



for three years on the mountain (the present Kāndeva Hill) in Champawat. Champawat is in the Pithoragarh district and is six km. by footpath from Mayavati Ashrama. Even now people show the semblance of a reptile on a stone. In the beginning the name Kumaon was confined only to Champawat and its surrounding villages. The Chandra kings of Champawat, in course of time, expanded their domain to cover a wide area, and with it, use of the name Kumaon spread. Now Kumaon has distinct cultural as well as geographical characteristics of its own. The area was successively ruled from 500 B.C. onwards by the kings of the Kuru Dynasty—Kunindās, Paurava-Varmans, Katyuris, and finally by the Chandra rulers, till the end of the eighteenth century. All during this long period the region was a stronghold of Brahminical culture.

In the second week of April 1890, Vivekananda was compelled to go down from Varanasi to the Baranagore Math in Calcutta. He cast off from him his ardent wish to settle down for a time in the holy city practising meditation and spiritual disciplines when he heard of the passing away of Balaram Bose. He felt urgently the need to be with the bereaved family and also to enquire into the affairs of the fledgling Math. At the Math, with his brother monks he was his old buoyant self. He fired their hearts and minds ablaze with his luminous explanations of the teachings of the Master and the Upaniṣads. For hours, day after day, the young monks sat round their vibrant leader spellbound listening to his inexhaustible flow of words on various subjects. No university, it can be said, could have given them a richer education in knowledge, with profound insights, depth, and vastness. Like his Guru, he too was unfathomable.

The Swami was a man of wonderful versatility. He could speak on any

subject with authority, invariably throwing new light on it—be it religion, philosophy, history, science, art, literature, philology, sociology, and what not! He could clothe any dry subject with such a beauty and grace that it became a most interesting study and roused the keenest desire for further knowledge. One wondered as to how he could have garnered all this diverse knowledge, how he could have exercised his thinking and analytic mind in such a masterly way over them, especially those which were outside his sphere of study as a Sannyasin, and how without a moment's hesitation he could give them out, enriched with his own original comments and conclusions!¹

Though Vivekananda devoted a few months to training his younger brother-disciples, yet now and then he felt intensely spurred by the desire to escape, to lose himself in tapasyā in the immensity of the Himalayas. He felt the call, no doubt, of the great mission that awaited him, but its exact contours and the form which it would take were still shrouded in mist. How and when the mission would begin, and when God would command him to embark upon it were uncertain. Swamiji waited impatiently, like a lion held captive. A colossal force that was rising in him could not be contained any longer. The indomitable spirit to be care-free and wander seized him anew and he wanted to fly like an eagle in the limitless sky.

In the meantime, Akhandananda had returned to the Math and narrated about the splendours of the journey to the shrines of Kedarnath and Badrinath, and about his adventures in the mountains. This was

1. *The Life of Swami Vivekananda, by his Eastern and Western Disciples* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1918) Vol. IV, p. 216.

sufficient for Swamiji. He said to him, "You are my man! You have faith! Come, let us be off together." In his letter to Swami Saradananda on July 6, 1890, he wrote, "I intend shortly, as soon as I can get a portion of my fare, to go up to Almora and thence to some place in Garhwal on the Ganga, where I can settle down for a long meditation. Gangadhar (Swami Akhandananda) is accompanying me...I am longing for a flight to the Himalayas." To Saradananda again he wrote on July 15th, "I have my own plans for the future and they shall be a secret." Prior to his long journey he first went to Holy Mother with Akhandananda to ask for her blessings. He sought her out at Ghusuree, a village across the Ganga. He told her, "Mother, I shall not return until I have attained the highest jñāna." The Holy Mother, touching his forehead, blessed him in the name of the Master. The Mother asked Akhandananda to take care of Naren and to see that he would not suffer for food. Before leaving the Math Swamiji told his brother-disciples, "I shall not return until I acquire such realization that my very touch will transform a man." To carry out the gigantic work of the Lord, Swamiji needed preparation in solitude. To contain the stupendous cosmic energy which would transform a person by a mere touch of the body or brain was a task fit only for a spiritual giant. It is staggering to think how Swamiji became a huge reservoir of divine cosmic force whose mere words could set ablaze spirituality in any dry heart. In his later life we come across many an instance of how this very thing happened.

