

This is not a research thesis, nor is it a collection of folk myths. It is also not a mere coffee table book to adorn your drawing room either. The three valleys covered in this book, collectively marking the Indo-Nepal and the Indo-Tibet borders, are home to the Rangs or the Shaukas, the most gentle and the most cultured of the people one hopes to find anywhere. They monopolized the international trade with Tibet for centuries via this route before the 1962 Sino-India war. It is in the company of these people living in the most challenging and rugged natural circumstances that one discovers countless unheard of truths about life in the Himalayas.

The Kumaon Mandal Vikas Nigam presents this first-of-its-kind book with the sole objective of giving a proper introduction to the Vyans, Chaundas and the Darma valleys of Kumaon. The Vyans valley falls on the Kailash-Mansarovar pilgrimage; the Darma valley is unequivocally said to be possessing the most stunning landscapes while the Chaundas valley has always held the distinction of being a highly progressive heartland of the Rang culture and civilization. These are the lesser known domains in the immense natural and cultural chattels of Uttarakhand that this venture seeks to highlight.



A KUMAON MANDAL VIKAS NIGAM PUBLICATION

Throne of the Gods
The incredible Vyans, Chaundas and Darma valleys

Throne of the Gods

The incredible Vyans, Chaundas and Darma Valleys

" ... we are amongst women, who like the little Japanese, laugh at everything and everybody, and do not rush away to hide, or draw their veils over their faces as the Southerners, we are amongst prayer-flags, chortens and prayer-poles, where stone pillars fend off spirits and ghosts from the homestead, where men whistle to the sheep and goats which carry precious burdens on their backs, and sneeze at the ponies or mules which they ride, and where yaks and *jibboos* replace the homely cattle of the lower hills. It is a strange country which charms at the first sight, and for which one forms a singular attachment, that never grows cold."

-Charles A. Sherring (1906)

The Kumaon Mandal Vikas Nigam presents a glimpse of the remarkable world lying in the valleys populated by the Rangs or the Shaukas of Dharchula *tehsil* in Pithoragarh district of Uttarakhand, namely Vyans, Chaundas and Darma. It is the most beautiful and pristine Himalayan expanse that provides endless delight to the visitors. This book introduces you to the life, cosmology, tradition and culture of the people living in this unspoiled terrain. It also provides an opening to get familiar with the astounding scenery and topography of the region.

Throne of the Gods

The amazing Vyans, Chaundas and Darma valleys



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The amazing Vyans, Chaundas and Darma valleys

Concept, research and text

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Throne of the Gods

In the Shloka 2.5 of the Tenth Discourse of the sacred Bhagvad Gita, one comes across these lines:

*Of the immovable things
I am the mighty Himalayas*

Kalidasa, the great Indian poet-playwright thus begins his 5th Century epic Kumārasambhava:

अस्त्युत्तरस्यां दिशि देवतात्मा हिमालयो नाम नगाधिराजः।
पूर्वापरौ तोयनिधी विगाह्य स्थितः पृथिव्या इव मानदण्डः॥
अनन्तरत्नप्रभवस्य यस्य हिमं न सौभाग्यविलोपि जातम्।
एको हि दोषो गुणसन्निपाते निमज्जतीन्द्रोः किरणेष्विवाङ्कः॥

(On the northern frontier of this country that forms the heartland of gods, intercalating himself into eastern and western oceans like a measuring stick of earth, there stands the sovereign of snowy mountains renowned as Mt. Himalaya. Whose snow has not become a despoiler of his exquisiteness for he is the fountainhead of innumerable products of high value; why because, a single blemish cannot be fingered when umpteen virtues are present; just like a speckle in the moon that does not despoil his exquisiteness, but wanes in the exquisite moonlight; such an unblemished Himavan is there in the North.)

The Mighty Himalayas. A mention of the name alone is enough to conjure the most superlative images of immensity humans can think of. Such has been the lure and enigma of these divine towering mountains that pilgrims, travellers, adventurers, saints, mountaineers, explorers, anthropologists, researchers and geologists alike have been fascinated by it for centuries.

The Himalayas forming the border between India and the rest of Asia are the world's highest mountain span. The literary translation of the word Himalaya i.e. 'residence of snow' fits aptly owing to the verity that a greater part of it is perpetually covered in snow. Home of some of the tallest mountains the Himalayas stretch across half a dozen countries and are the source of several major rivers including the Indus, the Ganges, the Brahmaputra, and the Yangtze. Created relatively recently in the history of our earth, the Himalayas as we recognize them now started taking shape around seventy million years ago as the Indian Subcontinent carried on coercing its path into Asia. As a consequence of the resultant continental collision, what was the bed of the old Tethys Sea gradually began to be rise upwards and as it crinkled and distorted repeatedly, it created long ridges and valleys. The mountains have slowly been getting taller and taller for around sixty million years although most of the growing has occurred in phases, the last of which was about 600,000 years ago.



Vyans Valley | *Thimmarayaswamy Krishnappa*



Bugyal in Dugtu village of Darma valley | Amit Sah

Just visualize, in these early years of the 21st century, the exultation of discovering a hitherto untrammelled array of mountains with some of the most breathtakingly beautiful scenery in the Indian Himalayas, where no summits have been scaled and only two high-altitude passes have until now been crossed by trekkers. In the Rang valleys one still finds ample opportunities of discovering unknown facets of the mountain, of interacting with the wonderful local people on their traditions, mythology and folklore, of tentatively moving up secreted elusive valleys unsure of where they head, and of detecting prospective treks of ascent on beautiful altitudes of 6000 meters plus.

Such is the privilege and good fortune of the visitor to these valleys that one can make the original incursions and weigh up diversions such as Atkinson, Charles Sherring, Smythe, Longstaff, and Shipton must have experienced more than a hundred years ago.

The Uttarakhand Division was originally created as part of the then Uttar Pradesh on 23 February, 1960. The Pithoragarh, Uttarkashi and Chamoli districts constituted this division. Forty years later on 9 November 2000 Uttarakhand was re-created as the 27th state of the Republic of India from the Himalayan and adjoining North-Western districts of Uttar Pradesh. Uttarakhand is generally divided into two divisions namely Kumaon and Garhwal. It would in fact be a misapprehension to treat Uttarakhand as another administrative unit. Uttarakhand embodies the wholesome cultural heritage and age-old values of our country.

It is from the blessed Himalayan heights of Uttarakhand that all the sacred rivers and streams originate, giving life to the immense Northern Indian plains. The Kumaon Mandal Vikas Nigam invites you to one of the most alluring regions falling in these very heights of Kumaon to live through a once-in-a-lifetime experience, filled with adventure, discovery, recreation and bliss.



Chhangru village in Nepal | *Ujjwal Singh Bohra*

The British Deputy Commissioner of India during the first years of the twentieth century Charles A. Sherring had extensively travelled through all the Rang valleys and put down his experiences in his cult book named 'Western Tibet and the British Borderland', published in 1906 in London. In this book he describes in detail the customs, government and religion of the Rangs besides giving interesting information on the social and commercial possibilities of the country. Charmed by the natural beauty of the landscape and the liveliness of the people populating it he writes:

"... we are amongst women, who like the little Japanese, laugh at everything and everybody, and do not rush away to hide, or draw their veils over their faces as the Southerners: we are amongst prayer-flags, chortens and prayer-poles, where stone pillars fend off spirits and ghosts from the homestead, where men whistle to the sheep and goats which carry precious burdens on their backs, and sneeze at the ponies or mules which they ride, and where yaks and *jibboos* replace the homely cattle of the lower hills. It is a strange country which charms at the first sight, and for which one forms a singular attachment, that never grows cold."

Elsewhere he says: "The Bhotias are a hard-working, practical race. They are always at work, both men and women, and in their idlest moments are still spinning thread for weaving, and in all their business are most capable and clear-headed."



The Vyans valley



The Vyans valley is one of the most important homes of the *Rangs* or *Shaukas* (more commonly, though wrongly addressed as the *Bhotias*), ethnic people that have inhabited the highest livable altitudes of the Kumaon Himalayas for centuries. The Vyans valley is situated in the Pithoragarh district of Uttarakhand along the river Kali, marking the Indo-Nepal border. To its west is the Johar valley formed by Gori, Kali's tributary. Johar valley is also home to another branch of the Shaukas. To the east fall the Vyans and Chaudans *pattis* on the upper and lower reaches of the valley along the Kali river respectively. Along the Dhauli river, another tributary of the Kali that confluences at Tawaghat, to the west is another beautiful valley called Darma. The people of Vyans, Chaudans and Darma together form the *Rang* or the *Shauka* community.

From times immemorial, the Himalayan expanse situated to the south of the holy Mount Kailash has been known for its natural splendor and spiritual stimulation. Extensive descriptions of this land are to be found in spiritual classics such as Kailash Khand Mahatmya, Nepal Khand Mahatmya, Uttarakhand Mahatmya and Skand Purana. Falling on the most frequented route to the Kailash-Mansarovar, this region falls in the Dharchula sub-division located in the north-eastern part of the Pithoragarh district. The small town of Dharchula forms the gateway to the land of the *Rangs*. The uppermost and western valley of Kali river and the valley formed by Kuti river that confluences with Kali at village Gunji together form the Vyans valley.

The land of the *Rangs* is spread between the altitudes of 2500 feet to 22600 feet in the central Himalayan region of Kumaon. The villages namely Budi, Garbyang, Gunji, Napalchyu, Rongkong, Nabi and Kuti are the summer residences of these people, who for centuries monopolized the Indo-Tibetan trade via this route. The *Rangs* have their winter settlements in and around Dharchula, with some of them being parts of Nepal falling to the other side of the river Kali.

Rangsyas in their traditional attire | Rajendra Singh Bisht



The Vyans valley is believed to have been named after Ved Vyas, the first great saint in the Hindu mythology. Rishi Ved Vyas or Bhagwan Ved Vyas is said to have classified the four Vedas, written eighteen Puranas, Brahmasutra and pronounced the epic Mahabharata, that was written down by Lord Ganesha. The Vyans valley is apparently the place where Rishi Ved Vyas worked upon these mightily divine projects. Three important temples dedicated to him can be found in Chhiyalekh (between Budi and Garbyang), Garbyang and Gunji. The temple at Gunji becomes the centre of an annual fair held in his honour in August.

The Vyans valley in general has held an important geographical and economic position owing to the fact that through this region the trade to Tibet and Kailash-Mansarovar pilgrimage were taken up.

The *Rangs* have traditionally led a semi-nomadic life. The villages in the valley are their summer homes where they mainly rear goats and sheep and cultivate one harvest (mainly of *Palthe* and *Phaphar*) and indulge in trade with the Tibetan market of Taklakot. The trade was disrupted after the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1950's but was reopened in 1991 after a series of diplomatic endeavours of the Indian government. In winters the villagers descend to their warmer settlements. The villages are shut down and the harvest is traditionally stored in pits. The journeying processions of people, goats, sheep and *jhuppus* (a utility beast of burden created as a cross between a yak and a cow) is called *Kuncha*.



Dharchula is perched on both banks of the Kali River at a pleasant height of 1000 metres. It is the last market place for the journey to the Vyans and other two Rang valleys. This little town has gradually grown in size and population over the last couple of decades and the busy hustle-bustle has added a charm to it which is so peculiar of all hilly towns of North India. Most Rang people from all the three valleys have their winter homes in and around this town. Many Rangs own shops and other businesses too. It is also the biggest centre for collecting and distributing rare herbs and medicinal plants that are found in the valleys.

The journey to the Rang valleys begins from Dharchula. A traveller is required to obtain an inner line permit from the office of the Sub Divisional Magistrate in Dharchula beforehand. An exciting 19-km jeep drive along the Kali river takes one to Tawaghat, where the Kali and Dhauli rivers confluence. The Vyans valley lies along the Kali river that marks the Indo-Nepal border.

From Tawaghat one has a choice of several routes to take up in order to reach the Vyans valley. One either takes a jeep to Narayan Ashram from Tawaghat (32 km) and then begins to trek through Sirkha (6 km from Narayan Ashram) to Gala through Rungling Top and Simkhola (14 km from Sirkha). Alternatively one could take a jeep to Pangla (12 km from Tawaghat) from where an 8-km climb takes one to Sirkha and then reach Gala. A third route requires one to go to Mangti (5 km from Pangla) and further to Garba Dhar (2 km from Mangti) and Gala (7 km from Garba Dhar). From Gala the distance to the first village of Vyans valley i.e. Budi is 18 km which is reached after crossing Malpa and Lamari .

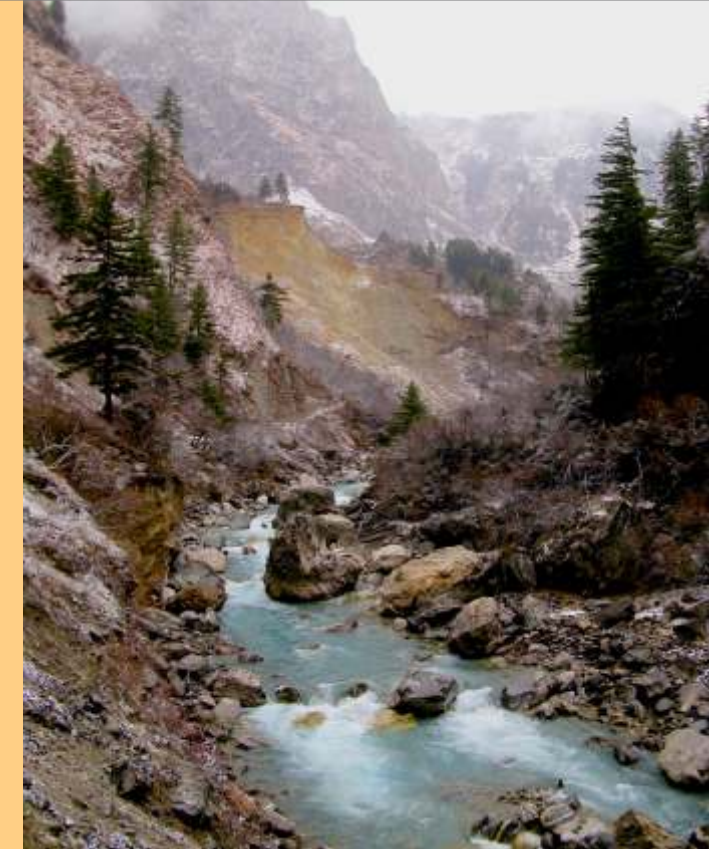
A fourth route to Budi from Tawaghat involves going to Mangti (5 km from Pangla) and further to Garba Dhar (2 km from Mangti) and further from Garba Dhar to Lakhanpur (4 km). From Lakhanpur one passes through Najyang, Malpa and Lamari to reach Budi (16 km from Lakhanpur). The first day of the trek might be a little strenuous including walking on more than a few ups and downs and a first-time traveller is advised to make necessary preparations as well as take necessary precautions before embarking on the journey.



Near Malpa | *Thimmarayaswamy Krishnappa*



En route to Budi village | *Thimmarayaswamy Krishnappa*



The traditional route goes through Simkhola and Lakhanpur (locally called Lakwar-Phu), Khan Dera (or Khan Mang Dera) and Najyang before hitting Malpa. Some hundred years ago, when the erstwhile king of Mysore was on his way back from Kailash Mansarovar, he realized that the path was very difficult and precarious. In order to make things easier for the future travellers, he brought strong and sturdy Khan workers from Kashmir to prepare a better route by breaking the solid rocks falling on the way, a task in which these workers excelled traditionally. These workers had built a cave for themselves for the purpose of staying in the night. This spot has since then acquired the name Khan Dera. The world of myth, fantasy and great story-telling opens up to a curious and enthusiastic traveller right from Simkhola Gaad (Ghatyabagad). The wonderful myths of Gala Bagel and Kalu Bura (Simkhola) and Tampa Khuchi Shyina (Lakhanpur) would be narrated by the locals to anyone who is interested.

From Lakhanpur one reaches Najyang where a stream originates from a glacier. The whole region is richly endowed with plentiful and rare herbs, flora and fauna. From Najyang the next destination is Malpa (also known as Malipa). The tiny hamlet of Malpa became part of international headlines when a massive landslide in 1997 swept away the whole settlement resulting in the deaths of about 250 people including several pilgrims to the holy Kailash-Mansarovar in Tibet. A memorial has been put up at Malpa by the Kumaon Mandal Vikas Nigam in memory of the people who lost their lives. Moving further from Malpa one encounters a cascade called Pelshitti and a flat land called Chhankan-Ri. A little further from Chhankan-Ri is the small village of Lamari. Lamari holds a special significance in the mythological world of the Vyans valley. The place is regarded as the birthplace of the famous Tyind Lama of Budi village whose story would be narrated elsewhere in the book. A small stream called Nyungtang-Ti falling in the route to Budi from Lamari also appears in several myths since Nyungtang is the goddess of water and prosperity and is worshipped in all the villages of the valley. A little naturally formed statue of the great goddess can also be spotted on the trek. One passes through places like Kothla and Thakti encountering a beautiful waterfall and a hot water spring that bears special healing powers. Little further from Thakti, the first glimpses of the Budi village are seen. The trek to Budi from this point is steep and tiring. A small rivulet called Palang confluences with the great Kali river at this point. Palang originates from the nearby Galja glaciers.

A watermill at the entrance of the Budi village welcomes the traveller to the land defined by great prosperity, mythology, incredible natural magnificence and human strife against the occasional inclemency of Mother Nature.

Between Lamari and Budi | *Aniruddh Garbyal*

Budi: The gateway to the Vyans valley

Budi is - "the first and the only sub-alpine Rang village of the Vyans Valley situated at an elevation of 9070 feet above the level of the sea on the right bank of the Palangar stream above its confluence with the Kali. Immediately above Budi, a steep ridge advances from the mountain side on the north-west and extends across the valley, leaving but a narrow passage for the river. The summit of Chetu-binayak is then reached after an ascent of about 1750 feet by an easy path and thence the entrance into upper Byans." This is how the great Edwin Thomas Atkinson describes the Budi village in his 'The Himalayan Gazetteer' first published in 1884.

Home of Budiylas, Lamas and Raipas, Budi is located at the lowest altitude among the Rang villages of the valley. There is a Kumaon Mandal Vikas Nigam guesthouse offering fantastic visuals of the Annapurna (Api) peak of the great Himalayas. The main Budi village is at a distance of about 500 m from the guesthouse.

The Rang families are divided according to an age-old and intricate social system based on genealogy in which the descendents of one ancestor are grouped as one specific clan called *raath*. The specific *raaths* live in specific parts of the village called *sauras*.

The *raaths* of the Budi village include Lama, Raichyang and Khwenchyang. The Lama *raath* has a further sub-*raath* called Gundakchyang. The sub-*raaths* of Raichyang *raath* are Pikuraichyang, Pangpuraichyang and Jekhuraichyang.



Budi village | Thimmarayaswamy Krishnappa



The Rang cosmology and religious life revolves around a number of gods that are attributed multi-dimensional characteristics in accordance with the prevalent local social faith. Some gods are directly linked to nature and its forces while several others have mythological beliefs attached to their existence. These beliefs have been passed on through generations via an extremely vivid and opulent oral tradition. The social set of connections and credence is such that it becomes difficult to draw a line between social customs and religious faith. This potent and stimulating mix between faith and life that directs the stream of life is to be seen all through the Rang valleys.

Charles A. Sherring writes - "The Saithan, or god's place, is a little chamber a yard in length and the same in breadth and one or two yards in height, in which there is a white stone, and on top of which there is a small branch of a tree adorned with narrow strips of white cloth (Dhaja) which flutter in the wind. However, most frequently we find no shrine, but instead a simple stone, and by it a prayer-pole or Darchyo (a tree trunk with a few branches left on the top) fixed in the ground with streamers (Dhaja) floating from it."

The foremost festivals celebrated in the village include worship of Hya Gabla, Kirji (called Kangdali in the Chaundas valley), the Vyas Fair, Nubu Saam and Budani. The people of Budi acknowledge the great Tyind Lama as the saviour and father-figure of the village, the several stories, anecdotes and myths about whose life and deeds are associated to a number of places, days, people and villages.

View of Budi | Thimmarayaswamy Krishnappa



The Kumaon Mandal Vikas Nigam guesthouse in Budi overlooking the valley | *Thimmarayaswamy Krishnappa*

The myth of Tyind Lama

Tyind Lama is said to have been born in the little settlement of Lamari from an egg that was hatched by a divine eagle. He was brought up by a lioness who fed him her own milk. Of course he also had a set of earthly parents.

Once when Tyind Lama was a child, he disappeared from his little swing. His parents and others started to anxiously search for him. Tyind Lama was fond of playing a dice-game called Chhilo. He possessed the power to transport his body at will and to enjoy a game or two of Chhilo he would often appear in Chhindu and Garbyang. A woman from Garbyang was enamoured by his physical attributes. One day she saw the boy Tyind Lama playing Chhilo alone near a watermill in Chhindu village. The boy wasn't wearing anything. As a matter of fact Tyind Lama used to play Chhilo with gods and ghosts, who couldn't be seen by ordinary mortals. Next morning the woman told her family about what she had seen the previous day. Some villagers went to the spot mentioned by the woman. The villagers saw a boy standing there. When the boy saw the crowd approaching him, he began flying and disappeared in the air with a friendly smile on his face. Tyind Lama has since then been also addressed as Phangt Lama (a Lama who could fly). The spot from where Tyind Lama had taken off is still intact in the shape of a pillar while all the surrounding land has already sunk deep.

When the woman heard of the magical disappearance, she was convinced that he was the same boy who frequently appeared in her visions. The villagers tempted her with all sorts of riches in return of providing the boy's whereabouts, but she refused. The woman demanded that the Nyungtang (the goddess of water and prosperity) be handed over to her. The demand of the woman was met and the people found the boy Tyind Lama at the place again pointed out by her.

In his life Tyind Lama acquired the fame and respect as the chief redeemer and champion of the region specially of the Budi village. He was physically powerful, clever, sharp and intelligent and dedicated his life to the welfare and progress of the Rangs.

The first myth giving evidence of his prowess is to be found in Simkhola where he defeated an evil demon by the name of Gala Bagel. Another myth mentions another demon called Tampa Khuchi Shyina who lived in a cave behind the Tampa waterfall situated opposite a place near Lakhanpur across the Kali river in Nepal. The ever-hungry Tampa Khuchi Shyina had become a constant terror for the shepherds and the



House in Budi | *Thimmarayaswamy Krishnappa*



villagers. The story of how Tyind Lama tricked the Tampa Khuchi Shyina into gulping down a red-hot stone and made him leave the Rang-territory is recounted in grand detail by the elderly people of Budi.

Another myth about Tyind Lama is associated to his hobby of playing Chhilo. In a place near the Budi village, a demon (locally called shyina) by the name of Thakong would often come to play the dice-game with Tyind Lama. The two powerful players would have frequent rows whose evidences are to be seen today in the form of several pit-like formations in the area. A fine-looking boulder can also be seen at the same spot. It is believed that the two would sit on this boulder and play the game. Since Tyind Lama was the stronger of the two, the boulder got inclined little deeper on the side where he took his seat.

Another story involving these two relates to a wrestling bout between Thakong and the son of Tyind Lama. This eventful bout was instrumental in making Thakong realize his mistakes and publicly apologize.

Once Tyind Lama was invited to the Darma valley by the leading Lama there called Darma Lama. Before food was served the Darma Lama requested Tyind Lama to wash his hands from a nearby water-source. When Tyind Lama reached the water-source, the water had turned to solid ice. In fact through his divine powers the Darma Lama had frozen all the water sources, rivers and waterfalls of the region to exhibit his strength to his esteemed guest. Tyind Lama couldn't wash his hands and met a temporary defeat. But on his return he grabbed all the water of Darma and carried it to a place near Budi before releasing it. A water-source erupted there as a result and is presently called Darma Chi Naso by the people of Budi.

Another similar myth including these two lamas states that as a symbol of display of his powers, the Darma Lama sent an invitation through a lady-servant of his to Tyind Lama. The lady met Tyind Lama near a bridge that joined Chhindu and Chhangru. The specially appointed disciple-servant of Darma Lama carried the water of the flowing Kali river in a shallow basket made from bamboo. In return, to send an equally potent message back to the Darma Lama, Tyind Lama took the skin of a dry walnut and hit a solid rock with it. A water-source again erupted out of this rock. This water-source is named Kure-Ti and its water is famed to hold immense healing powers.

There are many more such myths that abound in the memory of the people of Budi. The Tyind Lama was blessed with superhuman divine powers and his friendship with another great Lama of his time namely Shaukpo Lama of Kuti is known all over the valley. Details of this friendship will be narrated in this book later when one would speak of Kuti and its lamas.

Tyind Lama has till this day indirectly been serving the people of Budi through his present descendent Khushal Lama, who is kept in high regard in the valley for his mystic strength.

View of the peaks from Bhudi | *Thimmarayaswamy Krishnappa*

Chhiyalekh

A very steep and testing climb of about 3 km to the north of Budi would take one to Chhiyalekh (locally known as Chhyeto), situated at an altitude of 3350 m. The official inner line begins from Chhiyalekh and the visitors have to present their official documents at the ITBP check-post. From Chhiyalekh you can see the vast expanse of the natural grandeur of the Vyans valley. The vast meadows of Chhiyalekh are abundant in all kinds of herbal and medicinal plants. The profusion of many-coloured wild seasonal flowers in all shades and shapes and sizes gives the impression of an explosion of hues. From this brilliant location one has excellent views of the snow-laden peaks of Mount Api and Hya Namjyung.

