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JULIE-ANN CLYMA

## Voyage to the Goddess

(Plates 12–14)

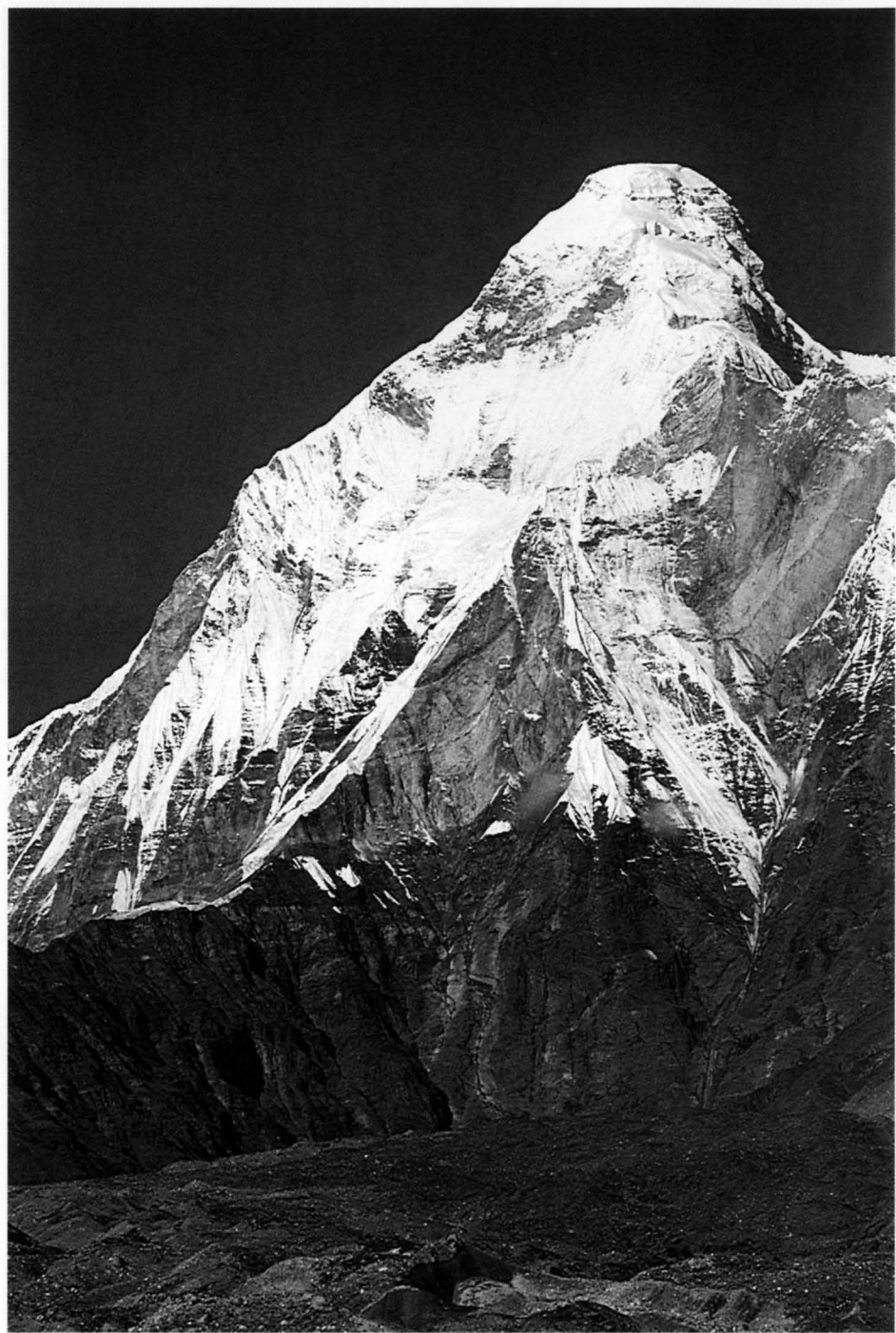
... from a distance of sixty miles we got our first good sight of the two peaks of Nanda Devi towering over their inviolate ramparts of ice ... We were now on the very threshold of the Himalaya and every day the scene became more impressive. Perhaps the finest march of all is that ... through the gorge of the Gori River, roaring down white from the Milam glaciers ... In the recesses between the cliffs were thickets of Himalayan oak, trees of rhododendron and box, with stands of dwarf bamboo. On the crags above were *thar*, short-horned, long-haired wild goats, desperate climbers and lovers of precipices ... Flights of entrancing butterflies thronged our path.

