

Photo Essay

Kuari Pass: A Journey into the Courtyard of the Goddess

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Abstract

The trail to Kuari Pass passes through the heart of Garhwal in the Western Himalayan region of India. The way up to the pass is known for some of the most jaw dropping vistas of high Himalayas. While peaks like Mt. Dronagiri, Bhramal, Hathi and Gauri are constant companions on the route, a vantage point at Jhandi Dhar brings one face to face with many other prominent snow peaks like Kedarnath, Kedar Dome, Mana Mandir, Neelkantha, Kamet, Chaukhamba and the magnificent Nanda Devi, behind her rocky sentinels of the Bugyal Koti range. Beyond snow peaks, the trail offers serene forest patches of ancient oaks and walnuts together with the experience of traversing expansive Himalayan meadows at multiple occasions along the way. This journey to Kuari Pass is the first of many that I plan to undertake, with a central focus on trekking in and around Mt. Nanda Devi's sphere of influence. Trails to Rudranath, Bagini Glacier, Nanda Devi East Base Camp and Shipton's Dibrugetta across Dharansi Pass await and I earnestly hope that the Goddess allows us into her courtyard each time like the way she welcomed us on the Kuari Pass trail.

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Keywords

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Kuari Pass

A Journey into the Courtyard of the Goddess

Upayan Chatterjee

At the chilly height of 11,000 feet above sea level, deep within the towering forest of golden oak and ancient walnut in Tali, we had set up camp on a small clear patch amidst a dense grove of gnarly rhododendron. An unending downpour had swelled the easy-flowing stream by our camp into a torrent and it seemed all too eager to invade the somewhat dry shelter we had within our tents. As we huddled inside our sleeping bags, the

incessant rhythm of rain seemed to be the worst one could face until we noticed the spiders. The arachnids that had crept into our two-man tent probably had nothing other than finding shelter in mind. But my tent-mate didn't seem willing to share it with anyone – or anything – other than me. “I know they are probably just trying to survive but, hey, so are we”, he had argued as soon as I had meekly put forward the idea of letting the beautiful spiders be.

A beam of light illuminating the valley down below. Tents have been set up at our camp in Gulling Top.



The light of day was fading fast. Soon, all that existed around us was engulfed in darkness – the inside of our tent, my tent-mate’s face, the sleeping bags, the spiders, even the forest beyond our thin layers of canvas. It was a darkness that no light dared to challenge, a darkness that reminded us how nights were meant to descend on Earth. This darkness, as thick and ancient as the great rocks of the Himalayas, had made us a part of itself. The sound of

rain, the smell of drenched forest, and the warm touch of our sleeping bag’s quilt were all that remained perceivable. The torch and its batteries were precious. When locating the invading spiders was clearly beyond scope, we finally made peace with them – what couldn’t be seen, of course, didn’t exist. But the rain still existed, its monotone audible; the

muddy stream was there, too, growing more apparent by the minute through the wet ground below our tents and under this cloak of an impregnable darkness, flashbacks of the extraordinary beginning to this day soon took over.

Just before sunrise at Gulling Top. Hints of the Sun visible from behind the rocky outline of Mt. Dronagiri, Rishikot and Bugyal Koti range with the tip of Mt. Nanda Devi jutting out like the fin of a shark



The sun finally appearing
from behind the giant
Himalayan wall

We had camped the previous night at Gulling Top. For me the day had begun with a thin yellow band of light that had appeared behind the rocky outline of Dronagiri, Riskhikot, and Bugyal Koti, with the distinct shape of Nanda Devi's tip easily discernible beyond them. The jagged rocks were dark against the sun emanating from behind. On the third day of October, the auspicious Durgashtami of Bengal's five-day Durga Pujo carnival, a skyline formed by some of the highest mountain peaks in the world was right there in

