

# In Guarded Realms of Nanda- The Hill Goddess - 1

**RAJSHEKHAR PANT**

*"I stand upon a wind swept ridge at night with the stars bright above and I am no longer alone but I waver and merge with all the shadows that surround me. I am part of the whole and am content."*

So wrote in her diary Nandadevi Unsoeld. She was a young blond and beautiful girl from America, who lost her life while attempting to summit the Nandadevi Peak. The year was 1976. Her father Willi Unsoeld, himself a mountaineer, had named her after this imposing peak. It is revered throughout the central Himalayan region in the state of Uttarakhand as the most prominent physical manifestation of the hill Goddess - the Nandadevi. She is the Goddess of Bliss, who instills among the mountain-folk the conviction that despite all difficulties and limitations, life in these rugged terrains is to be lived with all possible enthusiasm.

Throughout the central Himalayan region, the cult of Nandadevi has been the most vibrant supernatural and spiritual strain conditioning the lives of mountain-folk since time immemorial. Nanda is not the sanitised version of the primitive mother goddess in these hills. She is the loving daughter of the neighbouring villages and is married to Shiva, the hermit king of Kailash - a far off snowy kingdom in the Himalayas. No elaborate ritual is required to please her. She doesn't even need imposing and ornate structures as her shrine. A co-sharer of the simple human emotions she is pleased when the 'bazi' or the hereditary drummer of the village beats the drum to mark an auspicious occasion; when the villagers dance to the songs sung in her honour or speak out their day-to-day problems before her or come to her shrine to seek her blessings. She even communicates with her devotees through chosen oracles.

Whenever in the vicinity of the unsurpassable grandeur of the mountains, one is bound to feel an essential oneness with nature - from where originates life and are conserved its various forms and their continuity. The difference between life

and death melts away in these heights, where every end is but a fresh beginning with new promises and ever-new hopes. Whether Nandadevi Unsoeld was also feeling something like that when she wrote these lines in her diary, a few days before becoming a part of the mountains with which she shared her name, who knows?

Of late, I had been wandering in the villages of Tolma, Reni and Lata. These villages are at an average distance of three to four kms above the Joshimath-Malari road in Chamoli district of Garhwal Himalayas. This region constitutes the immediate habitable vicinity of Nanda Devi range. The wide range of bio-diversity and eco-systems these hilly terrains have, besides a society known for its rich culture and an ancient ethnic identity, make this entire expanse a natural choice for a new conservation theme i.e. The Biosphere Reserve. Serving the purpose of a natural museum and a living laboratory these Biospheres have been formed all over the world under the Man and Biosphere Programme of the UNSECO. Such Reserves are identified by the government of the countries they fall in and are maintained by the state. There are 13 such Reserves in India.

The Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve enjoys the distinction of being the first Biosphere Reserve of the Himalayas. It is the second oldest Biosphere Reserve of the Country.

These villages are inhabited by the Tolcha community of the Bhotiya origin. These sons of the soil happened to be a trading community basically. Both Trans-Himalayan and inland trading in wool, wild edibles, herbs, minerals, etc., was their main preoccupation. Migrating seasonally with their livestock right up to the foothills of the Kumaon Himalayas, (or practising transhumance culture) they once were seen as the Himalayan counterparts of

western Romanies. Their culture and ways of life have undergone much of transition due to rapid socio-political changes in the border region in the early sixties of the previous century.

Except for the senior citizens and their grandchildren, these villages become vacant with the melting of the snows. A sizable majority of young ones, both men and women leave for alpine heights for sheep grazing. It is also

populace volunteered to save the environment by embracing the trees to be felled then, by the forest-contractors.