Tom Longstaff, *This My Voyage*

Nanda Devi – the Goddess – has long provided a challenge to enthral the mountaineer. Described as ‘the most romantic mountain in the world, surrounded by legend of inaccessibility’, since the turn of the century she drew the attention of some of Britain’s finest climbers including Graham, Ruttledge, Longstaff, Shipton and Tilman. Repeated approaches over a period of 50 years were required before even a route to the foot of the mountain could be forced. The Rishi Ganga, an obstacle equal to the mountain itself, provided a way into the Nanda Devi Sanctuary from the west, for the first ascent of the main summit in 1936.

For a younger generation of climbers it is not just the difficulty of the terrain that has made the Sanctuary inaccessible. In 1982 the Nanda Devi area was closed for environmental reasons resulting in a total loss of access to a large number of important and historical peaks. However, in 1993 my husband Roger and I learnt that the ‘inner line’ that marks the restricted area close to India’s sensitive border with Tibet was to be relaxed making it possible once more to reach the eastern rim of the Sanctuary by an approach from the Milam valley.

Prior to the closure of the border in the 1970s, the Milam valley was the main link between India and western Tibet (three routes lead to the Tibetan markets of Gyanima and Taklakot). Our research showed that the Pachu Gad, one of the side valleys from the Milam valley, had probably not been visited by a mountaineering party since 1905 when Dr Tom Longstaff tried to reach the Sanctuary from the east. With the two Brocherel brothers, Longstaff climbed out of the Pachu Gad by crossing a pass at



12. Nanda Devi East seen from the Panchu glacier. The South Ridge rises steeply on the left-hand skyline. (*Julie-Ann Clyma*) (p52)

c5300m on the ridge between Nanda Devi East (7434m) and Nanda Lapak (5782m) and descended into the Lawan valley. Longstaff and the Brocherels went on to become the first to see into the Inner Sanctuary when they reached the col on the south ridge of Nanda Devi East (Longstaff's Col c5910m) and climbed the first obstacles of the ridge before turning back. They then almost reached the summit of Nanda Khot 6861m and left the area by an intrepid first crossing of the Shalang and Poting glaciers. All these excursions were completed in a very lightweight style with the minimum of support. Finding great inspiration in Longstaff's lightweight exploration of the area, the possibility of using the pass at c5300m to reach the unclimbed NE ridge of Nanda Devi East seemed a challenging possibility for a team of two climbing in alpine style.

Nanda Devi East was first climbed in 1939 by a Polish expedition that followed Longstaff's route to the S ridge. Other ascents of the S ridge were made by parties based within the Sanctuary in 1951 (French), 1975 (Indian-French) and 1976 (Indian-Japanese). In the post-monsoon season of 1991 an Indian-Russian expedition with 32 climbers repeated the Polish approach from the Lawan valley (they reported fixing 9000ft of rope and fourteen members reaching the summit). A year later an Indian Border Security Force also repeated the climb, as did a large Spanish expedition in the pre-monsoon season of 1994.

The approach to the mountain from Munsiri along the Milam valley and Gori rivers proved every bit as spectacular and beautiful as Longstaff had described, and the four-day walk brought us to an excellent Base Camp site in Alpine-like meadows in the Pachu valley on 12 September. Having established ourselves in the valley, our efforts to reach the NE ridge of the mountain were somewhat short-lived. The route to the pass that Longstaff had reached on snow in 1905 was completely bare. Our attempt to climb to the pass was made in miserable conditions: low cloud, rain, steep mud, unstable scree, loose rock towers, and the rattle and hum of stonefall. We reached c5200m beneath a final steep loose wall before deciding to turn back. After a reconnaissance of other options from the Pachu valley it soon became clear that our only hope of climbing Nanda Devi East in the conditions would be by moving around to the Lawan valley.

It was not until 21 September that everything was at the new Base Camp site. Up until this point we had slept no higher than 4200m and we now had only 17 days before having to start the walk out. We decided to spend 4-5 days on an acclimatisation trip, and then make an attempt on the summit. We looked again at a possible route to the NE ridge from this valley, but the dry conditions and the added threat of sérac fall made us turn our attention to the S ridge. Once again, we found ourselves travelling in Longstaff's footsteps. Already on the S ridge was an Indian-American expedition of eight members that was coming to an end having reached a high point of around 6200m, and a Spanish expedition that was load-carrying to Longstaff's Col. Both teams were using fixed rope.