The Garbyang village can be seen from here. Also visible from here are the villages of Chhangru, Chhindu and Gaga. It is said that earth and sky run into each other at Chhiyalekh. A rare temple of Vyas Rishi is located here along with another one dedicated to Baram Dev.

The Indian Army and the ITBP (Indo Tibetan Border Police) have their major check-posts in Chhiyalekh which can boast of a recently built helipad as well.

The myth of *sanjivani* and Chhiyalekh

The Ramayana states that when Laxman got fatally wounded and fell unconscious during the war between Lord Ram and Ravana, Lord Hanuman was sent to the Himalayas to fetch a herb called *sanjivani* from the Himalayas. Many believe that Lord Hanuman had come to Chhiyalekh to gather the magical herb that could bring the dead back to life.

A popular myth narrates that once a saint was travelling through the Vyans valley. It got evening by the time he made it to Chhiyalekh. He decided to pass the night there. With some effort he managed to kill a bird for his dinner. He made fire and fetched water from a water-source named Aiyya Marti close by to prepare dinner. He put the bird-meat in a pot and started cooking. He broke a little twig from a tree named Biru Kwalsyin and using it as a ladle began to stir the contents of the cooking pot. That very moment the killed bird came back to life and flew from inside the pot into the dark forest.

The saint realized that the twig he had used as a ladle belonged to the *sanjivani* plant. When people and other creatures of the world heard of this, Chhiyalekh was flooded by visitors all of whom wanted their share of the herb. The herb was scared that interacting with so many creatures that included humans, birds, animals, insects, spiders and even lice, it would lose its purity. In order to maintain its potency and integrity, the herb decided to fly away to the top of the mountain that shelters the Chhangru village of Nepal.



Chiyalekh valley | Thimmarayaswamy Krishnappa



Rock with human face in Chhiyalekh | Thimmarayaswamy Krishnappa

Garbyang: the 'sinking' village

Beyond the Chhiyalekh pass is situated the village of Garbyang. The total distance from Budi to Garbyang is 9 km. For almost half a century this village has acquired dubious fame as 'the sinking village'. Once a huge spread of even ground, the village began sinking at the beginning of the 1960's and some of the finest houses of the valley have been consumed by ground. The unfortunate process continues even today and one can see houses with extremely skilful wood-carvings precariously hanging on to whatever ground had been left in the village.

Atkinson describes the topography of the Garbyang village in the following words : "The first village in the upper Byans is Garbiya or Garbiyang (10,320 feet), close to the Kali river. The houses here are two-stories high quaintly and closely studded with poles erected for ornament or most probably from some superstitious motive. A little beyond stand the remains of the village Chhindu, the rest of which has been swept away by the river. The base of this valley is formed by an accumulation of old alluvium and debris from the surrounding mountain sides in strata of considerable aggregate thickness and loose consistency, through which the river appears to have cut its present channel, three or four hundred feet below the site of the present villages, and to the great danger of those which are too near its bank. The Chetu hill above Budhi is in fact the abrupt termination of the elevated bed of dotritus, forming to the south an acclivity of 200 feet or more in vertical height; to the east and north-east where the river breaks through it appears in cliffs and landslips many hundred feet high."

In the pre-1962 era Garbyang was one of the most flourishing tracts of Kumaon region. This immensely prosperous village was once the centre of international trade with Tibet for several centuries. It is mentioned in Atkinson's gazetteer (published in 1882) that Baz Bahahur Chand, the erstwhile king of Khasdesh took personal interest for the growth of this trade and supervised the construction of the trade route.

The tragedy was a huge setback for the residents of the village who had to be rehabilitated in the alien plains of Sitarganj in the Terai tract of Kumaon.

During a lucky overnight stay at the village, in the company of some old man, you might get to hear grand stories of the Chhota Vilayat, the mini-Europe, that the village once was.





Swiss explorers Arnold Heim and August Gansser had visited Garbyang in 1936. Their recollections about Garbyang can be found in their book 'The Throne of the Gods - An Account of the First Swiss Expedition to the Himalayas'. Some interesting and amusing details from this important text are as under -

At the edge of the expansion of the valley where there are screes, and where two lateral valleys debouch, on the northern slope at 8500 feet is the village of Budhi, consisting of about fifteen stone huts, and reminding us of a mountain village in the Ticino. One of the porters pointed at a distant cliff. I could not understand what interested him until I had examined it through the field-glasses. It was not a vulture's nest, for the spots beneath the overhanging rocks were brown. They were bees' nests, built where they would be safe from men or beasts with a taste for honey.

*After an hour or two's rest in the village whose summer population had not yet arrived (cortals, as such villages are called in the Pyrenees) our strength was recuperated. It was only six miles, we were told, to reach our first aim. Only six miles, but they were mountain miles, the first two of them being a very steep climb in zig-zags. The sun was blazing, and the rocks like an oven. We were drenched with sweat when, at 10,460 feet, we reached a green plateau, bestrewn with boulders, but mainly carpeted with flowers : violet iris, carmine primulas (*Pvimula denticulata*), small pale-blue gentian, odorous violets, flowering shrubs such as daphne, barberry, and cotoneaster. Behind were groups of tall fir trees, and in the background the snow-peaks : the ice-encrusted summit of Nampa, which we were rapidly approaching, and nearer, to the left of Nampa, a mountain like the Silberhorn. They were resplendent above the dark forest of a Nepalese lateral valley .*

Shall we reach them ? Our goal was in sight only three miles away, and we reached it in a couple of hours-the village of Garbyang.

Vintage Garbyang | women weaving | Photo courtesy S. S. Garbyal

In quarters at Garbyang

The village rose from the same terrace as the bungalow. Having no less than two hundred houses, it was a large place for the inner Himalayas, the only other settlement of that size in the Almora district being Milam, far away to the N.W. Seen from close at hand, Garbyang was " not so dusty ". Besides the primitive huts, there were some fine-looking old two-storeyed houses with lovely wood-carvings on the door- and window-frames. Being painted reddish-brown, they stood out in splendid contrast with the deep blue sky. This Bhotia settlement was obviously under Tibetan influence, the staircases in the two-storeyed buildings were cut out of a tree-trunk, and near by some prayer-flagstuffs had been propped against the wall.

I need hardly say that we could not rest until we had solved the geological puzzles of Garbyang. As if cut with a knife, the upper border of the terrace runs along the side of the valley, not only in the village, but for several miles above Garbyang. On the opposing, the Nepalese, face was the village of Chhangru, also upon the terrace, which ended down-valley towards the S.W., in the transversely disposed plateau (marked 10,809 feet on the map) about two miles from Garbyang. A further visit showed that the lower part had the aspect of detritus, of moraine, but the upper part the aspect of landslip. Vainly did we seek a place from which the landslide had come. Had it fallen upon the glacier which was once there ? This much was certain, that the river had been dammed up by the transversal plateau. This gave rise to a lake, which extended more than six miles down the valley. Gradually this lake was filled up with fine silt which now forms the fertile soil of the terraces of Garbyang, through whose deposits the river has once more cut deeply.

*On its new course, deviating to the left of the wall, it reached rockbottom under the moraine, and is now cutting into that rock-bottom yet more deeply, instead of taking the old more direct valley towards Budhi. It has cut down about 800 feet into the transversal plateau. Every day a bearded vulture patrols the valley. In its wonderful soaring flight it is able, without beating its wings, to glide as close to the ribs of rock as an albatross glides almost touching the crests of the waves in the South Seas. At Garbyang there are some of the carrion crows and kites (*Milvus migrans*) which enliven the lower levels. As for the red-billed Alpine crows (*Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax*), huge flights of these settle down on the flowery meads. Their call reminds us of that of the European jackdaw.*

On the second day after our arrival, since I had still some writing to do, Gansser made the first excursion to higher altitudes, accompanied by Paldin. They scaled the rocks immediately behind the village, but alas, after we reached Garbyang there was a change for the worse in the weather. I anxiously noted that the clouds were gathering overhead, and was somewhat disturbed as to the possibility of their being lost in the mist. At length, as twilight was falling, there came a hail. They returned with noses blistered by the sun, but in enthusiastic mood.

*" Through a rift in the clouds I saw all the way to Gurla Mandhata in Tibet. Magnificent peaks, white horns with fluted icy encrustation, are pretty close to us in the S.E., in Nepal, whereas the twenty-thousander above Budhi, which had seemed attractive to us on the map, is less interesting, and probably unclimbable." After a long scramble over the ridge, Gansser reached an altitude of 16,467 feet, at a point where the Indian topographers erected a cairn long ago. He brought me back a big spray of foliage. The specimen stands on my table as I write ; it is vigorous and tough -rhododendron from 13,000 feet, with white, violet-bordered trumpet-shaped flowers in spherical tufts. I have never seen anything of the sort in a garden. (It was, presumably, *Rhododendron lepidotum*.)*

[From Arnold Heim and August Gansser's
'The Throne of the Gods - An Account of the First Swiss Expedition to the Himalayas' (1939)]

Garbyang : the people and their gods

There was a time when almost two hundred and fifty families lived in this extremely prosperous village. The houses were divided family-wise into three sections called *sauras*, namely Yarpachyang (the upper part), Gunda *saura* (the middle part) and Pangpachyang (the lower part).

The families belong to different traditional clans called *raaths*. The *raaths* belonging to Yarpachyang include Chhinjyal, Bura, Nimphan and Khosa. The Gunda *saura* houses Syangchim, Khakchym and Nuchyim *raaths* while the Lango, Ranjan, Chhamyal, Guma and Nima *raaths* belong to Pangpachyang.



Garbyang in snow | Aniruddh Garbyal



The greatest god of Garbyang is Hya Namjyung. Hya Namjyung is the earth god of this village and is worshipped by all the *raaths*. The people collectively named Syangyarpachyang (including Yarpachyang *raath* of the upper *saura* and the Gunda *raath* of the middle *saura*) separately worship their ancestral god Hya Kungar. Hya Kungar is the rain god who is still approached for granting and stopping rain whenever required. The villagers gather at an arranged spot in the village and invoke this rain god by scattering some *phaphar* (a popular coarse grain, grown in the Rang valleys) flour. The Pangpachyang *raath* of the lower *saura* worships Hya Yangladhar. Hya Yangladhar is considered to be a part of Hya Namjyung.

The other major gods worshipped in the village include Hya Thimpa Namjyung, Chhainto Guru, Vyas Dev, Karjang Gungka, Hya Gabla, Layar Kuti, Laraung-Kakaung, Api Guthi, Hya Laraungpa, Hya Chhipla, Hya Kalyabir, Hya Bappa, Bungjyung Guru, Darma Gungru, Joshimath Gungru, Hya Siddha, Hya Gangri, Lipu Chan, Tilsi Nyungtang, Devi Mai, Hya Tadang (Hya Chyunti), Yisaun Gambo, Hya Langa, Dirkhun Nyungtang, Saungpo Nyungtang etc.

Valley of Garbyang | Soumil U. Shah

The myth of Karjang Gungka

Karjang Gungka's ancestors were originally from Jumla but had settled in Garbyang at some point in time. The father of Karjang Gungka was very powerful and took undue advantage of his physical strength by indulging in larceny and pilfering in the village. Karjang Gungka had one sister who was married to Tasong-Hya. Karjang Gungka followed the footsteps of his father and in the company of Jumli-Hya indulged in robbery and terror. The troubled villagers made a complaint to Tasong-Hya. Tasong-Hya tried to persuade his brother-in-law. Karjang Gungka would rob the villagers and keep his plunder secretly in a place called Karjang. Tasong-Hya was also concerned by the deeds of Karjang Gungka. He sent his wife to Karjang for ancestor-*puja* with a pitcher filled with poisoned alcohol. He asked her to come back home immediately after the *puja* was over to which she complied. Later when Tasong-Hya and his brother Gungsung-Hya went to Karjang, they saw that Karjang Gungka was happily intoxicated. The brothers set the place on fire. Flames kept rising from Karjang for seven days. Karjang Gungka had met his end.



Old House in Garbyang | Sunil Sharma



Karjang Gungka had two sons who had gone to the plains with their herds for trade at the time of the above incident. On their way home, when they reached a place called Thin near Lamari, an old woman by the name Thin Lala told them that their house in Karjang had been set on fire and that their father had been killed. She advised them not to go home and stay with her. The younger brother climbed the top of a nearby mountain and saw fumes rising from Karjang. After he had told this fact to his elder brother, the two decided not to go home and stay with the old lady. In due course of time the old lady got his daughter married to the elder brother and made him live in her house permanently. The younger brother went to Garhwal. It was there that he took his revenge by killing the shepherds of Tasong-Hya and Gungsung-Hya, who had taken their herds for grazing.

Ladies from Garbyang | Dhiraj Singh Garbyal

Tasong-Hya and Gungsung-Hya

Once upon a time, two brothers named Tasong-Hya and Gungsung-Hya used to reside in the Chhindu *tok* of the Garbyang village. An evil wrestler named Dudla-Paiku also lived in those days in the Nabi and Rongkong villages of the Vyans valley. Dudla-Paiku's terror was widespread in the valley. After a fierce battle, Tasong-Hya and Gungsung-Hya killed the wicked wrestler. As a result the two brothers became highly respectable in the region.

Once a shepherd took the goats belonging to the two brothers to Garhwal for grazing. The people of Niti-Mana unjustly killed the shepherd. On hearing the sad news, the brothers set out to the spot and took their revenge by slaying the people of Niti-Mana. The elder brother named Tasong-Hya brought back the goats to Garbyang while Gungsung-Hya, the younger one was tempted by a pitcher full of wine lying in a deserted house. He drank the wine and decided to stay on. This is said to be the reason why linguistic similarities are found in these two regions.



Jhuppus in Garbyang in winter | Aniruddh Garbyal



The people of the Garbyang village attribute the existence of their village to these two warrior brothers. Tasong-Hya and Gungsung-Hya were well-versed in local justice. They were intelligent, rational, accommodating, strong and audacious. They got rid of several evil forces dominating the valley and reestablished peace and harmony. They were the village headmen and judges. They were responsible for settling all the disputes of the whole Vyans valley. When they grew old, they handed over the title of Bara (the headman and judge) to the Bura *raath* of Garbyang.

It is common belief that when Tasong-Hya and Gungsung-Hya turned very old, it became difficult for them to walk to Garbyang for the hearings. A palanquin had been arranged to bring these highly respectable judges reverently from Chhindu to the court in Garbyang, where they delivered their decisions.

Several popular myths about Tasong-Hya and Gungsung-Hya are predominant in the whole Vyans valley and these Garbyal ancestors are regarded in very high esteem for their unparalleled traits.

The cairn of faith | Dhiraj Singh Garbyal



The Myth of Hya Namjyung

Hya Namjyung is the greatest god of Garbyang and the Vyans valley. He is also known by the name of Sajya Dakpo. He is said to have been appointed by Hya Gangri as the guard for the Kailash-Mansarovar route. It is a firm local belief that without the permission of Hya Namjyung, no good or evil can reach Kailash-Mansarovar.

Nanda Devi is the greatest goddess of Johar valley of Munsyari (locally known as Chyanam) while Darma Nevla is the supreme god of Darma. A similar status is enjoyed by Hya Namjyung in the Vyans valley.

Hya Namjyung is said to have three wives to whom he has granted a lake each in the Mount Api (Annapurna) range for taking holy dips. It is also believed that the statue of Hya Namjyung also lies in this range in the shape of a mountain. A glacier in the Mount Api range is believed to represent his wealth.

Hya Namjyung owned great riches and a very handsome and strong persona. He could mesmerize anyone he laid his eyes upon. He had 100 sons and 25 daughters. When Hya Namjyung went on a visit to the Darma valley, he was infatuated by the beauty of Darma Nevla's wife and took her away to the Vyans valley. On hearing the news of his wife's kidnapping, Darma Nevla gathered all his fellow gods and goddesses and marched towards the Vyans valley. Hya Namjyung also called upon all his fellow gods and goddesses and a *panchayat* was held between the two parties.

The judge Hya Gangkang gave his decision in favour of Hya Namjyung and decreed that Darma Nevla could take along all the wealth of Hya Namjyung in return of his wife. Darma Nevla had to concede defeat at the behest of his brother called Gane who resided in Syela village of the Darma valley. It is believed that Darma Nevla took away all the possessions of Hya Namjyung including his clothes. Hya Namjyung was left only with his turban and his waist-belt (*jyujyang*). The mountain in the Mount Api range representing Hya Namjyung resembles a person wearing these two pieces of attire only.

Hya Namjyung was overwhelmed by the support shown by his fellow gods and goddesses and he rewarded each of them with a son. The ritual *puja* of Keepang and Barani is held in the villages of the valley that hold a seat of this powerful god. In the Darma valley Hya Namjyung is worshipped as a goddess. The goddess of water and prosperity in the Vyans valley i.e. Nyungtang, is addressed as Namjyung Nyungtang in the Darma valley.



Gobarya Pandit of Garbyang

Rai Bahadur Gobarya Pandit was one of the greatest persons among the Rangs. Born around 1868, his reputation as a legendary trader was spread like his trade up to Ladakh, Lhasa, Kathmandu, Kanpur, Delhi, Bombay, Calcutta and other places. He had developed very approachable and close relations with the king of Nepal, the Rajwars of Askot and the top British officials of the region. The courage, verbal skills, social consciousness and innovative intelligence of this great man were highly regarded by these elites and they were always willing to offer him all sorts of favours. He had helped the British in several topographical surveys. In 1906, the British government rewarded him with the title of Rai Saheb and a silver medal. In 1912 he was further rewarded with the title of Rai Bahadur and a gold medal.

Very well versed in the English, Hindi, Tibetan, Nepali and Pahari languages, he was a very eloquent orator. He was very innovative and enthusiastic about arts, trade and industry. Carrying wool from Tibet to the Indian markets through treacherous hilly routes used to be a tough task in those times. He introduced a very effective way of transporting wool by inventing novel bales and carry bags. He encouraged the Rang people to make use of frames for weaving carpets. He taught the people the use of Persian knots and the methods of colouring wool. It was through his encouragement that several Rang men and women were able to participate in several trade-exhibitions all over India with their own products. An esteemed British organization based in Adelphi, London, called The Society for the Encouragement of Industries, Commerce and Art nominated Gobarya Pandit as one of its elite members. He was instrumental in sending a woman called Chachhe from Rongkong village to Allahabad for imparting training of carpet-weaving to other artisans. On the demand of the British government the abovementioned lady not only got an opportunity to go to England for two years, she also participated in an exhibition at the Buckingham Palace where she introduced the queen and the British elite the innovative techniques of weaving that she had mastered while working with Pandit Gobarya.

When he was very young and had only received education up to the sixth standard, he was sent at the recommendation of the Sub Deputy of the Department of Education, to a school in a place called Konti-Kwaldang in Darma to work as a replacement for the teacher who had gone on a long leave. It was then



that he acquired the honorary title of Pandit. He worked there for two months. He returned home only to join his father's already prosperous trade. He realized that the expansive family trade required him to have fluency over several languages. He appointed a tutor to learn English at home. In later years he made Kathmandu his trade-headquarters. The Government of Nepal was more than contented by his accomplishments and granted him revenue-free ownership of several villages.

During the era of the Pal, Chand and the Gorkha rulers, the Rang people were faced with an unsolicited problem. During the summer months when the Rangs would migrate to their upper villages, the local officials would convert their yards into fields for cultivation. This caused inconvenience to the Rangs because they had to put in a lot of effort to get their houses in order on their return to the winter homes in Dharchula and Jauljibi. The officials would create further hassles if a complaint was made. Pandit Gobarya spoke to the British officials and ensured that the illegal rights of the Pal Rajwars were taken away from Dharchula and the Jauljibi-valley. Consequently the Gori river was marked as the northern boundary of the Riyasat of Askot and the valleys were freed from the control of the Pal Rajwars. Similar conditions were predominant in the Deuthala and Darchula regions of Nepal. Gobarya Pandit went to see the Nepali king in Kathmandu and acquired a royal decree that the land inside Nepal, belonging to the residents of Gunji and Garbyang was registered on their names.

After the 1815 treaty, the Kali river has been treated as the boundary between Nepal and India. The Nepali king had appointed a toll-inspector at the border between Dharchula and Darchula. This official would collect a toll tax from the people including Rangs, whenever they entered Nepal via the bridge. A cruel toll-inspector by the name Kalu Chand was notorious for his misdeeds. He would beat, torture and frequently arrest the shepherds and the Rangs. Pandit Gobarya had to wield his influence to settle the issues and save his people on a regular basis. Kalu Chand in the meantime filed a false complaint against the Pandit in the court of the Nepali king. Pandit Gobarya had no option but to go to the court of the Nepali king and narrate the truth. Kalu Chand was suspended and the right to collect tax on all the bridges falling on the Kali river between Tanakpur and Garbyang was granted to Pandit Gobarya. Since Pandit Gobarya was a busy trader, this task was looked after by his nephew Param Singh Garbyal till 1930. After the death of Pandit Gobarya, the new Nepali government again handed over these rights to its toll-inspectors.

Pandit Gobarya's life came to an end in 1930 in Kathmandu where he was given a royal cremation. His deeds and achievements still remain unparalleled in the annals of the recent Rang-history.



Gunji village | *Rajendra Singh Bisht*



A house in Gunji | www.bcmtouring.com

Gunji

Eight km ahead of Garbyang is the village of Gunji. The route to Gunji is comparatively even on which you come across mesmerizing landscapes, verdant meadows and seasonal carpets of colourful flowers. The Himalayan magnificence accompanies you all the way.

Overlooking the confluence of the Kali and the Kuti-Yangti rivers, Gunji is one of the most important villages falling on the Kailash-Mansarovar trek. Several government and defence agencies have their setups at Gunji that facilitate this famous pilgrimage, the Indo-Tibetan trade and other activities in the region. A Kumaon Mandal Vikas Nigam guesthouse in Gunji has also been built for facilitating the pilgrims to Kailash-Mansarovar.

The village Gunji becomes the hub of several cultural activities and festivals during the visiting season. The residents of the village are called Gunjyals. The Gunjyals were called Gungchyangs in earlier and Thungthungpa in still earlier times. To the east of Gunji are Talla and Malla Kauwwan, to the west is Nabi village while the Napalchyu village is situated to the south. To the north of Gunji lie the gigantic Himalayan mountains and the Lipu Lekh pass to Tibet.



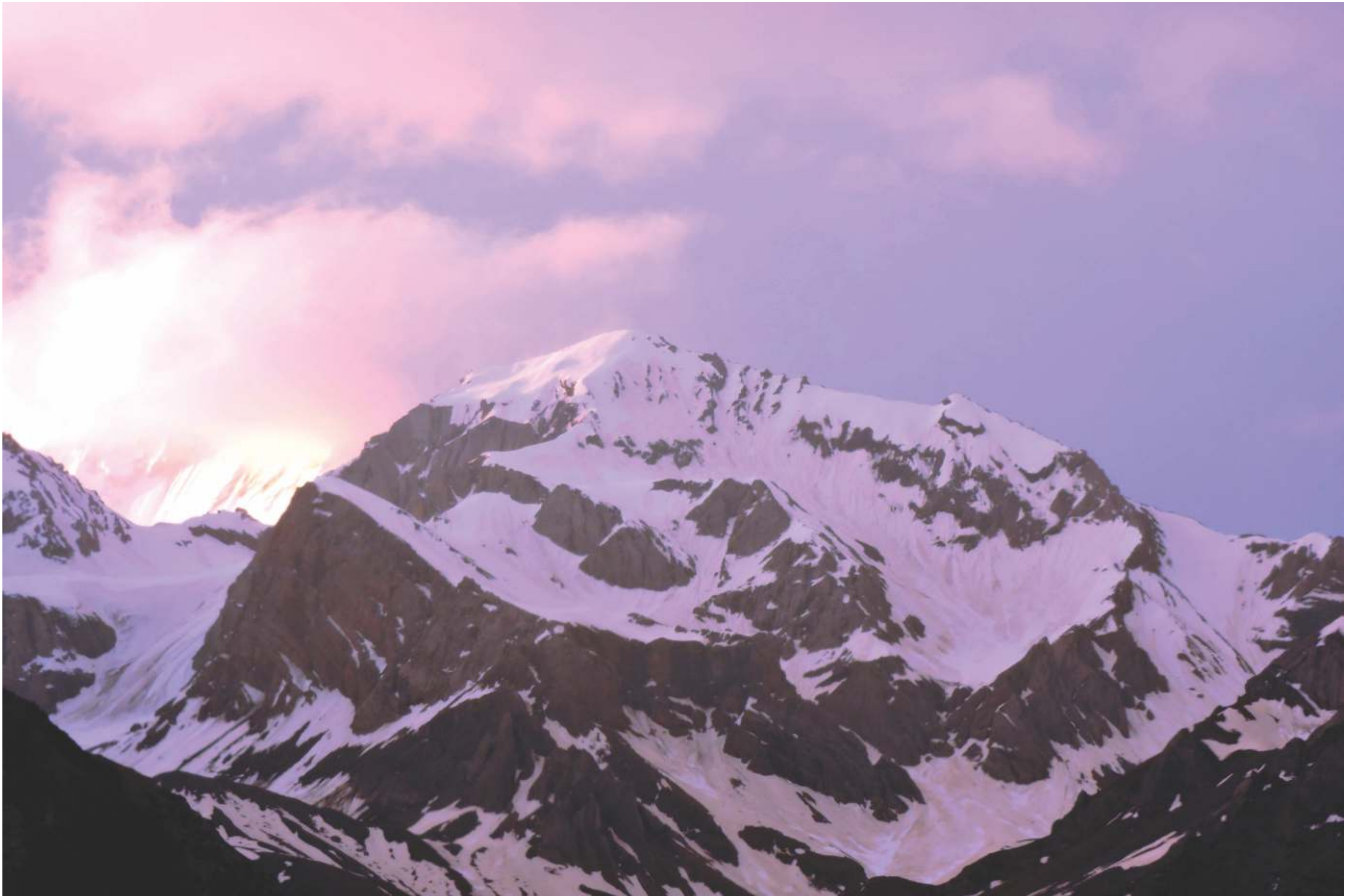
Vyas temple overlooking Gunji | *Thimmarayaswamy Krishnapp*



To reach the Lipu Lekh pass one has to first go to Kala Pani which is situated at a distance of 9 km from Gunji. From Kala Pani one treks further northwards to Nabidhang which is a further 9 km. From Nabidhang one has the views of the amazing and incredible Om Parvat. From Nabidhang a strenuous and highly taxing trek of 9 more km takes one to the Lipu Lekh pass from where one enters Tibet, the land of the holy Mount Kailash and the Mansarovar lake. The route to Tibet via Lipu Lekh pass had been used for international trade with Tibet by the Rang traders for centuries.



