and breathed hard nine times.

Though the glacier was safe, five of us went by the barren side while our goggled comrades reached the saddle of the pass by climbing straight. This saddle was no more than a furlong from the point where we had put on the waste-wool shoes. Yet it took us full one hour to reach it!

6. KALINDI KHAL—19,510

This was Kalindi Khal (Pass) across the principal snow range of the Himalayas, the climax of our journey. Two parties of Europeans had crossed this Pass before now, according to our guide Dileep Singh. One Mr. Birnie also is said to have surveyed this region, and ignoring the ancient classical name he had renamed the Pass after himself, calling it Birnie Pass! This is how it came to be mentioned as such in Geological Survey maps. The great snow giant standing cold and motionless through eternity must have smiled at these attempts of puny men to satisfy their own little vanities. With their exit these petty heroics of the aliens must pass into oblivion.

The saddle of the Pass is 19,510 feet from sea level. The summit stands a few hundred feet higher to the left. The practice with the westerners when they reach any new or unknown region or mountain

height is to plant their nation's flag at the point attained. We were Indian monks brought up under different traditions. Our ancients called the universe a vast nest for all God's beings. To seek to divide it with narrow domestic walls called nationalism would have sounded to them 'a little vulgar.' So we paid our homage to the Pass by following reverentially the practice of the Indian pilgrims, viz., putting up a tiny pile of stones on the summit of the Pass and reinforcing it by tying the uppermost pebble with a tiny bit of saffron coloured cloth which I tore from my *dhoti*. We then chanted benedictory texts from the Upanishads and were happy.

VIII. FISSURES AND CREVASSES

1. TREACHEROUS GOING

HAVING reached the Pass, the pinnacle of our hope and ambition, we wanted to linger here awhile and celebrate our victory.

"Not yet," said our vigilant guide. "We have still to go a long way through an unknown sea of snows. It is not easy hereafter on the other side of the Pass. We have many a steep and treacherous glacier still ahead of us to negotiate."

Bowing to his injunction we started without demur.

We tied ourselves once again with the ropes at our waists and began to descend. Our guide was heading the party. We had now to advance on the edge of a steep precipice of snow. We went very cautiously and reached its end. We had not proceeded far when suddenly our guide fell waist-deep into a fissure! We hurriedly advanced and pulled him out. Again he tried to advance and again he fell in the next one! The whole glacier here was covered with knee-deep winter snow which concealed the treacherous fissures below. It was impossible to know where they lay and which was the safe spot. We were in a fix.

2. UNCHARTERED SNOWS

Seeing us thus intrigued, the ever agile intrepid Kailas Giri who was walking last in the row rushed to our rescue.

"Stay, stay. Let me come up to you," he shouted.

And untying himself, he came up.

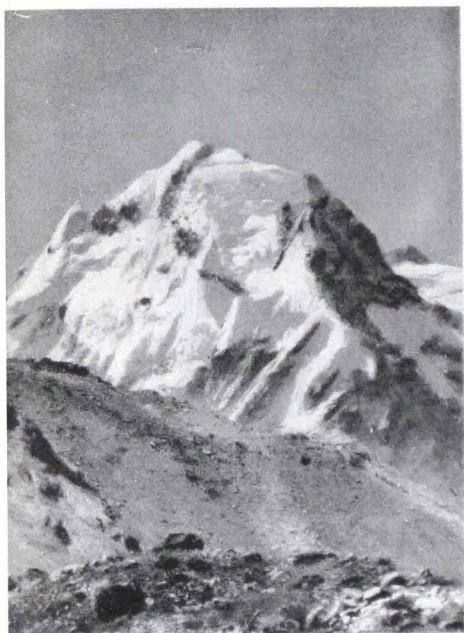
"And behold! 'The last amongst you shall be the first!'"

He mustered all his strength and made an attempt to advance, unmindful of the fissures. He too fell precipitate! We pulled him out too.



