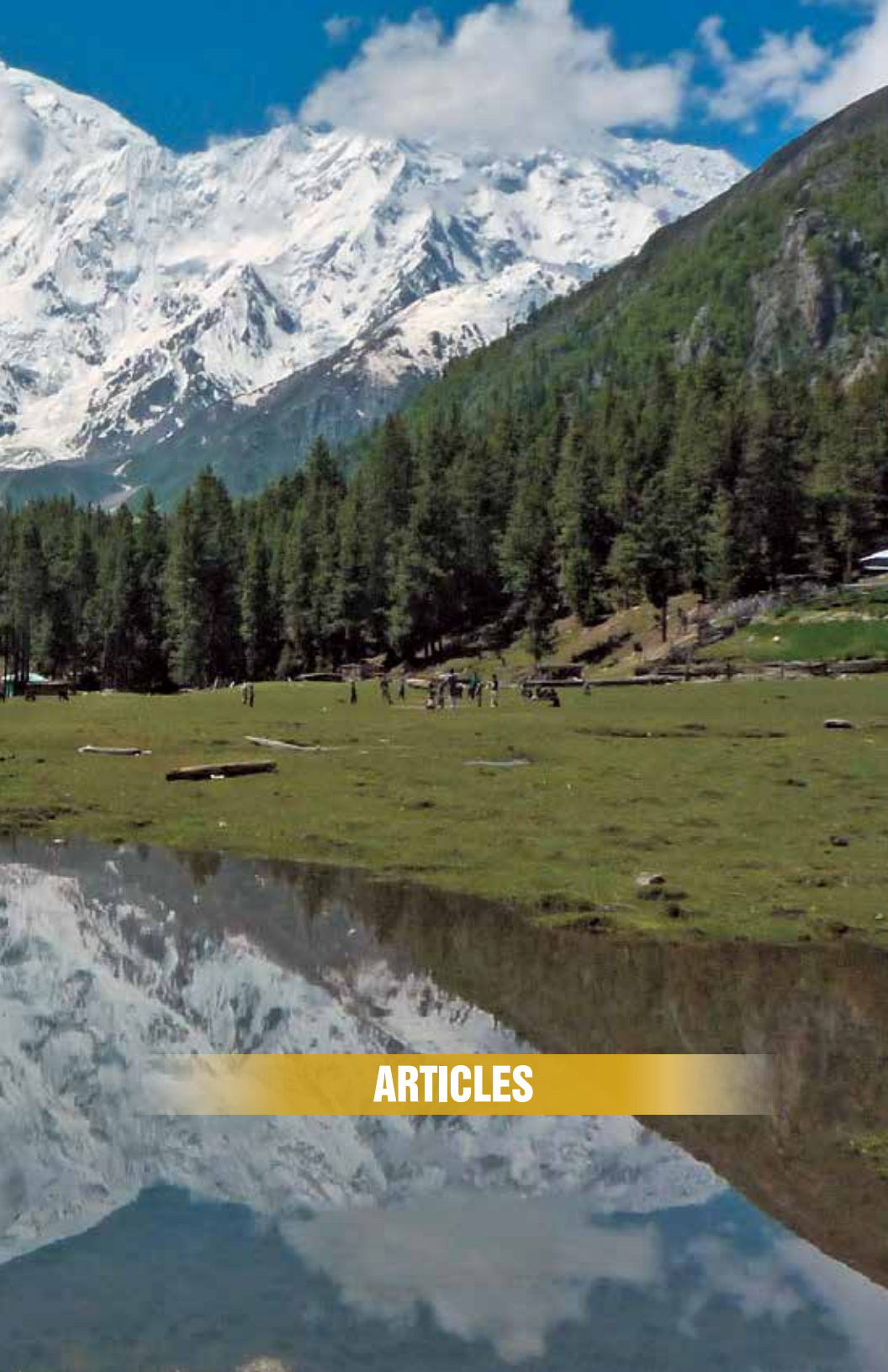




Fairy Meadows (Liver Khan)



ARTICLES



Survey of India Office, Calcutta.

PANDIT NAIN SINGH, C. I. E.

SURVEY OF INDIA.

THE FIRST OF THE PANDITS OF TIBETAN EXPLORATION.

1865-75.