The topography of Nandadevi region had kept it almost inviolate by men for centuries. The Nandadevi peak itself remained quite inaccessible for quite some time and is still considered to be one of the toughest peaks in the world to climb. By the early eighties, the



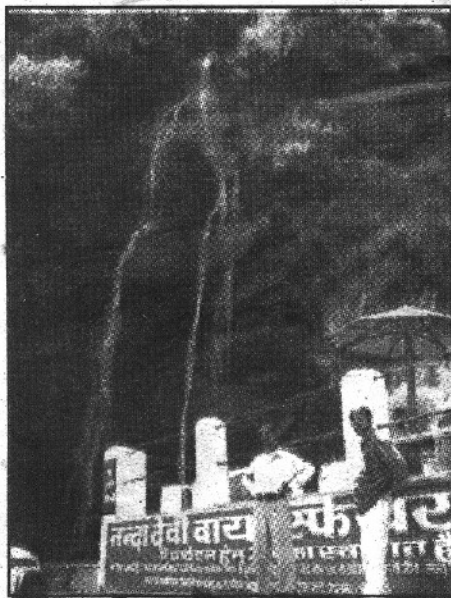
When the youngsters are out on collection spree

the time to collect, hand roll and dry the wild Allium which grows naturally in the alpine. Known locally as 'Jambu' or 'Faran' Allium is used in regional cuisine for aroma. It is an indispensable item, indeed, with every hill kitchen.

The apparent madness in the exuberance of nature here definitely has a method, a plan, to make the life that teems in this wilderness more comfortable. In perfect unison with their surroundings, men here have chosen to stand as sentinels to whatever dots this landscape. It is from this region that the call of conservation came in the early seventies of the previous century in the form of the famous Chipko - the movement in which under the dynamic leadership of Gaura Devi of the village Reni - the local

core zone of the Nandadevi region was conferred the status of national park. On 18 January 1988, taking a cue from UNESCO's Man & Biosphere programme, Nandadevi National Park was given the status of Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve also called NDBR. Recognised as a world heritage site in 1992, the reserve area of NDBR earlier covered an area of 2236.74 sq km with a buffer, consisting mainly of habitation zone of 1612.12 sq km and an uninhabited core zone of 624.62 sq kms. In February 2000, the total area of NDBR has been extended to 5860 sq kms by including into it the Valley of Flowers National Park as second core zone and adjoining habitation zones as buffer area.

Hundreds of species of trees,



Entry point of NDBR



**Restricted Valley of Flowers**



**In Valley of Flowers**

wild edibles, lifesaving herbs, and also deadly plants are found all over. The shy musk deer, bharals and the Himalayan black bear may be seen if one has enough of time and patience. Watching the colourful Monal from close quarters here is again a treat to the eyes. Even the rare snow leopard may be sighted by those having an extra bit of luck.

A 15 km trek connects the Joshimath-Badrinath road with the second core zone of the Nandadevi Biosphere Reserve. Ice rarely melts here even in the hottest month of June. The region where this is second core zone is located, is called the Bhyundar Valley. It was Frank S Smythe, an English mountaineer, who first discovered it in 1931. He spontaneously named it as 'The Valley of Flowers'. In 1939 the Botanical Garden of Edinburgh sent Miss Joan Margrett Legge here to collect the seeds of some rare varieties. She lost her life in this valley in a fatal fall from a rock on 4 July 1939 and is buried at the spot of her fall in the valley. Well before the death of this young girl, Frank S Smythe in his book had described this landscape as - "a valley of perfect beauty where the human spirit may find repose". The words engraved on the grave of Joan Margrett - I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills from where cometh my help - speak of the ultimate solace human heart has always found in such towering heights melting into the endless blue.

Situated in the upper expansions of Bhyundar Ganga, a tributary of Alaknanda, the Valley of Flowers has seen some important changes in the past few years. Grazing of cattle is completely banned here now. One cannot take away plants or their bulbs from here. In active liaison with the Forest Department, the local youth here have been a grand success in keeping the region clean despite the mounting pressure of tourists and pilgrims who pass touching this valley while on the way to Hemkund Sahib six kms beyond.