front of me. Back at home we would all take an early bath on Durgashtami and dress up to gather before the goddess with our offerings of flowers – flowers that carry our prayers to her. But I wasn't at home and the stream by the camp was too cold for a bath. I didn't have a gathering to attend, and I had no flowers to mediate my conversation with the goddess. All I had was a table-shaped rock to stand and shiver on and to gaze at the mighty Himalayan range before me with my freezing palms pressed against each other in prayer. I don't know what I prayed for, or whether my prayers found their way past the bitter

winds blowing against my face. So I silently watched how the yellow band of light turned white and the first light of day caught the tip of Mount Nanda Devi. The sun, bright and fierce, then appeared from behind the giant Himalayan wall. The rocks shone like silver in their veil of snow, the wagtails appeared in the stream, the tits frisked in the bushes, the pipits danced on the rocks, and a sparkling day broke in the Himalayas. Soon enough, the camp rose from its slumber, smoke emanated from the kitchen tent, and everybody became busy– washing up in the river, having breakfast, packing tents and sleeping bags, gearing up for the day ahead.



The Gulling Top campsite sat at the edge of Tali Forest and as we hopped across the stream into its shadows, we could see through the occasional gaps in the dense foliage the peaks across the valley being lit up by the sun. But little of its comfort reached us through the thick canopy of walnuts, maples, and oaks. The steep ascent of the trail did more to keep us warm. Sunrays seemed to have abandoned us in those early days of October. Monsoon was almost over, and amidst the expanse of green, orange hues of early autumn had begun to jostle for space. Part of the ground was covered with trilobed leaves of maple, but most of it was an undiscernible,

mushy humus. Giant roots of ancient trees were spread like skinny fingers, holding all of it in a monstrous grip. Monsoon streams were alive, allowing for much needed water breaks along the forest trail that winded relentlessly upwards. Every now and then, the great peaks would appear through the tangle: Mount Dronagiri beyond the walnuts, Mount Brahma against the orange-ish bush and sometimes, when the gap was wide enough, the entire spread of Bugyal Koti, with just the white tip of Nanda Devi behind them, would turn up, allowing me to justify my pauses, much less for photographing the vista than for catching my breath.

Diffused afternoon lights
paint the Bugyal Koti range



The sudden clear patch
amidst the forest stretch
ahead of Gulling

Somewhere along the trail, after crossing a giant oak laden with basket ferns, the forest opened onto a meadow tall with yellow grass and dotted with violet-white flowers. If you glanced back, you'd see the grandest vista of Mounts Brahma, Hathi, and Gauri with their black rocks and white snow standing tall against a dark blue sky. And then as abruptly as the forest of walnut trees had opened into a meadow, the grass turned into towering oak and the forests started again.

Our happy march across the meadow ended. As we navigated the shadowy forest trail, Nitin bhai, Dilbar bhai, and Bhagat bhai resumed their continual reminders that each member in our team should be able to see the one in front of us clearly. From there on, till we reached Tali Forest camp amidst the woods, only once did Mount Brahma appear at a bend. We could see only the trees and their canopy, the streams and the mud beneath our shoes.



When we reached our second campsite in Tali and started setting up camp, daylight still lingered. We thought of keeping the sleeping bags out till the sun went down to let them gather whatever warmth they could. But, soon, clouds gathered and brought with them rain, first a light drizzle, in which you could sit outside in a circle discussing sore shoulders and aching feet. The kind of rain in which you could go out into the forest, walk

along the stream, and find fallen trees along them, to sit on; later, though, the drizzle changed into a harsh downpour that made us rush for the shelter of our tents. We hoped for it to pass soon enough for us to resume our frolic in the woods, but it didn't. A hailstorm started. We huddled in our tents, the spiders came and, eventually, the darkness; that morning didn't really show us the day.