Pundit Nain Singh Rawat : Explorer Extraordinaire

Shekhar Pathak

He is not a topographical automation, or merely of a great multitude of native employees with an average qualification. His observations have added a larger amount of important knowledge to the map of Asia than those of any other living man and his journals form an exceedingly interesting book of travels.

There has been some work done in the field of history of exploration in Asia. However, Indian explorers of the colonial period are unknown or lesser known as compared to others, even today. Pundit Nain Singh Rawat (1830-1895) was one of the greatest explorers of the 19th century – he did exploration work in Tibet, Central Asia and the Tartary region. He started his career as a coolie with the Schlagientweit brothers and later he worked in the Survey of India as an ordinary surveyor. He soon emerged as one of the pioneers of Indian Surveys. This article has been written in the 150th year of his first Trans-Himalayan expedition.

Nain Singh was originally from Milam village (Johar region of present day Indo-Nepal border district of Pithoragarh, in the state of Uttarakhand, India). Milam was a Sauka or Johari settlement, situated near the Milam glacier in the higher Himalaya and en route to Untadhura and Kingri Bingri passes which lead to Gyanima mart in Western Tibet. His father, Lata Burha or Amar Singh (1795-1848), for personal reasons had to leave the Milam village and settle in a non-Sauka (Bhotia) village named Bhatkura with his two wives (Nitwali and Lakhma Biljwal), near Madkot in the lower Johar. Lata was 24-25 years old at that time.

He settled here after losing a court case and his ancestral property in Milam. Both his wives committed suicide by jumping in the Gori river. Sauka women rarely did such things. This was in the year 1824; Lata was 29 years old. There was no hope of remarriage because no Johari or Marchha-Tolchha would give their daughter to Lata.

However, in the following year Lata married Jasuli, daughter of Jumal Rana (of Jumma village near Tawaghat in parganah Askot). His eldest son Samjang was born in 1826, and Nain Singh, on 21 October 1830. While a daughter was born in 1833, the youngest son, Maga, was born in 1836. After giving birth to four children and completing 13 years of married life, Jasuli died in May 1838. She spent all her married life in Bhatkura. In the words of Nain Singh, "his father had to marry for the fourth time to bring up his four children". Lata now married Padima, daughter of Thola Dhapwal of Dhapa village in 1839. From this wife were born Gajraj (1839) and Kaliyan (1841). Kaliyan also became a surveyor in Survey of India.

Actually, Bhatkura, a non-Sauka village, was the birthplace of Nain Singh and he was born from a non-Sauka mother. However, the fourth marriage of Lata with Padima shows that the Saukas had later accepted him. Though he did not get his ancestral property back, the slightly changed attitude of his clan gave him the opportunity to go back to Milam in 1847 after a *vanvas* of 27 years, where he died the following year, in social and financial difficulties.

Back to the Roots : Nain Singh in Milam

It was Nain Singh's good fortune, that their father, before his death, was able to bring his family back to their roots. None of Lata's progeny was born in Milam as is claimed by colonial writers. Nain Singh's first diary gives details about his mother, his birthplace, his date of birth and his own difficult childhood. His coming back to Milam also repeatedly reopened old social and family wounds. They (the rest of the Lata family) always reminded the children about what their father had done. Some of the cousins and the villagers neither forgot nor forgave Lata even after his demise. However, it is also true that some of them, like Mani Burha, were sympathetic towards Nain Singh and his siblings.

Milam was one of the biggest human settlements in Kumaon in those years and Bhatkura was a tiny village. Milam was next after Almora and three other towns in terms of population in British Kumaon, a very busy trade centre between June and October, and the last halting village before reaching Western Tibet. The Saukas of this area were keen traders and sole controllers of the Indo-Tibetan trade through the passes of British Kumaon.

In those days, there was no possibility of getting an education in this distant part of Kumaon. The early death of his parents created problems for Nain Singh and his brothers. An older cousin, Mani Burha, helped Nain Singh and suggested that he should begin some trade. Before joining any trade, he suddenly left home in July 1851, one day after quarrelling with his stepmother. In his first ever journey from Milam, he went to Mana via Munsyari, Danpur, Badhan, Himni, Balan, Irani, Pana, Joshimath and Badrinath (in the early 20th century Lord Curzon travelled on parts of this route so this trail is named 'Curzon Route'). This was the first time that Nain Singh had crossed *bugyals* (alpine pastures) like Manatoli, Aali, Bedini, Kunwari, and Gaursu and rivers like Gori, East Ramganga, Saryu, Pindar, Kail, Birahi, Nandakini, Alaknanda and Vishnuganga.

