

[Legends from the Living Mountain](#)

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Legends from the Living Mountain

The awesome Himalayan giant, Nanda Devi, touches the soul of all who see Her and claims the life of some

Book Excerpt: Himalayan mountain lore is a mix of ancient myth and modern drama. Sometimes, the two overlap, as findings reinforce traditional tales. In "Sacred Mountains of the World," Professor Edwin Bernbaum records the legends of hundreds of the world's great peaks. We excerpt his telling of the mysterious and tragic happenings at Nanda Devi, abode of the Goddess of Bliss.

By Dr. Edwin Bernbaum, Berkeley

In addition to the paradise she shares with Siva on Kailas, Parvati, the mountain daughter of Himalaya, has Her abode on a number of other mountains, where She appears in various forms--some beautiful, some terrifying. As Nanda Devi, the "Goddess of Bliss," She dwells in beauty on the lovely peak of that name in the Himalayas northeast of Delhi, not far from the Nepalese border. The highest mountain in India outside the principality of Sikkim, Nanda Devi soars in alluring curves of rock and ice to culminate in a delicate summit, poised at 25,645 feet, above a ring of snow peaks that form a sanctuary protecting the Goddess from all but her most determined admirers.

The names of these peaks reflect their relationship to the Deity they serve: Nanda Ghunti, "Nanda's Veil;" Nanda Kot, "Nanda's Fortress;" Nanda Khat, "Nanda's Bed." The only break in their otherwise impregnable wall of rock and snow is the terrifying gorge of the Rishi Ganga, one of the sources of the sacred Ganges, named after seven sages of Hindu mythology who fled the oppression of demons to seek refuge with the Goddess before departing this world to become enshrined as seven stars [the Pleiades] in the constellation of Ursa Major. Shepherds and porters from nearby villages who venture into the area believe that they can sometimes hear the sounds of these sages in the company of their divine protectoress--drums beating, the blare of trumpets, and the eerie barking of dogs. The few foreign mountaineers who manage to penetrate the gorge, inching their way along the sides of sheer cliffs that plunge thousands of feet into the river roaring below, find themselves in a paradise of gentle meadows filled with flowers at the foot of the sacred peak, which stands like a temple in the middle of the sanctuary itself.

Nanda Devi lies in the region of Uttarakhand, the principal area of pilgrimage in the Indian Himalayas. This region of sacred peaks and rivers ranks second only to Kailas and Manasarovar in the degree of its sanctity for Hindus. Closer to the lowlands and much more accessible, it is visited by many more pilgrims, who come by the tens of thousands to bathe at Gomukh, the glacial source of the Ganges, and to worship at Kedarnath and Badrinath, lofty temples of Siva and Vishnu sequestered in narrow valleys beneath the icy thrones of the Gods themselves. One finely chiseled peak to which they pay special reverence, 21,467-foot Shivling, they regard as a magnificent symbol the transcendent God Siva himself. Women in sedan

chairs, old men with canes, babies in baskets, Hindus from all parts of India, many of them unprepared for the cold and wind of high altitude, flock along the network of pilgrimage routes linking the holy shrines. Many are so old or weak that they never return: they die in the land of the Gods, happy in the thought that by doing so they have gained merit that will bring them closer to final release from death and rebirth. The region is also the favorite haunt of holy men and wandering yogis, who come to follow the example of Siva and meditate in the sharp clear air of the heights, within sight of the peaks that lead to heaven and the goal they seek.

As the Goddess who resides on the highest mountain in the region, Nanda Devi has many shrines and temples dedicated to her. One of the better-known ones is in the hill station of Almora, which affords one of the best views of the peak itself and the mountains that surround it. Although primarily a benevolent Deity, Nanda can take on the form of Durga, the wrathful Goddess who absorbed into herself the power of all the Gods, including Vishnu and Siva, in order to slay a buffalo demon who was threatening the world. Villagers accordingly treat her with great respect and sacrifice goats and buffalo to her on certain festivals or whenever they feel they may have offended her. One such festival involves a strenuous pilgrimage of three weeks over a 17,000-foot pass to snowfields not far from Nanda Devi, beneath the summit of Trisul, a spectacular peak that some view as the trident of Siva, others as the weapon of Nanda herself. Once every twelve years thousands of devotees, many of them barefoot, accompany palanquins with images of the Goddess, taking Her home to the mountain bearing Her name. A ram with four horns, adorned with clothes and ornaments meant for Nanda Devi, leads the party to the shrine at the end of the pilgrimage

and then, its task complete, wanders off to vanish into the eternal snows.

One such pilgrimage of the past ended in disaster. According to a legend prevalent in the area, a prince of a neighboring country fell in love with a beautiful princess of Garhwal, and they consummated their marriage without performing the proper ceremonies. The Goddess was offended, and evil times fell on the prince's kingdom after he became king. To placate Nanda the people went forth in pomp on a mass pilgrimage to her shrine high in the snows beneath Trisul. The king, however, did not take such practices seriously and brought along dancing girls for entertainment. This additional transgression compounded the original offense, and the Goddess destroyed the party with avalanches of snow. Whether or not it happened that way, in 1954 hundreds of corpses, some mummified, some reduced to skeletons, were found in the rocky moraine of Rup Kund, a glacial lake just short of the shrine to Nanda Devi. Carbon dating showed the grisly find to be more than six hundred years old, in all likelihood the remains of a pilgrimage party that perished in either a blizzard or an enormous avalanche.

