

# Indo-Scottish Vishnugarh Darh Expedition 2016

Garhwal, Uttarakhand, India

21 May – 10 June 2016



View up the Panpatia glacier moraine (looking west).



### Written by:

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## Expedition Summary

This expedition was intending to explore unclimbed mountains in a reasonably accessible range between Joshimath and Badrinath, in Garhwal, Uttarakhand, India. The ridge is called the Vishnugarh Darh (Vishnu's Fortress), south of the Panpatia Glacier, which is to the south of Nilkanth. All the peaks are under 6000m, and most are attractive in their pointy-ness and in the fact that they won't require all the hassle of permits, liaison officers and their concomitant costs.

Susan Jensen met Anindya 'Raja' Mukherjee in Delhi on 22 May 2016, travelled by train and shared-jeep over two days to Joshimath. In Joshimath, Nilander Singh (Dron Adventure) organized the Uttarakhand Forestry Department permit, transport to the trailhead, porters and two base camp staff (because you can have a cook/base camp security, but they won't stay on their own). We organised food for base camp and our hill food, food for porters going up and down, tents, kitchen equipment, kerosene and all the other miscellany.

On 27 May began two days' walk up to base camp, another day moving base camp to a better place, then a couple of days in recce to decide where to begin. From the beginning of the walk up to base camp Raja's breathing had started going rough, but we decided that it was remnants from breathing the unsavoury air of Joshimath, and the clean air of the mountains would cure him (it worked for Thomas Mann, didn't it?).

After a couple of recce days, on 2 June we went up to a higher position (about 4200m) from which the next day we would move into a glacial bowl that would present us with our first set of unclimbed peaks. The morning arrived and Raja's breathing was painful. It didn't have the usual symptoms of HAPE (see more in the illness and injury section of this report), but it was also obvious that he wasn't acclimatising. I (Susan) went for a recce walk to 4765m to peek into that glacial bowl and do some future climbing, then went back to the tent, packed up and we walked back down to base camp.



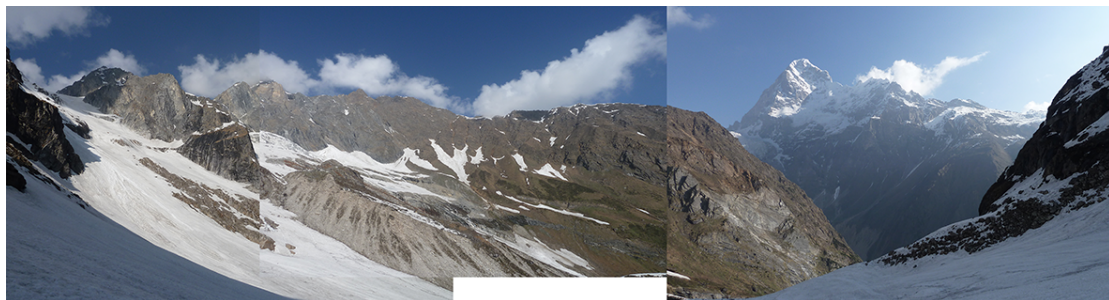
Panorama from 4765m, the mouth of the cirque above tributary glacier south of Panpatia glacier. Looking east.

The next day (4 June) Raja rested in base camp and I went to a lower bivvy at the base of a couloir that led into a cirque in a slightly more easterly section of the Vishnugarh Darh. Early morning had me at the top of a 4400m peak that I'm sure

has been climbed before; I looked at the rocky peaks and soft snow around me (it had been 6°C at 5am) and headed back.