The Joharis had been marrying into the Marchha and Tolchha clans of Dhauli Ganga (Niti) and Vishnu Ganga (Mana) valleys. At Mana village, Nain Singh started staying with Latadev Marchha, a well-known trader of the valley. Latadev's daughter Lati was married to Nain's elder cousin Mani Burha. After some time Nain Singh got married to Umti, the niece of Amardev Marchha. Nain Singh remained at Mana until early 1854. It is very likely that he may have gone to Tibet and to the winter settlements of the Marchhas in those years though he has not mentioned that in his diary. He felt staying permanently at his *sasural* (in-laws house) was insulting or below his dignity, although Amardev had made him agree that he would continue to live with him. Amardev had promised his brother's and his rights and share of property to Nain Singh. In March 1854, Nain returned to Milam with his 13-year-old wife (he calls her '*Kabeelay*' in his diary) without informing his in-laws.

His stepmother and brothers were happy at his return but his being unemployed was a concern. The problems that existed when Nain Singh had left home remained unresolved. To those was added the well-being of Umti who was from a well-to-do family and for her, going to Milam was difficult in the beginning. Mani Burha had anyway been fond of Nain Singh and now a new relationship had been forged, for Umti was the first cousin of Mani Burha's wife.

Within less than a fortnight's stay at home, on 15 April 1854, the 24-year-old Nain Singh, with financial support from Mani

Burha and others, started on a journey with Jeeta Jangpangi and Beeju Dharamsaktu to different regions of Bharmor, Punjab Hills (Himachal) to purchase sheep, goats, horses, yaks and other domestic animals. It was the longest journey he had undertaken. After crossing over the long foot hills they reached Bharmor. He saw the temple of Trilokinath on the left bank of Chandra-Bhaga (Chinav) river. The temple was built in Indian style with a marble statue of Buddha. The religious rituals were performed in the traditional Tibetan way. As in other regions of the border areas, it was a shared cultural legacy, still very much visible in all Indo-Tibet border areas.

They purchased more than 361 animals – 350 sheep and goats, 10 yaks and a horse. They returned to Keylong via Barhalhacha pass, Spiti, and then entered Tibet (Sumgil and Tholing). In Tholing, he met his father-in-law, Amardev Marchha, who taunted him for leaving Mana without telling him. He gifted him a horse to make amends, as this was one of the ways of compensating social insults.

Unfortunately, on the return journey one third of the animals died near Tholing, due to a disease known as *maan* (render pest) and only around 100 survived. However, this journey helped him in his future expeditions. But his debts mounted - even managing food and clothing was difficult at home and in addition, the family and community did not treat them respectfully. His step-mother realized that the amount of the debt would continue to mount and so would the family's difficulties. She separated from this family with her two young sons. All possessions in the house were divided into two parts and half was given to Nain Singh and his brothers and sister.

Nain Singh had to look for new ways of sustenance. It was the turning point in his life.

The Schlagintweit Brothers

The Survey of India was established in 1767, 63 years before the birth of the Royal Geographical Society (RGS) and Great Trigonometrical Survey which started in 1802. After that the European powers started survey work on the different continents. The great German geographer and scientist Alexander Humboldt (1769-1859), had initially suggested to the Royal Society, Royal Geological Society and

Royal Geographical Society (all from Great Britain) that they should connect the magnetic surveys of the different parts of the world. The Societies submitted a memorandum to East India Company for making a new physical map of India in the light of new research and exploration. But the Company refused to accede to this request. Finally, Alexander Humboldt used his connection and requested the King of Prussia to intervene. The Company accepted the King of Prussia's request and the three Schlagintweit brothers were given the work of surveying the Indian subcontinent.