© Thimmarayaswamy Krishnappa





The *raaths* and gods of Gunji

The main *raaths* of the Gunji village are Lama, Bura (also known as Thamo), Tamyar, Lechym, Laiba, Gunda and Kharku. These *raaths* are classified into three major *sauras* namely Thamochyang-Gundakchyang, Laiba-Lechymchyang and Kharkuchyang. The Gunjyals have their fields in both Gunji and the nearby located Kawwan. There are three different watermills for the three different raths on the banks of the Napalchyu Piyar river in Talla Napalchyu.

The Gunjyals worship several gods and goddesses including Tippa Chyabje, Guru Se, Tyityi Kalyindarje, Ba Janglaru, Nha Namti, Tata Bijli, Gyamjusura, Jagmal, Jamdar, Mahakali (or Purnagiri), Garjya Lungti, Duni Tuli, Jya Thaong Thong Guru, Thiche Phugchan, Myi Phugchan, Gangri Labchyang, Kalyaganj, Dhagsyinbe, Syipchyu, Hya Gangri, Guru Rimbrache, Padma Sambhah, Kayar Gabla Devi and the water goddess Nyungtang.

Generally all the *raaths* collectively worship all the gods but the abode for Myilo Thimo, Keepang, Syang Se, Nha Namti and Tata Bijli has been separately established in a different spot for the Kahrku rath. Similarly the abode for Nyungtang is set up separately for Lama, Thamo and Tamyar *raaths*. The Laiba and Lechym *raaths* have another different place of worship for Nyungtang while the Gunda rath has another different one.



The Jumli Hya Samo of Gunji

A festival of triumph called Jumli Hya Samo is celebrated every twelve years in the village of Gunji. In ancient times the Gunchyangs (the residents of Gunji presently known as Gunjyals) were known by the names Tingongpa or Thungongpa. These people lived in a place near Gunji called Dungja. In the course of time two brothers by the names Amyarchyang and Ampachyang settled in the present Gunji village.

The village of Kha-Kawwa (also known as Kawwa Kuti) was situated across the Kali river on the present Indo-Nepal border. The headman of Kha-Kawwa used to be the chief of all the local villages and held the right to collect tax from all. The tax had to be paid in the form of gold brought from Tibet. Gradually the headman's terror and tyranny reached such an extent that the act of carrying an ordinary stone from land was taxed. Under the leadership of the wise Amyarchyang, the other headmen of the neighbouring villages planned to assassinate the headman of Kha-Kawwa. The news of the conspiracy somehow got leaked to the headman of Kha-Kawwa who secretly won the faith of the headman of Rilkot village and invited all the neighbouring village-headmen to participate in a collective *puja*. The headman of Kha-Kawwa wanted to kill Amyarchyang on the pretext of this *puja*.

Accompanied by his innocent 12-year old son, Amyarchyang went to participate in the *puja*. When the *puja* was going on, the people of Kha-Kawwa tricked the father and son to go to a solitary place where they were attacked. The young boy managed to save his life by running into the dense bushes of the fields of Lali-Thang. Amyarchyang has in the meantime been cruelly murdered.

When Amyarchyang didn't return to his village, his villagers set out to Kha-Kawwa to find their headman only to realize that he had been slain.

The untimely and unfortunate death of Amyarchyang brought a flurry of misfortune to the Gunji village and the people finally decided to invade Kha-Kawwa again with full might. The people of Kha-Kawwa got the news of this planned attack and got scared. They abandoned Kha-Kawwa overnight and migrated to Jumla. Before leaving their village they buried their precious jewels and gold in forests and caves. They were given a wild goose chase by the Gunjyals. Their desire to attack Kha-Kawwa couldn't be fulfilled.

After some time the people who had run away to Jumla began to face unprecedented natural calamities. Their Lamas (soothsayers) recommended that a round stone called Kalyin kept over a platform in Gunji village had to be brought to the village. Accompanied by a horse and a yak, the people of Jumla came to Gunji in disguise with the objective of carrying the Kalyin to their village. The backbones of both the animals got fractured when the Kalyin was being loaded on to their backs. Their mission failed.

In the meantime the misfortune of Gunji continued - natural calamities and deaths became a regular feature of day-to-day life. Eventually, all the gods residing between Budi and Kuti were invoked. It was divinely indicated that the main reason behind Gunji's misfortune was the fact that Ampangchyang, the younger brother of Amyarchyang was cultivating the land belonging to his elder brother after the latter's death. The Lamas recommended that for the peace and happiness of Gunji, an effigy of Jumli Hya (the king of Jumla) had to be completely destroyed every twelfth year as a symbol of true revenge.

Ever since then all the Gunjyals gather every twelfth year in the village and on a prearranged day march with their newly-shined arms to a spot in the forest below the rock of Fasdang. There they prepare an effigy of Jumli Hya with *Syilyi* flour and blood-filled goat's intestines. This effigy is then ceremoniously attacked and demolished as a symbol of revenge. *Samo* in Rang dialect means complete demolition and hence this victory march has been named Jumli Hya Samo.

Rongkong

Further from Gunji one comes across a great expanse of fields and dense pine forest that lead to a small place called Chyaram. The beautiful forest in front is called Chyaram Jhara (in local dialect *jhara* is the word for forest) One of the oldest primary schools had been set up in Chyaram for the children of Nabi, Rongkong, Gunji, Napalchyu and Kuti. This pioneering school lies in ruins now as new schools have been opened in almost all the villages. Once you cross Chyaram, the fields belonging to the people of Nabi are visible. Walking through the fields on a thin foot-lane, one comes across a huge vertical piece of rock embedded firmly in the ground among the fields. It is said that a wrestler called Dudla Paiku had carried this rock on his shoulders from a place called Kungkang in the Rongkong village to exhibit his physical might to the villagers. It is difficult to make assumptions regarding the size and weight of this monumental rock.

A very little ahead of this monument is a little bridge to the left of the main trek over a little rivulet originating from distant northern glaciers. This rivulet forms the borderline between Nabi and Rongkong. It further forms the border between Gunji and Napalchyu and ultimately meets the grand Kali river. The route straight goes to Nabi whose total distance from Gunji is only three km. Crossing the little old bridge brings Rongkong into sight. Before the entrance to the village the seat of the village god lies under the shade of a huge pine tree. The villagers trust that no evil force can enter the village beyond this point.

Till a few years back, large amounts of food-grain were produced in the vast and expansive fertile fields of Rongkong. Traditionally the Rangs have been a semi-nomadic race. The villagers would come to these summer villages for one harvest and trade activities. In the changed circumstances of the present time, the number of people coming to their native villages has shot down greatly. A visit to the two villages of Rongkong and Napalchyu especially would unfold many sad stories of migration and abandoned households.



Rongkong village | Vikas Gupta



Another aspect of the Rongkong village | Thimmarayaswamy Krishnappa

The *raaths* and gods of Rongkong

The residents of Rongkong take on the name Rongkali. There are two main *raaths* of Rongkong namely Pangpa and Yarpa. The chief gods of the village are Hya Gangkang, Hya Namjyung and the goddess Nyungtang.

There are a number of spots in the village that deserve a mention because of their beauty and the stories attached to them. These places include Tutran Jhara, Nyungtang-Ti-Chhu, Budi Galja, Kwalkang, Sullu, Syang-Dong-Le, Kungkang, Gangkang, Darmapala, Tokpsya, Mittigunda, Twankolha, Baram, Lukchvu, Ngasa and Nyungtang Chhvu etc. All these places have local legends and anecdotes attached to them.



The myth of Rimkha Rakhu and Rongkong Rakhu

Several centuries ago two villages lied on either sides of the river Dhangjyung. The current village of Rongkong was on one side while on the other side of the river was the village Rimkha Rakhu that housed about 100 families. The residents of both villages lived in harmony and performed their community rituals and *pujas* collectively. A wrestler named Rongpa Raiyatu was considered to be the person responsible to supervise all the activities of both the villages in a peaceful manner. The villagers followed his directions.

After the death of Rongpa Raiyatu, the cord of harmony between the villages was broken and disputes became frequent. Crimes like murder became the order of the day. This mayhem went on for several years as a consequence of which both villages not only suffered several casualties, they also reached a point of complete obliteration. The villages presented a picture of desertion and desolation. Ultimately the remaining survivors of Rimkha Rakhu abandoned their village and left for an anonymous destination. These violent disputes had left the people of Rongkong in a very terrible state as not enough working hands could survive the havoc. There were hardly any people left to work on the fields. Gradually people from other places were offered free land and assets in return of accepting to settle in Rongkong. It took several years before the village could reach a minimum level of prosperity and rebuild cordial relations with other neighbouring villages. The people of Rongkong could not take possession of the abandoned Rimkha Rakhu because they didn't have the necessary number of persons left. With the passage of time the Rimkha Rakhu turned into scattered ruins that can still be seen.

The exact time of this event is not easy to guess although some elderly people claim that some of the villagers of Rimkha Rakhu had migrated to Garhwal while some found their new dwelling in Pitti Rangchym of Ladakh.

The village of Rongkong has traditionally been known for its wrestlers. Dudla Paiku was one such wrestler whose name appears in more than a couple of myths and anecdotes mentioned in this book.

Napalchyu

Lying adjacent to Rongkong village, the Napalchyu village is formed of two parts - Talla (lower) and Malla (upper) Napalchyu. The name of the village is derived from *Napal* (mountain wheat) and *Chyo* (a traditional unit of measuring length). It was believed that the wheat produced in this village was the best and the most delicious in the whole valley.

Situated to the north of Napalchyu are Nabi and Rongkong while to the south are the villages of Garbyang and Chhangru. To the east of Napalchyu lie Gunji and Talla and Malla Kawwan while to the west is the divine land of Yarong Hya Ruvse. This western part housed the celestial Aiyya Marti and Biru Kwalsyin that find a mention in the myth relating to the sanjivani herb in Chhiyalekh.



The *raaths* and gods of Napalchyu

There are four traditional *raaths* residing in Napalchyu namely Pangchhyang Nuchimpa, Yarchhyang Nuchimpa, Gundagpa and Yartogpa. Pangchhyang Nuchimpa, Yarchhyang Nuchimpa and Gundagpa *raaths* do not inter-marry while the Yartogpa *raath* can marry with all the remaining three *raaths*. It is believed that the ancestors of the Yartogpas had arrived in Napalchyu from Rongkong.

Hya Ruvse is the terra firma god of Napalchyu. The other important gods of the village include Hya Keepang, Hya Gangri Labchan, Hya Yaramyi, Hya Langa, Devi Mata, Nyungtang Sya, Hya Gangkang, Hya Gelbu and Hya Lakha etc.





The myth of Jainchyang Rakhu

Myth has it that in very ancient times at the foothills of Mount Yarong there was the holy abode of Aiyya Marti and Biru Kwalsyin. There were two village-settlements by the name of Jainchyang and Napalchyal Pitra (ancestor). A little stream marked the boundary between the vast and fertile fields of two villages. Both villages were extremely prosperous with Jainchyang holding an upper hand. Jainchyang housed more families and was relatively more prosperous. A hundred families resided in Jainchyang and is referred to as Jainchyang Rakhu in the prevalent myths.

A natural catastrophe completely demolished the Jainchyang village leaving just two brothers as survivors who were fortunately absent from the village on the night the calamity struck. The forlorn brothers became so distraught that they left their ancestral village for Jumla-Humla in Nepal. It is said that the descendents of these brothers have now swelled into a clan of 100 families and still follow the Rang rituals and lifestyle.

The Napalchyal ancestor's village became more prosperous than ever before because it acquired the land and riches of the abandoned Jainchyang Rakhu. The village became the richest and the most affluent in the whole valley. People from far and wide talked about this village.

During the same time, a poor widow lived in the adjacent Darma valley. She was made to lead a wretched life and was constantly ridiculed by her family members. The troubled lady was left with no option but to leave her house in search of a better and more respectable living. She walked on and on till she reached Chyaram Jhara. The tired woman fell asleep and saw in her dreams the gods directing her to her new home to a nearby place where the divine Aiyya Marti and Biru Kwalsyin resided in ancient times. The dream described her new home in a village that had vast fertile fields through which a clear stream ran.

When the old lady woke up and looked around from Chyaram and spotted the Napalchyu village. She discovered that the village fitted the description provided in her dream. On reaching the village she got to know that the divine Aiyya Marti and Biru Kwalsyin also had their ancient abode in Napalchyu. Accepting

the god's will she decided to work as a servant in household. Her loyalty, hardworking nature and affable nature wins the hearts of the Napalchyals who allow her to respectfully pass the rest of her life under their patronage.

The myth of Tyind Lama of Budi again makes an appearance in Napalchyu, where a contemporary Lama from Napalchyu is squarely defeated by the ever potent Tyind Lama.





Nabi

The distance between Gunji and Nabi is a mere 3 km. Nabi is the only village in the whole valley that has flat fields all around. The water resources are also aplenty. The word Nabi is said to have been derived from Ngabi. Ngabi is formed from two root words i.e. Nga and Bi (meaning five and rocky hill respectively in the local dialect Rang-lo). Thus Ngabi is a village located under the shadow of five rocky hills. Another phrase that is associated with Nabi is Ngasa Marti that means fifty water-sources.

It is a firm faith of the villagers of Nabi that the water body born from the fifty water-sources located behind the rocks of nabi forms the waterfall called Jang-ti-tha. Jang-ti-tha is regarded as very chaste by the locals. It is impossible to conceive the existence of Nabi village without Jang-ti-tha. The water from Jang-ti-tha is instrumental in running the water system of the village that also includes two watermills. It is because of this fact that this water is addressed as Jangti-Multi (water like gold and silver). The waters of Jang-ti-tha have their origin in the Ngasa Marti and the glaciers formed during the winters.

Ngasa Marti holds a very special place for Nabi. It is equivalent to what Ganga stands for in Hinduism. It is also a common faith that a warrior named Gangya is the protecting god of the Jang-ti-kho region. His holy seat has also been established in the village.

Ladies at work in Nabi | *Anshul Rautela*Nabi | *Anshul Rutela*

The *raaths* and gods of Nabi

The families of Nabi are divided into two groups of *raaths* namely Yerpachyang and Pangpachyang. The Yerpachyang group includes the Lachimpa, Badapa and Yersongpa *raaths* while the Pangpachyang group incorporates Beurpa, Pangsongpa and Kangsongpa *raaths*.

The most important gods of Nabi are Hya Gabla, Hya Thakpang, Hya Namjung, Hya Maabar, Chyola Kuti Bolaa Kuti, Hya Himyi, Ngasa Marti, Anye Gurma, Chhipla Gabla, Nayal Mangala, Rhangam Nhamti, Hya Gangri Labjang and Mu Jurba Saa Barma etc.



The myth of Ngabi Syankam and Gunji Syankam

If one looks southwards from Nabi to the front, the beautiful Rongkong village is seen. To the north-east and north-west of the village are mountain ranges. The peak lying to the extreme east has the figure of a male and is known as Ngabi Syankam. Facing Ngabi Syankam is the peak called Gunji Syankam. The Gunji Syankam peak has the figure of a female.

The two opposite mountains had been attributed human feelings and emotions. Thus the two would almost always gaze each other. With the passage of time Ngabi Syankam was deeply enamoured by the beauty and grace of Gunji Syankam. After having waited for long for an appropriate moment to arrive, Ngabi Syankam is said to have made an amorous proposal to Gunji Syankam.

Gunji Syankam was least amused by these advances of Ngabi Syankam. She refused the proposal but the adamant Ngabi Syankam did not give in and kept pressing forward. Gunji Syankam lost her calm and in a fit of rage attacked Ngabi Syankam with her *ril* (a sharp sword-like wooden instrument used in weaving carpets). The unsuccessful love story of the two mountains ended with Ngabi Syankam losing his left arm. The remnants of this episode can be seen in the shape of the peak of Ngabi Syankam.





Kuti

The last village on the way to Adi Kailash is the serenely picturesque village Kuti. Kuti is situated at a distance of 16 km from Nabi.

Charles A. Sherring's in his classic book 'Western Tibet and British Borderland' made the following statement about the Rang valleys some 110 years ago while he was passing through these valleys - "In those lovely valleys there is still the romance and poetry of life: each tree has its god, each bush its spirit." Kuti actually does literal justice to Charles A. Sherring's statement.

About three hundred years back, the Kuti village was situated further up at a place called Chyamalti. Kuti is famous as the most sacred village among all the Rangs. Situated at a height of roughly 12,500 feet, Kuti is said to house as many as 330 million gods and goddesses. A number of stories about *dhamis* and *lamas*, enlightened spiritual souls possessing direct communication capabilities with the supernatural, are narrated with enthusiasm by people.

Then there is this remarkable salt mine of Kuti that was turned into rocks by a curse. We would know more about this myth further in the course of this text. Chhagani or Chhaga, as the mine is locally named deserves a visit by the inquisitive traveler.

The sacred Kuti Gulach festival is held every 12 years in the honour of supreme deities Gulach Mapang and Namchyal. No Rang ritual is complete without the pleasantly heady local brew Chyakti and small pyramid-like cakes called Dhalang made of flour. These are the two major offerings made at most *pujas* and other occasions to the gods.

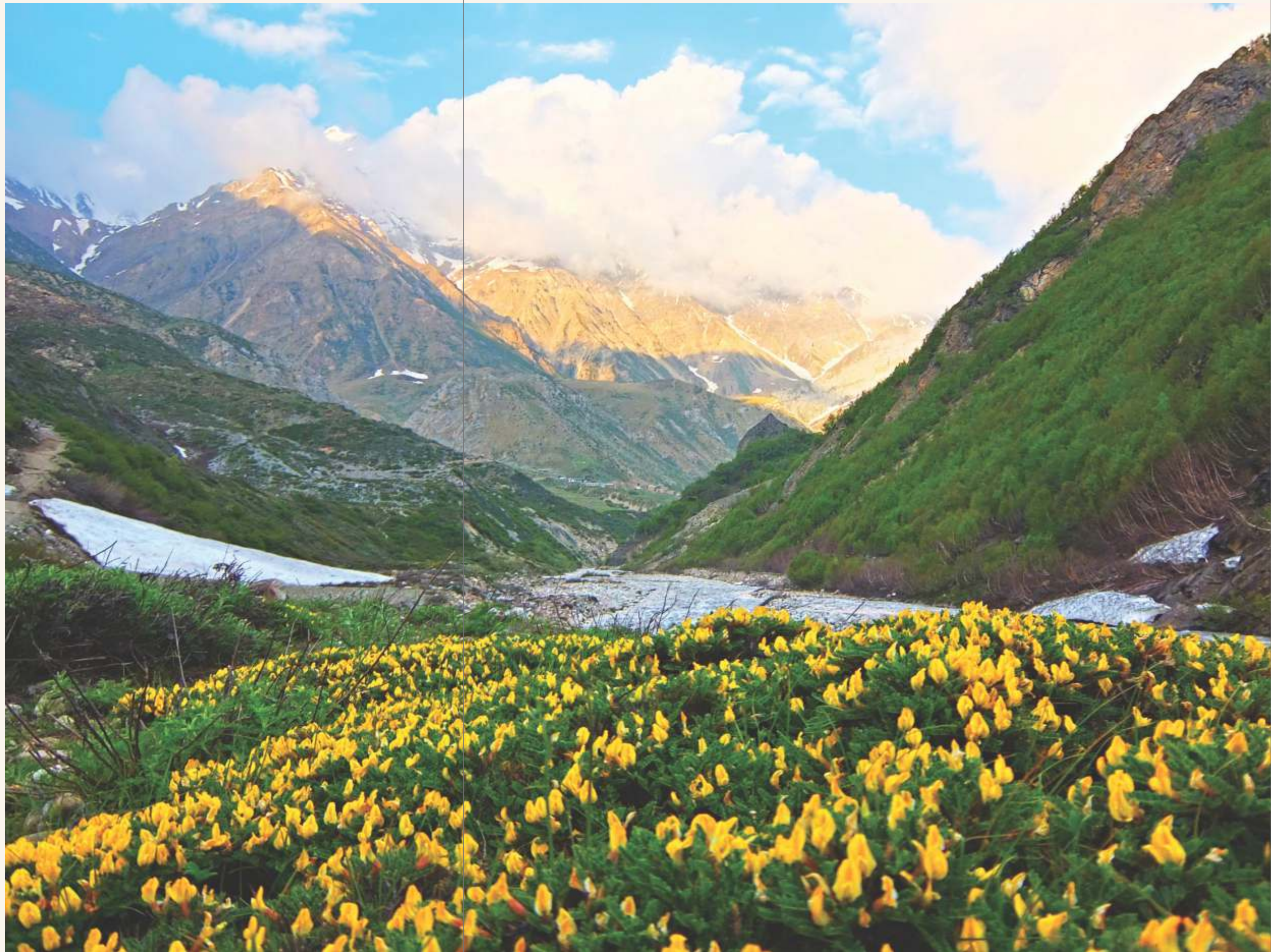
Talking of brew, it will not be irrelevant to mention Mar-jya, the butter tea that is heartily consumed by all and sundry at all times of the day. The typical Rang regime would consist of *sili-kutu* and *lafu-dungcha* (Rotis made from *Palthi* and *Phanphar*, the locally harvested grains served with radish and spicy chilly-salt). Rice, meat and lentils add to the wholesomely nutritious diet that one needs to stay fit in these heavily demanding natural conditions.



The gods and *raaths* of Kuti

The families of Kuti are divided into two groups of *raaths* namely Yarpa and Pangpa. The Pangpa group includes the Tumpadi Lahma, Wechim, Chyangchu, Chichim, Pikhulahma and Barchim *raaths* while the Yarpa group incorporates Yallo, Panglo, Yarchyal, Kharpa and Chitkpa *raaths*.

The chief gods worshipped by the Kutiyals among others are Jagat Guru, Kalyaganj, Kalikaka, Shildangdu, Bajbayang, Urginguru, Gulach, Mahpang, Namchyal, Muchupya, Gabla, Chapsa Guru, Kali Mata, Purnagiri, Kharse and Darboche. On particular occasions the Pangpas worship Gulach while the Yarpas worship Mahpang. Gulach aur Mapang are otherwise give equal esteem by all Kutiyals.



The Lamas of Kuti and their incredible accomplishments

The Rang people have absolute faith over the spiritual powers of the Lamas, the clairvoyant oracles. Each village has one or several Lamas who selflessly serve the people in their good and bad times alike. It is firmly believed that through their special divine authority they wield an unquestionable command over nature and that they are capable to find a remedy for every trouble. These divine persons have rather normal appearances and they commit their lives to the welfare of the villages. They would exhibit their superhuman strength whenever a necessity arrives. They could foresee calamities as grave as death and countless incidents are narrated by one and sundry about their deeds.

Local Rang people narrate with enthusiasm the myths and tales of the Shaukpo Lama of Kuti village who could fly. Shaukpo Lama was a close friend of Tyind Lama of Budi village and the two friends would often fly to each other's village to have long conversations. The fifth generation of Shaukpo Lama still resides in Kuti but none of its members is a Lama. Similar mindboggling acts are attributed to the youngest of the six Tumpadi Lama brothers named Darje Lama, the flutter of whose wings could be heard whenever he spread his arms. These brothers were so formidable that they could postpone the imminent death of their mother for a fair period of time by guarding their entire household against the invasion of Yama, the god of death. One can still encounter elderly people in the valley who claim to have witnessed all this personally. The extraordinary deeds performed by Jasram Lama of Kuti village in the Rapla village of Nepal are still recounted by the villagers in great elaborate detail.

To a modern observer these facts might sound as fiction but according to the belief of the Rang people the Lamas still hold all the answers to all the problems and extraordinary acts like turning the course of a mighty stream, conjuring lions and pythons, controlling natural forces by will and foreseeing the future are a daily situation for them. The modern day Lamas might not be as potent as say a Shaukpo Lama or a Darje Lama but they and their deific words are still kept in the highest esteem by the locals.





The Shyabjekalin of Kuti

The chief gods of the Kuti village include Gulach Mapang, Namchyal, Shildangdu, Bajgbayang, Ursinguru, Kalyaganj, Kalikakaka, Kunti Mata, Purnagiri, Syang-se and Nyungtang. Apart from these the Shyabjekalin (a stone Shiva Lingam) holds a very important place in the cosmology of Kuti. This is supposed to be a special souvenir handed over to the Kuti village by the Lord Shiva himself. It is also a common faith the Shyabjekalin came down from the heaven. The Shyabjekalin originally had two pieces but Kuti could receive only one as the other one was taken away by the evil powers. The local Lamas have unsuccessfully tried to get the other part back many times.