Interesting patterns of age on a fallen tree inside the Tali forest

After hours of sitting in the dark, the sound of rain had started sounding almost like a melody, a soothing score playing behind the scenes my mind conjured – some real and recent, others distant and abstract. There was little reason to exercise control over this wandering of the mind, the rampaging rain was probably never going to stop. But then Nitin bhai's voice came ringing: "Come out and gather at the dinner tent. Rain's gone for now." My wandering mind was forced back to the present: I could still clearly hear the raindrops! What was Nitin bhai talking about? Confused and hesitant, I stuck a suspicious arm out of the tent – nothing. Not a single drop of water fell on my outstretched

palm. Were my ears fooling me? The situation required illumination. It was time to use a bit of the precious light that my battery-powered torch offered. Our campsite looked transformed: puddles were everywhere, and the hail stones, broken up into a fine icy powder, had gathered at the hilts of our tents. It wasn't raining, but water was dripping steadily off the wet canopy of giant oaks in the forest. That was the sound I had heard – but for our little camp under a small patch of open sky,

the downpour continued inside the forest! Even after all of us had gathered in the muddy dinner tent, and our discussion had found its way to the previous night at Gulling Top, the forest around us kept up its late conversation with the rain. We were free to eavesdrop but not allowed to be a part of it. So, we discussed the last stone-roofed houses of Upper Tugasi, the thatched mud huts and the goat herders, forever floating across the Himalayas in search of greener pastures.

Village houses on the way to Gulling Top campsite from Upper Tugasi village



The temporary shelters of
shepherds crossed on the
way to Gulling Top

Back in the day, when the bond between Garhwal and Tibet was forged in ice, men moved across treacherous mountain passes to trade in salt and borax. They sang their songs as they walked and sure-footed densely furred goats carried their load. These goats provided wool that the Garhwali herders would finish spinning over the course of their journey to and from Tibet. These goats carried culture, carried stories and they carried love across an unbroken Himalayan expanse, that existed before the politicians fought their wars. India went to war against China in 1962. It severed the intricate connection of Garhwal with Tibet and broke the basis of economy in the

high Himalayas. Traders, once prosperous enough to pay the fine for stranded Britishers, were left to fend for themselves. Their generational knowledge of the various cols and passes, seasonal streams and trails and their ability to survive the harsh Himalayan wilderness does not translate into business any longer. Now the pahadis are no longer traders; they are herders, and their knowledge of Himalayan routes now shapes expeditions, where they serve as guides or load-bearers. This work barely keeps them and their goats alive. For expeditioners, their goats are merely food that needn't be carried because they can walk. On our way to the Gulling Top campsite the previous day, we had stumbled upon them, the famed shepherds of the western Himalayas, as they sat with their goats under the shadows of the towering Mount Dronagiri.



The peak had remained a constant feature throughout the entire trail from Dhak village to Gulling Top until the late evening clouds shrouded it from view. It had rained the previous afternoon as well, just as sunset approached, but that rain was only a few harmless drops. Soft, diffused light had lit up the Bugyal Koti range and a rainbow had appeared over Upper Tugasi village, the settlement visible as a set of tiny specks from the vantage of Gulling Top. Dronagiri was painted orange, but its tip remained invisible till the last light

of day had disappeared. As the evening progressed, however, clouds dispersed, stars came up, as did the moon, and slowly the veil over Mount Dronagiri's face lifted – the clouds had brought fresh snow to the peak and it glistened like silver in moonlight. All of us watched, nobody spoke and we barely moved – until the biting wind that had picked up fiercely and was blowing unchallenged across the open expanse of Gulling Top forced us into our tents.

Tip of Mt. Dronagiri emerges from amidst the clouds with fresh snow shining in moonlight



Forests around Pipalkoti
engulfed in clouds

Today, at Tali camp, protected within the dense forest, we could still hear the wind rustling through the woods, but the trees had blunted its bite. Nitin bhai had scheduled an early start for the next day's journey to the Kuari pass; his sharp reminder got us back on our feet and out of the relatively cosy sanctuary of the dining tent. On the muddy way back to our own two-man tents, as we looked up to the skies to check if the rain clouds still lingered, the glittering stars from the night at Gulling Top greeted us again.