In February 1856, Nain Singh was on his way to Ramnagar in connection with his trading activities when he heard that 'Adolphe and Hermann, Sahib Bahadurs of the Magnetic Survey' were going to Turkistan and Ladakh. Actually these were the noted German explorers – the three Schlagintweit brothers – Robert, Adolphe and Hermann. Nain's cousin, Mani Singh (or Patwari) was head of the helpers' team. Nain Singh immediately wanted to go along as a porter. Initially Mani refused to take him but after some intervention, agreed. This would be another turning point in Nain's life and in the lives of new generations of Johar.

They started from home on 28 February 1856. After travelling to Nainital, Hardwar and Nahan they reached Shimla, where Mani met the Schlagintweit brothers. Mani's monthly salary was fixed at Rs. 60 while Nain Singh and Daulpa Pangtey would receive Rs. 35.

Mani went with Hermann Schlagintweit to Ladakh via Kanawar (Kinnaur), Piny (Spiti) and Tsomoriri (lake in Ladakh region). Daulpa Pangtey and Nain Singh accompanied Adolphe and Robert from Kulu to Lahaul, crossing over the Rohtang pass. From there Daulpa went with Adolphe to Baltistan via Zanskar. Nain Singh accompanied Robert to Leh crossing over through the Barhalhacha pass and Rukh Syoke. All groups stayed in Ladakh while Hermann and Robert went up to the Pushia village of Khotan near the border of Turkistan with Mani, Muhammad Amin, Maksud and Ladakhi porters. From there returned to Leh in October 1856. After crossing over the Kargil passes, they reached the Kashmir valley. Adolphe also returned to Kashmir from Skurdu (the winter capital of Ladakh along the Indus river).

Nain Singh's party stayed in Kashmir for some time and proceeded to Punjab. In December 1856, the group reached Rawalpindi via Baramula along Jhelum river, where they stayed for many days. From there Adolphe planned to go through Kabul, Bokhara and Russia to England. Hermann and Robert decided to take the sea route. All three brothers were very happy with Nain Singh. Apart from his behaviour and ability to learn fast, he taught them the Tibetan language, while from them he learnt map-making, use of instruments for measuring altitude, latitude, longitude, air-pressure, etc., and a little English. He took barometer readings and prismatic observations. A person who joined as a coolie thus became an involved technical companion.

Both Hermann and Robert wanted Nain Singh to accompany them to England. Not knowing what would be the result of a foreign trip, Nain Singh initially refused to go. Crossing over the sea was a great taboo in those days. Hermann and Robert insisted, putting Nain Singh in a dilemma. He thought that if he continued to refuse he might lose his job. Finally, Nain Singh asked Mani who got angry, probably out of jealousy. He advised Nain Singh to run away from the camp because if he went, his family would consider him dead.

Nain Singh was not yet an independent person. He could not take his own decisions so he returned after the meeting with Mani and left a long letter for the Schlagintweit brothers without meeting them in person. They were surprised and never got to know the real cause of Nain Singh's change of mind.

Pundit (Teacher) became Pundit (Surveyor)

In 1858, Nain Singh engaged in trade again thus going to Bageshwar, which was a mid-mountain trade mart in the region. At Kapkot (en-route to Pindari glacier) he met Col. Henry Strachey, who employed him as his servant. He knew of Nain's participation in the Schlagintweit brothers' expedition. Nain Singh accompanied him to Johar, Namik and Pindari glaciers. Strachey introduced him to the Dy Commissioner of Almora, Mr. Kalvin, Education Inspector Mr. White and Col Edmund Smyth, a much travelled military officer, who later became the Education Inspector in Kumaon.

This connection became instrumental in Nain Singh's becoming a teacher (Pundit) in the newly established primary school at Milam in



1784 map of India

1859. In 1862 he was given the additional charge of opening a school in the neighbouring Darma (Dharchula) patti. In Milam, his becoming teacher was opposed by some of the Milamwals (inhabitants of Milam) but he worked hard and Edmund also supported him. Nain Singh did his job well