This is believed to be the purest and the holiest object endowed to Kuti and a festival is held every year to commemorate it.

Myth has it that the Shyabjekalin was originally placed in the main altar near the abode of Syang-se. The people of all the other villages knew about the significance and propriety of Shyabjekalin. It was a matter of awe and envy for them. A Lama from a different village tried to steal it one day and managed to carry it to some distance. When the Lamas of Kuti realized that the theft had occurred, they gathered all the people of the village and began wielding their superhuman powers. As a result the small Shyabjekalin became so heavy that the people carrying it found it impossible to take it any further. The stealers then tried to load the Shyabjekalin on to the back of a yak. The unfortunate yak had to suffer a broken backbone. They had no other option but to leave the Shyabjekalin mid-way between Gunji and Nabi in a place known as Chyaram Jhara. Having ensured that no further damage was done, the Lamas of Kuti decreed that a nine-year old boy be sent to Chyaram Jhara. This little boy brought back the Shyabjekalin, carrying it on his back through a distance of 14 km. The villagers of Kuti resolved that the safety of Shyabjekalin was of utmost importance and that every family of the village would have to keep it safely in its house for a period of one year each.

There are more than one hundred families which literally means that one house gets to keep the Shyabjekalin the second time after at least more than a century. The once-in-a-lifetime event of shifting the Shyabjekalin from one household to another takes place every year on a fixed date.

The house that has had the privilege of keeping the holy Shyabjekalin invites all the villagers and the Lamas for a ceremonial lunch after which the sacred symbol is wrapped in a white piece of cloth called *dhaja* and carried with full reverence to Kusong Kuti (the community gathering place). Lamps are in honour of the Shyabjekalin and the Lamas make forecasts by observing their flames. After a long *puja*, the Shyabjekalin is carried in the evening to the next household, followed by a procession of drummers and dancing villagers. An evening meal is offered to everyone present. The holy symbol is seen only by a lucky few, who offer different versions about its beauty and magnificence.









Looking towards Kuti from a spot near Jolingkong | *Thimmarayaswamy Krishnappa*

Jolingkong, Adi Kilash and Parvari Sarovar

A trek of further 14 km from Kuti takes one to Jolingkong, the last halt on the way to the Mount Adi Kailash. On route to Jolingkong, one comes across queer geological remnants of the ancient Tethys sea. The rocks remind you of the beaches of some islands - bristly rocks embedded with fossils. If you stand facing the rocks and close your eyes, you can even imagine yourself standing at some beach on a seashore. For a split second you can even feel the magic happening.





Jolingkong offers the most picture perfect and surreal landscapes for the beholder. Right in front is the superlative Adi Kailash peak among the snow capped mountains. Adi Kailash (or Chhota Kailash i.e Mini Kailash) is an almost exact replica of the Mount Kailash of Tibet and is kept in very high esteem by the locals. As you turn back you see very high, barren and incredibly shaped light-brown mountains. There is not a hint of any vegetation on them. The serene Kuti Yangti flows next to the KMVN camp. Jolingkong also serves as the base camp for climbing expeditions to Adi Kailash and other peaks in the vicinity.







The myth of the paddy fields of Jolingkong

Once upon a time, there was a king living in Kuti called Leeben Hya. He had two wives. One of them was Tibetan while the other came from Marma in Nepal. The queen from Tibet was used to eating whatever grew in the heights of Kuti, which comprised generally of coarse food grains and had no problems whatsoever in adjusting. The Nepalese queen was used to eating finer delicacies in her paternal home and she could not get herself to like the traditional Vyaansi food. She was a devout Brahmin woman and had firm faith in her gods. She decided to try growing paddy, barley and *madwa* (*finger millet*) in these heights. The queen sent a messenger to her father who obliged by sending seeds of finer grains. A big field was especially ploughed and prepared for this purpose in Jolingkong.

Following the Shauka tradition the queen requested all the worms and insects of the world to come and populate and make her field fertile. There was one technical problem though. Because of the altitude of the place, snakes could not survive there. And it was mandatory to have them present in order to grow the desired food because the region was infested with plague caused by mice and rats.

So the Nepalese queen, banking on her faith began to worship Shesh Naag, the cobra-god.

In the meantime, the Tibetan queen got jealous of the additional attention being given to the other queen and decided to have her own salt mine in Kuti. Her father's kingdom could boast of several salt mines containing the whitest salt possible. She too began to worship her deities, who turned a ravine near Kuti into salt mine overnight.

Yielding to the requests of the religious Nepali queen, the Shesh Naag meanwhile began his arduous journey from the Darma valley to Jolingkong via the 15- kilometre long Syela glacier.

The Tibetan queen was waiting for the other queen's efforts ending in fiasco. When she heard the news of the divine cobra's journey, her jealousy knew no bounds. She summoned the evil village enchantress and asked for her help. The enchantress accompanied the queen to the top of the mountain, from the other side of which the Shesh Naag was on his way to bless the pious queen's field. The two wicked women waited for the Shesh Naag to reach the top. As the cobra-god began to slide down, the two women chopped off his head with the help of the razor – sharp '*thal*' (*beater*) of a loom.

The cobra god's head fell down the steep knoll to the bank of Kuti Yangti while the rest of the body left its impression on the rocks.

Hearing of the heinous crime the enraged king reached the site and after a fierce battle, all three, the king, the Tibetan queen and the enchantress – were killed.

“You can see the Shesh Naag's impression from Kuti. And if you climb down to the riverbank you can also see the head. Two thin streams come out from the base of the hill: one filled with a thick white fluid, the other with a brown and mossy one. The former comes out from the brain of the king while the other originates from the evil queen's brain. ...” The woman from Gunji tells me with conviction in her voice.

Since Shesh Naag could not bless the field, the puja offered by the Nepalese queen remained incomplete. As a result, every year one can see paddy plants coming up, but they don't produce any grain. The salt mine of Kuti also turned into stone.



The Sin-La pass and related topography

Sin-La (5500 m) or the Lebong pass traditionally joins the Vyans valley to the upper Darma valley at Bidang. The other two passes in the region include the Nama pass (5250 m) between Kuti and Sela and Chatem la (c. 5650 m) between Brammah Parvat and Cheepaydang.

The Adi Kailash range opens up in front of the trekkers, climbers and mountaineers a vast array of peaks, glaciers and passes. The most important peaks to the north of the Sin-La pass include Rajula (5850 m), two unnamed peaks of altitudes 5900 m and 6400 m, Trident Peaks (5400-5500m) and the Jolingkong Peaks (5300-5550 m). The Central Adi Kailash sector includes Adi Kailash (5975 m), Ishan Parvat or Adi Kailash II (6150 m), Brammah Parvat (6321 m), Cheepaydang (c. 6200 m), Yungtangto (5850 m), Pandav Parvat (5750 m) and Nikurch Killa (5700 m).

The peaks to the south of the Nama Pass include Rajay Jue (c. 6100 m) while the bordering peaks to the east of the Kuti Yangti Valley are known as Sangthang (6480 m) and Kunti Peak (c. 6000 m). The Rama glacier, Lebong glacier, Nikurch Rama glacier, Chatem glacier and Nama glacier complete the topography of this magnificent territory.

The Kumaon Mandal Vikas Nigam offers an exciting journey-itinerary to the Adi Kailash, the details of which are provided at the end. From this year onwards the organization has, in association with the local youth and trekking-enthusiasts proposes home-stays in various villages falling on the alternative route to Adi Kailash. This would be a first of a kind itinerary that includes home-stays at such high altitudes (including Kuti village).



Chhangru and Tinkar: The Rang connect in Nepal

The villages named Chhangru and Tinkar lying in Nepal on the opposite side of the international border are also populated by the Rangs. Apart from Chhangru and Tinkar, a couple of more Nepali villages namely Rapla, Syangkang and Dumling also house several Rang families who call themselves Burathokis. The Rangs of the Vyans and the other two valleys have age-old relationships with the people living these villages. As a matter of fact the residents of these villages are also Rangs that follow similar social and religious customs. Marriages between the members of these villages with those in the Rang valleys are extremely common



Tinkar

The village of Tinkar is located at an altitude of 12,300 feet. The residents of the village are called Tinkaris. In ancient times they took the name Sardang-pa. There are two major *raaths* in Tinkar namely Yarpa and Pangpa. The sub *raaths* of Yarpa include Syangthothu, Nyuchyimchyang, Barkharchyang and Panglongchyang, while those belonging to Pangpa are Syangtukchyang, Panglokhchyang, Yarkhachyang and Laiba Sainfokchyang.

The main village gods comprise Nam Sain, Lohasur, Mam Bhi, Tin Hwa-Hwa, Mayar and Gumpang. The collective rituals named Budani and Rhang Kalmo involve offering of worship to Lord Nam Sain by all the *raaths*. The Banam Sai *puja* involves worshipping two different gods - Mam Bhi (by Yarpas) and Tin Hwa-Hwa (by Pangpas).



Syangkang village | Mangal Singh Budhathoki

Rhang Kalmo is an annual festival that is held in Tinkar in the month of Ashadh (corresponding to the months of June and July). The festival involves the villagers taking their horses, decorated for the occasion, to the village meadow. After some rituals they ride to the village. After circling the village once they all gather at the temple for a *Puja*.



Looking down the Tinkar valley | ai.stanford.edu

Chhangru

Situated across the river, at a little distance from Garbyang is the village of Chhangru. Hya Madhyo, Vyas Rikhi, Hya Namgyung, Gabla, Syang-se, Gangri-Labchan, Siddh Chhokyong, Dalmala, Saun Gabla, Ngasamarti Nyungtang, Tidangsya Nyungtang, Mailirong, Shurvir, Dhalvir, Shekhvir, Vikhmadhyo, Rousain, Kharbovir, Tingovir, Devimai are some of the main gods worshipped by the people of Chhangru.



The myth of Chhangru-Rakhu

There was a time when 100 families lived in Chhangru. A famous myth from Chhangru speaks of a daughter belonging to Chhangru. She had been married to a family in Marma. When she had a small son, she became a widow. Once, while she had come to her parental village, some construction work was going on at her father's home. A strange happening was puzzling the villagers. They would build the wall everyday only to find the next morning that the newly-built part had disappeared.

The young widow would go to the fields assisting her family while her young child played at home. Once the kid reached the site of construction and injured his finger. One drop of the blood from his finger happened to drop upon the un-built wall. As soon as the drop fell upon the wall, the wall began to rise on its own. On seeing this miracle, an evil idea hit the people of the village that the house under construction might be desiring the sacrifice of the child. In their fit of madness, they slaughtered the kid and offered it to the house. The widow came back from the fields and began searching for her child who was nowhere to be found. When she heard of the unfortunate event the next day she became very miserable and despondent and left her home crying for Marma. On her way back she cursed the villagers thus - "May the Chhangru-Rakhu (the hundred families living in the village) be totally demolished, may the grass upon Sitla never stop growing and may the route between Nampa and Marma get permanently blocked!"

A dog from the village also accompanied the widow. The way to Marma lied on the top of the hill opposite Chhangru Nampa-Gursing-Dang. The woman tied the dog there with a chain and left for her in-laws home. The Nampa-Marma route has since then been closed by a glacier. Sitla is always covered with bushes and the people of Chhangru-Rakhu have become extinct. An impression of the dog is seen on the rocks at the spot where it had been tied. The spot is known as Nikhi Dang nowadays.

The story about the extinction of Chhangru-Rakhu is also very awe-inspiring. Those were the times when whole villages were routed by a single invasion of epidemics like cholera. There used to be a watermill in Chhangru where people would go to get their grains powdered into flour. One day the person managing the watermill had to work overtime all through the night because a huge amount of grain had arrived. Some defect came up in the lower part of the watermill and the man went down to the river to fix it. Some stray drops of water fell on his flour-covered face giving the impression that he was suffering from smallpox. In the meantime a villager reached the watermill. When he looked at the manager's face, he ran back to the village and informed the villagers that the manager has been infected with smallpox. When the manager reached the village, he was stoned by the villagers. People were terrified at the prospect of the spread of the epidemic.



At the same time some girls were busy weaving collectively when a crow began to caw. It is believed that the girls could understand the language of animals and birds in those days. They realized that something had been stuck in the crow's throat. They caught the crow and took out a gold earring from the crow's throat. When the villagers saw the earring they presumed that it had come from the corpse of some woman who must have died of the epidemic and whose flesh the crow was eating.

As such the people were scared of the imminent consequences of the widow's curse. These two incidents further terrorized them. They carried all their belongings and took refuge in a cave between the rocks that sheltered the village. Gradually their ration was finished. They were very scared of going to the village and eventually all of them died in the cave.

In due course of time the ill-fated cave was discovered by some stray hunters. In fact it was later discovered that the cave had two storeys. The skeletons of the unfortunate residents of the old Chhangru were found lying all over the floors of the cave. Their jewellery, pots and other precious belongings were also scattered. It is a common belief that nothing should be brought home from those caves. The entrance to the upper storey of the cave was later blocked by earthquake. With difficulty one can still make it to the lower part of the cave.

With the passage of time several families from the neighbouring regions came to and settled in Chhangru and the village again became a large settlement.

The people presently living in Chhangru include Boras, Lalas and Aitwals.

One interesting version of the Chhangru story had been recorded in great and almost similar detail by Arnold Heim and August Gansser in their 'The Throne of the Gods - An Account of the First Swiss Expedition to the Himalayas' (1939) relevant extracts of which are being provided further.

The cave of the dead at Chhangru -

by Arnold Heim and August Gansser

I was still licking my fingers, having used them, Indian-fashion, to eat rice with, when Chandru Singh arrived, and, in fluent English, told us about a burial cave in the cliffs above the Nepalese village of Chhangru, facing us. I promptly decided to visit this cave. A rickety bridge led across the roaring border torrent, Kali Ganga.

No-one tried to hinder us. Through a pine forest on a steep slope we reached Chhangru, situated on the terrace about 330 feet above the river. Its stone houses had been built in a most picturesque situation. Between the prayer-staffs there was a good view of the savage ice-peaks crowning the Nampa Valley. The village chief was an elderly woman with finely cut and intelligent features, Himeti Padani by name. According to local belief, she had sprung from the legendary family of the Boro. She invited us to tea. In the courtyard of her house, we squatted tailor-fashion on a carpet and were served with tea in saucers of wood rimmed with silver. The tea was disgustingly sweet and full of floating hairs. At least half the inhabitants of the village had assembled, and stood round us staring.

Apparently I was the first white man most of them had ever seen. Himeti Padani told us an ancient legend in a low-pitched melodious voice, and Chandru translated it into English : " Long, long ago there was a path leading to the village of Marma which lies to the S.W. over the ice ridges of the Nampa Valley which are now unscaleable. In those days flowers bloomed where to-day there is nothing but a wilderness of ice. The men of Marma came to Chhangru, where they found wives and returned with their families to Marma. Thus sprang to life the race of the Boro.

Once a Boro woman came with her child to Chhangru and wanted to build herself a house here. The child was playing with sharp stones and cut one of its fingers. Out of the blood which dripped from the wound, the walls of the house grew of themselves. The inhabitants of Chhangru, seeing the miracle, supposed that there must be supernatural forces in the child's blood and slew it, hoping to see more miracles. But nothing happened. The heartbroken mother cursed the village, prophesied that it would be smitten with black smallpox, and departed. Owing to her curse, the pass became ice-bound, and the flowery alps were transformed into savage glaciers. No longer could anyone from Chhangru come to visit Marma.

I looked across to the savage icy ridges of the Nampa chain. In truth this north-western part of Nepal is completely shut off from the rest of the country, with which it can only communicate by way of British India or by way of Tibet. Is it not strange that one of the principal themes of our Swiss mountain legends - that which concerns the disappearance of flowery meads owing to a curse - should exist also in these little-known regions of the Himalayan Switzerland ?

Such were my reflections while the old Boro woman served me with a large basin of rice. Her intentions were most kindly. Drawing her white coif over her forehead, she resumed her tale.

A few years later, on the night of the full moon, two men went down to the mill by the river. Their faces were whitened by flour. Since the mill was running badly, one of them went to look at the mill-wheel. Some of the foam splashed into his face. When he came back to his friend, the latter did not recognize him, but fancied himself to be looking at the smallpox demon. Terrified, he ran back to the village with the dreadful tidings. At that moment, black smallpox broke out. The Boro woman's curse had been fulfilled. At Chhangru, the Boro families fled with all their possessions into the rocks, and disappeared into a cave. Since then nothing more has been seen or heard of them. The village was completely depopulated until, many years later, new inhabitants occupied the ruined huts. Having heard that the Boros had had immense riches, they sought a long time for the cave and at length discovered it. But when they were about to carry off some of the treasure, a voice shouted from the deep interior that a dreadful fate would befall them if they did not leave all exactly as it was. Greatly alarmed, they fled from the sinister spot.



Among the gaping populace who had listened, as well as myself, to this recital, no-one would admit knowing anything about the cave, except for a man who declared that ten or twenty years ago, during a violent earthquake, the roof of the inner part of the cave had fallen in. He had been there once. Though clad in rags, he seemed a good sort of fellow enough, and, at my request, promised to take me to the cave. A dense thicket of junipers, wild roses, cotoneasters, and gorse barred our way. Our hands were badly scratched when we had forced our way through the scrub, the little thorns of the gorse sticking in the skin like those of certain cactuses. Large multi-coloured lizards vanished into the fissures of the rocks as we passed. Though we were at so great an altitude, I could not feel sure that there would be no snakes. About 1600 feet above the village, the cave was over 12,000 feet above sea-level. My companion peered anxiously as if afraid that someone might be spying upon us. It was a difficult climb over the last rocks to reach the cave. The sun was blazing from the zenith.

We climbed round a shoulder of rock, and suddenly happened upon a skeleton in a crouching posture. On the ground beside it a couple of skulls were lying, and grinned at us out of the black orbits. Several plaits of hair still clung to the vertex of one. A narrow aperture led steeply into the interior of the cave, which soon opened out into a great space. My companions followed me timidly, covering mouth and nostrils with their rags so that the evil spirits might not find entrance. We made what light we could in the interior with a candle and a torch of resinous wood. The whole place was crowded with human bones. The skeletons were enveloped in parchments skin, and in some cases still bore rags of clothing. Among the skulls and the fallen rocks stood two long wooden cylinders adorned with bamboo fibres-such as are still used to-day by the Tibetans when brewing their tea flavoured with rancid butter. In the back of the cave we found wooden cases that were crumbling to dust, but still contained the bones of children.

We could not get any farther because, as my Nepalese guide declared, the roof had fallen in during the great earthquake. Beyond this point he said, there had been a still larger chamber, and many more boxes filled with the bones of children had been piled around a hearth. There were also many weapons and trinkets. He also insisted that a threatening voice from the far interior had demanded the restoration of whatever anyone wanted to carry away. I myself had to refrain from carrying away any mementoes, not from superstition, but because I was so scrupulously watched by my companions when I was examining the various objects. As we were clambering down the rocks and pushing our way through the thorny thicket on the way back to the village, I was wondering how whole families, cumbered with little children, could ever have reached this cave. Besides, what was the meaning of the boxes filled with the bones of children ? My guide said that the children must have been put into the boxes alive, hoping to ward off the infection, and had perished there miserably.

[From Throne of the Gods - An Account of the First Swiss Expedition to the Himalayas' (1939)]

Rambangchyim - the centre for educating the youth

An ancient system of educating the youth about the ways of life and worldly behaviour was prevalent in all the Rang valleys. This system was existent till the third and fourth decades of the twentieth century. It was called Rambang (commonly mispronounced as Rangbang). In the Rang dialect 'ram' or 'ramo' means coming and meeting. 'Bang' stands for a place. Thus Rambang was a meeting place meant for the young. The house, whose location was not fixed (called Rambangchyim) meant for this purpose was present in every village ('chyang' meaning a house).

The logistics of the Rambangchyims were managed by young women of the village. These women could be the members of the club as long as they were unmarried and had reached a minimum age of 15 years. A head-girl of sorts was chosen from among the members. Young boys and men would visit the club only after a permission was granted to them by the head-girl. The young men from other villages could also arrive as guests. No non-Rang was ever allowed inside the Rambangchyims. The Rambangchyims served the dual purpose of entertainment and education. A lot of innovative games involving singing, song-writing and dancing were played throughout the night. Food and drinks were served to all. Meeting alone with someone from the other sex was prohibited.

A set of rules was drawn for the Rambangchyims by the lady members that formed the guidelines for expected behaviour on the part of the hosts and guests alike. Charles A. Sherring has recounted vivid details in his book 'Western Tibet and British Borderlands'. He writes - "When a resident of a distant part of the country comes to a village, travelling on business, he would not dream of asking his friends to give him food and shelter, for this would be regarded as a disgrace and he must wait to be invited by them first. However if he goes to the Rambang he is sure of a hospitable welcome. In this way, the Rambang is a great convenience, but it can only be used thus by persons known in the village; a stranger is unwelcome without an introduction."

A very beautiful custom was practiced in Rambang when it came to guests from other villages. Sometimes these guests were persuaded in a friendly manner to extend their stay in the village for a couple of days or more. The night before the day of their departure they were bid sentimental farewells accompanied by singing sweet songs on the theme of separation. The next day, the young women would escort the guests till the border of the village and bid them goodbye by waving handkerchiefs and sheets. Sherring had witnessed this as he wrote - "They wave long sheets; one girl holding one end and the another the other end. This waving can be seen for miles, and is really a very pretty custom. It is also used in bidding farewell to friends and lovers and is frequently accompanied by whistling two fingers being placed in the mouth as in the familiar London cat call."



The Rambangchyims offered the correct gender-education to the youth after they entered puberty. The constant interaction with other members of their own age made the youth more worldly wise and rational. Several marriages were properly arranged in the confines of the Rambangchyims where future husbands and wives could observe their partners from very close quarters before committing a lifelong promise. This helped in better married lives of the Rangs. Participating in the various artistic activities in the Rambangchyims brought forth the creativity of the youth. Famous anthropologist Mr. Ratan Singh Raipa has written - "It was just like an institution where young children could learn good manners, etiquettes and the ways of paying due respect and other economical arts of working."

This social custom based on providing a proper channel to the natural instincts of the youth was a very successful one before it unfortunately became extinct with the advent and spread of the so-called modernity and education.

Saihyamo or the Kaag Purana

The format of *Gwan* or the last rites prevalent in the Rang community has remained the sole touchstone on the basis of which the Rang culture can be evaluated. The cultural symbols of the community are losing ground with each passing day owing to the lack of it. The community is stranded at the crossroads. As a consequence of the absence of any guidance, the future generations would be left with no alternative but to dissolve themselves in the cultural stream of other communities. Therefore this effort has been made to record in writing the rites and rituals performed at the time of *Gwan* (last rites), known as *Saihyamo* (installation of the deity) or Kaag Purana, which is founded not on mythological stories but upon folk tales of the Rang tribe. The cultural character of any community is clearly reflected in the rituals associated to events from birth to death. *Saihyamo* (installation of the deity) or Kaag Purana is the ritual of guiding the soul in the other world.

First and foremost for this purpose a pretty statue or effigy of the diseased (*juu*) is made which resembles the person. It is then decorated with the cloths and ornaments used by the dead person. After the construction of the *juu*, two persons are appointed as Guides (*Saihyakchas*). These two take their seats to the left and right respectively. Generally the *Saihyakcha* seated to the right is called the *Amhricha* (demonstrator of the path) while the other to the left is called the *Bangrhicha* (demonstrator of the place). After the installation of the *juu*, it is the *Saihyakcha* who establishes the diseased soul as equivalent to God. *Saihyakcha* aptly means the one who establishes the God. After the diseased soul is established equivalent to God, the family, relatives and the villages offer floral tributes to the *juu*. Further, in accordance with the local customs, the *juu* is offered worship with *Akshat* (rice grains) and incense-sticks.

The last rites are collectively called *Gwan* in the Rang community. The *Saihyakchas*, acting as the guides to the path and place of the deceased soul in the other world address it thus: “O newly deceased soul (*Nushyimi*), for you to remain free of anxiety, we have offered *Chun Chun Dwalbu* (Exact sacred words) and *Kan-Kan Byeto* (desired *pind*) to your *juu* for your emancipation, so that you are not tortured by the several kinds of devils in the other world (*Yamlok*). From now on no power can even lightly trouble you and no ghost or phantom would come in front of you. According to the Rang belief, the homeland of the deceased souls is supposed to be situated near Kailash at *Kshulun Gvi Paatu* (nine terraced fields near *Kshulun*). The *Amhricha* and the *Bangrhicha* assist the deceased soul reach the place where there are nine terraced fields. The uppermost place is thought to be the preferred residing place of the deceased souls because this is known as *Pitralok* (the land of the ancestors). Thus the Rangs believe that the land of the ancestors is a real place and not an imaginary one. *Saihyamo* is also aptly known as *Kaag Purana*. The third chapter of this book is important in this background that narrates the myth of Myiyar Mishru, the God of Sky (*Myiyar* = Sky, *Mishru* = God), who is believed to have his abode in a place called *Tulthin Goon Tulthin* above village Sosa in the Chaundas Patti (Belt).