15. *Top left:* Shivling—Another View

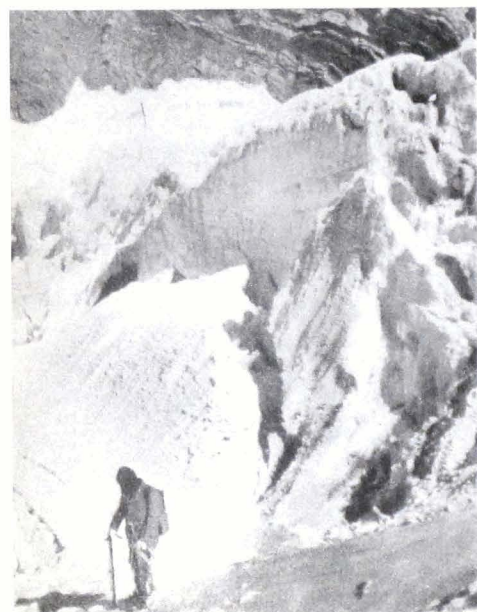
16. *Top right:* To Nandanvan Plateau

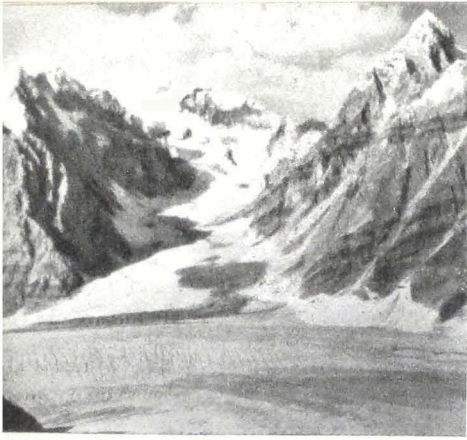


17. *Centre:* Kharcha Parvat with Sumeru (in the background)

18. *Bottom left:* An Avalanche

19. *Bottom right:* The Chaturangi Glacier





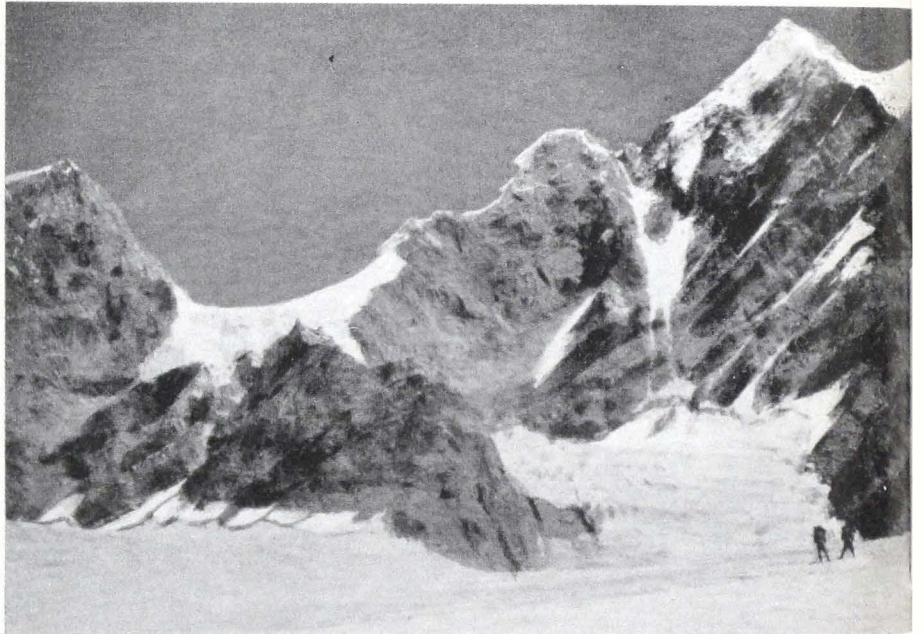
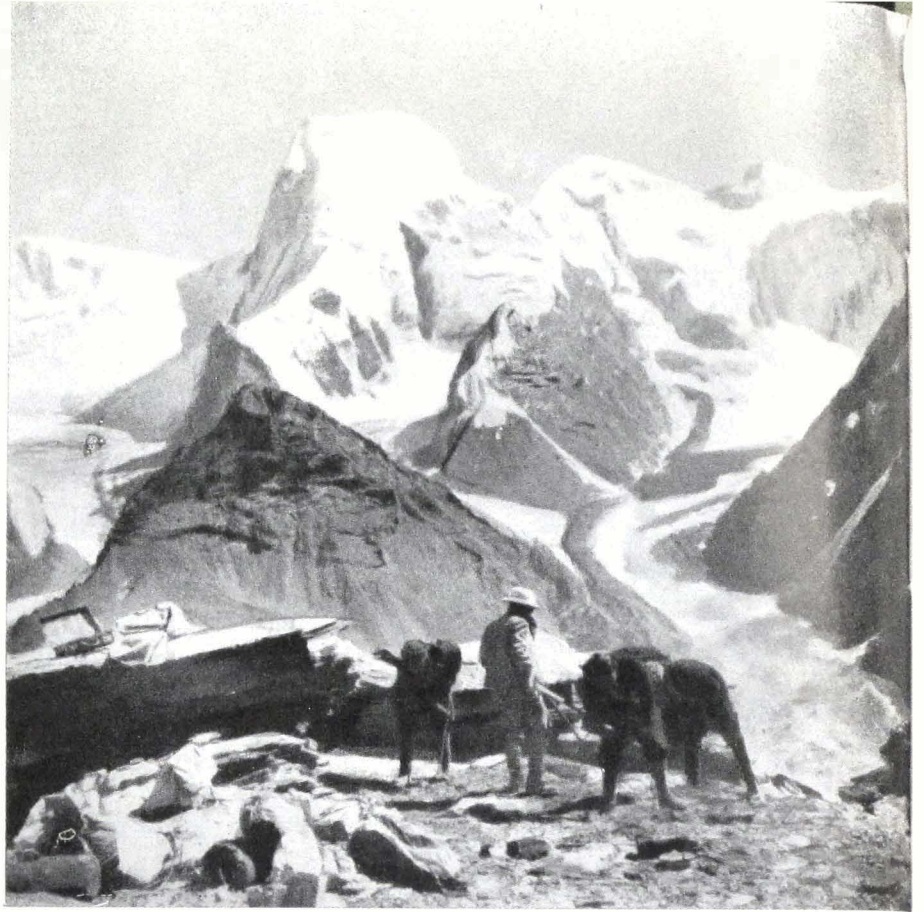
20. *Top left:* Jahnvikund below Swachchand Peak and Glacier