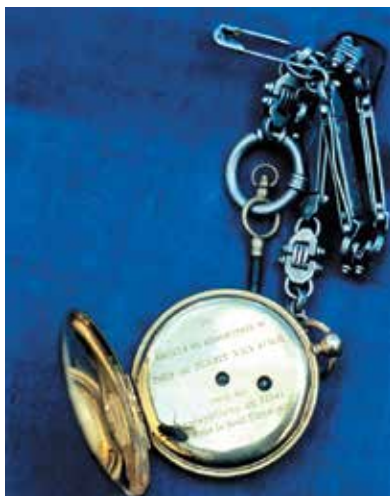
It is surprising that a person who never saw school as a child (as there were no schools in the region where he was growing up), became the very first teacher of the first generation of educated Saukas in the Johar and Darma regions. Nain Singh disclosed his background, the debt he had, to Edmund Smith. He mentioned that the meagre salary could not enable him to pay back his old debts. Smith was unable to increase the scale so he suggested that Nain Singh join Survey of India in Dehradun for a better salary. But the nature of the work would be different. Smith had already spoken to Col. Montgomerie about Nain Singh and Mani Singh. This connection took them to Survey of India.

In February 1863, Nain Singh, Mani and Kalyan reached Survey of India HQ at Dehradun. They were trained in different aspects of surveying, use of instruments and collecting data. Finally, at the end of 1864, they got orders from Col. Montgomerie to proceed to Tibet through Johar to draw maps. At that time, the Johar route was closed so they decided to go through the Kathmandu route. In January 1865, they started from Dehradun and reached Kathmandu on 13 March, 1865. They tried their best to get permission to go with a reliable party and through a safe route. At that time, the Kuti and Nialam routes were also closed due to heavy snowfall. March was too early for a clear pass.

They opted for another route. Dressed in Tibetan garments and speaking the Tibetan language, they proceeded through Kyirong carrying their instruments inside their clothes. They were stopped by a Tibetan police officer at Kyirong and were informed that the route was closed. The only alternative was to try the route through Kuti or Nialam again. The party returned to Kathmandu. At that time, Tibet was a forbidden country and Lhasa was a closed city. In those days, even traders found it difficult to reach Lhasa. At last, Mani went with a different group and Nain Singh had to accompany a Bushhar trader's party. Nain Singh introduced himself as a Bushhari and reached Tradom in Tibet on 6 September, 1865.

From there he joined a caravan that was coming from Kashmir and going towards Lhasa. After visiting Ratung, Sigatse, Gyantse, etc., the caravan reached Lhasa on 10 January, 1866. This was the first ever Survey of India representative in Lhasa. He stayed for three months and worked on a detailed description of Lhasa. He visited Potala Palace and met 13-year-old His Holiness, the Dalai Lama. He also participated in Losar, the New Year celebrations of Tibetans (15 February, 1866) but his primary work was to study and survey Lhasa. It was not possible for him to remain under cover for long. One day two Kashmiri Muslim traders enquired and recognized that he was not a trader from Rampur Bushhar. He immediately left Lhasa on 21 April, 1866 after staying for about 100 days and crossing Gyantse and Sigatse he went westwards along Sangpo river.

After crossing over Mahem la, he reached Darchin in Kailash Manasarovar region (the catchment area of Sutlej river) on 17 June



Compass

1866; a region where the Kumaoni Saukas had been coming for a long time in connection with trans-Himalayan trade. This was his first trip to the Kailash area, frequently visited by his community. Then he crossed over Niti pass (crossed by William Moorcroft in 1812) as the Kingri Bigri la was full of ice and snow and after Lapthal, Topidhunga he crossed Untadhura pass on 29 June and reached Milam. In July 1866, he

returned to Dehradun and Mussoorie (this year of achievements for Nain Singh was also the year of death of George Everest). Nain Singh travelled more than 2400 km, over 18 months and the mean height of the places he travelled was between 3333-5333 m above sea level.

The RGS presented him a gold watch with an inscription in the Devnagri script. The British Government in India also honoured him.

Thokjalung : The Region of Gold, Borax and Salt Mines

A year after that tiring journey, he was ordered to join an expedition to Western Tibet. The main aim was to explore the gold, salt and borax mines and collect geographical information. The journey was difficult and risky, especially because Tibetan officers knew of his previous journey. It was also possible that the Sauka traders of Kumaon in different trade centres of Western Tibet may recognize him.

The 11-member team started its journey from Mana 25 July 1867. The biggest challenge in the region was from Tibetan dacoits. Nain Singh's party took guns and swords with them.