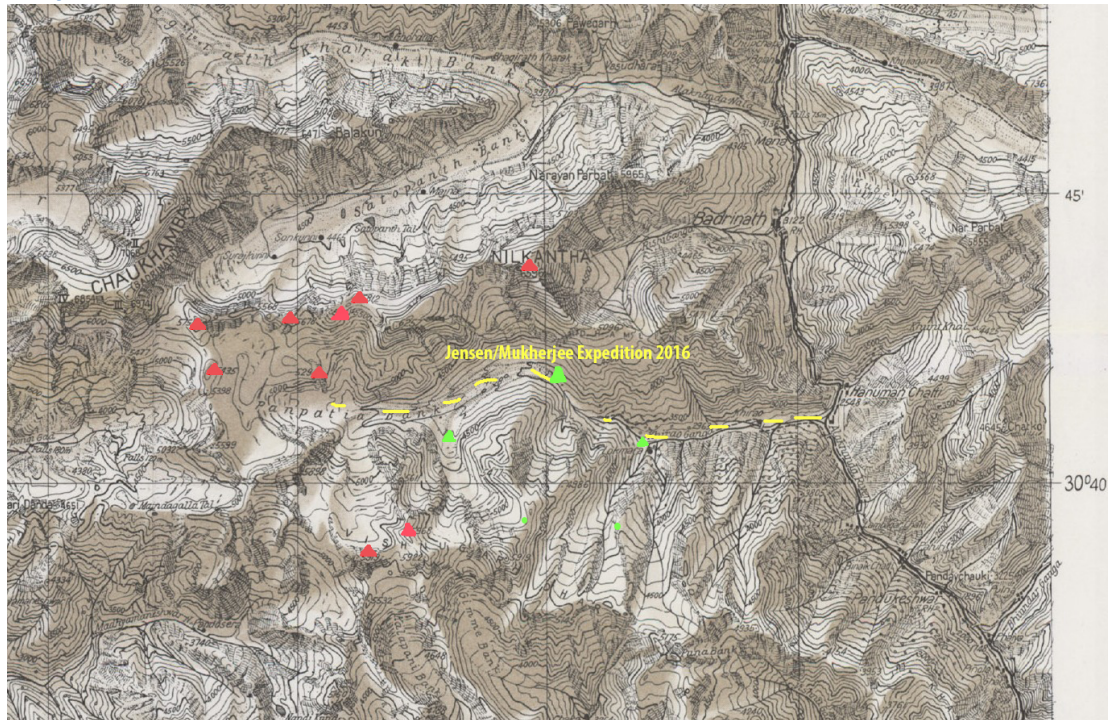
Tempting view into glacier, looking south; taken from main path to Panpatia Glacier. Peak climbed is rocky one on left.



Panorama of glacier from below peak climbed, looking mostly west to north. Nilkanth in right background.

We decided that Raja needed to be under a doctor's care. The following day, Susan and Dinesh (one of the base camp staff) returned to Joshimath to send the porters up. On 7 June Raja and Zaman returned to Joshimath with the rest of our gear. On 8 June we re-arranged our return travel plans and Raja got in touch with his GP in Kolkata. 9 June we returned to Haridwar; on 10 June Susan was flying to the UK and Raja on a train back to Kolkata. Raja had developed a lung infection. He's doing much better now.

## Map



Based on the 1939 Swiss map - showing the approach route from the road, position of Base Camp just below the snout of the Panpatia glacier, the high camp reached by the team, and Susan's lower bivvy. The two green circles show the highest points reached, and the point from which photos were taken that are included in this report.

## Notes on porters in Garhwal

Yarsagumba (*Cordyceps sinensis*) is a parasitic fungus that grows on and consumes the Himalayan ghost moth caterpillar, and is one of the most expensive/valuable of the Chinese remedies. According to its proponents, it will cure anything, even diseases you don't yet have, and is a powerful aphrodisiac; the Chinese pay an absolute fortune for them. They grow at altitude on Himalayan mountains, and Garhwal seems to be a particularly fertile region from which to harvest. Harvest is done by slowly crawling the green hillsides, carefully picking them up and tying them into a cloth in a bundle.

The Yarsagumba season starts in late April and continues until some time in June or into July, depending on the year. In the Khirao valley below the Panpatia glacier, one person can quite easily pick 3000-4000 Rs worth in a day. Over the course of a month or two, that represents an income that can sustain a family (or a drug habit) throughout the rest of the year. The inhabitants of the encampment that we spoke with were from Dehradun, and were living in rough tarpaulin shelters while they gathered yarsagumba, to maintain their nice houses and the education of their children in the large city.

Mountaineers, both foreign and domestic, come into the area and offer the localsthe opportunity to earn 600 Rs per day for a long walk with a heavy load. It's not difficult for them to refuse. In fact, if they agree, you may want to be a bit

suspicious. Unfortunately for the mountaineers, Garhwal is full of very attractive mountains whose approach would benefit from the assistance of porters. The best way to deal with this is to give advance notice to a logistics company. The average foreign expedition will be doing this already, but just in case you attempt something more impromptu: agents in Garhwal usually have their own pack of porters, often Kumaoni or Nepali, that they keep continually employed and who they know are reliable. They tend to be people that actually want to be in the mountains. If you want to go as a small, lightweight expedition and not have it fall apart due to lack of competent porters, get a sort of package deal from such an agent, which is likely to be everything from the airport to base camp. You can go lightweight and alpine-style above base camp. That way the agent makes a bit of a profit – some percentage that you will never know – you still pay less than you would have if you had tried to organise it yourself, and you have a much greater chance of being allocated the good porters. It may be that lots of them are taken up by an 11-day, 15 person Indian trekking trip that leaves just before you do and makes the agent more money, but if it goes reasonably well you won't have to go foraging for the villagers that really can't be bothered.