21. *Top right:* Here Sahibs had camped; (above) Mighty Satopanth Range

22. *Centre left:* Mandani Parvat

23. *Centre right:* Glaciers below Chaukhamba

24. *Bottom:* Snow Giants



We were on the horns of a dilemma. A sea of endless uncharted snows full of treacherous fissures and crevasses lay in front of us, and we were struggling through them desperately without a compass. The afternoon snow-glare added to our woes and our eyes oozed badly. At last after cool deliberation we decided to move to our right. And Dame Fortune favoured us. There were no cracks or fissures here, and we waded through the snow without a mishap. A very fine slope was now in front of us. Kailas Giri was still struggling, but there was no danger, and we hurried through without slackening our pace.

3. WE SLIDE

Within a short time a steep precipice confronted us again. We avoided it taking a short-cut to our right by sliding down a slope which was safer, and reached a lower snow range about 50 feet below. This sliding was strange experience, the first in our lives. We simply let ourselves go on the smooth snow, and down we went without a bruise or a scratch!

After a short rocky descent which we negotiated with caution, we had a second slope to slide. Here our guide let his baggage roll down first in order to make sure there was no cravasse or fissure at the bottom. It reached the glacier-bed safe, and we slipped one by one on the track made by it in the snow, reaching the bottom without a mishap.

4. THE ONIONS

On reaching the glacier-bed we tied ourselves with the ropes again. We trudged on again further and further. It was very irksome. At long last, in the middle of the glacier, we arrived at a small pond. We sat down, rather collapsed of sheer fatigue and exhaustion. Our guide gave a drink of fresh water to each of us, but we had begun to feel a vomiting sensation and drank but little. Fortunately, the onions of the shepherd boy, came to our rescue in combating the sensation, and we offered good Jeet Singh, the shepherd boy, three cheers as a token of our grateful thanks for his loving gift.

IX. WE LOSE OUR WAY

1. ANOTHER HAIR-BREADTH ESCAPE

WE felt fit again and played a game of snow-balls for a while, after which we started again. Our eyes had begun to ache frightfully. The glare during our three days' trek in the snows without goggles had begun to tell upon us. We could hardly open our eyes and see our path in front. We had not gone far from the pond when thick fog enveloped us suddenly. It was so dense that we could hardly see one another. Sunk in this sea of fog, and as ill-luck would have it, we had lost our way!

We came to be aware of this only when we suddenly heard the voice of our guide, who was heading us, bidding us sharply :

"Sit down where you are. Every one. Quick. Or we perish, one and all !"

We obeyed instantly.

"What's the matter ?" I shouted.

Grim silence. No answer.

I apprehended something serious. I began to fumble in the fog and listen carefully. Our guide was now saying something, but could not be seen in the thick fog. Evidently he was in a quandary and much agitated. Presently, he shouted again.

"Don't move. Not one of you. We are on the brink of a big crevasse."

"I knew, when the fog came," he continued, "that some such thing would happen. There is a steep crevasse less than a yard ahead of us. It is so steep that I don't see the bottom. One step further would have sent me and perhaps all of us to its bottom. We have lost our way."

He seemed much agitated.

"I am sorry I landed you all in this danger," he added.

"Now don't you be silly, comrade, I said. "We are all in the same plight. We are comrades, tied to one another by strong ropes, even literally. You forget, my friend, we are sadhus with no one behind us to mourn. We will be anxious only for you. Now be of good cheer and instruct us how to help ourselves."

"As for us," I continued, "let me assure you that even if this blessed fog hangs on for twenty-four hours, we are game. We shall pray and sing devotional psalms of Shiva here and keep vigil all night."

Thus we cheered him.

2. A TIGHT CORNER

"There is no time to lose. We must find our way again and reach the Arva river-bank before evening." And he began to look round. We were indeed in a tight corner. Our position was similar to that of a caterpillar which has reached the farthest end of a twig and stretches the front half of its body in the air while sticking to the twig by its rear, knowing not where to place the front feet.

"In which direction did you go when you went with the Europeans?" I inquired of our guide.

"The left".

"Then let us advance in that direction and leave all other thought."