[courtesy Late Mr. Jagat Singh Nabiyal]



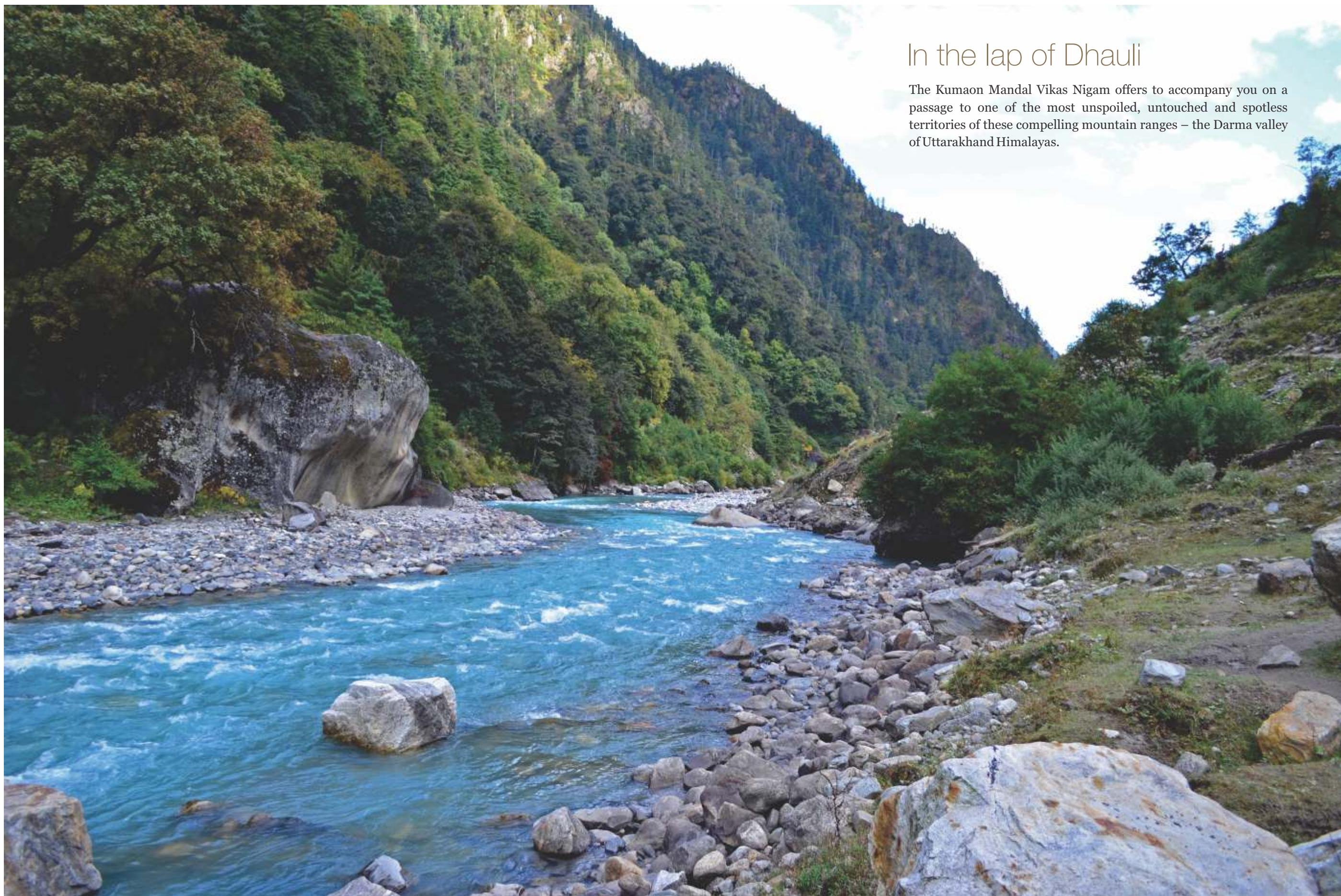


Yong Girl | *Dhiraj Singh Garbyal*



The Darma valley

A view to Daantu from Dugtu | *Ravi Patiyl*



In the lap of Dhauli

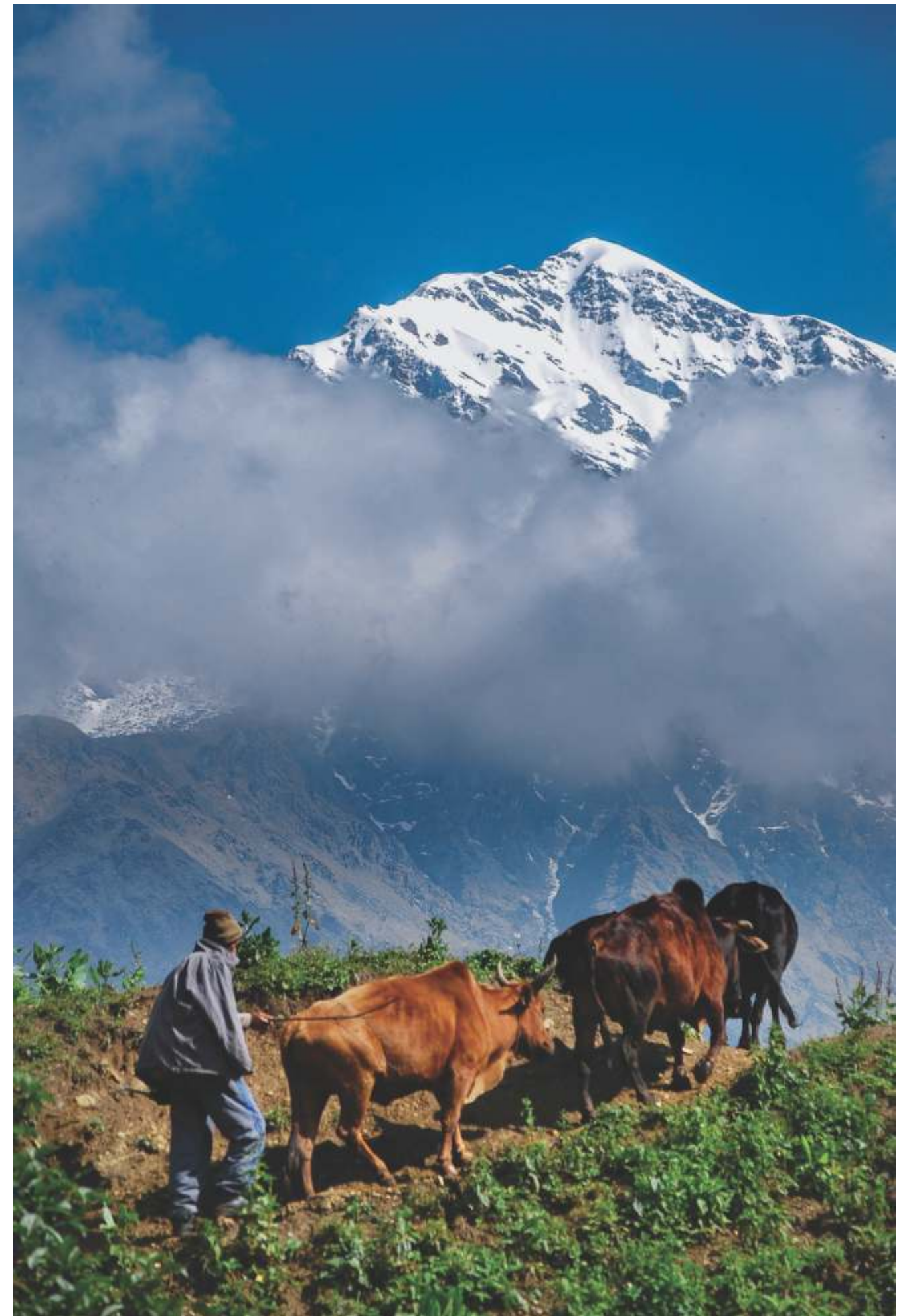
The Kumaon Mandal Vikas Nigam offers to accompany you on a passage to one of the most unspoiled, untouched and spotless territories of these compelling mountain ranges – the Darma valley of Uttarakhand Himalayas.

The Darma valley is one of the principal habitats of the *Rangs* or *Shaukas*. The Darma valley is situated in the Pithoragarh district of the Indian state of Uttarakhand along the river Dhaulī. The Dhaulī river confluences with the Kali river. The latter marks the border between India and Nepal. Dhaulī is counted among the bigger tributaries of Kali and originates in the glaciers in the vicinity of the Sin La Pass. The Sin La joins the Darma to the Vyans valley. Dhaulī is known to have two headquarters namely Dharmaganga and Lassar, the collective waters of which takes the name of Dhauliganga or simply Dhaulī. The Vyans valley is situated along the river Kali.





Rang Women posing in the richly carved windows | *Ravi Patiyal*



Toil in Divine Company | *Vinod Upreti*

Travellers with extensive experience in Kumaon are unequivocal in their view that Dharma is the most stunning valley as far as natural splendour is concerned. Terrific views of the magnificent Panchchuli peaks, vast and comparatively even verdurous spreads with seasonal patchwork of pink carpets formed by the Nepal fields in bloom, a plethora of flora and fauna and the most gentle of the people make Dharma an ideal destination for trekkers from around the world.





At Dharchula one should get properly equipped with necessary permits before setting out on the journey to the Darma valley. Regular jeep service runs covering a distance of 18 kilometres between Dharchula and Tawaghat. From Tawaghat further the road goes to as far as Dar and Syela, the first villages of the lower and upper Darma respectively and little further up to Urthing.



The Rangs of this valley traditionally lived in 19 villages, of which 14 are part of the Upper Darma while rest belong to Lower Darma. The villages of Upper Darma include Syela, Chal, Nangling, Baling, Baun, Philam, Saun, Dugtu, Daantu, Go, Dhakar, Tidang, Marchha and Seepu.

The lower Darma incorporates Sobla, Tejam-Batan, Dar and Bongling. Another i.e the 19th village namely Khimling-Daave or Bidang presently has no local population.

Baling | *Ravi Patiyal*



Daantu | *Ravi Patiyal*



Generations bonded together | *Vinod Upreti*

Dar and Bongling

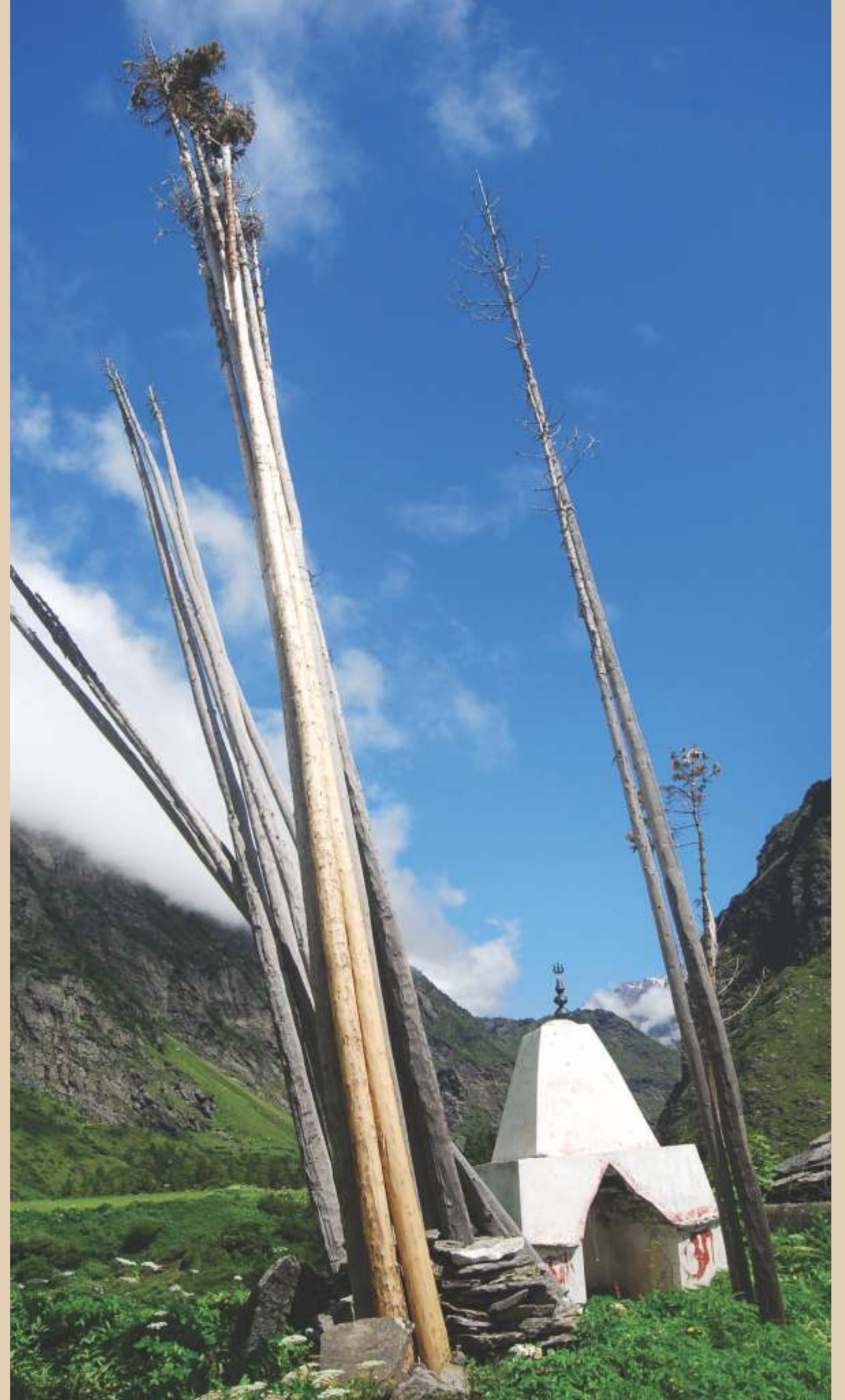
The last village officially connected to a motorable road from Dharchula is Dar. Perched 37 kilometres away from Dharchula on a pretty hill, Dar can be called the Gateway to Darma. Moderate climate and fertile lands characterize this tiny village. A natural hot water spring is a major attraction of the village. About four decades back, massive landslides threatened the extinction of Dar and the people were offered displacement in the Terai town of Sitarganj by the government. Fortunately the landslides subsided and the Dariyals stayed on in their native village but the truth remains that the village is gradually though not alarmingly, sinking.

Syela

From Dar a treacherous 4 km trek takes you to Bongling village. A one-kilometre long rocky stretch on this path is notoriously known as the most dangerous part of the trek. Some original inhabitants of Baun, Nangling and Syela have settled here. In earlier times, Bongling held an important place in the lives of the semi-nomadic Rangs. A stretched-out meadow at a nearby place called Chalkhamfo was treated as the favourite spot for grazing and resting the flocks of sheep and goats by the travelling Kunchas.

Syela, the first village of the Upper Darma is at a distance of 8 kilometres from Bongling. Tingtha Fall and Vurthing are some interesting spots nearby with the latter being part of local folklores regarding the practice of divorce. Syela is surrounded by high mountains on both sides and therefore doesn't receive enough sun. A popular myth has it that some ancestors of the village decided to chop down the eastern mountain during the night to clear the path of sunrays. According to divine decree the job had to be accomplished before the first light of dawn. As destined the deed could not be realized before the deadline and as a result the mountain on which Syela is located looks tilted and the riverbank below is laden with cut boulders. There is a pass from Syela to Kuti village in the Vyans valley which is hardly frequented in recent times. The Mandam bugyal of Syela is known all across Darma for its green pastures and abundant vegetation. Sheep rearing was the main profession of the residents of Darma till about a century back. Mandam bugyal of Syela was the favourite spot of these shepherds who were involved in transportation of agro-produce through sheep and goats. The bugyal is famed for its copious supply of natural herbs like Arch (wild turmeric), Kinjri, Atees, Hatthajari, Katki, Chheebi and Kwacho etc.





Nangling

About six kilometres away from Syela is the all important Nangling village. It is a general belief that the real Darma starts from Nangling. Spread out valleys, big flat fields and seasonal carpets of multi-coloured, vibrant and gaudy flowers are like a signature theme of all further villages of Darma all the way up to Seepu.



The Myth of Kaluwa Lwar

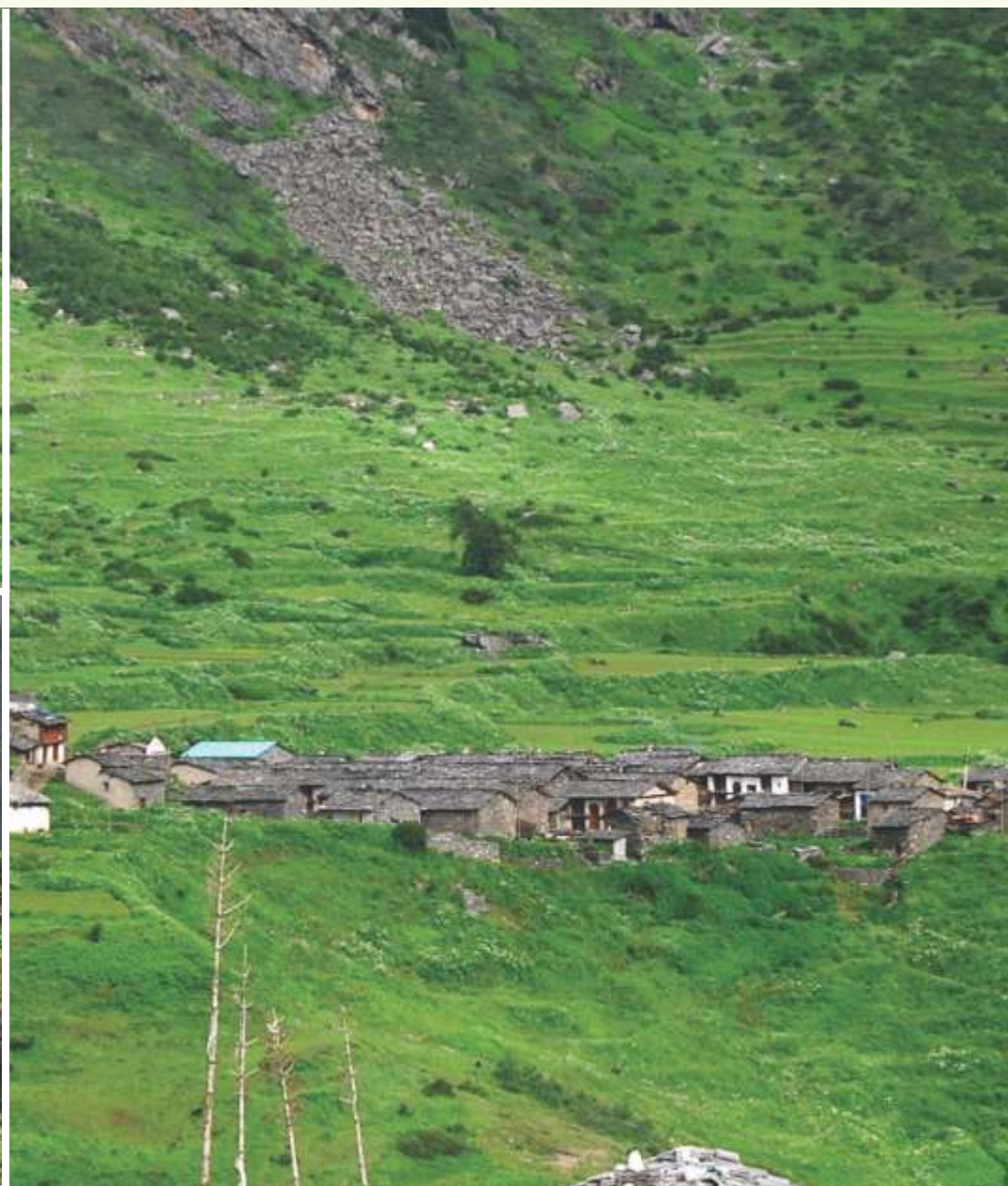
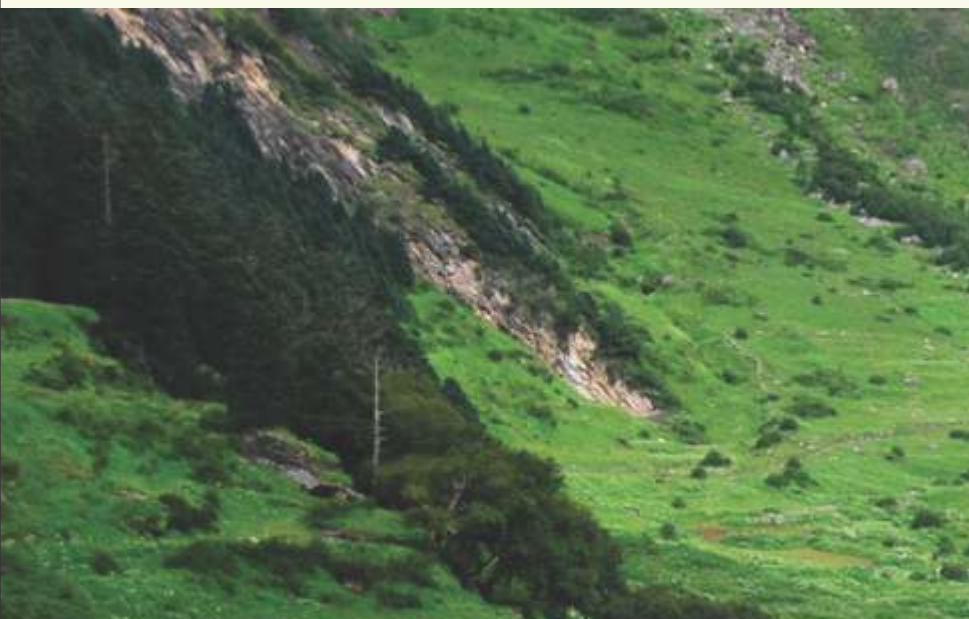
There used to live a cobra near Nangling village that would kill people migrating from the Upper Darma. This forced the people to carve out an alternate route for their frequent trade journeys. This new route was tricky and precarious. People wanted to get rid of the cobra but were afraid of challenging it. Finally Kaluwa Lwar, a brave blacksmith came forward and took up the contest. He opened his workshop near Nangling village and became a fake friend of the cobra. The cobra would often be invited by the blacksmith over cups of tasty *Marjya* (butter tea). One day Kaluwa Lwar prepared several Chhirpas (edible balls made from *sattu*) for the dreaded guest. The cobra was enjoying these chhirpas when the blacksmith said to the cobra that he would prepare special red Chhirpas for him and that they were super delicious if devoured with closed eyes. The cobra believed his only acquaintance in the region and was tricked into gulping down a red hot iron ball in the name of food as a result of which its stomach exploded and marked the end of the cobra's cruelties. The dead cobra's body was impressed upon a rock that can still be seen. It is also believed that the happy villagers danced ecstatically for a long time after the cobra's death and that a rock in the village still bears imprints of their feet. The part of this bizarre myth in which Kaliya Lwar leads the evil cobra to Kailash Mansarovar where the latter is justifiably killed by the former, is most fascinating, with abundant and wonderful descriptions of the scenic beauty en route Kailash from Darma valley. The myth of Hurbi, the evil chicken is equally captivating. The village also seems to have acquired its name from the very same cobra (Naag).

About 200 metres away from the village on the way to Baling village there are two huge boulders that are famed to have been part of Kaluwa Lwar's workshop. The myth of Kaluwa Lwar finds a different version in the Rung village of the Chaundans valley. Similar myths are woven around the other village gods.



There are a couple of striking and gorgeously picturesque bugyals facing the glacier above the village and are a must-see for passionate trekkers. The moderate climate of Nangling makes it ideal for living all round the year.





Baling

Baling appears with a breathtaking suddenness. The hitherto narrow landscape filled with steep mountains and impatient rivulets and streams and wild vegetation, is suddenly replaced by a broad and immensely serene one.

Baling is 5 kilometres away from Nangling. During the season, the village looks awesome between pink *palthe* fields in full bloom. There is a watermill in the middle of the village. Distant villages can be spotted with their pink *palthe* haze on the green slopes and heights – giving an impression of an immense green carpet with pink patchwork. A small part of the Panchchuli range is also visible from Baling. In fact the beauty of the village is beyond belief.

The forest and bugyal of Baling are also very well known in whole of Darma. The forest flourishes in Deodar trees which do not grow in further and higher villages. Since Deodar trees are mandatorily required for making *Darchyos* for the worship of Syang-Se (chief god of all villages), the villagers of Saun, Dugtu, Baun and Philam etc. are allowed to take away a limited number of them from Baling every year.