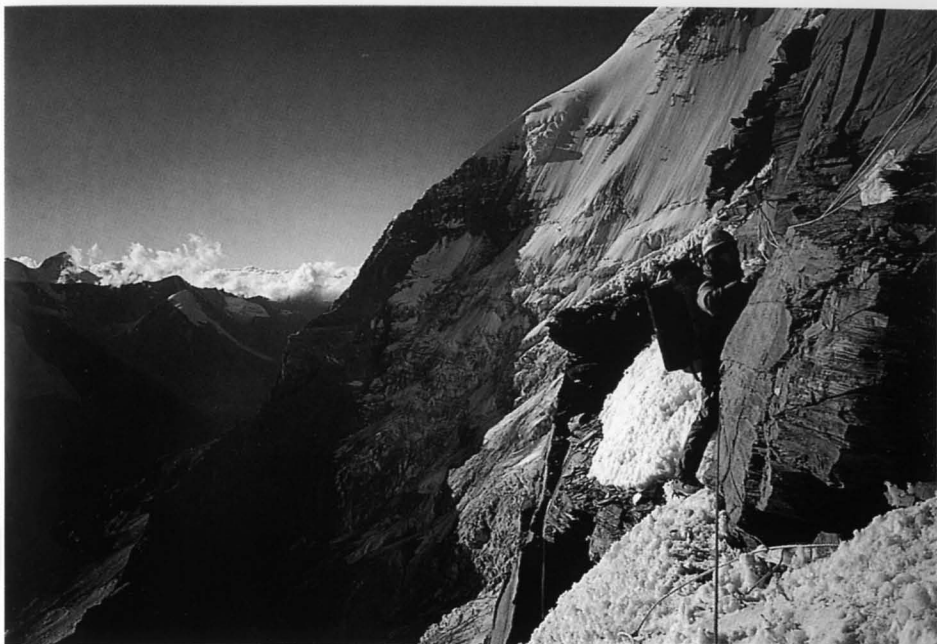
Having moved up to Advanced Base at c4700m for a night, we made a pre-dawn start next morning, and decided to climb an independent line to the left of the route fixed by the other teams. Just as on the Pachu side, there was no usable snow low down on the mountain, making it necessary to climb a rock rib to reach Longstaff's Col. Although the rock was very loose in places our route gave some enjoyable pitches before returning to the crest of the rib at an easy section to join the line being used by the other teams. A snow patch at c5500m provided a tent site and our first proper night on the mountain.

Next day we moved up to Longstaff's Col and continued along the Pinnacles. The first two towers were bare of snow, exposing loose rock and rubble, but a snow patch on top of the third Pinnacle provided an excellent site for a single tent and our second night on the mountain. The next section of the ridge was steeper, but at last gave some reasonable quality snow and steep rock steps, with inspiring views into the Inner Sanctuary. This third day on the mountain saw us reaching the American team's high camp at c6100m.

The following day we left our tent, and climbed as high as we could in order to check out the upper part of the route for our summit bid. The climbing involved further absorbing rock and snow steps and then gave way at c6200m to an elegant, corniced arête. It was a great pleasure to step out on unspoiled territory, away from the old fixed rope that littered the lower section of the climb, and to be totally alone on the mountain. The snow arête soon merged into a wide and windswept shelf that presented obvious potential for a further campsite. Above this shelf a mixed face led to the next section of the ridge. We climbed up to c6700m before turning back owing to the strong cold wind that had begun to blow from the Sanctuary. It was clear from our exploration that a number of lines would be possible on this face and that at its top at c6900m there might be potential for a further camp site. Happy with this reconnaissance we sped back to our tent. Leaving our tent behind at 6100m and our stove and pans at Longstaff's Col, we descended next morning to Base Camp.

With time extremely limited before the porters were due to return on 8 October, it was only possible to take two rest days – although 'rest' was rather a misnomer for, like the Americans, we were taken aback by the amount of rubbish left in the Base Camp area. We spent a day shovelling up debris and burning or burying as much as possible.

On 1 October at 5.30am we left the site of Advanced Base Camp for our tent at 6100m, which we reached almost 12 long hours later at 5pm. Having made such a big height gain (1400m) in one push with heavy sacks we decided to take a rest day on the 2nd. We enjoyed a long sleep but in the afternoon experienced a period of heavier snowfall and spectacular peals of thunder. We became fearful that we had missed the best window of weather and might now be defeated on our summit bid. However, the morning of the 3rd dawned clear, although extremely cold and windy. We



13. Traversing a gendarme on the South Ridge of Nanda Devi East.  
The South Ridge of Nanda Devi is in the background. (Roger Payne) (p52)



14. Julie-Ann Clyma approaching the summit of Nanda Devi East at 4.30pm,  
6 October 1994, having made the first female and first alpine-style ascent.  
Nanda Kot in the background. (Roger Payne) (p52)

finally set off at 10am along the ridge. It was hard going on the steeper rock steps with heavy sacks, but we made steady progress and reached a good campsite beside the Spanish at c6500m on the plateau by early afternoon. Unfortunately a terrific storm blew up, and we were soon enveloped in driven snow and strong winds as we struggled to get the tent up. We eventually crawled into the tent around 3.30pm and spent a miserable afternoon trying to dry out our equipment.