In the middle of July 1890, Vivekananda, free from all worries and responsibilities, doubtless with a rare joy surging within his heart, set out on his long wanderings to the Himalayas. His intention was not to hurry there by rail, but to travel on foot along the

Ganga, begging his food and sleeping under the trees, not harbouring any thoughts for the morrow. So with divine music in their hearts and countenances radiating peace and dispassion, the two sannyasins trudged on day after day. Though poorly clad, with only staffs and kamandalu in their hands, the sight of the two wanderers did not go unnoticed or unremembered by the villagers along their way. As for Vivekananda, with his athletic build, luminous eyes, and regal mien, it was impossible for him to remain inconspicuous anywhere. His pre-eminent characteristic, as Romain Rolland pointed out, "was his kingliness. He was a born king and nobody ever came near him, either in India or in America, without paying homage to his majesty."² There was a certain dignity and grace about him which set him apart from all others. Even in this period of *wanderjahre*, that Swami was a spiritual genius was made clear enough to many learned pandits.

To give rest to their tired limbs, the two monks halted at Bhagalpar, a town on the bank of the Ganga in Bihar, about 560 km. from Calcutta. The legend of the locality has it that Parasurāma, an incarnation of Viṣṇu, was born here. At Bhagalpur they stayed for a few days as guests of Manmathanath Chowdhury. This good man who became a great admirer of Swamiji, at first did not show any respect, thinking the two monks to be only ordinary wandering sadhus when they came to his home. But little by little as they talked, he came to realize that the leader was a man of great parts. It happened that Manmathanath Babu conversed with Swamiji on Buddhism and soon found out that the monk was a thousand times more learned than he himself was. To test Swamiji's knowledge of

² Romain Rolland, *The Life of Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1979) page 5.

Sanskrit, he brought out all the Upaniṣads and questioned him on many abstruse passages. From his illuminating replies, Manmathanath discovered that Swamiji's mastery of the scriptures was of an extraordinary kind. And the way he could recite passage after passage was greatly charming. Thus, wrote Chowdhury, "being firmly convinced of his wonderful knowledge—equally in English, Sanskrit, and in Yoga, I was greatly drawn towards him...Once I noted that he was humming a tune to himself. So I asked him if he could sing. He replied, 'Very little.' But being pressed hard by us he sang, and what was my surprise to find that, as in learning so in music, he was wonderfully accomplished!"³

Before leaving Bhagalpur, after their seven days' stopover, Swamiji also had a long discussion with the Jain teachers of the place on religious beliefs. From Bhagalpur the two itinerants then visited on their northerly way, Vaidyanath, Varanasi, and Ayodhya. In Varanasi, Swamiji said as he took leave of Pramada Babu and others, that he would not come back to Kasi until he could burst on society like a bomb and make it follow him like a dog. This startling expression turned out to be prophetic, he did not return to that holy city until he had awakened the highest consciousness of his race and given a new direction to the current of world thought on its way to discovering the advaitic oneness of the Upaniṣads.

From Ayodhya they hurried straight towards Nainital, a distance of about 450 km. Passing over the Tarai, the hot and humid Gangetic Plain at the base of the Himalayan foothills, they began climbing the hills of the Siwaliks. The monsoon rains must have

nearly ended, because it was the end of August, and that year the rainy season was short. The monsoon is vigorous in the Kumaon hills during June to August. From the beginning of September the dark stratus-filled sky turns into blue, only here and there dotted with fleecy-white strato-cumulous patches. Immediately after the rains the hills and forests present a spectacular sight. In the distance also the great tufts of broken clouds so mingle amongst the snow covered peaks, that it is often difficult to distinguish them apart. The scenic beauty is breathtaking in the forests too, as the seemingly endless tiers of dark Siwaliks are silhouetted in various shades against the horizon, and within the dense jungle of pine, sal, deodar, holly, dense oak and rhododendrons, the deep green foliage glistens like liquid silver in the bright sunlight and morning dew. Cascades are seen rushing down every ravine and over rocky precipices to become boisterous mountain streams further down. Yet the background of deep silence, away from the turbulence of human travails, is imposing. Alternately entering the sudden coolness on the shady sides of the hills, then emerging into the bright warmth of the sun as they moved upward and onward, the mere touch of the vibrant air, contrasting with the memory of the plains below, must have lifted the minds of the sannyasins to soar into the transcendental heights of their Siva-nature. The Nainital hills are called the Siwalik Range, meaning "belonging to Siva the Supreme."