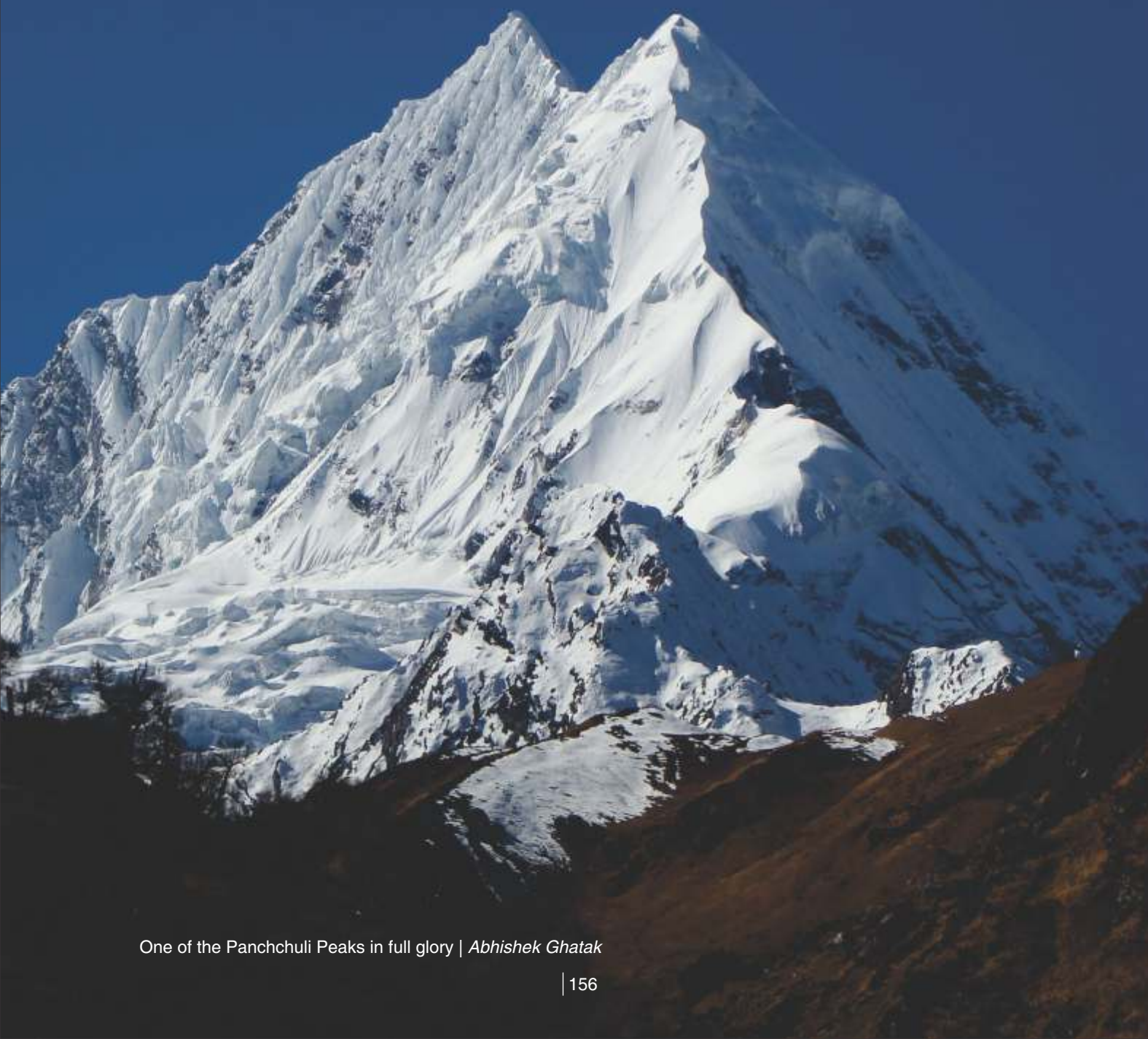
Saun and Dugtu

Five kilometres from Baling, the villages of Saun and Dugtu, despite their being two separate entities are situated as one unit. Dugtu is located on a lower field while Saun is at a height of about 30-40 metres from it above the road. The water-sources of both villages are one. The village of Saun has been given the sole responsibility to protect the Bhojpatra (birch) forest adjacent to it in order to avoid avalanches and it has to be said that the Saunals have performed their duties commendably for past centuries.





From the viewpoint of topography, these two villages form the centre of the Darma valley. The natural magnificence of these two is categorically breathtaking. To the east one sees the villages Baun and Philam, to the north is village Daantu while the glittering peaks of Panchchuli form a crowning glory on the western firmament. The peaks of Panchchuli have already acquired a cult status among trekkers coming to the Darma valley. Various state and private outfits offer trekking packages to the Panchchuli Base camp near Saun-Dugtu. Huge fields and abundant waters mark these two villages. A small rivulet called Nyaula separates these two from Daantu. Nyaula confluences with the Dhauli just below a spot called Landang. This same Dhauli separates Saun-Dugtu from Baun and Philam.



One of the Panchchuli Peaks in full glory | *Abhishek Ghatak*

Panchchuli at Sunset from the Base Camp | *Abhishek Ghatak*



Panchchuli from Daantu | *Ravi Patiyal*

There is a steep climb through a thick Bhojpatra forest above Saun that takes you to the top of the hill where there is a holy pond called Rangjyadi Talab. The view is fabulous from the top. You have in the front parts of the Panchchuli range and the pretty specks of houses that form Baun, Daantu, Baling and Philam. The Rangjyadi Talab has no more than a few buckets of mossy water in it. Remnants of earlier pujas lie scattered near it and there is a small and ancient looking temple as well, which in fact is an aesthetic pile of grey- brown stones. The other narrow path leading down to the village is visible through a lush Bhojpatra forest. The dense foliage of the holy trees is transparent against the bright sunlight. Soft, high grass is grown on both sides of the slender path. As the forest grows denser it gradually gets more and more shadowy. The beauty of things overwhelms you. The exquisite Bhojpatra trees look as though a whole village, while still in prayer, was turned into a forest by one stroke of the unknown. When it gets a little dark the darkness is green and there is a lot of space between the darkness and you.



Daantu

Hya Gabla and Sachir-Muchir are the chief gods of the villages among others. The greatest god of the Darma valley, recognised in the other two valleys as well – Gabla – has his sacred seat in Daantu. Daantu has the honour of being the divine court of Gabla, the almighty god with nine sisters. Gabla's closest friends are supposed to include Muchir of Saun, Tidangchhyung of Tidang and a select few. The other great gods of Daantu include Rangchylim, Nyaula, Syu, Rangdang and Nyungtang.



Looking down the valley | *Abhishek Ghatak*

Daantu is only at a distance of 1.5 kilometres from Saun-Dugtu. The village holds an important mythical and historic place. It is popular faith that the fourteen gods and thirty goddesses of Darma (*Chyepi Se Sumsa Ma*) always held their meetings in the courtyard of Hya Gabla in Daantu. Daantu hosts an annual Gabla Fair every year during August that attracts people from far and wide. This fair was started by the Upper Darma Sewa Samiti in 1977.



Panchchuli Peaks from Daantu | *Ravi Patiyl*



The story of Jasuli Datal

There also is a statue of Jasuli Datal in Daantu. Jasuli Datal known popularly as Jasuli Buri (Jasuli, the old woman) was a rich and generous woman of Daantu. She lived around 175 years back. All kinds of legends are to be heard about her wealth and generosity. She had no children and this made her life very depressing and cheerless. The most popular version of her story tells us that during the last days of her life she became so desperate with her ample wealth that she decided to drown all that she had, in the Dhauli. As she was about to commit the deed, some rare British official happened to pass by.

He asked her the reason for what she was doing. On coming to know of her plight and desperation, the British official requested her to put the money to better use for the benefit of her own people. It is narrated that several ponies and goats carrying Jasuli Buri's riches followed the British official, who with that money built *dharamshalas* for the Shauka traders and pilgrims at several places in Kumaon, Garhwal and even Nepal. Remnants of these *dharamshalas* are still found. One comes across these lying abandoned next to the roads mainly in Majkhali, Almora and Suyalbari of Kumaon. These *dharamshalas* are small hut like stone structures with quite a few tiny rooms inside. It saddens one to see these historical monuments in such dilapidated state.



Baun and Philam

The villages of Baun and Philam are on the other side of the river. One first goes in the direction of Baling for about a mile and then takes a very steep, precarious and slippery path to get to the river. After crossing an old iron bridge you climb up to Baun village taking a steeper and muddier trail. At the entrance of the village is a stream, drifting through massive boulders. There is a solemn looking, beautiful Shiva temple at the entrance to the village.

Baun | *Shalu Datal*



Temple of Chyuti Gabla at Baun | *Vinod Upreti*

Walking a little further up one finds the village school. Close to the school there are the ruins of the church established by the Christian missionaries in previous century. This is interesting to note that the Christian missionaries had tried their best to influence the Rangs for a long time. They had set up a church in the Sirkha village of the Chaundas valley as well but met with almost no success. Only one family from that village could be persuaded to convert. But here in Baun their efforts were completely futile. The ruins tell the story of the Shaukas' respect for their faith and traditions and underline their sense of integrity.

Ruins of the missionary church at Baun | *Vinod Upreti*



Philam | *Ravi Patiyal*

Baun is the biggest village of the valley with maximum population. The view of the Panchchuli ranges is the most stunning from Baun. In earlier times there were a number of glaciers and waterfalls in the village which are no more to be seen. The village gods include Chyuti Gabla, Shyang Se, Nyaula, Vhetau Se, Musai and Nyungtang, the water-goddess.

Philam is hardly a kilometre away from Baun. About twenty or so families of the village trace back their roots in the Ladakh region of North India. The village was called Pangsung or Philam Rakhu in earlier times. Rangchym is the greatest god of this village.





Go and Dhakar

The villages Go and Dhakar are at a distance of roughly two to three kilometres to the North-East of Daantu. A small village called Hvula is linked to the village of Go and Go-Hvula are together called the twin villages of Darma. The village boasts of the deeds of Kitti Faundaar, a resident of this very village from some three hundred years ago. Kitti Faundaar was the biggest entrepreneur and businessman always concerned with the well being of the people of the Darma valley. The village of Dhakar was renowned in the whole of Darma as the richest village till about 50 years before.





Tidang

Tidang village is at a distance of one and a half kilometers from Dhakar. Tidang is surrounded by rivers from three sides. A high pass between Tidang and Dhakar stretches quite far and high. There are several glaciers on both sides of the pass. There are several bugyals there as well. The glaciers are long and huge resulting in the unpredictable flow of the local stream aptly named Chyolang Yangti (Mad river). The village has among other local gods, a Tibetan god called Chhyung Se. Not till too far back a picture of the Tibetan deity was brought to Tidang every year from across the border. On a specific day of the year this god was worshipped. The puja is accompanied by community gambling and making fire by briskly rubbing a tiny wooden stick on a wooden plank. The fire makes a different spot every year on the plank. More than 500 such marks are found on the wooden planks used for this purpose. This is an absolute evidence supporting the fact that the village has been populated for at least half a millennium.

Countless myths about ghosts (Shyinas and Channas) and beautiful She-ghosts (Kortang Syas) are narrated with enthusiasm and awe.







Seepu and Marchha

The villages of Marchha and Seepu are the last villages of the valley and are situated at a distance of roughly 3 kilometers from Tidang. A very short but tricky pass close to Seepu can take one to the Johar valley situated along the river Gori. The bugyals of Seepu and Marchha are popular among the Gaddi shepherds of Himachal Pradesh who come here every year with their flock. A small pond called Milti Bave is worth a visit. It is popular faith that if anyone utters a lie in the vicinity of this pond, mother nature exhibits her wrath by immediately turning the sky grey which is followed by heavy rain. A great fair is organized in the Marchha village every twelve years for the gods Mabar and Rangchym.



Bidang

It would not be irrelevant to mention here that the supreme god of all villages is addressed by the name of Syang Se which takes upon the names such as Mahadev, Maphar, Chhyung, Larong, Puktang, Dumphau, Rangchym, Chyuti Gabla Paumi, Sachir, Muchir, Bakti, Mudaru an Gabla depending upon the village faith. There are several gods and goddesses besides.

The Bidang village was once inhabited by the Khampas who would make their temporary dwellings in tents. Later the village was abandoned. From last few years the Khampas have revived the custom of paying annual visits to their ancestral temple in Bidang, where otherwise a check post of the ITBP (Indo Tibetan Border Police) has been established by the government. Bidang is situated at a distance of 15 kilometers from Go village. Bidang is the last place to stay overnight before taking on the journey to Sin La pass and cross over to the Vyans valley through the sacred Adi Kailash range of the Himalayas. Sin La is the highest pass in the Kumaon region.









The story of Rajula and Malushahi

The most popular folk tale represented in the musical tradition of Kumaoni folklore is that of Rajula and Malushahi. The heroine of this ballad is supposed to have come from a village of the Darma valley. Here is an excerpt from an article published in the blog *Uttarakhand Times* –

Rajula Malushahi is one of the most comprehensive ballads of Kumaon, Uttarakhand. This epic ballad has been sung in the Kumaon Himalayas for at least a thousand years. Rajula Malushahi is the love story of King Malushahi, perhaps a historical personage and Rajula, daughter of a Tibetan trader visiting the king's dominions.

Set at the time when the Katyuri dynasty was fragmenting into independent fiefdoms, the ballad traces its origins to around the 10th century A.D., when a king no longer reigned from the capital of Kartikeyapur. Instead, the ballad tells the tale of one successor king, Malushahi, who ruled from Bairath, near present-day Dwarahat. The king, although already married to seven queens, falls in love with Rajula, the beautiful and intelligent daughter of Sunapati Shauka, a Bhotiya (Rang) trader of Tibetan goods. Their romantic adventures in search of one another take them to the far corners of the Himalayas, where intrigue, treachery, violence, black magic, and even death conspire to keep them apart.

In their travels, the principle characters visit many places and deal with at least three distinct cultures - the Katyuri, Bhotia (Shauka), and Tibetan (Huniya). Unlike other tales, the characters never become gods, nor are overpowered by them, as Malushahi and especially Rajula use their wits to escape danger time and time again.

All three main versions of the ballad end in the marriage of Malushahi and Rajula. Sung at a stretch in a village courtyard or home on a happy social occasion the ballad takes ten or 12 hours to perform.



A tribute to the Rang Spirit

A Rang would come to the native village every summer and shift to a winter settlement near Dharchula in winters. Most of the Rangs thus have two homes. Technically they are semi-nomads. The upper villages get covered in snow during the winters. All summers they live in their villages and grow one crop. One remarkable thing about their winter homes is that most of them are in Nepal where they not only own land but also have the right of franchise. And they vote in India as well. It definitely is a rare privilege to be able to participate in forming the governments of two countries. We were told later that some Rangs during good old days used to hold land and property in Tibet as well. The loss of their homeland is certainly a huge tragedy for all the Tibetans, but travelling in these valleys we realise that Rangs have also suffered because of this. They used to monopolise the Indo-Tibet trade from this area and Rangs were known all through Kumaon as those little-eyed gypsies, who appeared in winters travelling with herds of goats and sheep and selling herbs, spices, wool and most importantly salt. Generations of Kumaonis have been fed on the salt from the Tibetan mines, supplied by them. Before the 1962 war they were immensely prosperous and everyone was in some way or the other associated with trade from Tibet. Old Shaukas still have vivid memories of the Tibetan official, jongpen, coming all the way from Lhasa to collect tax that the Shaukas had to pay for doing business in Tibet. All Shauka traders had a friend trader in two of the main Tibetan market towns of Taklakot or Gyanima. This friend trader was called mitra. A strong emotional and economic bond joined generations of these mitras. The mitras through an official document, called Gamgya, were obliged to trade with each other only.

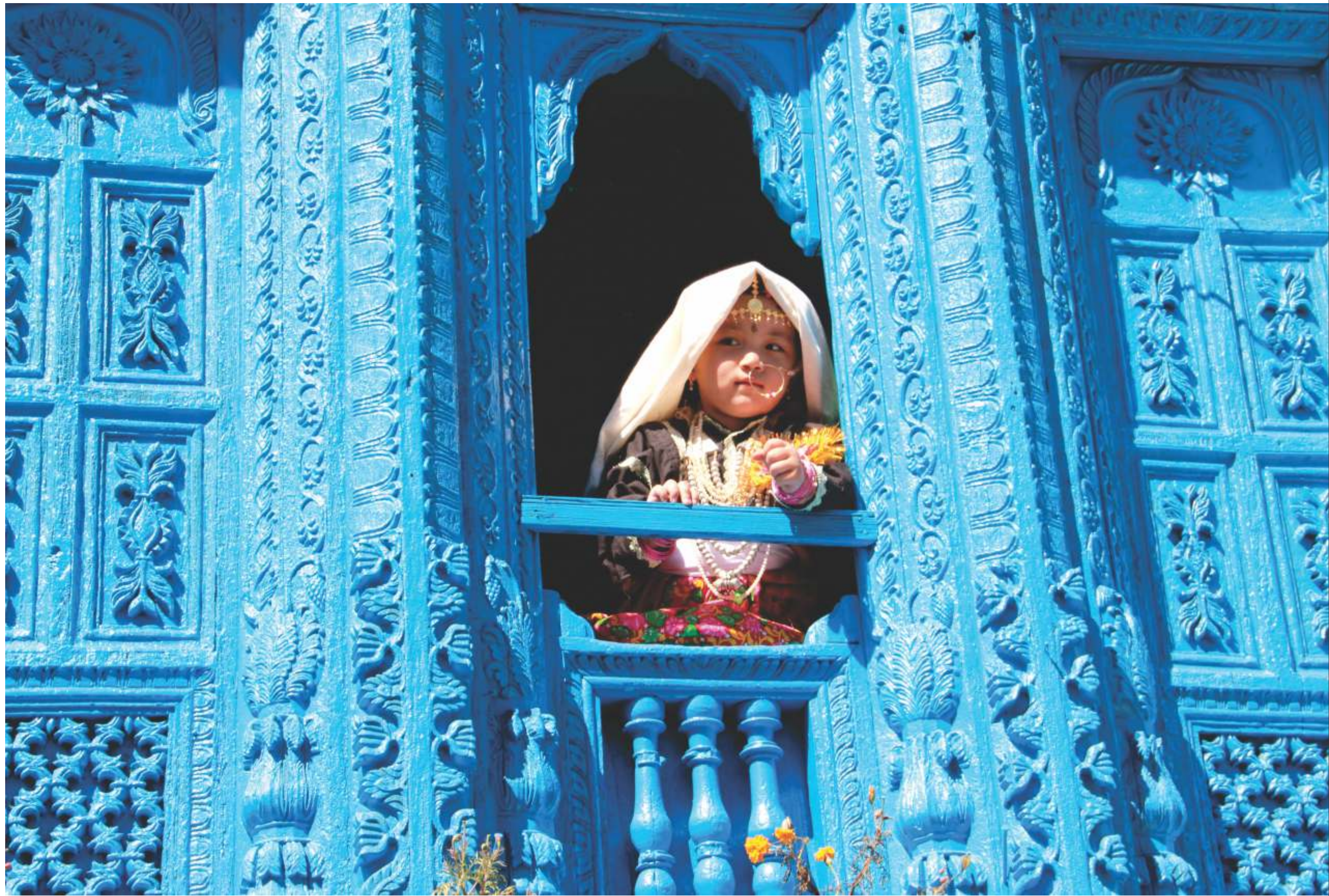
A typical marketplace scene in Taklakot market would have various sets of the two mitra traders dealing secretly, fixing various prices with their fingertips; their hands joined under the cover of a holy cloth. Whenever a new trade relation was established between two parties, a gold or silver coin would be placed in a silver bowl filled with sacred wine as good omen. The two mitras would then break a holy stone or wood into two pieces and keep one each. Later in case of the absence of one mitra, his representative could do business showing that holy piece to the Tibetan mitra. The bitter Sino-Indian relations in the aftermath of the war brought an end to this age-old trade. This came as a shock to the Shaukas as their very roots had been shaken and they had to find new means to live off. Soon they were fortunately declared a scheduled tribe by the government. Being inherently hardworking they saw that their only chance was to grab the government jobs for which they got special reservation because of the above enlistment. Today we have Shaukas at top official posts in almost all government departments in almost every corner of the country. For a community whose population is limited to several thousand only, it has been a great achievement.





The Chaundas valley

The immensity of the great Himalayas has, for generations, filled the human heart with bewilderment and awe. The mystery of these holy mountains has traditionally been a constant source of inspiration and creativity for travellers, adventurers, saints, mountaineers, explorers, anthropologists, researchers and geologists. The Kumaon Mandal Vikas Nigam offers to take you on an unforgettable journey to a Himalayan region that is a rare goldmine of folklore and natural plenty. Let us travel together to the Chaundas valley - the mythical land of warrior women and Kangdali.



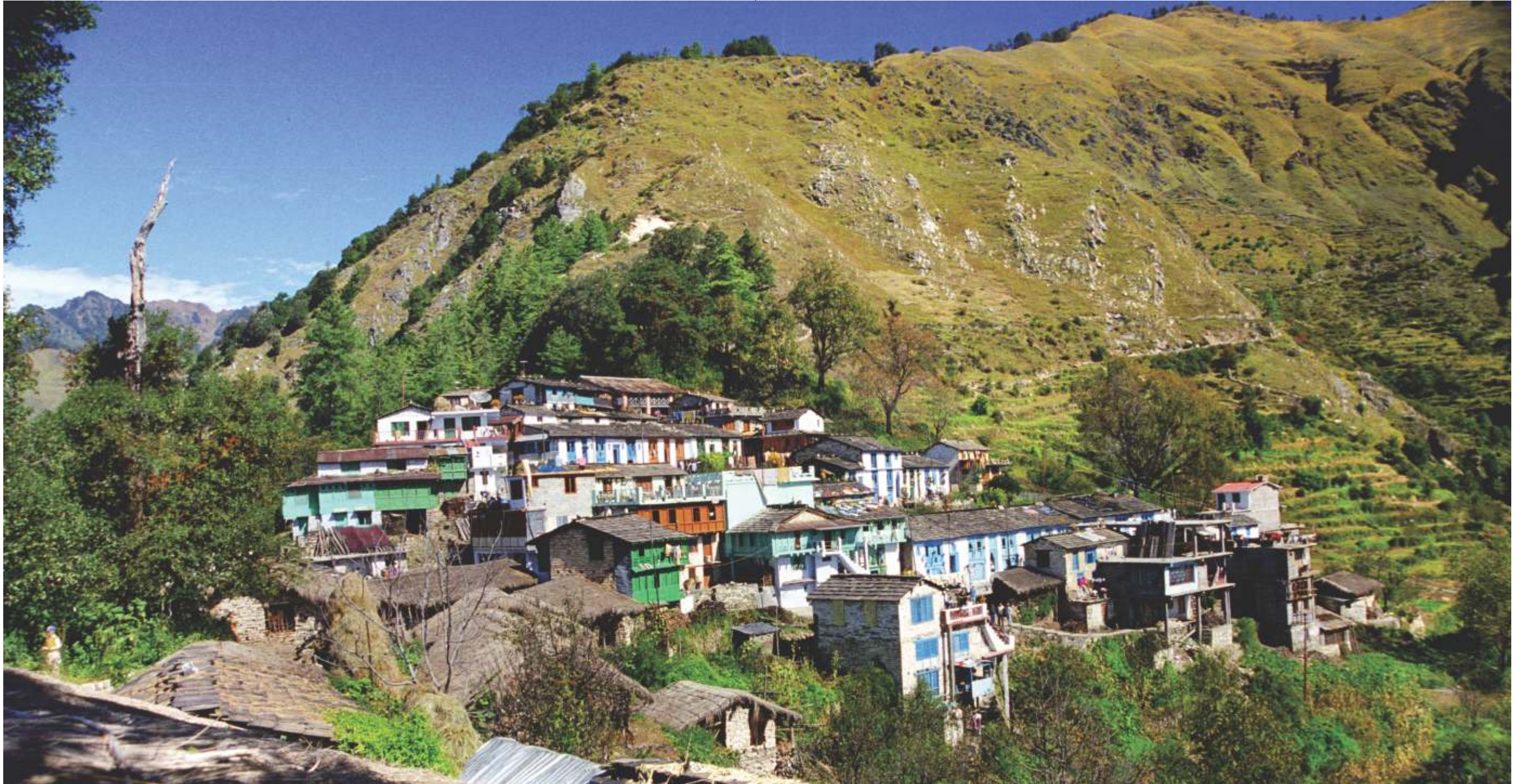
Tiny eyes, enormous vision. Girl in Sosa village | *Dhiraj Singh Garbyal*



Chyepi Bangba

The Chaundas valley finds an early mention in the sacred Manas Khand as *Chaturdash* (meaning fourteen in Sanskrit). The valley is locally known as *Chyepi Bangba* (also literally meaning a group of fourteen). It is a common belief that in ancient times, there either were fourteen ancestors or fourteen villages in the valley that accounted for the name. As such, no Rang ritual is complete without remembering *Chyepi Se Sumsa Ma* (fourteen gods and thirty goddesses); and one can therefore infer that the number fourteen has always been an auspicious number for the Rang too as is the case in the earliest Hindu scriptures that hold the number in high esteem.

Situated between the Kali and the Dhauli rivers, this valley has always held the distinction of being a highly progressive heartland of the Rang culture and civilization. While the inhabitants of the other two Rang valleys were forced to live a semi-nomadic life because of topographical reasons, the people of Chaundas had the luxury of having permanent homes and hence a comparatively more prosperous life. It is commonly believed that the land of Chaundas was the sacred home of the creator and upholder of the Rang civilization namely Miyar Mishru, who prospered in Tilthin-Gungtilthin near Sosa village.



The myth of Myiyar Mishru

Myiyar Mishru was a very affluent person. It is because of his affluence that he, an ordinary mortal has been equated with Gods. He had no dearth of riches, gold and precious gems. He had only one son who met an untimely death. A profoundly grief-stricken Myiyar Mishru began to seek ways to resuscitate his dead son. For this purpose he prepared a funeral pyre made of gold and silver, which he tried to light with a shell. All this proved futile as neither did the pyre catch fire nor did his son come back to life. This made Myiyar Mishru further sorrowful. At that point in time, a crow came there flying. When the crow saw the sorry state of Myiyar Mishru, it tried to console him thus: “O Deity! Your son cannot be brought back to life. His funeral rites cannot also be done upon the pyre made of gold and silver. To think that a person once dead can be brought back to life is to disagree with the divine. Your prime duty therefore is to provide proper liberation to the departed. For this you would have to prepare a pyre with wood. Only then would the funeral of your son be complete when his body that was made of the five elements would become one with the five elements themselves. In other words his deceased soul would find its freedom from the corporeal body.”