We advanced to the left. There were crevasses here and there, but we persevered with a firm resolve to find our way. Slowly but steadily we advanced and were soon out of danger.

"We have found the way!" exclaimed our guide in great joy.

We were all happy. The crisis had passed.

A small descent confronted us. Swami Dayal relieved the troubled guide of his irksome task for a time and led. We were navigating through the third sea of unchartered snows now, but were heartened with our fresh victory over the worst mishap, and so were walking briskly. We found the glacier broken and full of crevasses and fissures again. There were at least ten to fifteen of them one after another. But we crossed them all cautiously and safely.

. ACROSS GANGOTRI GLACIERS . . .

"Please, now, move on to the right," shouted our guide from behind. We did so and came upon the glacier now covered with rubble.

"Untie yourselves now. No need."

We obeyed.

And collecting the ropes he headed the party again.

3. THUNDER AND STORM

The evening was nearing and, the fog which was still on now changed into dark thick clouds. We could not see our comrades in front. It began to snow in thick flakes. The thunder roared and the lightening flashed. But we had reached the end of the glacier.

"Though we are now on *terra firma*," said one of us, "God wants us to be put to a fresh ordeal. Where shall we find shelter?"

"No my friend," said I. "There is no cause for despair. We are all Shiva's devotees. With his grace we have crossed the glaciers and scored the greatest victory of our life. It is, therefore, Shiva Himself who is celebrating the great victory achieved by His children. He is firing guns of thunder, and is showering snow-flakes on you."

"Hurrah !" shouted all. We were in an ecstasy of joy and thankfulness.

4. WE CELEBRATE VICTORY

By this time the clouds had disappeared and we had reached the end of most of the snows. The river Arva with its white clouds of foam was within our view and we were overjoyed. It was not a big stream here at its source in the glacier, and one could cross it quite easily.

We all formed ourselves into a circle and lifted one another and danced, overjoyed at our successful trek. We lifted our beloved guide thrice on our shoulders, with repeated cheers.

"*Bum Bhole ki Jai*"

"*Bharat Mata ki Jai*"

"*Sab Santan ki Jai*"

And we all rejoiced, jumped and danced in supreme happiness. It would be futile to attempt to describe it.

X. FURTHER ORDEALS

1. A 'RESPECTFUL BURIAL'

ALTHOUGH the glacier had ended we had still some winter snow to pass through, and we hastened to reach our prospective camping ground further down the river-bank. Our waste-wool shoes were utterly worn out by now. They had stood us in good stead according to plan, at the most critical stage of our journey.

So we gave them 'a respectful burial' in these last snows!

We trudged along a couple of miles more. We had struggled against snows, glaciers, fissures, crevasses and storms the whole day without eating, only on the strength of a little tea and bread in the morning. This seemed age-old. I felt so much tired and exhausted that I simply sat down and declared my inability to advance. I was terribly hungry, and my back ached frightfully. My comrades were in the same plight, one and all.

So we gave up the ambition for reaching our day's destination and decided to camp for the night where we were.

2. A HALT ON THE ARVA

We removed stones and slabs scattered over the ground which was bare and without snow. It was almost dark now. We also sat together and ate our bread with water. We had no firewood nor did the place seem to have fuel of any kind. Not a blade of grass grew, nor bush nor bramble. We must needs have water at least. Before darkness came upon us I had spotted a pond in the vicinity. So I went out in the dark and fetched water. It sufficed for the whole party that night.

. ACROSS GANGOTRI GLACIERS . . .

But our woes had not ended yet. Our guide had splitting and tearing headache. He was confined to bed and had neither food nor water all night. Kailas Giri was in the same plight a little further up. "My eyes are aching terribly. I can't sleep," he groaned.

I had with me honey in a tiny bottle. I dropped it in his eyes. It was of no avail. All of us five, who had walked through the snows without goggles, suffered similarly all night and had no sleep.

3. SNOW-GLARE SICKNESS

23rd July, Monday—Our guide, whose headache had subsided and who woke up early, exhorted us all to a start at once.

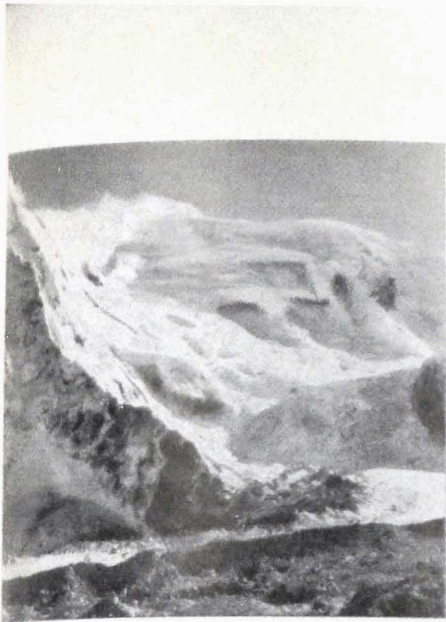
"It is better to cover as much distance before the sun begins to shine and spread its glare," he said, "otherwise your eyes will trouble you much and interfere with our journey. We must reach our destination Badrinath today."