The next day, our camp was awake ahead of the sun; we washed in the icy waters of the stream and geared up to get going in the darkness of the night. Nitin bhai was bustling about, the kitchen tent already emanated smoke, and even before most of us had readied our backpack Bhagat bhai had already left for the final leg of the journey to Kuari Pass with a small section of our group. All of us wanted to reach the grand Himalayan amphitheatre of Jhandi Dhar before the clouds curtailed off the vista. Beyond the camp, the forest was more of what we had experienced the previous day. A relentless ascent.




Its murky floor was soft after the heavy downpour, and our feet sank into humus. Yellow leaves and autumn colours seemed muted, the woodlands shrouded in gloom. Jutting stones, that could offer stable support on the muddy trail, were difficult to locate in the faint light of daybreak. Or, perhaps, the forests were just as they always are in the early hours of a day, perhaps it was only our apprehension – with the sky hidden behind a dense canopy, we had no way to know whether the rain-clouds from last night were coming back. But then, the sun shone, its bright beams forced their way through the

canopy and the Himalayan wilderness sprang to life. The yellows and oranges of autumn became vibrant, and chattering warblers filled the bush. Past busy woodpeckers and scurrying magpies, the forest stretched on and ascent grew steeper. But with this hint of a sunny morning and probable clear weather, our mental resolve grew stronger. Slowly, as our bodies warmed up from exertion and the early morning chill began to wear off, the usual walking rhythm set in. After an hour or so of oaks and rhododendrons, we came across the

Himalayan birches. They brought the inkling that the end of the treeline was perhaps finally near. Yet, when the forests did end, it still felt sudden. It was as if someone had drawn a line of truce between the warring parties of tall trees and meadow grasses; the land under the dominion of each party was adjacent but clearly demarcated. The forest that had begun the day before yesterday at the edges of Gulling Top campsite ended here at the famed Chitrakantha meadows.

The familiar Gauri, Hathi and Brahma as seen from Chitrakantha clearing above the treelines of Tali forest



Trekkers on the way to the
vantage point of Jhandi Dhar

A zone of transition, these meadows high in the Himalayas are lands that neither trees nor permanent snow have been able to conquer – these ‘bugyals’ are too high for trees to survive in and too low for snow to linger after winter. The winters cover these

meadows in several layers of snow, while in summer the white carpet melts away into green grasses that derive their sustenance from meltwater. Late summer and monsoon fill them with flowers of myriad colours and variety. Then autumn turns these meadows yellow, orange and, eventually, brown, as the drying grass get ready for the fresh snows of winter to return, for the meltwater to turn them green in the summer to follow. As we walked onto the Chitrakantha meadows

– soft with golden-yellow grass – on the fourth of October, a spotless blue sky greeted us with an array of snow peaks on the horizon. Mount Brahma’s distinctive shape, resembling the petals of the mythical Brahma Kamal flower, rose alongside the Hathi and Gauri peaks. The familiar expanse of Mount Dronagiri, accompanied by Riskhikot, Trishuli, and Bugyal Koti, appeared as well. Nanda Devi’s iconic shoulder was now visible behind them. As we moved higher across the meadowy ridge, the view improved and Nitin bhai made it a point to keep reminding me that spending too much time photographing there would mean a narrower window of opportunity at Jhandi Dhar, where the peaks present themselves at their grandest.

So we trudged along and soon caught up with those of our members who had left the camp before us at dawn. We met at a juncture where the meadow narrowed into a thin trail at a 60°–70° slope. To its right, a steep mountain wall rose in defiance; the left stared into a deep, forested abyss. We had probably traversed similar narrow sections through the forests but the tall trees on the slopes had hidden the abyss from us. Now that the slopes were bare, we were face to face with a nerve-wracking hanging trail. The route

to Jhandi Dhar offered no respite from these sections and they appeared at regular intervals, each steeper than the previous. The wind blew unabashed, with no tall trees in their way, and the gusts made us shiver even under the fierce sun. Close to the Jhandi top, big boulders began to appear. The gradient of ascent was the steepest. The mountain walls on either side of the trail had ceased to exist and on both sides of the narrow walkway a magnificent play of light and shade presented itself.