### **Brief history of area's climbs**

Mythology has it that a Hindu priest gave a sermon each day in Badrinath and one in Kedarnath; he would give one in Badrinath in the morning, walk across to Kedarnath and give a sermon in the evening, stay overnight, give a sermon in Kedarnath in the morning then walk to Badrinath in the evening. Vishnu, the god of this area, frowned heavily on anyone who ate before he gave a sermon, and one day this priest got a bit hungry and had some berries on his walk. In a fury, Vishnu threw up Nilkanth and a few other tops; that stopped the priest but he may have been the first one to spend much time in this area.

For decades, Indian mountaineering teams had explored the area in search of the mythical pass that would link Kedarnath and Badrinath. In 1999, Anindya Mukherjee and Sundryar Singh were the first to stand on the col, and in 2000, Martin Moran and party did the first crossing of Panpatia Col. Much of the mountaineering attention in this area has been either on that col or on Nilkanth, the stunning peak that provides the holy backdrop to Badrinath.

The Vishnugarh Dhar (Vishnu's Fortress) is the ridge of peaks that line the south side of the Panpatia glacier, and all are under 6000m – some of them only just. Many of them look interestingly technical and very few have been climbed; the only known ascents are that of Martin Moran's 1998 ascent with Bede Arkless of P5758 at the head of the glacier, and P5919, named Lakshmi's Peak by a group from Martin's 2000 expedition team to Nilkanth. In May 2016, Martin Moran also led a team up the previously-highest-unclimbed peak of 5986m, via its south side.

Our intention was to explore some of the cirques at the heads of the tributary glaciers, and do several first ascents of the peaks therein. They remain unexplored.

## Team – members, staff, porters

Climbing team:

**Susan Jensen.** Data analyst for NHS England, production assistant for Scottish Mountaineering Club guidebooks. Dual US/UK, age 48. Susan has led and/or participated in several expeditions to the Indian and Chinese Himalaya, the Pamirs and Alaska, with first ascents of various peaks of around 6000m, and one 7000m peak in the East Karakoram in 2013, of alpine grades ranging from PD to AD. The Alaska trip was intended to be Denali's Cassin Route but weather dictated that West Buttress as acclimatisation route was all we would do. In spite of having recently moved to the south of England, she remains a keen rock and winter climber, with a small handful of first ascents in both, up to E1 and IV,5, respectively. Susan is comfortable leading E2 trad, VI,6 in Scottish Winter, and ED graded alpine routes.

### **Anindya 'Raja' Mukherjee**

Raja is a writer and mountaineering expedition guide when he isn't busy having his own adventures. His official base camp is in Kolkata, West Bengal, and has participated in, led and/or organised more than 30 mountaineering expeditions in the Indian Himalaya, and trekked extensively across the range. He has also climbed and trekked in Tanzania, Uganda, Greenland, Iceland, Caucasus, Sierra Cascades, North Ireland, China and in the Swiss and French Alps. In 2008, he became the first Asian to participate in high altitude speed climbing competition on Mount Elbrus, Russia. But above all, his passion lies in exploring the less known and unknown valleys, glaciers and mountains of the Indian Himalaya. Raja's mountaineering exploits include Nanda Devi East (7434m) in October 2014, in semi-alpine style; Kalang (6387m) in 2012, an alpine style winter ascent of Tinchinkhang (6002m) in 2008, Mt Snowdon (yes, the one in North Wales) via the Snowdon Horseshoe in 2007; alpine style ascent of Nandaghunti in 2005.

The kitchen staff and general all-around great guys were Zaman Patan Singh (Nilander Singh's younger brother) and Dinesh Rana, from Chamoli, both experienced expedition staff.

The porters were Nepali that Dron Adventures retains as its staff; I had met some of them on previous expeditions when they worked for other agents.