The words of the crow (Kaag) brought eternal realization of the cycle of birth and death to Myiyar Mishru who goes on to perform the last rites as advised by the wise crow. Further all the rituals to perform the last rites were narrated by the crow to Myiyar Mishru . While Myiyar Mishru was performing all these rites, a woman belonging to the land was watching him from a spot where no one could see her. She was Kyen Hrinsya, the lone sister of two brothers Pubanyun and Syangbanyun. The brothers had already died as a consequence of having committed the sin of incest. This unfortunate lone sister Kyen Hrinsya had happened to reach *Tilthin-Gungtilthin* by chance while searching for fire. This lone sister had secretly watched the last rites of his son being performed by Myiyar Mishru. She considered performing similar last rites for her two dead brothers. Thinking thus she returned from *Tilthin-Gungtilthin* to her home performed proper last rites (called *Gwan*) for her brothers. For that reason in the Rang belief, the lone sister of two brothers i.e. Kyen Hrinsya is traditionally believed to be the one who, following the rituals performed by Myiyar Mishru brought into being the practice of *Gwan* in this land. The unique status of Myiyar Mishru as the original Rang deity and ancestor is indisputable.

Although the name Chaundas implies a valley hosting fourteen villages, in reality the number of villages in the valley is more than that. The main villages of the Chaundas valley include Pangu, Rimjhim, Baikung, Rautaun, Himkhola, Chhalma-Chhilasong, Sosa, Sirkha, Sirdang, Bangba, Jaikot, Kurila, Simkhola, Babla, Teejya, Rung, Bungbung, Gala, Jipti and Pangla. As a consequence of the severe geographical and climatic conditions, agriculture has never been the principal occupation of the people, although crops of *phaphar*, *uva*, mustard, finger millet, soyabean, rajma, potatoes etc. are regularly harvested.





Girl at the door | Deepak K. Chaturvedi



Before the China war of 1962, trade with Tibet had been the backbone of the Rang economy, which revolved mostly around sheep-rearing and wool-business. Salt and borax were the major imports that the Rang traders brought from the Tibetan markets of Taklakot and Gyanima. The bitter Sino-Indian relations in the aftermath of the war brought an end to this age-old trade. This came as a shock to the Rangs as their very roots had been shaken and they had to find new means to live off. Soon they were declared a scheduled tribe by the government. Being inherently diligent they saw that their only chance was to grab the government jobs.

Today we have Rangs at top official posts in almost all government departments in almost every corner of the country. For a community whose population is limited to only several thousand, it has been a great achievement.

A typical Rang household | Deepak K. Chaturvedi



The women of Chaundas | Deepak K. Chaturvedi

The Rang society and culture is a rare blend of hospitality and generosity. The Rang homes have traditionally followed the ancient Indian custom of treating every guest as the embodiment of the almighty. A Rang easily adjusts to all types of surroundings and environments. It is impossible to find any beggars in the Rang community. People believe in hard work and are not shy in taking up any occupation. Their dedication to work is an epitome in itself. The hostile and difficult natural circumstances of the

Rang valleys demand that people work together. The cooperation that is exhibited during the times of crisis as well as celebration is exemplary. Every family and village ritual is complemented by the unconditional, enthusiastic cooperation and support of the community. The ancient system of village banking called Jhumkho is still practiced in all the villages. Practicing any kind of discrimination on the basis of caste, creed and race is taken as uncivilized and inhuman.



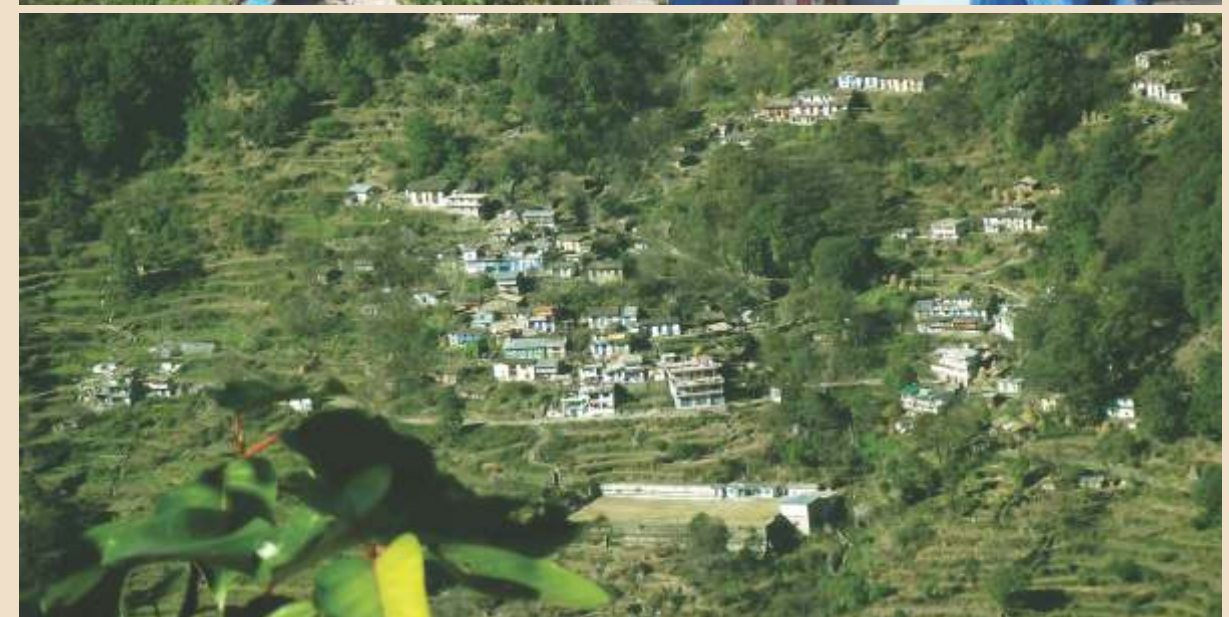
The Rang villages are densely built clusters of beautiful houses. These clusters are called *Haaru*. The houses are mostly double-storied. The upper floor houses the kitchen whose architecture is unique in that the *Mulin* (the fireplace) is built right at the centre. The doors and windows bear exquisite wood carvings.



Pangu, Rimjhim, Baikung, Sosa, Himkhola and Rauntaun

The Pangu village can be called the gateway to the Chaundas valley. Inhabited mostly by the Hyankis and Patiyals, this village has held a very important place in the field of education for the valley. The first school of Chaundas was established in the early 1930's in Pangu and it has since its inception had the honour of having produced hundreds of pupils that have made a name for themselves in diverse fields of excellence.

The villages Rimjhim (home to Rimjhyals, Phakaliyals and Hotiyals), Baikung and Rauntaun (both inhabited by Rautelas) are treated as one Gram Sabha. The small Himkhola village is the residence of Garkhals. Majority of the inhabitants of the Sosa village are either Hyankis or Garkhals.



Bangba Syang Se : The supreme god of Chaundas

The number fourteen holds a special place in the Chaundas valley. The Rang society mainly worships the fourteen gods and thirty goddesses, collectively addressed as *Chyepi Se Sumsa Mha*. The scriptures mention that Lord Shiva's *damru* has fourteen 'pratyaharas'. Similarly fourteen jewels were found when the mythical event of *Samudra Manthan* took place.

The place where the greatest god of Chaundas is worshipped is called Tilthin. The place is situated at the core of Bangba and holds a celebrated place. The historically important villages of Chaundas namely Gung Tilthin, Syang Kutu, Phalak, Pillu Pee Song and Rongto Sum Song lie in the vicinity. Tilthin also happens to be the land of Miyar Mishru, the creator of 'Kak Purana'.

Bangba Syang Se's residence is also in Tilthin. He had three sons - Lamhyar Kak, Syangtang Kak and Kartaru. Bangba Syang Se's second wife was the daughter of a demon who lived in Bhapon (Jyutigarh). Kartaru was born out of this marriage.

The people of Chyepi Bangba hold a collective puja for Syang Se every year on the day of Kartik Purnima. The villagers from all the villages of the valley take out processions with drums and gather at their respective *Se-Thans* (the seat of god). Gods are invoked through *Dhamis* and *Dangariyas* and forecasts are sought. When the villagers of Pangu and Rauntaun proceed towards their *Se-Thans*, they traditionally give a call to Kartaru from a place called Dudang and invite him to the *puja*. The next morning, elaborate *pujas* are performed and sheep are sacrificed. It has been observed that the prettiest sheep is always accepted by Kartaru. Rice and meat is distributed as *prasad*. The heart of the sacrificed sheep is then observed by the expert *Dhamis* and forecasts are made. This tradition is called *Chhinchhya* and recommendations made after this ritual are strictly followed by the people even today. The art of *Chhinchhya* is a very complicated and ancient and people from all the three Rang valleys still hold it as the absolute evidence for future.



Rung, Teejya, Babla, Sirdang, Sirkha, Gala, Jipti and Bungbung

The villages of Rung, Teejya, Babla, Sirdang and Sirkha can be treated as a slightly separate geographical cluster. Hyankis, Patiyals, Rautelas, Payars, Nayals and Dangariyals live in Rung, Teejya and Babla while the village of Sirdang is the ancestral dwelling of the Khunnus, Bhaunts and Hyarsungs. The picturesque Sirkha village houses Khairs, Tatwals, Sirkhals and Hyankis.

The villages of Gala, Jipti and Bungbung have a mix of inhabitants with various backgrounds while Chhalma- Chhilasong remains the lone village in the valley with a predominant population of the people from the scheduled castes.







Traditional jewellery of the Rang women

The stunningly pretty traditional dress worn by the Rang women is called *Chyung-Bhala*. This fabulously feminine attire is complemented by the various gorgeous ornaments. The local name for these ornaments is *Lahyarsya*. These are donned by all Rang women and girls on all the festive occasions, which are many.

Both silver and gold are used for making these conventional ornaments. Some of the most popularly used ornaments include –

Bali – for the head

Beera and Lakchhyab – for the ears and nose respectively

Khongle – a necklace meant to be worn on the upper part of the neck

Kanthi – a long, beaded necklace especially for girls

Champakali, Chyungch, Chandrahaar, Baldang – types of necklaces

Nang-Bahan – thick bracelets

Chhyu-Dibra-Rachkunya – to be worn on the neck and left part of the chest

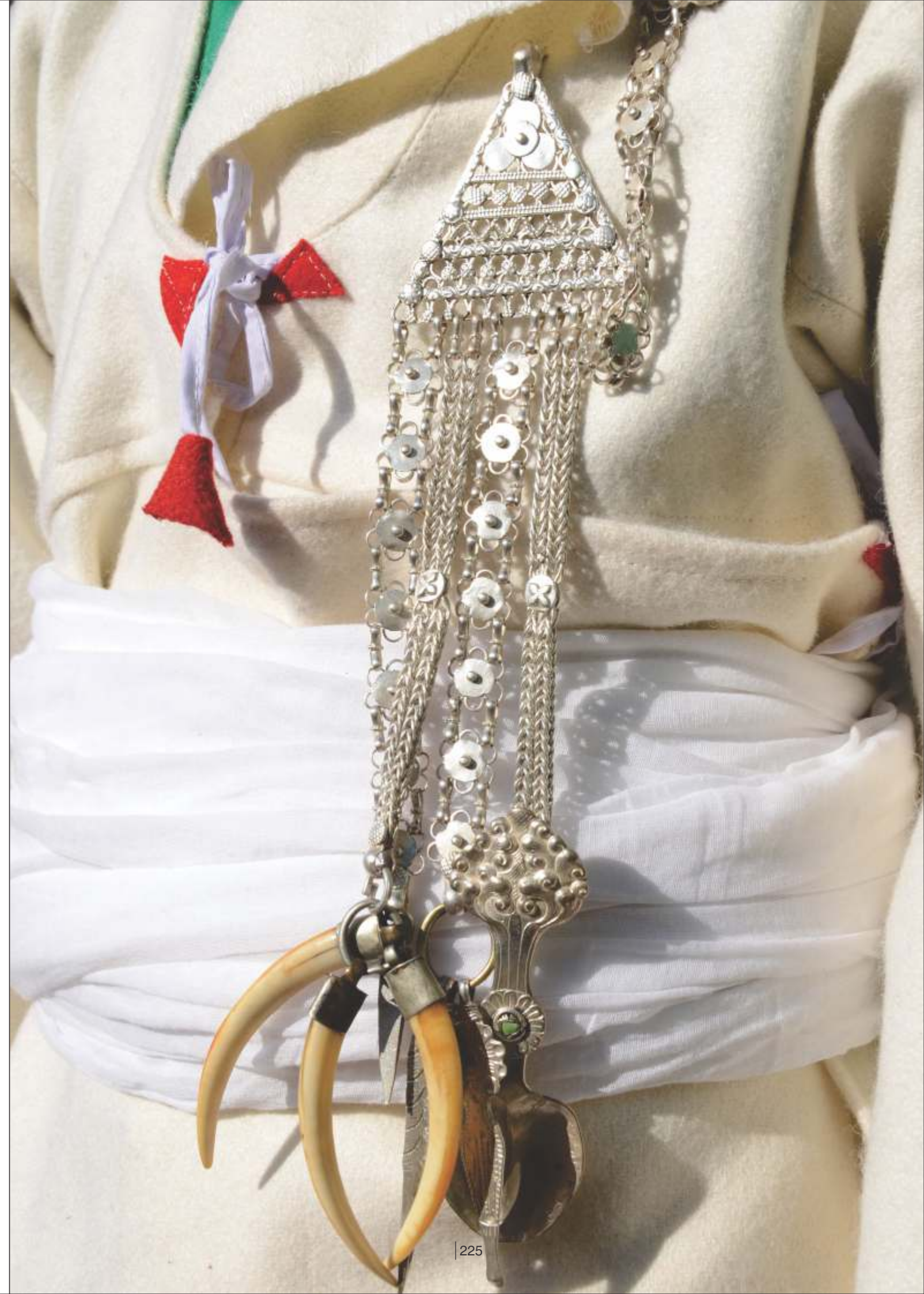
Of these only Beera and Lakchhyab are traditionally made of gold although new experiments are frequently done these days and it is common for the women to put on gold necklaces as well.





Traditional male attire

The traditional male attire includes a Ranga (a white woolen coat), a byanthlo (a white turban) and a jyujyang (a thin white cloth used as belt). Sometimes the Ranga is decorated with specific silver ornaments.





Narayan Ashram

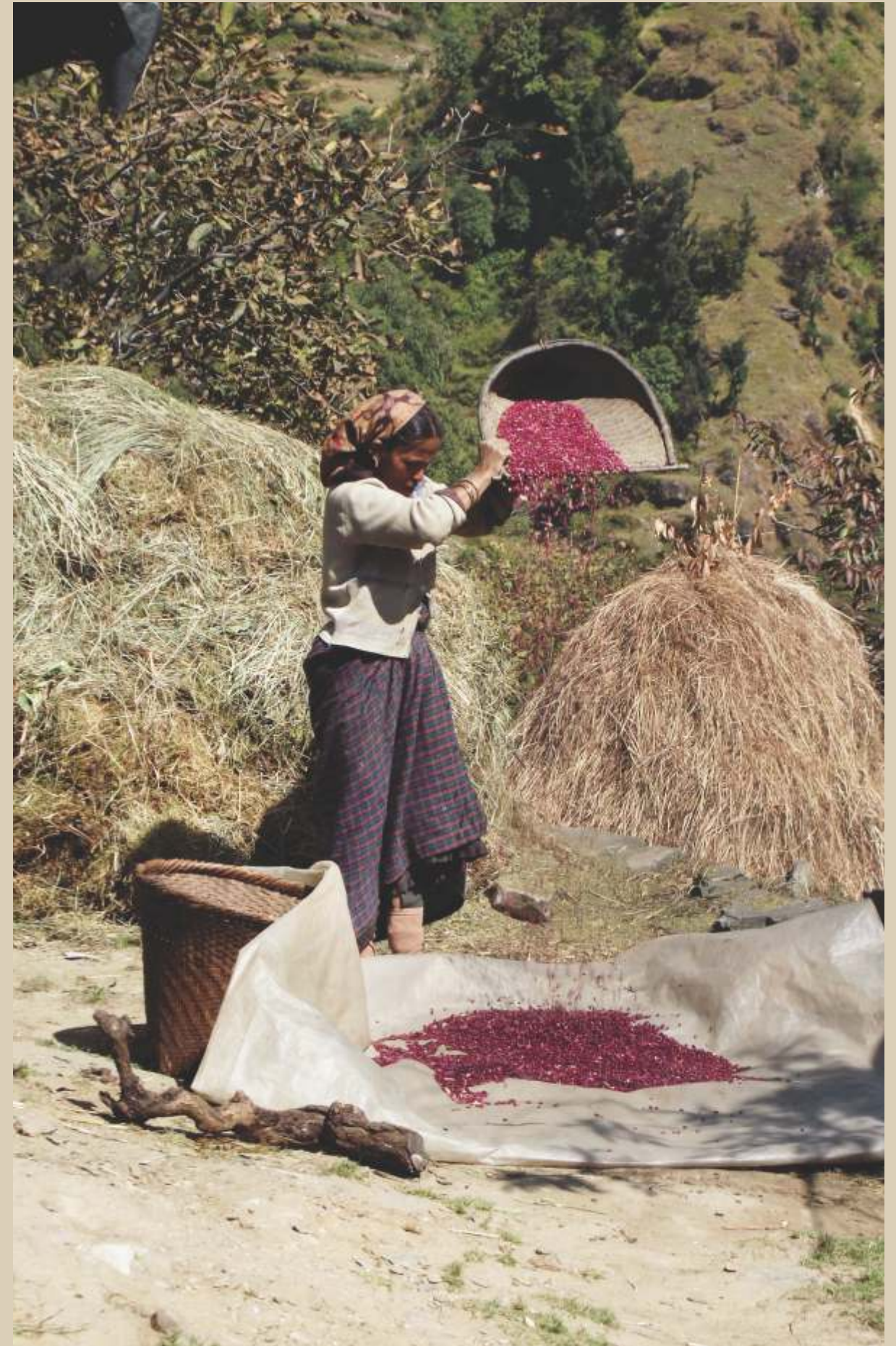
The Narayan Ashram is a major attraction of the Chaundas valley. The Ashram is located on a hill near the Sosa village at an altitude of 2,734 metres above sea level. This ashram was established in 1936 by a *sadhu* and social reformer, Narayan Swami. The efforts made by Narayan Swami for the development of education and social consciousness in the Bangba were remarkable and today the Ashram is seen as a centre for socio-cultural and economic progress.

The ashram draws tourists and peace-seekers from all over the country, throughout the year.

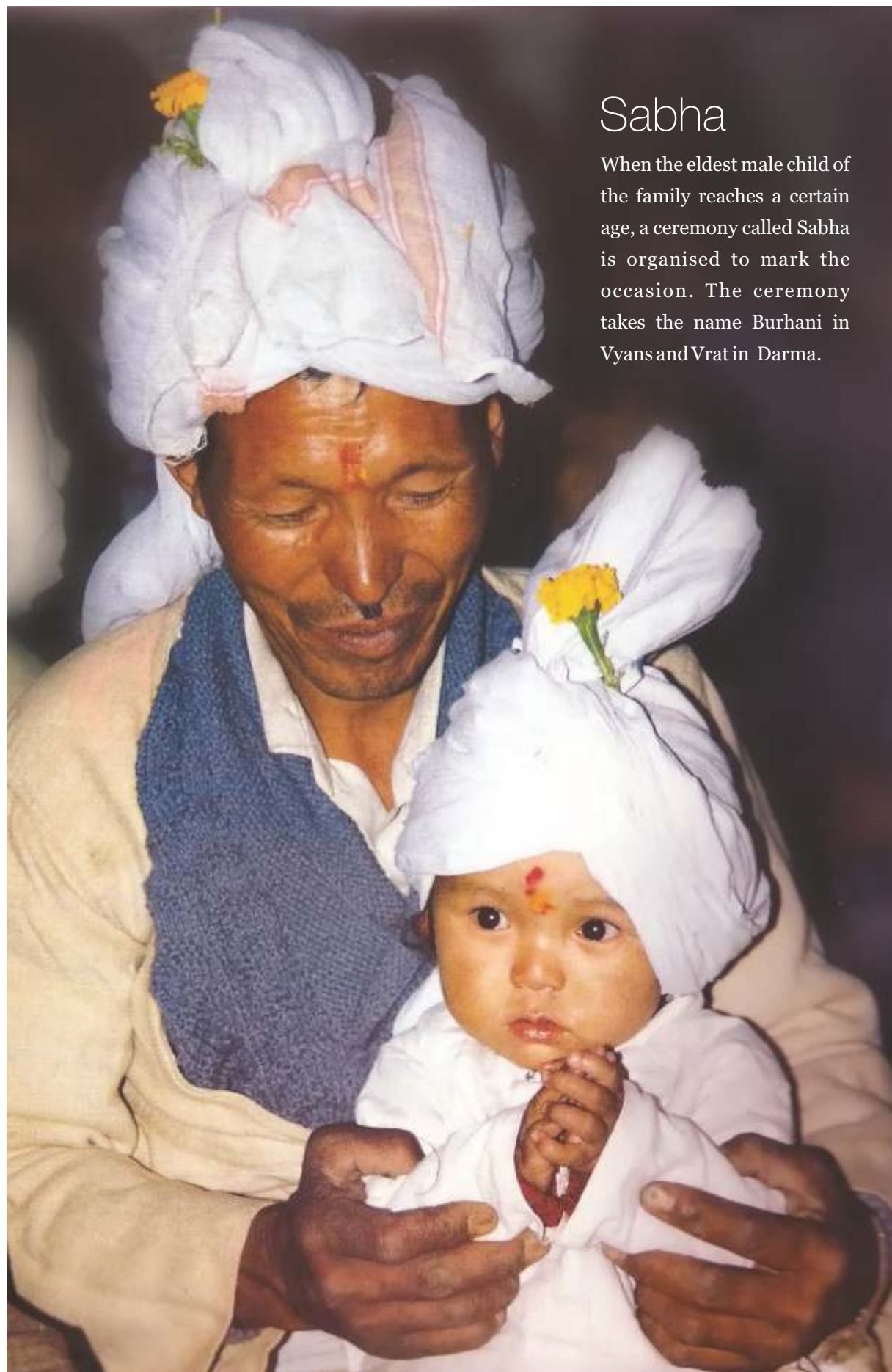




A superb example of woodcarving | *Ritik Hyanki*



Work | *Ritik Hyanki*



Sabha

When the eldest male child of the family reaches a certain age, a ceremony called Sabha is organised to mark the occasion. The ceremony takes the name Burhani in Vyans and Vrat in Darma.

The Chaundas valley is abundant in folklore and mythology. Great tales and fables about several themes have been narrated over generations although storytelling still remains the realm of the elderly. A fortunate traveller in the valley would be invited to a Rang home for food, spirit and long storytelling sessions.





The Myth of Peepee-Hya

There were five brother-gods whose five sisters were humans living in the Rung village of Bangba. The brothers would often visit their sisters. Every time the sisters offered any food to their brothers, the latter refused it on the ground that gods weren't allowed to eat human food. This made the sisters sad.

Once, in order to persuade the brothers to eat at least once, the sisters manually peeled off the skin from 5 *Manns* (Approximately 200 kilograms) of paddy with the help of their delicate nails and prepared a rice dish. The humbled god-brothers were left with no option but to accept the food offered to them. They decided to perform a show. When they began to eat, they secretly threw the food behind their shoulders in such a way that the sisters thought they were eating. The sisters were happy. While they were performing this play, one grain of rice fell into the accidentally opened mouth of the youngest brother. Next morning when the time came for the brothers' return, their flying machines refused to take off, since one of them had swallowed a grain of human food. The elder brothers tried every trick but nothing worked and they had to ask the culprit to stay back on earth. They promised to provide all heavenly facilities and wealth to him.

This brother was known as Peepee-Hya. Peepee-Hya built his palace in Sirkha and was regarded as a king by the people.

A *Dalli* tree heard of Peepee-Hya's wealth and decided to walk all the way from Jaikot to Sirkha to visit the king. When the tree reached the palace, the clever Peepee-Hya turned the tree into a staircase for his palace. In later years the king lost his head and decided to destroy all his wealth. He performed a reverse *pooja* by preparing a *dhalang* made of ash and sacrificed a dog to the gods. The gods got promptly angry and his wish was fulfilled. Another version of the story says that Peepee-Hya didn't want the villagers to get any part of his wealth after his imminent death. He is said to have buried all his wealth at some place in the mountain opposite Sirkha village. People say that on the days of *Poornima* and *Amavasya*, a lighted lamp can be seen on the spot where he had concealed his wealth.

Peepee-Hya was later attacked by Jumlihya, a cruel king from Nepal. Jumlihya found the secret to kill Peepee-Hya with the assistance of a *shyina* (a ghost). The people in the meantime had dug tunnels to save themselves from the atrocities of Jumlihya. One such tunnel can be seen in Sirkha even today. Peepee-Hya was ultimately killed and later the spread of cholera wiped out the whole population of the village. The remains of the village near Sirkha bear witness to this strange myth.



In the forest near the village of Gala, there lived a half-animal, half-human called Gala Paiku. Two brothers from the village used to go on regular hunting missions to the forest. They had dug a trap to catch wild animals. For several days their efforts were turning futile as someone else was taking away the trapped animals.