On the way along the ridges with accumulating clouds in close company



Mt. Nanda Devi behind the
rocks of Bugyal Koti as seen
from Jhandi Dhar

From up there, the intricate design of Himalayas' folded landscape looked like the halted waves of a great ocean. Perhaps they truly were. This was probably the land that lay beneath the great Sea of Tethys during the early days of the earth, the land that was forced upwards and shaped into one of the most intimidatingly vertical landscapes in the world. And, yet, amidst these unparalleled heights, at some of the most vertically distant places from today's seabeds, the rocks tell us stories of what used to be. The fossils of crustaceans and hints of the life

that existed on the ancient seabed lay side by side with the pugmarks of a leopard that had walked this trail to Jhandi top sometime in the recent past – pugmarks we stepped across while approaching the top today. Today, yesterday, and for the millions of years before that, the rocks lay still, quiet, at the narrow top of Jhandi Dhar, which could barely accommodate the entire team. We sat in awe. All around us, the legendary snow peaks stood in unwavering prominence – Kedarnath, Kedar Dome, Mana Mandir, Hathi and Gauri, Neelkanth, Kamet, Chaukhamba, Brahmam, Dronagiri, and the magnificent Nanda Devi, behind the rocky sentinels of the Bugyal Koti range.

The way up here had been hard and strenuous. A part of our group made, for themselves, the difficult decision of returning to Tali camp from Jhandi Dhar, where the negotiable trail ends during the snowy winter. They would stay back to savour the view from Jhandi Dhar and then return to camp. Bhagat bhai stayed with them. But this was autumn; for those who still had some steam, the trail stretched on for several more kilometres till the actual mountain pass of Kuari, still a good two-and-a-half hours away. Nitin Bhai led the way. The entire traversal back to Tali camp via Kuari top would take close to four-and-a-half hours from Jhandi Dhar. Nitin bhai set a strict turn-around time of 1 pm, after which we would have to start our return, whether we had reached the pass by then or not. At around 10 am, when white clouds had just begun to the float across the spotless blues of the mountain sky, we trudged onwards past Jhandi Dhar. The descent from the top to a connecting ledge that led to Kuari was steep and bouldery. From the ledge, the Pangarchulla peak loomed close. Down below we could see the base camp for those attempting to scale its summit: blue tents dotted a yellow-green bugyal. The path ahead was more of meadows, and breathtaking panorama. Thinning air demanded greater effort


for every movement and we clung tightly onto Nitin bhai's teachings of walking slow but never stopping. We made slow, but steady, progress over grass, rock and puddle. We passed abandoned shoes of a herder, a plethora of footmarks of goats and men, and walked beyond pugmarks that we didn't clearly recognize. With change in altitude, the meadow transformed from yellow-green to dark orange, so close to the colour of a female monal's feathers that we didn't even notice an entire flock until our presence startled them into a scurrying flight over the deep valleys below.

Amidst this realm of open meadow and boulder-dwelling Himalayan mice, I saw a pine standing alone, like a solitary soldier guarding some remote outpost. Wasn't this place above the tree line? Didn't the forest end far below? Perhaps it did, perhaps this one pine wasn't what was intended, perhaps it was an accident. Or was it a show of grit, of defiance, of thriving where no other tree could even survive? Wind had weathered its branches, many of which hung broken and leafless, but the great pine had endured for decades. This was probably the same pine that Frank Smythe had seen during his explorations in the region that eventually,

though through an error in navigation, revealed the famed Valley of Flowers. An audacious individual, surviving out here all alone: "one sentinel weather-beaten tree standing out before the others", Smythe wrote and rewarded this pine's grit with immortality. Those who came after Smythe and many who are still to come, shall probably continue to look for it. Even after the tree falls it will perhaps linger in obscure memoirs and travelogues. But that is for later; then there was nothing obscure about its presence – it stood tall and distinct, almost like a kingpin, marking another zone of transition where grassy meadows gave way to boulders.