The people of the region also view Nanda Devi as a benevolent source of life and renewal. According to ancient Hindu mythology, a flood once covered the entire world. As in the biblical story of Noah, a sage named Manu was warned of the impending disaster and built himself a boat in which he survived. Vishnu, the Preserver, incarnated himself as a fish and towed the craft to safety on the summit of a mountain peak. As the waters receded, Manu together with his family and the remnants of all living creatures went down the slope to

repopulate the earth. The people of Uttarakhand identify the mountain of the flood as Nanda Devi itself, and one local group, the Rajis, still regard the peak as the abode of their ancestors. According to one legend, the seven sages associated with the Rishi Ganga accompanied Manu in his boat and remained behind to dwell in the company of the Goddess herself.

The beautiful peak of Nanda Devi has cast its spell over Westerners as well as Indians. A succession of mountaineering expeditions, beginning in 1883, tried without success to penetrate the veil of the Goddess and reach her mysterious sanctuary beyond the impassable gorges of the Rishi Ganga. Finally, in 1934, the British climbers and explorers Eric Shipton and H. W. Tilman managed to force a tenuous passage through the cliffs and became the first humans ever to enter the lovely valley at the foot of the sacred peak itself. Shipton wrote of his experience: "We were now actually in the inner sanctuary of the Nanda Devi Basin, and at each step I experienced that subtle thrill which anyone of imagination must feel when treading hitherto unexplored country. Each corner held some thrilling secret to be revealed for the trouble of looking. My most blissful dream as a child was to be in some such valley, free to wander where I liked, and discover for myself some hitherto unrevealed glory of Nature. Now the reality was no less wonderful than that half-forgotten dream; and of how many childish fancies can that be said, in this age of disillusionment?"

Two years later, in 1936, Tilman returned with an Anglo-American expedition to climb the mountain. The day they reached the summit, an enormous storm at the end of the

monsoon caused a sacred river in the area to flood and partially destroy a village, sweeping away the lives of forty people. When some members of the expedition visited the high Hindu priest of Badrinath afterward and asked him if the villagers would hold them responsible for offending the Goddess and causing the deaths, he replied, "No, they will regard you as mahatamas, great-souled ones, for having climbed the mountain."

On the way down the mountain, people at another village had asked the expedition members if they had seen the golden pagoda and pond said to be on the summit, and when told they had not, the villagers refused to believe that the expedition had actually climbed the peak. The climbers mentioned this to the priest at Badrinath, and he said, with a smile, "No, you probably wouldn't have seen those things."

Some years later Nanda Devi cast its spell on another climber, giving rise to a tragic but beautiful story that brings together the cultures of East and West. Willi Unsoeld, a well-known American mountaineer who made the first ascent of the west ridge of Mount Everest, saw Nanda Devi as a young man and thought the peak so lovely that he vowed if he ever had a daughter he would name her after it. In the course of time he married and his wife, Jolene, gave birth to a girl, whom they named Nanda Devi Unsoeld. When Devi, as she was called, reached the age of twenty-one, she decided that she wanted to climb the peak whose name she bore. She and her father organized an expedition that included some of the best mountaineers in America, and in 1977 they set out for Nanda Devi.

After struggling through the Rishi Ganga Gorge, the first group of climbers reached the summit by a difficult new route. Devi climbed to a high camp at 24,000 feet to make the second ascent. However, after a day of being tent-bound in a storm, she felt too ill to continue. As they were preparing to descend, she suddenly sat up and said, very calmly, "I am going to die"--and she died in her father's arms. Willi tried without success to revive her until, heartbroken, he realized she was dead. His description of what followed reveals the depth of his feelings for his daughter and the mountain for which he had named her: "We agreed that it would be most fitting for Devi's body to be committed to the snows of the mountain for which she had come to feel such a deep attachment. Andy, Peter and I knelt in a circle in the snow and grasped hands while each chanted a broken farewell to the comrade who had so recently filled such a vivid place in our lives. My final prayer was one of thanksgiving for a world filled with the sublimity of the high places, for the sheer beauty of the mountains and for the surpassing miracle that we should be so formed as to respond with ecstasy to such beauty, and for the constant element of danger without which the mountain experience would not exercise such a grip on our sensibilities. We then laid the body to rest in its icy tomb, at rest on the breast of the Bliss-Giving Goddess Nanda."

The story continues. On the way to the mountain, Devi had made a great impression on the porters and villagers along the trail. Having lived in Kathmandu with her father, who had served there as Peace Corps director, she spoke Nepali, which had enabled her to communicate with the people in their own, closely related language of Garhwali. The natural warmth of her personality and her obvious interest in them and their welfare had touched them deeply. In addition, her striking

blonde hair had elicited comparisons with Gauri, the golden form of the Goddess Parvati. When the local villagers heard of her death, they concluded that she had not really died. According to them, Willi's vow to name his daughter Nanda Devi had caused the Deity to enter her body and become incarnate in her. Her apparent death was, in fact, the Goddess' way of coming home to her mountain. And so a new myth has entered the sacred lore surrounding the beautiful peak of Nanda Devi.

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