We got ready hurriedly and started. Our eyes were oozing continuously and we had to wipe them every half minute. I took the goggles from Swami Dayal Das and tried to use them in vain. However, I kept on wearing them.

We had hardly proceeded a mile when the sun peeped above the high cliffs. So sudden was the effect of its rays on each one of us who had the oozing eyes that he simply sat down where he was, covering his eyes with his palms. Our guide Dileep Singh and Swami Dayal Das ran to their help. I too ran up to them. We carried each of them on our backs to the nearest level ground and covered them with our blankets.

4. WE BREAK OUR STICKS FOR FUEL

This unforeseen circumstance compelled us to halt there and then for the day! There was no alternative. None of us had eaten enough for the two previous days. There was no firewood to be found here in the neighbourhood. So we broke our sticks for fuel! This was not enough. I then remembered *daba*, seen during my journey to Kailas in Tibet, a green shrub which grew at high altitudes on river banks and



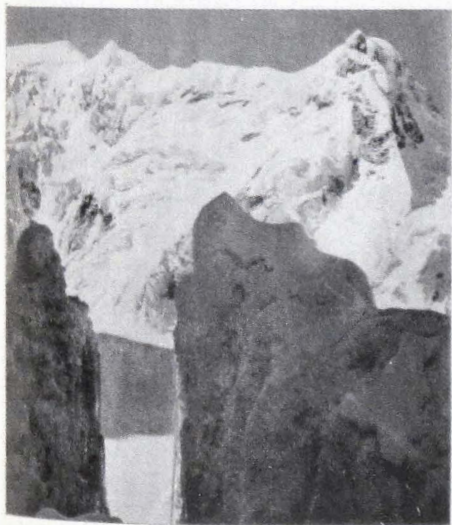
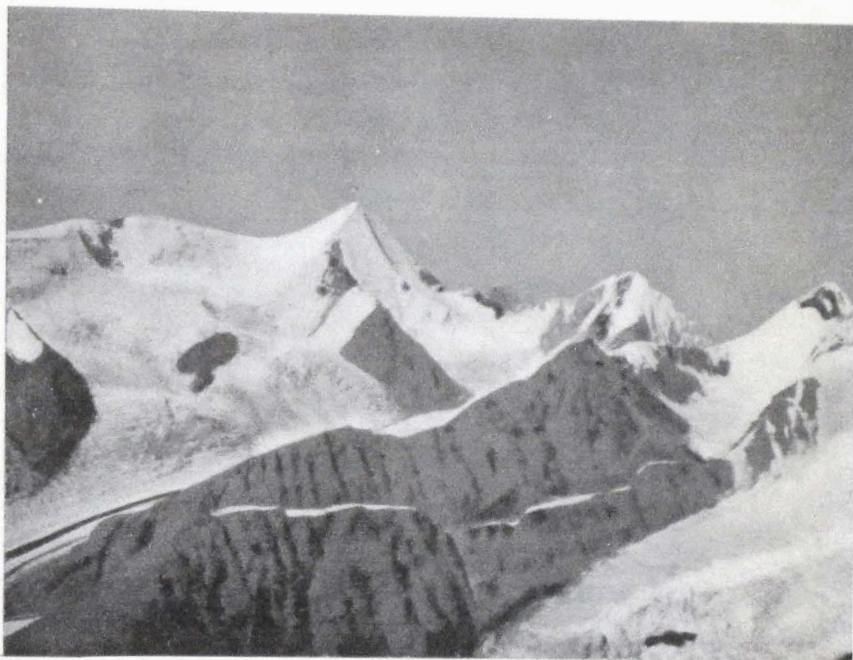
25. *Top left:* North Flank
Chaukhamba

26. *Top left:* Unchartered Snows

27. *Centre:* North Range above
Chaturangi

28. *Bottom left:* The Gorge (below
Chaukhamba)