There, a thin strand of water gushed down the mountain slope. After strenuously hopping across the big chunks of loose boulder we reached the edge of the stream. The icy current had worn large boulders down into pebbles, which helped us walk past its flow. This was the final leg of the trail, the top of Kuari Pass then clearly in view. The last bit up to the mountain pass was expectedly steep. By the time we had scaled the narrow ledge, separating one side of the pass from the other, a curtain of clouds had started to drop over the peaks.

The snaking ridge towards Kuari Pass as seen from the vantage at Jhandi Dhar with Pangarchulla peak looming in distance



The Himalayan amphitheater
at Kuari Pass - peaks plunging
into the clouds

And there we stood, amidst the giants, on the rocks where Shipton and Tilman had once been. Shipton wrote:

“We were privileged to see what must be one of the grandest mountain views in the world. As we raised our heads above the top of the pass a gigantic sweep of icy peaks confronted us, and it was difficult to refrain from gasping at the vastness of the scene. The serrated line of the Kedarnath and Badrinath peaks, Kamet, Hathi Parbat, and the great cleft of the Dhaul Valley were easily recognized, but the glittering array of snowy peaks of all shapes and sizes which filled the gaps were easier to admire and wonder at than to identify. South of the Dhaul towered the graceful Dunagiri, but a sight of Nanda Devi, so soon to be our lodestone, was denied us.”




Re-entering Tali forests
amidst the gloom of
rainclouds

We headed back, walking more confidently across, now, familiar territory. The steep ascent we had endured was now a vertical descent to negotiate, the valleys that were warm with the orange light of dawn now looked different in the diffused light of a midday sun shining through the clouds. But the kingpins stood unmoved – the boulders, the stream, the pine, the Pangarchulla base camp, the pile of stones at Jhandi Dhar, the forest at the end of Chitrakantha clearing.

By the time we were in the forest again, it was afternoon, clouds choked the little light that the sun still emanated, and the gloom resembled the one we had seen at daybreak. Once back at camp, reunited with the group that had turned back from Jhandi Dhar, the rains came again – a downpour like the one last evening – but instead of sitting in our two-man shelters, today we were gathered at the dining tent; there was a decision to make. After this grueling day, the next day's 14-km trail down to Auli across Gorson Bugyal seemed too much for some. They wanted to go back the same way we had come up – from Dhak via Tugasi, Gulling Top, and

Tali forest to Tali camp – but others wanted to experience the panorama that the Auli trail offered. (The muleteers didn't have an option; the mules couldn't have negotiated the crossover trail on the Auli side.) Speaking with the steely impartiality of a leader, Nitin bhai stressed on the vistas that the overhanging trail from Tali to Gorson Bugyal offered, but also on the potential danger of attempting to cross it immediately after a rainy afternoon; if it rained today as long as it did yesterday, we couldn't attempt the trail. The showers passed quickly, though, and the rain clouds moved apart, leaving the decision up to us. Most chose to retrace their ascent to Tali camp from Dhak via Tugasi, Gulling, and Tali forest. The rest decided to take the trail across Gorson Bugyal to Auli, with Nitin Bhai showing the way. I chose to be part of this second group.



Next morning, the final day of descent to Auli, began with an ascent through the forest. The trail wended upwards for about an hour before the forest opened up again, now into the yellow grass of Tali bugyal with the cobalt-blue Tali lake right at its heart, offering us the first clear, distinct view of

Mount Nanda Devi's iconic shape, though faraway and small. And then the wide bugyal narrowed into an intricate goat trail, hanging precariously over a sheer drop down to the deep valley on its right. All along its length, with every passing bend, Mount Nanda Devi grew closer. Dronagiri, Brahmamal, and their compatriots rose in the distance, with the Dhauliganga snaking through its deep, narrow gorge like a thin strip of turquoise. Amidst this extraordinary setting, the clouds threatened to


stage an anti-climax. They had gathered early today. Nitin bhai apprehended rain. As the great mountains cast their shadows and the lammergeiers circled above us, we made a beeline for the end of this overhanging trail – we needed to get off it before the rains came. And then as the trail widened and the drop to the right became less sheer, we turned a corner, leaving behind the Dronagiri, Nanda Devi, Brahmamal, Hati, and Gauri group of ranges, to see the great expanse of Gorson Bugyal ahead of us. Mount Nilkanth appeared and the tips of Chaukhamba massif were barely visible behind the black rocks of lesser peaks. A sea of green dotted with blue-grey waterholes stretched in front of us, and the tall forest at the shore of this great sea of grass marked the approach to Auli.