On the way they had to cross obstacles of Tibetan officers and difficult terrain. They reached Tholing, one of the important cultural centres of Western Tibet, on 4 August, 1867. Rinchen Jangpo (Ratn Bhadra) built a beautiful monastery here in 9th-10th century and

similar monasteries were replicated in later years at Tabo in the Spiti valley and other places in Himalaya. Nain Singh met his father-in-law Amardev for the second time in Tholing.

From there they started the journey towards Thokjalung and reached there on 26 August 1867. They were allowed to stay for four or five days by the *hakim* (officer) so they used each second of those days working. Nain Singh made a detailed report on the mines of gold, salt and borax, the mining process, the labourers and their conditions. He surveyed the whole town of Thokjalung. On their return, they surveyed the Indus and Sutlej valleys. Their survey actually becomes the connecting link between the work done by Moorcroft in Western Tibet and Cunningham in the Ladakh area.

When he returned from Mana pass, there was heavy snowfall – he suffered from frostbite and fell ill. The party came back to Dehradun in December 1867. This was the first attempt by the Survey of India in this region. The team was able to survey the catchments of the Indus, Sutlej and their tributaries. He, for the first time, mentions the 7-8000 m Aling Kangri mountain where he met local people who ate only meat. Thokjalung expedition added one more feather to his cap. They had walked around 1700 km.

Five Months in Yarkand

The next five years were a bit restful for Nain Singh. He worked more as a teacher-trainer at the Sol HQ at Dehradun and in Mussoorie. He was rewriting his diaries and notes scattered in thousands of small scraps of paper, most of which are still preserved at the Survey of India, Dehradun, and National Archives of India, Delhi. Nain Singh first worked with Montgomerie and when the latter went back to England due to bad health, Nain Singh worked with Henry Trotter. He wrote the very first vernacular primer of surveying known as 'Akshans Darpan' (1871) and it might be among the first scientific writings in Hindi in the second half of the 19th century.

On 14 February, 1873, Col. Montgomerie, who had become the Dy Superintendent of the GTS, ordered him to conduct the survey of the unknown Sangpo valley downstream from Lhasa. It was suggested that they should go to Sahibganj and Allahabad by train and from

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A page from Nain's diary

there to Darjeeling, Sikkim, Giangche and Lhasa. From Lhasa they were told to go along Sangpo down to Lakhimpur, the British Indian settlement in upper Assam.

Kishan Singh was helping with preparations. They were at Almora awaiting final orders. In the first week of April 1873, the new Dy Superintendent of GTS, JBN Hennessey, decided to postpone the expedition. He ordered Nain Singh and Kishan Singh to reach Mussoorie to teach surveying to two new surveyors and join T Douglas Forsyth and Henry Trotter to Yarkand and Aksu region. This expedition, known as the Forsyth Mission, was actually the second Forsyth Mission and became Nain Singh's third big expedition after joining the GTS. Kalyan Singh, Jasmal and a few others were with this team.

The English members of this expedition were T Douglas Forsyth, Henry Trotter, EF Chapman, Thomas Gordon, John Biddulph, Dr H Bellow and Dr Stolicza. This was the first expedition to Tibet in which English surveyors, explorers and doctors were participating. They started from Mussoorie June 1873 and from Shimla they went further, crossed over Baralhacha reaching Leh in early August. They were in Yarkand on 8 November 1873 and Nain Singh stayed there for five months. He has vividly described the region. They finally returned to Leh in May 1874.

The group with its subgroups worked in the area south and north of Karakoram range; in places like Chyanglung, Saserghati, Daulatbegi, Gyapsan, Shahidulla, Korgan, Mustaq, Kargalik, Yarkand, Aksu etc. They found a direct route from India to Turkistan, by passing the Dogra territory. This route of around 1500 km was via Najibabad-Srinagar-Joshimath-Niti-Tholing-Bogo La-Gartok-Damchok-Zara La-Rudok-Khotan

Each member contributed to a 550-page book that was published on this expedition, one of the first documents with photographs. But there was no photo of the Pundit in this volume. The English officers however appreciated Nain Singh for working fearlessly in a geographically, climatically, geopolitically and socially difficult terrain.

Leh to Lhasa to Tawang : The Last and Greatest Expedition

His last and the greatest exploration trek was on the north back of Himalaya – from Dehradun-Shimla-Leh to Lhasa, culminating in back journey to Samye-Tawang-Udalgudi-Guwahati-Calcutta and finally to Dehradun.