29. *Bottom right:* West Flank
Chaukhamba

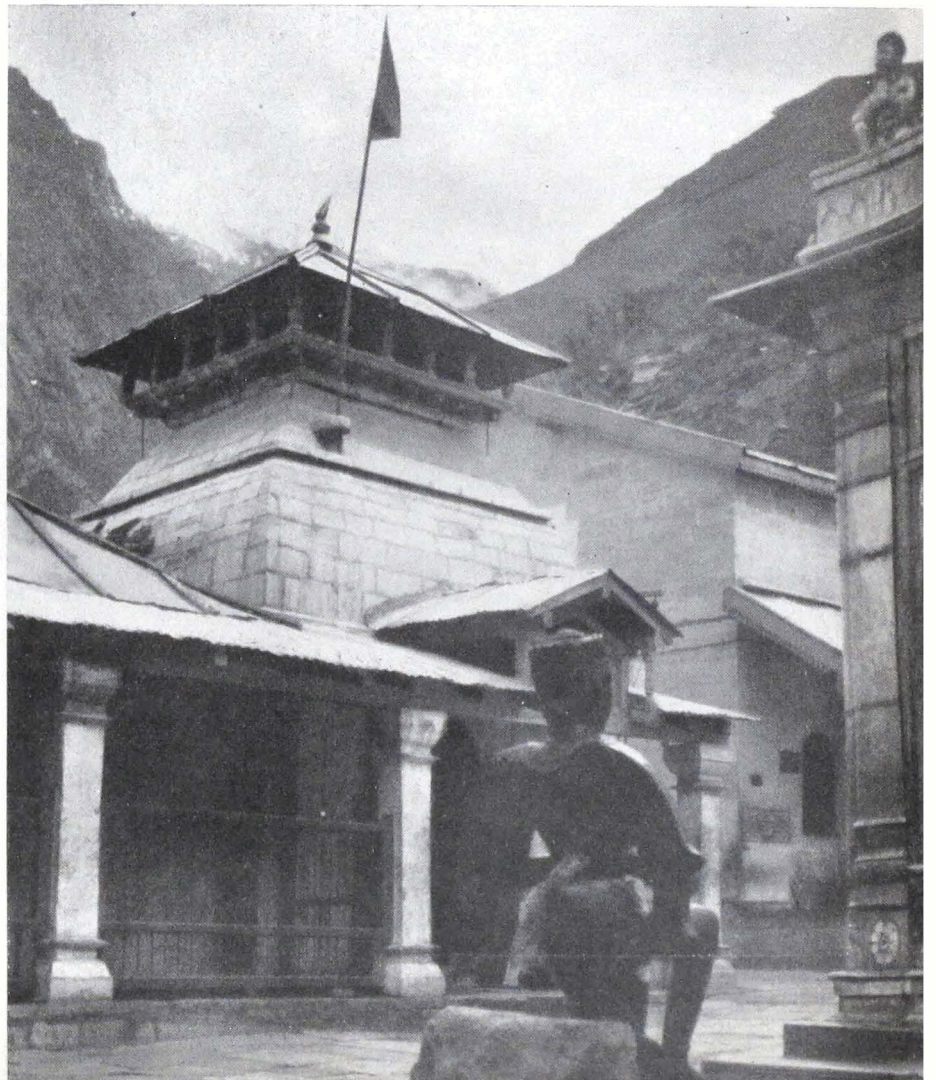




0. *Top:* Fissures and Crevasses

1. *Bottom left:* Neelkanth—The Queen Peak, with Badrinath township below

2. *Bottom right:* The Shrine at Badrinath



which burned while green like a candle. I went out to reconnoitre in search of it and, as good luck would have it, found it.

So tea was made. We three alone took it. The rest were writhing in their eye-pain with bent heads all day. They could take neither food nor tea.

In the midst of this agonising situation, and in spite of Swami Dayal Das's exhortations, I could not help sallying forth from under our tent, off and on, to enjoy the enchanting scenery of snow-ranges and high peaks in the bright sunshine. Such has been its lure to me.

I grew meditative. Foreigners come and climb in order to explore and discover these snow mountains and peaks and glaciers—the glories of our motherland. Why should not have I and my countrymen forestalled them? Why should we allow them to make insolent claims? Well, a beginning had been made, I felt, by a few penniless monks of India. And with the advent of freedom this state of things must change. I felt reassured.

Night came, but our comrades were still in agony.

"Can't you open your eyes?" I asked one of them.

'No, it is impossible. I feel as if a hundred needles are pricking my eyes simultaneously.'

We were helpless. One precious day had been wasted. We spent the night under our tent.

XI. THE VICTORY

24th July, Tuesday

1. GASTOLI

THE morning came with a heavy shower. But though it rained, the weather was quite normal and invigorating. We had descended thousands of feet from the great Pass and its glaciers, and were almost on the level of our abode at Gangotri. Our comrades had felt relieved, their pain in the eyes having subsided.

So we started off.

A thin layer of something still lingered on the pupils of their eyes. The eye-focus had been disturbed, and they saw each object in front of them in twos and threes. They could not even distinguish man from animal at a short distance. After snow-glare sickness this happens to the eyes almost invariably, and it takes a full week sometimes to cure fully.

It seldom results in permanent damage.

We soon came to a stream which joined the Arva river. The water was too cold. We crossed it at a convenient point. The Arva was flowing to our left. Our path onward was now smooth. This was a great relief to our worn out feet and eyes.

We went on merrily. Grassy pastures with heaps of dung lay to our right and left. We now reached the confluence of the Arva with the Saraswati,—another river coming from the northerly direction of the Mana Pass in the snows leading a pathway to Tibet. Close to the

confluence is a vast level ground called Gastoli which is the halting station for Bhotia traders' caravans going to or coming from Tibet, *via* Mana Pass. We halted for a shortwhile here and refreshed ourselves with sweets. A Bhotia caravan, consisting of loaded sheep and goats and a few yaks going to Tibet with merchandise, was camping on the opposite bank.