It seemed that in each day the window of calm conditions was shrinking. The strong overnight winds on the mountain were not abating until later and later in the morning, while the afternoon storms were moving in earlier each day and becoming more intense. It seemed prudent, before making our summit bid, to try to move our tent higher.

Meanwhile, the Spanish announced that they were going for the top the following day from the Plateau. At midnight they woke us up as they set about preparing to depart. The wind was howling and the temperature was bitter; in our minds this was no time to be going up. We settled back down, with thoughts of another rest day in mind, but got little rest until 4am when the Spanish finally departed. By 10am the wind had dropped and we spent the next few hours drying out equipment and eating as much as possible in preparation for moving up the next day. We saw the Spanish reach about 6900m but, fearful of frostbite, they descended and decided their expedition was at an end. In the afternoon the valleys to the east of the mountain were again shrouded in cloud, and there was more snowfall. We had another bad night owing to strong winds, but the morning of the 5th dawned clear and by 10am the wind had dropped, so we set off.

The climbing on the face proved to be very enjoyable with good snow and lots of interest provided by weaving in and out of rock bands. All except one short 25m pitch was climbed moving together, and by 3pm in deteriorating weather we reached the cornice of the upper ridge. We traversed for 100m or so until just above us we could see the prominent black rock marking c7000m. In the poor conditions our only choice was to start levelling out a tent platform in the steep slope dropping down from the cornice to the plateau below. The night was appalling. Both of us developed altitude headaches and the strong winds seemed as if they would flatten the tent. A further complication was the huge volume of powder snow being deposited inside our protective snow walls, making it necessary to shovel out the entrance of the tent every hour or so.

Waking from a light doze to the early morning sun was a great relief, but on our exposed perch the wind howled. It was a miserable process gearing up inside our small tent – first frost, then condensation rained down. The effort of wriggling into wind suits and pulling on boots saw us gasping for breath with heads pounding. It was not until 9.30am that we stepped outside. The view before us was inspiring, as the horizon was clear and the way to the top obvious. Taking turns in deep snow, we set off along the corniced ridge.



The wind had us labouring in our steps, but within a couple of hours we had reached the first major obstacle: a steep wall. The way through this barrier, with its complex array of rock buttresses and snow couloirs and slopes, was not immediately clear. However, continuing close to the edge of the ridge seemed the most obvious thing to do, and soon we were launched on short pitches of ice interspersed with awkward rock steps. Three pitches saw us through this and then we were back on the sharply defined crest. The climbing moved from one side to another, skirting rock obstacles and providing exhilarating climbing over the outrageous exposure to the valley floors on either side. The desperate cold meant that it was not possible to stop even for a moment to pull out water bottles or food. Despite our continuous progress, it was close to 3.30pm before we reached a further steep wall that we sincerely hoped would soon lead to the summit. Mindful of our stretched state and the usual afternoon storms, we pondered the climbing ahead. While part of us urged the need to go down quickly, the desire to finish what we had started was great. Uncertain that we could climb the most direct route up the wall, instead we skirted around to the Sanctuary side of the mountain. While this proved initially straightforward, it left us facing a final precarious pitch up steep loose rock slabs. However, having overcome this last obstacle and regained the ridge crest, only another 100m of almost flat ground lay between us and the final rock outcrop.

We reached the summit of Nanda Devi East at 5pm just as the sun was dipping behind storm clouds. Snow was pluming off the top of the main summit but the sky was clear and from our vantage point we could see across to the summit of Nanda Kot and to the horizon in every direction.

The descent was long and tiring and not without incident when an abseil point almost failed. We spent one more night at 6900m, descending through the next day and night to reach Base Camp just four hours before the porters arrived on the 8th. Our brief moments on the summit had been bliss although we were acutely aware of our exposed position, without any chance of outside help if things went wrong. In our solitude we were conscious of those who had pioneered the way before us. We had climbed in the best style we could and felt that our lightweight ascent had been a fitting conclusion to the voyage that Tom Longstaff had embarked upon nearly 90 years before. Our feelings could perhaps best be described in the words of Eric Shipton: '... in the sanctuary of the Blessed Goddess we had found the lasting peace which is the reward of those who seek to know high mountain places'.

**Summary:** In September-October 1994 Julie-Ann Clyma and Roger Payne attempted a new route on the NW ridge of Nanda Devi East (7434m). When this proved impracticable they moved to the S ridge and, on 6 October, made the first British/New Zealand ascent of the route, the first ascent of the mountain by a woman and the first ascent in alpine style.