The Myth of Gala Paiku

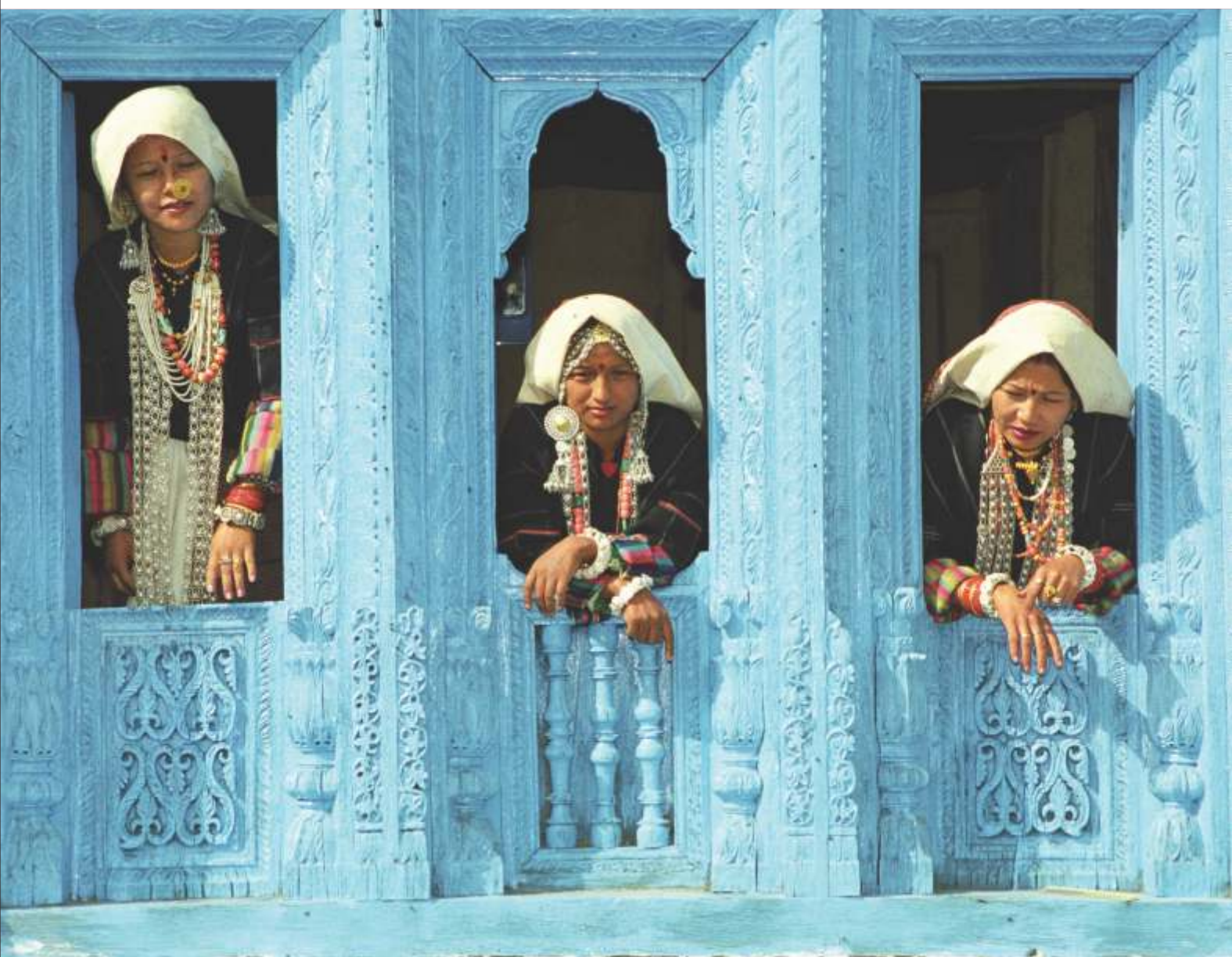
In the meantime these brothers regularly worked on their land to prepare new fields. Every morning they would see that someone had worked overnight at a monstrous speed on the fields and built boundaries for the fields with the help of immense cut-boulders. This filled the brothers with further bewilderment.

In order to find out the truth, one brother put on a thick overall called *palli* and jumped into the trap. In the night the Gala Paiku came, saw the brother in the trap and took him for another wild animal. Gala Paiku carried the brother away to a nearby cave. The cave was filled with the bones and corpses of recently trapped animals. The brother too was thrown on to this pile. The clever brother acted dead and kept observing Gala Paiku's movements.

The Gala Paiku always carried a walking stick and a little round stone. Gala Paiku would lick the stone and set out on new ventures. The brother realized that Gala Paiku's power was hidden in the two objects. Next night when Gala Paiku was asleep, the brother stole the stick and stone and succeeded in escaping from the cave. In the morning the helpless Gala Paiku reached the brother's home in search of his stick and stone. Gala Paiku knew that his secret power was hidden inside the house and was left with no option but to become a slave of the clever brothers. Gala Paiku worked for years without success in the hope that the brothers would pity him and return his secret possessions.

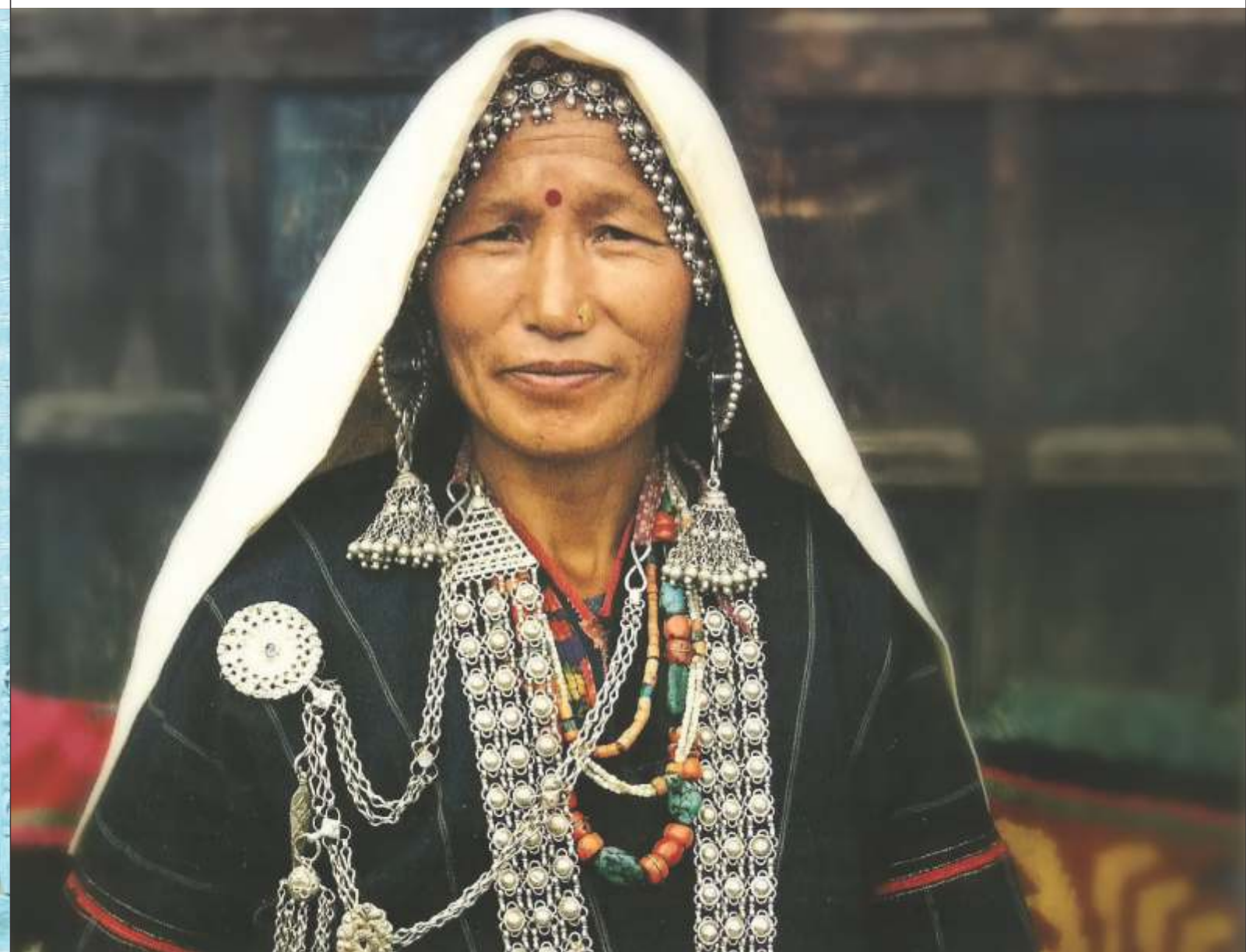
One day while one brother was working on his field, he realized that he had forgotten the *dee*, the leather-yoke for the oxen to be used for ploughing. He asked Gala Paiku to go and fetch it from the house. Gala Paiku went to the house and said to the brother's old wife "Grandma, grandma! Give me the *dwee*." Gala Paiku's accent was such that he couldn't pronounce *dee*. The old woman didn't first understand why her husband wanted the *dwee* (meaning two). She shouted from inside the house to her husband if she should give the *dwee* to the Gala Paiku. The impatient husband shouted back "Yes, yes, give him the *dee* ... Fast!" The old woman promptly handed over the two things to the Gala Paiku.

In return of the torture and pains that were inflicted upon him by the two brothers, the Gala Paiku cursed that their clan would never grow beyond nine families and went back to the forest. The brothers were scared and moved to a new settlement, which now is the Sirkha village. The effects of the Gala Paiku's curse are still felt by a specific clan living in Sirkha.



The myths of Rung

The moon-god would often visit Rung village on the nights of *Poornima* to drink water. Some young dames of the village fell in love with him. These pretty ladies wished that the moon-god stayed permanently in their village. They threw cow-dung on his face, thinking that their action would make him impure and unfit for the heavens. But their wish wasn't fulfilled and the moon-god managed to go back. The marks of the cow-dung are still to be seen on his face though.



In another myth, the moon-god, during his frequent visits to Rung village, happened to owe a lot of money to a famous local blacksmith. When the moon-god didn't oblige even after constant reminders for payment, the angered blacksmith decided to teach him a lesson. The blacksmith held the moon-god tightly with his red-hot iron tongs. This left a mark on the moon and is visible during all lunar eclipses.



Kangdali: The festival of fearless Rang character

The festival of Kangdali is associated to the flowering of the Kangdali (Botanical name: *Strophillanthus Kuntianus*) plant that occurs after every twelve years. The bush of this plant is 4 to 5 feet high and it grows between the altitudes of 5000 and 7500 feet in the Chaundas valley. In the neighbouring Vyans valley these plants grow at the altitudes of 8000 to 8500 feet. Every twelfth year when the bushes of Kangdali come to bloom, a festival with the same name is celebrated with much vigour and enthusiasm when the Rang people living in various parts of the globe come to their ancestral land to participate in it. The flowering bushes of the Kangdali plant are destroyed by the women as an act of valour and resistance. There are several myths correlated to the celebration.



The First myth about Kangdali:

The first and the most predominant myth involves a rich couple by the name Madu and Gaji that lived in the region. Bhadu was their only boy child. When the boy was twelve years old, the father Madu died. Soon after Bhadu also fell ill. Gaji did her best to get her ailing son cured, but no medical advice was fruitful. A Tibetan Amji Lama (expert of medicines) was coincidentally travelling in the area. Gaji went to him and was advised by the Lama to prepare a mixture that contained the extract of a hundred plants and herbs. The Lama told her that the mixture would permanently cure Bhadu of his disease. The mother tried to do her best by preparing the recommended mixture. Unfortunately she could not find one hundred plants and the mixture did not work properly. In desperation she prepared another such mixture with the extract of the Kangdali plant and administered it to her son. The extract worked as poison and Bhadu died. The grief of the lonely widow was unimaginable. In her miserable agony she cursed the plant thus: "O wicked plant! Just the way you have taken away the life of my -year old son, your life would also be taken away by our womenfolk once you grow twelve years old. The women would demolish you everywhere with their dabulis" (dabuli: a sharp flat wooden stick used in weaving carpets by the Rang women. It is called Ril in the other valleys.)





The Second myth about Kangdali:

This myth also has an old widow with an only son. The son grew a poisonous sore on his foot. The old widow prepared a paste from the root of a Kangdali plant and applied it to her son's foot. The son died as a result. This old widow also cursed the Kangdali plant to die every twelve years.

The Third myth about Kangdali:

The people of Bangba were frustrated by the frequent invasions and plunders by outsiders and were forced to be equipped with arms at all times. The invaders resorted to guerilla warfare and hid behind Kangdali bushes at dawn. Their sudden attack caught the villagers unawares who consequently lost the battle. The helpless villagers attributed their defeat to the tall Kangdali bushes that provided shelter to the enemy. Ever since then, the Kangdali plant has been treated as an adversary.



People marching during Kangdali | *Deepak K. Chaturvedi*

The first day of the Kangdali Festival is called *Chim Lubm*. This day is marked by overall cleaning of the household and kitchen utensils. Several delicacies are prepared to mark the occasion.





On the second day called *Memsa*, the cooking area is worshipped and food is offered to the ancestors. The third day, called *Sai Thom Jya* marks the beginning of a religious prohibition on all farming and trade activities. This prohibition goes on until the celebration of Kangdali is over.



The small pyramid-like cakes made from powdered local grains are the most vital part of any religious ritual in the Rang society. These cakes, used as offerings to the deity are called Dhalang.





The fourth day is the day of Kangdali. All the villagers including men, women, children and the elderly don their traditional dresses and begin a journey to the *battle-front*. The journey is accompanied by a disciplined and rhythmic dance for several kilometers.

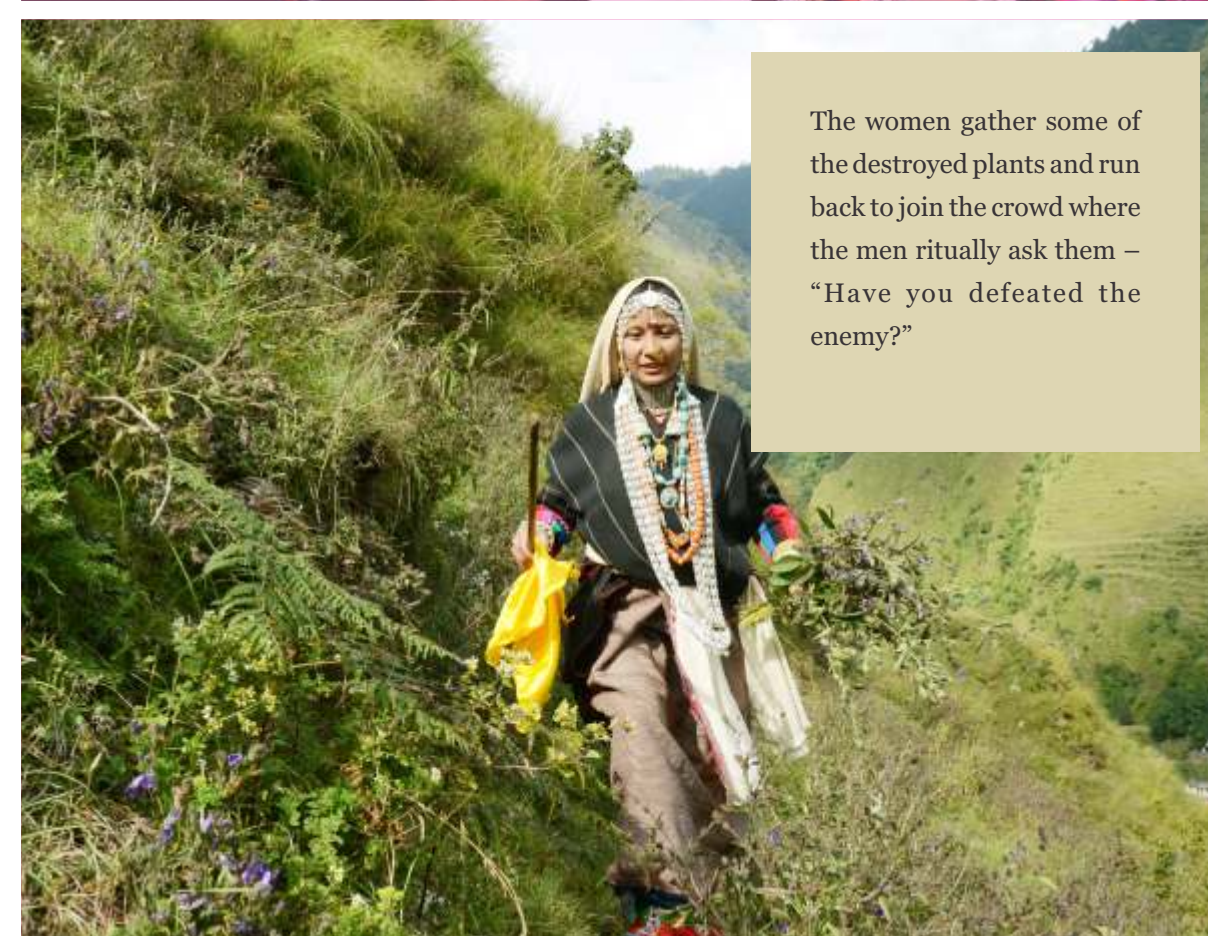
Once the procession reaches the destination, a few selected women charge down the slope to get to the spot where the Kangdali plants are in full blossom with violet flowers.





The women destroy the plants with their *Rils* (*Ril* is a sharp sword-like equipment used in weaving carpets) and sickles, shouting insults at the plants like – “Do you still wish to spread, O enemy!”





The women gather some of the destroyed plants and run back to join the crowd where the men ritually ask them – “Have you defeated the enemy?”



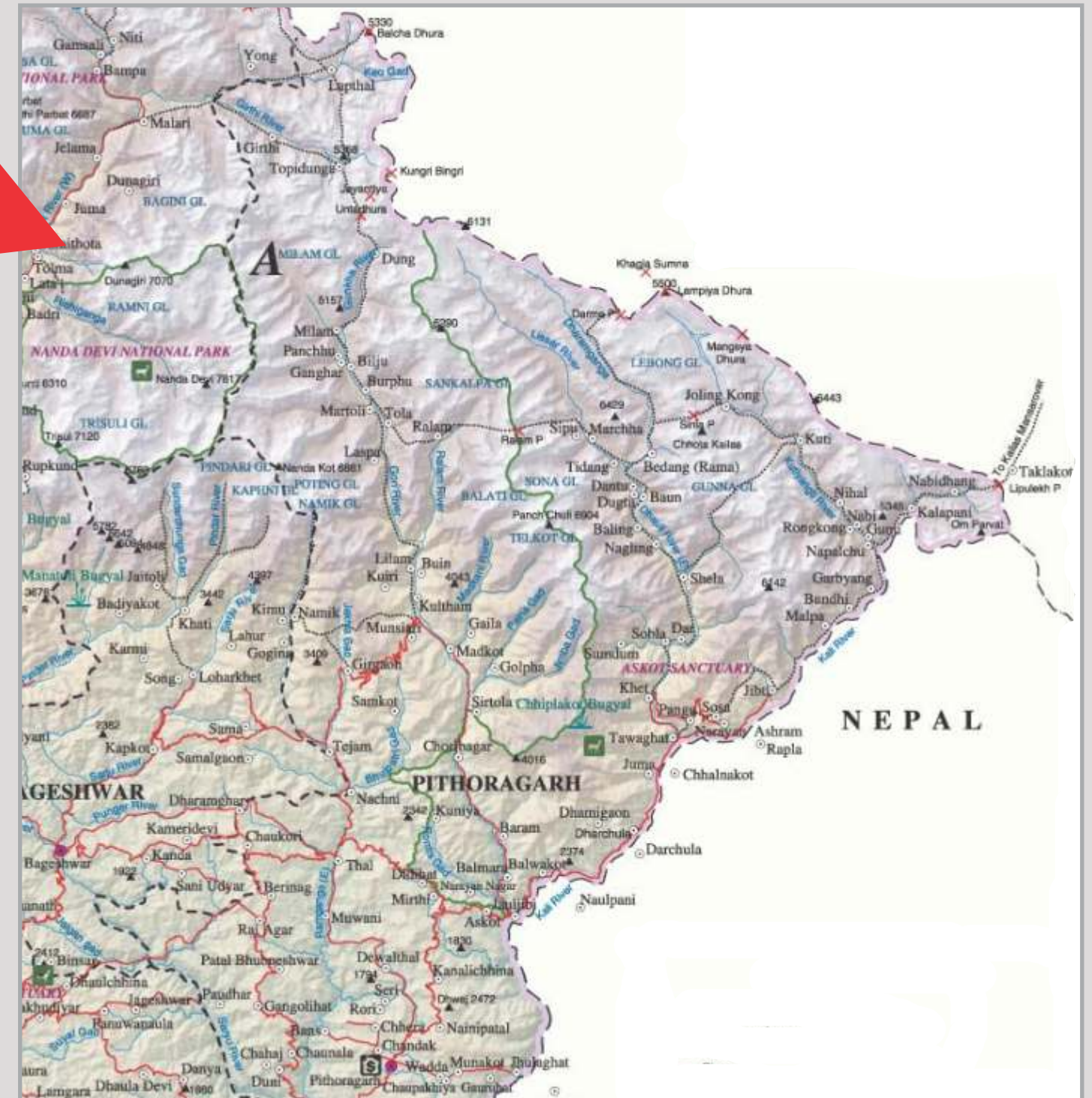
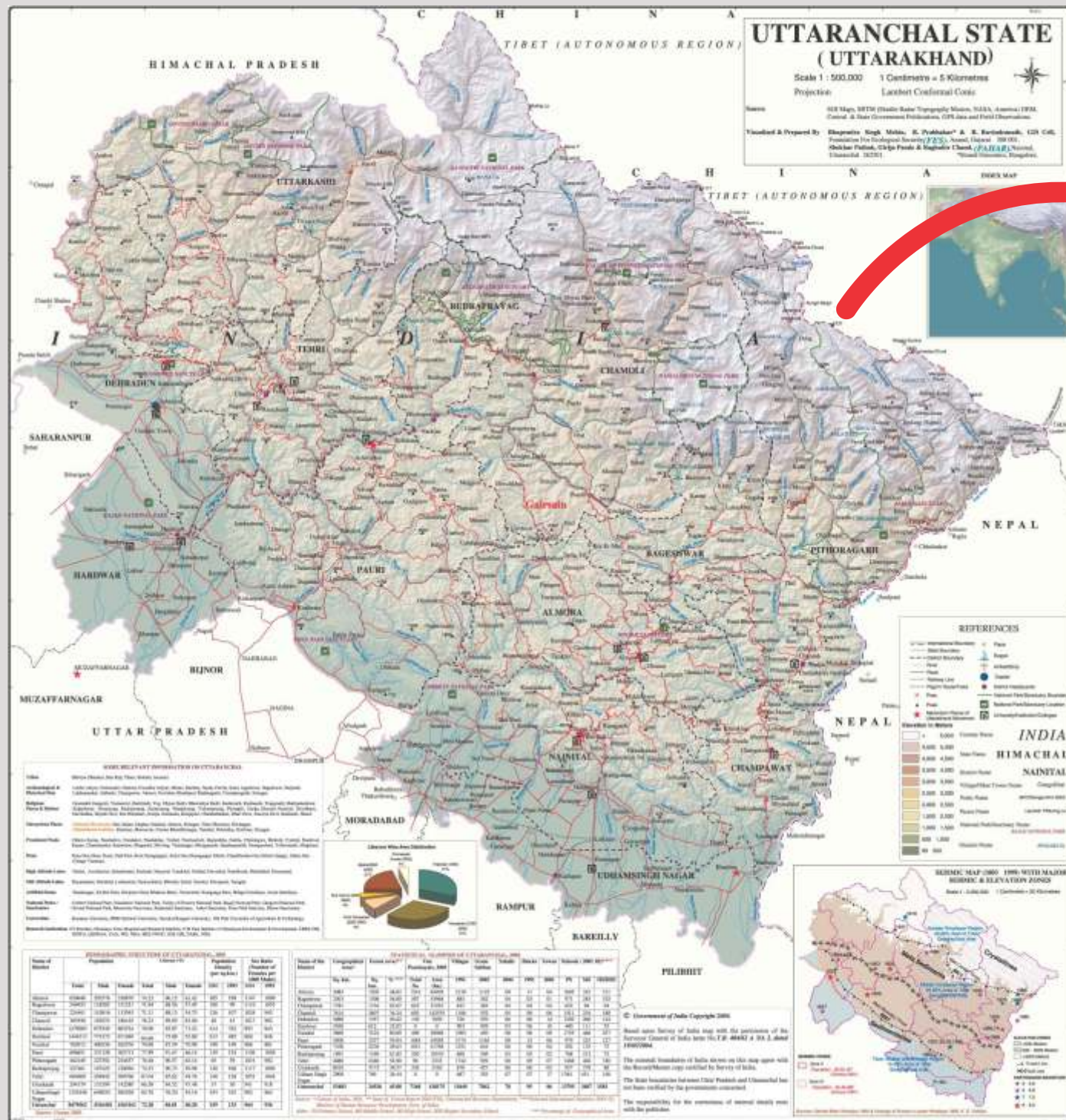
Once the women answer in the affirmative, the men too run down the slope, carrying their swords and completely demolish any signs of the Kangdali plants.



The heroic achievement is followed by ecstasy and dance as the procession makes its journey back to the village. The following celebrations go until late hours of the night.



Map of Uttarakhand



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