2. A SINGLE SLAB BRIDGE

We now made another five miles of easy journey along the bank of the Saraswati and reached Mana village by crossing the river on a queer bridge called the 'one slab' bridge. The precipices which form the banks of the river here are wide at the bottom below, but converge at the top so closely that they are bridged by a single slab! Hence the name.

At the village Mana people young and old, men women and children, surrounded us. They took us to be pilgrims returning from Kailas and Mansarover in Tibet by Mana Pass route. We were bombarded with questions :

"Did you go to Gyanima Mandi ?"

"Did you meet my father (so and so)?"

"Did you meet my son (at such and such place)?" He has gone there over two months now".

When we told them we did not come from Tibet side but came from Gangotri across the snows *via* Kalindi Pass, they were dissappointed. Others wondered and would not believe! Forty porters from their village had accompanied an expedition of some Europeans some years ago, and had attempted to cross these very snow heights. They had failed.

When they were convinced that we did come that way, they marvelled:

"Baba, you are Sadhus. You can achieve anything."

Up to this village of Mana we had covered over ten miles today. Badrinath, our destination, was now less than two miles.

. ACROSS GANGOTRI GLACIERS . . .

3. WE REACH THE GOAL

The rest of my story is easy to tell. Our river, the Saraswati, joins the Alaknanda (the main tributary of the Ganga joining her at Dev Prayag, 114 miles downstream) here. And we crossed it by a suspension bridge.

The snug little town of Badrinath, more correctly called Badari Puri, lay outstretched on the extensive plateau at the foot of Neelkanth, the queen among snow-peaks, and giant snow ranges, over the little township. It looked blissfully ignorant and unconcerned with the victory which six penniless Indian pilgrim monks under their hillman guide had scored above its head over vast glaciers and snow-capped passes. Alas, none seemed to be on tenterhooks in expectation, or busy organising a 'grand reception' for us ! Chagrined and humbled we tread our way through the streets unnoticed, and throw ourselves in the arms of our most intimate friend Brahmachari Vyas Dev, who is crossing the gates of the Punjabi Kshetra, in company with its manager, for the evening stroll.

XII. THE LIGHT

1. THE HOLY TOWN

THE cleanliness of the streets and of the innumerable little rest-houses, Dharamshalas, shops and hutments here presented a remarkable contrast with what I was used to for nine years at Gangotri and in little towns and bazars of the Ganga valley on my side. In spite of the daily crowds of pilgrims, porters, pack-ponies and caravans—the floating population of the holy town,—there was no filth here and you could walk barefoot to the shrine without difficulty. This is uncommon in the Himalayas.

2. THE BAR SINISTER!

But my enthusiasm disappeared as soon as I climbed the flight of stairs at the Holy Shrine inside which Badrinath, the Lord of the Worlds, was holding his Court and giving *Darshan* to huge crowds of His devotees who came from all corners of India. For behold! only the caste Hindus were to be admitted! A crowd of 'blue-blooded' Brahmin priests was there arrayed in full strength to enforce the bar sinister against those of humble birth, the lowly. The outcaste *Dom*—the Harijan,—beloved of the Lord, 'with whom my Father is well-pleased', has no entrance* and no audience here!

Depressed and heavy in heart at the inequities and insolence of man against man, I sit down on the last stair touching the shrine courtyard, oblivious of my comrades and of the swarming pilgrims. Tears roll down my cheeks and soak the massive beard.

'How long, O Lord! how long?'

*This was in 1945. The bar has been removed now through legislation.

. ACROSS GANGOTRI GLACIERS . . .

3. THE DELIVERANCE

Then in the gathering darkness and amidst the noise of a myriad gongs and drums and conch-shells which burst forth simultaneously with the Waving of the Lights in the Great Shrine, and in the countless little temples all over the Holy Town, my eyes see The Light. And despite the uproarious tumult of the overjoyed concourse, the voice within me is clearly audible :

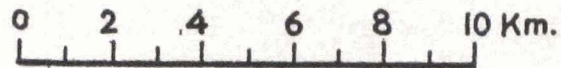
"The hollows shall be filled and the mountains levelled low. All inequities shall pass and arrogance shall taste the gall. Lo! Nemesis has arisen to end empires and with them, all privileges of birth and blood. Rejoice, ye who grieve and are heavy of heart. For, hark! DELIVERANCE is coming."

And across the flood of waving lights, above the heads of the multitude, I see from my place the face of the Lord's image beaming.