The party started from Leh in July 1874. Pundit Nain Singh and his comrades dressed as lamas holding prayer wheels, chanting 'Om Mani Padme Hum' (Oh! jewel of the lotus). After crossing Noh, Pangong lake, Thokdaurakpa, at the height of 4500-5000 m above sea level, he surveyed Itisik lake. This was the area peopled by the Khampa or Changpa. They were supposed to be dangerous but he found them simple Buddhist nomadic pastoralists in a cold desert area with very little water. Once, on the way, the Khampas rushed towards their camp but it was only out of curiosity. In September 1874, they reached the gold mines of Thokdaurakpa. The mine labourers were known as *fukpa* and they used to live inside the manmade land caves. Kumaoni Sauka traders also brought the gold from these mines to India.

According to Nain Singh, gold costing around Rs. 80,000 annually went to Gartok mart from those mines. Every year the gold miners had to give tax of 1/5th of one ounce per person per year to a *Sarpon* (Gold Commissioner). Nain Singh realized that the pastoralists were in much better condition than the gold miners.

On the way, he saw a tea caravan with 200 yaks, transporting brick tea to other regions, numerous sacred lakes and also met Bonpas, the pre-Buddhist Tibetans.

On 18 November 1874, eight years and 10 months later he reached the forbidden city of Lhasa. Revisiting Lhasa was a unique event in the life of Nain Singh Rawat, as no other explorers had achieved that distinction until then. However, the first person who met him was a Leh trader known to him. The news of his journey reached the Tibetan authorities in Lhasa. The trader also started blackmailing him. Nain Singh understood the situation and decided to leave the city two days after his arrival. His party, however, had to wait for money, which the British government had sent through a trader. Later, they found out that the trader had died on his way. Nain Singh opted to exit via a new route southeast of Lhasa. He sent two of his assistants to Ladakh with reports to the British Joint Commissioner of Ladakh, which reached the Survey department in January 1875.

When Nain Singh left Lhasa on 20 November 1874, he told the *sarai* manager that he was going on a pilgrimage and would come back within a month. As a precautionary measure, he walked towards the north in the morning and by evening towards the southeast. He crisscrossed the Lhasa-Peking road at Dichid (Peking was 5000 km from there with 136 stopovers on the way. Evariste Huc and Joseph Gabit had come from Peking to Lhasa by this route in 1844-46). After that, Nain crossed Gokhar pass, 3340 m, which was the divider of the catchments of the Lhasa and Sangpo rivers. In November 1874, he reached the 8th century (oldest) monastery of Samye. It was from here that Buddhism spread around Tibet and became recognized as the state religion. The monastery had four gates on each side and with golden statues, 1030 chortens, 108 sacred books (*Tanjur-Kanjur*) and on the walls, stanzas in the Devnagari script were carved or painted. He crossed over the Sangpo by a boat. He threw a wooden log into the river and noted that in two minutes and 40 seconds the log floated 30 m.

At Chhetang, a place with an old monastery, he left Sangpo, which was also visible from upper Assam. Nain was able to throw some more light on the course of the Sangpo. He enquired and found that local Tibetans were aware that Sangpo became Brahmaputra in Assam. This

is known as Dihang at Sadia in upper Assam. After that, Nain Singh crossed Dalatang la (5300 m) and reached the Droghpa pastures. After passing Karkang la (5403 m) he entered into catchments of the south flowing rivers and their glaciers. Finally, after crossing Serasa la he walked along Tawang river and crossed Mila Khatong la and Chhona Jong, a trading centre, before reaching Tawang in December 1874 where he stayed for 54 days. Tawang is famous for its large monastery and at the time of Nain Singh's arrival, there were 600 lamas (monks) in the monastery. Finally, he reached Odalgudi (close to today's Tejpur-Tawang road) and the Dy. Commissioner helped him reach Guwahati. From there he reached Calcutta on 11 March 1875 by steamer and finally returned to Dehradun.

In that expedition, he travelled from Leh to Lhasa to Odalgudi, around 2800 km. Of those, about 2400 kms were previously untrodden. He learnt about human geography, rivers, lakes, deserts, monasteries, glaciers, society and culture in that region and surveyed them for the first time. He noted the temperature, latitude, longitude and altitude of different places. This last trek was exhausting. Though Nain Singh was only 45 and lived for another 20 years, he was not fit for any further expeditions.