The crossover trail and
Mt. Nanda Devi alongside it

We had made exceptional time to avoid rain and had reached the Gurson bugyal far ahead of schedule. Now that the clouds had vanished and the bugyal was awash in golden sunshine, Nitin bhai let us off the harness to walk at whatever pace suited us. As the Garhwali herders' cows and mules grazed under the watchful gaze of Mounts Nilkanth,

Brahmal, Dronagiri, and Nanda Devi, and the tinkle of their cowbells filled the air, we trodded across the meadow towards Auli. A glance over our shoulder showed us Mount Nanda Devi, at unbelievably close quarters, probably one of the best views one could hope to see from anywhere in the country. It was the fifth of October, Dashami, the last day of Durga Puja back in Bengal; time for the goddess to depart our mortal

world back to her abode of immortality. For me, it would be the last day under Mount Nanda Devi's shadow before I returned to my everyday life in the city. But for Nitin bhai, the day was like every other day, except that it would be others who he would lead into the magical realms of the Himalayan interior. And as much as I envied that at the moment, I knew how demanding such a life is; it isn't easy to stay at these remote extremities of the mountains far from kin for months at end.

A black horse with a green halter is grazing on a lush green hillside. In the background, majestic snow-capped mountains rise against a clear blue sky. The scene is set in a high-altitude region, likely Gurson Bugyal, with the towering peaks of Mt. Nilkanth visible in the distance.

Probably that is why Nitin bhai never told us which village he came from, no matter how many times we asked. All he would say is that he is a “pahad ka baccha” (a child of the mountains). The people of Garhwal have walked the difficult slopes of the high Himalayas for so long that the mountains have become an identity greater than their own selves. Once, they were traders. Then they took explorers on secret alleyways in the mountains, carried their loads and cooked for them. When these adventurers rose to prominence and basked in the glory of their discoveries, Garhwalis remained in the shadows, hidden away in their little hamlets at the lap of the great mountains. Little gratitude percolated to them, little acknowledgements of their contributions to the famous expeditions were

ever made, but those born in the Himalayas had their hands too full with ensuring the basics of survival to care about seeking glory. They sought tillable lands, hardy cattle, water sources and ways to cope with the harsh conditions that permanently exist in the high Himalayas. They sought balance, and held the leopards and the bears in their forests in great reverence. They led a life, where survival itself was a feat of endurance. So they found their gods all around them – in forests and rivers, agricultural fields and huts. They held in respect all that they saw, they held in fear the forces they couldn’t control. Living amidst the Himalayas, made it easier for them to realise the scale at which the natural world works and our sheer insignificance at the face of its wrath. The people of Garhwal, thus, took to worship. They transformed their lives of endless toil into one of endless prayer.

A horse grazing at Gurson Bugyal under the shadows of Mt. Nilkanth

Upayan Chatterjee, the author, at the Kuari Pass summit with Mt. Brahma visible in background

As we descended deep into the pine forest of Auli and came upon the Padiyar temple, the priest explained how Lord Shiva had come to rest on the “padiyar” (stone slabs that cover the roofs of a traditional Garhwali home) of the village and Nanda Devi had been seated to his left. Sat on the temple’s stone courtyard

catching my breath, I noticed Mount Brahma peeping through the pines. For a split moment, everything made perfect sense. It was no coincidence that Garhwal, nestled in this beautiful but hostile western Himalayan landscape had forever been India’s Devbhoomi, the abode of our gods.