THE END

GANGOTRI-BADRINATH REGION

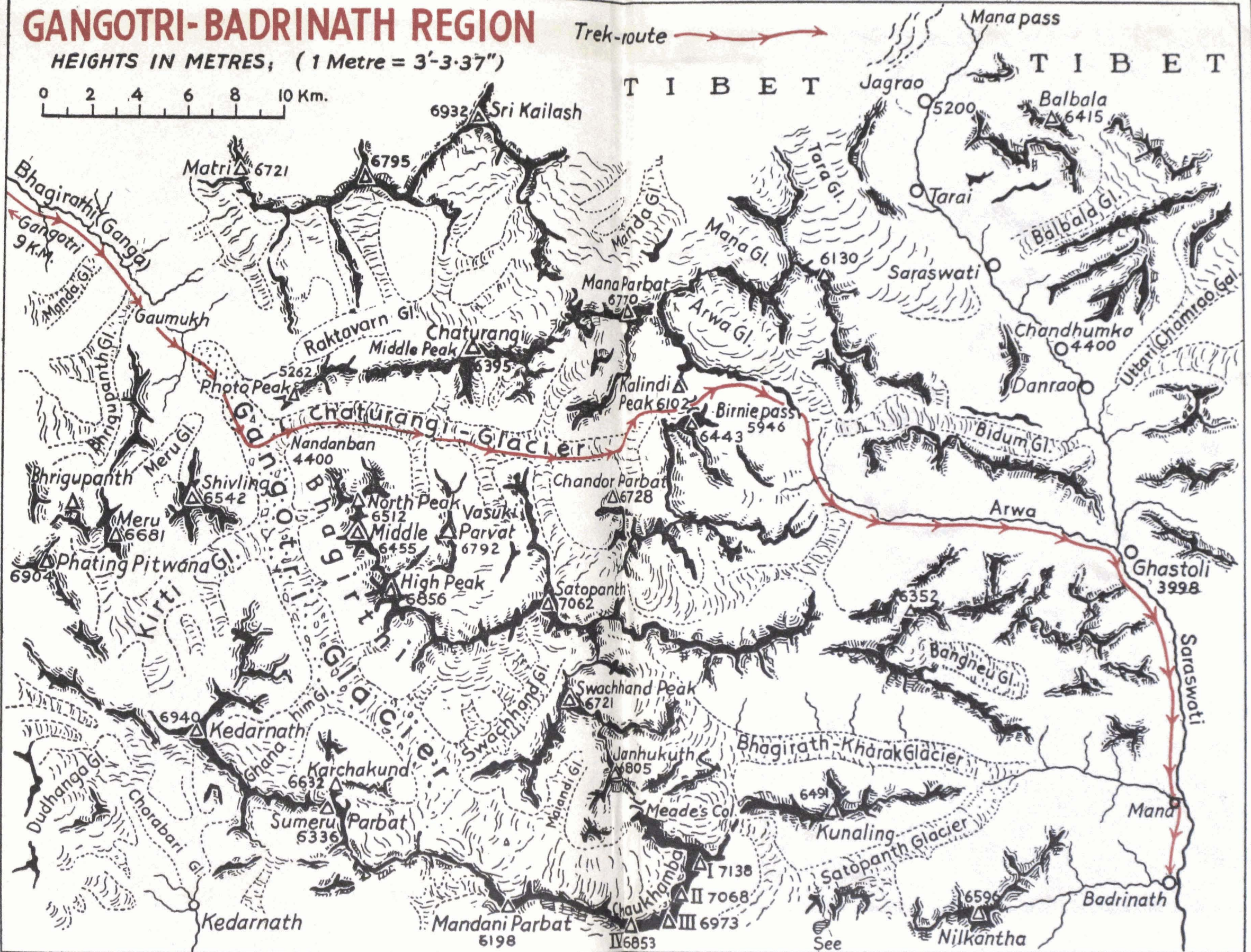
HEIGHTS IN METRES; (1 Metre = 3'-3.37")



Trek-route →

T I B E T

T I B E T



THIS narrative of half a dozen Hindu monks reaching Badrinath across glaciers beyond Gomukh in Garhwal-Himalaya is a saga of perseverance, endurance and faith worthy enough to inspire Indian youths to take to trekking and mountaineering. Brahmachari (now Swami) Prabodhanand and Swami Dayal with four comrades and a rustic stalwart for their guide, accomplished this feat barefoot 20 years ago without equipment; without warm clothing, goggles, torch or lanterns; in fact with a bagful of foodstuff and two bundles of firewood which they carried on their backs. The entire expense incurred was Rs. 39.00 !

SWAMI Prabodhanand is a high-souled monk from Punjab who, after graduating at the university continued Sanskrit studies for 15 years under Himalayan saints at Uttarkashi and Gangotri. He was once swept away by the torrential current of the Ganga at Gangotri, but was fortunately flung away on the bank downstream and saved. He is the disciple of Swami Jnananand, the well-known savant in atomic research. Swami Anand is a well-known Ramkrishnite sadhu of Gandhian persuasions.

Rs. 8.00