Nain Singh had seen the mountain Nanglong Kangri, on a previous expedition and further explored it on this expedition. Later, the range was named as Nain Singh range and remained so in atlases for many decades until 1961, when geographers resolved that no natural features should be named after individuals.

Travel Literature and a Scientific Book

Nain Singh may have never thought that what he jotted as notes and as a small book would become so important for later generations. Three diaries and a book, together known as *Akshans Darpan* have become important documents in the history of survey and vernacular writings in India. His fourth diary has not yet been located. The diaries tell us his personal story, the history of Johar (his region) and its different clans, the story of his parents and finally his different expeditions before and after he joined the GTS.

They capture his sensitivity, sensibility, curiosity, communication and language skills, ability to tackle problems and finally his commitment to collect hard data and measurements. He proved many times that

he could take risks but never missed his observations. And without the diaries, we would have missed most of his life and explorations.

Pundit Nain Singh – An Assessment

According to our studies, Pundit Nain Singh trekked more than 16000 kms before joining the Survey Department, and as a surveyor he trekked more than 26000 kms. He discovered more than a 100 places, many rivers and lakes, mines and monasteries. He inspired great explorers such as Kishan Singh, Percy Sykes, Sven Hedin, Younghusband and Rahul Sankrityayan. The Royal Geographical Society of London honoured him, he was awarded the title of CIE through the Government of India and got land as a grant near Moradabad in Uttar Pradesh.

The colonial rulers might not have wanted to make him a hero of Himalayan and trans-Himalayan explorations but it was hard for them to avoid acknowledging his contributions. Persons like Henry Yule advocated his case in the RGS by describing him as ‘Pundit of Pundits’, which finally became instrumental in awarding him the Victoria Medal (or Patron’s Medal) of the RGS. However, after his retirement nobody in the Survey of India was concerned about him. He received all his awards in absentia.

When the news arrived that Pundit was dead, no one cared to confirm it. Edmund Smyth wrote an emotionally charged and moving obituary in 1882 (in the Proceedings of the RGS and Monthly Records of Geography, Vol. IV). However, the district officers failed to confirm the news. But as per Survey of India records, he died only in 1895 – the actual date is not known.



Nain Singh stamp

It is said that he died in village Madkot by the banks of river Gori. Both his houses are still standing - his great-great grandson was a bookseller there until a few years ago and the latter's son is a teacher at Madkot.

*र. नैन सिंह Nain Singh
Explorer*

Nain's Signatures

In the end I must quote Henry Yule, from what he said at the RGS :

“...Nain Singh is the Pundit of Pundits. Nain Singh's great merits cannot be fully recognized by anything short of one of the Society's Gold medals. Either of his great journeys in Tibet would have brought this reward to any European explorer. To have made two such journeys adding so enormously to accurate knowledge...Is what no European but the first rank of traveller's like Livingstone or Grant have done...

He is not a topographical automation, or merely of a great multitude of native employees with an average qualification. His observations have added a larger amount of important knowledge to the map of Asia than those of any other living man and his journals form an exceedingly interesting book of travels. It will afford me great pleasure to take steps for the transmission of the medal through an official channel to the Pundit.”

There is need to remember Nain Singh and re-evaluate his achievements today. His unique journey from a shepherd to porter, to surveyor to teacher/ trainer and finally to an explorer extraordinaire should set an example for today's lovers of Himalaya, adventurers and modern explorers.

Summary

A life sketch of the great explorer, Pandit Nain Singh

About the Author

PROFESSOR SHEKHAR PATHAK taught in the Kumaon University for three decades; has been Fellow of I.I.A.S., Shimla and N.M.M.L., New Delhi; worked on social movements, history of explorations, Pundit Nain Singh's definitive biography, Himalayan History and Languages. He is associated with PAHAR and edits the journal of same name. He has been travelling in Himalaya for last four decades. Apart from dozens of journeys he has done in Himalaya and Tibet, the five Askot Arakot Abhiyans between 1974 and 2014; three Kailas-Manasarovar Yatras and trekking on different sides of Mt. Chomolangma (Everest) in Nepal, Tibet and Sikkim are worth mentioning.