## Weather, conditions

Winter of 2015-16 in this part of Garhwal had been very lean; their first snow was in April 2016. The ski resort of Auli above Joshimath suffered economically that winter.

Because the snow fell only after temperatures and solar energy were strong enough to remove it quickly, the mountains had much less snow than in previous years, and the gullies were very lean. Any solid rock will be of about E2 grade and above, so it is desirable to have snow cover over the remaining rubble.

From 27-31 May, the mornings were clear and the afternoons either had drizzle, rain or some pretty good thunderstorms. 1-4 June the days were clear, with only some puffy clouds up high. The afternoon thunderstorms returned on 5 June, giving a proper soaking to the part of the group that remained up high, and continued the next couple of days.

### **Expedition Log/Acclimatisation record**

Arrived Delhi 22 May

23-24 May - travel to Joshimath (train to Haridwar, jeep to Joshimath)

25-26 May - Joshimath, sorting porters and supplies

27-28 May - approach walk to base camp

29 May - porters left us too low; we moved our base camp to 3815m, better site

30-31 May - recce and establish ABC (4199m) for acclimatisation peaks in unexplored tributary

1 June - rest day at BC.

2 June - up to ABC, with recce above camp, to 4422m. Raja not breathing well

3 June - SJ up to glacial bowl at 4754m, returned to ABC. Raja still not well.

Returned to BC

4 June - SJ bivvy at mouth of lower tributary glacier (3600m)

5 June - SJ explore cirque of lower tributary, summit at east end of ridge (probable cairn) 4461m

6 June - SJ and Dinesh return to Joshimath to call for porters to get Raja home and under doctor's care

7 June - Raja and Zaman return to Joshimath

8 June - rebook journey home

9-10 June - return to UK and Kolkata (SJ and AM, respectively) via buses, trains and aeroplanes.

### **Further recommendations**

There is a good reason that people tend to favour 6000m peaks during what is traditionally the British summer holiday season. Not only does it provide the appropriate amount of physical suffering, it is also the case that the seasonal temperatures dictate that anything below that height will be too warm for safe or comfortable snow conditions. If you are going out to that area and have aspirations for anything less than 6500m, do it in early May.

There are lots of attractive small peaks out there, including what is now the highest unclimbed peak of 5865m, residing at the western end of the glacier.

### **Illnesses and injuries**

Raja's lung infection was likely to be related to an incident that occurred while on an attempt of the first ascent of Janahut (6805m) in 2010. Raja developed a severe cough, chest pain and breathing difficulty, and was believed to be suffering from High Altitude Pulmonary Oedema. Raja returned to base camp and waited 3 days for helicopter rescue; in hospital he was found to have a ruptured hydatid cyst (effectively a tapeworm) in one lung.



Raja had been harbouring a tapeworm in his lung for some unknown amount of time, and the spore-filled cyst chose high altitude for its rupture – which is how the spores are then spread throughout the rest of the host. Raja was successfully treated with surgery to remove the cyst and injured tissues, and then with medication to remove the spores. Once healed, the lung hadn't given him any problems on subsequent mountaineering trips, including on ascent of Nanda Devi East or his other high altitude endeavours since that time. It was just unlucky that it happened on this trip.

The interesting point of all this is that the hydatid cyst is apparently not uncommon in northern India generally, and certainly amongst Himalayan shepherds. The parasite enjoys the sheep dogs as the primary host, and the human is an accidental host. The most common point of infection is the liver, and the host doesn't know that he is carrying the tapeworm until it ruptures, at which point it is usually too late to do anything about it from their remote locations. A large proportion of hosts remain asymptomatic for many years, but Raja had apparently pushed this tapeworm into anoxia once too often so it went for revenge on that particular day.

Fortunately, this is unlikely to impact his future mountaineering endeavours but has definitely impacted his desire to eat mountain sheep or pet the sheepdogs that are often met on approach walks.

### Finance and accounts

#### Income:

MEF (including Alison Chadwick memorial grant) - £1800

BMC (including Julie Tullis Memorial grant) - £850

Montane/Alpine Club - £400

Austrian Alpine Club - £150

Total - £3200

#### Outgoing:

Flights - £902 (£802 SJ, £100 AM)

Uttarakhand forestry department permit 10,000Rs (ca £105)

In-country costs (2 people), including

Below base camp transport and accommodation, porters, base camp and staff costs

Food, including hill food £1225

Total £2232

Returned to MEF: £968