The foothills of the Siwaliks were once covered with these thick forests and inhabited by a great profusion of wild flora and fauna—tigers, leopards, pythons, hamadrayads, various kinds of deer: kakar, cheetal and sambhar, and pea-fowls, partridges, pheasants, jungle cocks and hens, and innumerable varieties of other birds. The southern-most belt of the Himalayan foot-

³. *The Life*, by Eastern & Western Disciples, page 245.

hills, which extend north-westward for more than 1600 km. are all parts of the Siwaliks. They have an average elevation of 2000 to 3000 feet as they rise abruptly from the Gangetic Plain or Tarai. The hills are subject to severe erosion in their unforested state because of the torrential rains. Periodic flash floods also cause havoc to crops, property and cattle. Reckless felling of trees, growing population, and efforts to increase cultivable land have in recent years exacerbated this condition. Much of the natural beauty of the Kumaon has thus been destroyed in recent years. A century ago, however with its thin and widely scattered population, it was paradise on earth for the naturalist. Even in the 1930s Jim Corbett wrote that occasionally tiger, leopard and king cobra were to be seen in the forest that spread from Kathgodam to Nainital.

Walking nearly 35 km. the two monks reached Nainital, lying 6346 feet above sea level. Here they were the guests of one Ramprasanna Bhattacharya. When they reached the place, Swami Akhandananda complained of pain in his chest which was the beginning of a severe bout with bronchitis. It gave him much trouble in high altitude and bracing climate. They spent about a week at Nainital enjoying the scenic splendour and visiting nearby important places.

At the end of the 19th century Nainital was sparsely populated and only a few permanent residents lived here during the severe winters. It has, since the 1850s, been a hill-station and now attracts a large number of tourists in the summer. In the old days government officials, Europeans and wealthy Indians, came to Nainital to escape the unbearable heat of the plains. In recent years the city is found always crowded with tourists. The city was founded in 1841 by the Britishers and prior to that

there was dense forest, a beautiful lake and a temple of Goddess Naini. The lake is a little more than three kilometres in circumference, fed at the upper end by a perennial spring; in one or two places it is 90 feet in depth. The present town is built around this lake. Geologists have their own theories about the lake, but the local legend traces it back to ancient times. Myth and legend say, that three famous sages, Atri, Pulastya, and Pulaha, while on a pilgrimage, arrived at the crest of the nearby highest mountain (Cheena 8970 ft.) and, finding no water to quench their thirst, dug a hole at the foot of the hill and meditated on Manasarovar. The water from sacred Manasarovar filled the hole. Therefore the lake was also called *Trisī-sarovar*. After the departure of the sages, Goddess Naina took up her residence in the waters. The present temple of Naini Devi on the bank was built in 1880; earlier it had been some distance away.

The lake and the temple were sacred to the Kumaon people and annual fairs used to be held. Word of the existence of a great lake reached the British administrators of the region. It was a closely guarded secret where it was exactly, the villagers were reluctant to disclose it for fear of defilement by the foreigners. But, it is said, one of the British officials, to discover the exact place, hit on an ingenious plan of placing a large stone on the head of a villager, instructing him that he would have to carry it until he arrived at the lake. After roaming over the hills for many days the man at last could not endure the burden of the heavy stone and disclosed the spot. The names and the elevation of the hills that surround the town are: Ayamrapatā, 7689 feet; Devpatā, 7181 feet; Hanibani, 7153 feet; Cheena, 8570 feet; Alma, 7980 feet, and Ladiyakanta, 8144 feet. Earlier there were many lakes, the four presently remaining are Naini Tal, Sat Tal, Bhim Tal, and Nakuchiya Tal.

After remaining nearly a week in Nainital the monks began their journey towards Almora town, a distance of 48 km. They determined to cover the entire distance on foot. In the course of their walking Vivekananda took a shortcut through the forest, wishing to be alone, and asked Akhandananda to go on by the usual route. Later they met each other. On the third day they stopped, intending to spend the night under a huge peepul tree standing on the bank of the Kosi River. Here another mountain stream, the Suāl, joins it. The natural scenery of the place was charming. The clear cold waters of the river flowed with a soothing sound and the surrounding hills covered with tall trees and the azure sky filled their hearts. Swamiji said to his companion, "This place is grand. What a delightful spot for meditation!" After refreshing himself with a bath in the cold river, he sat under the peepul tree and soon, as was natural with him, his mind soared to a transcendental plane. For a long time he remained in that state. When he regained his normal consciousness, he said to his *gurubhāi*, "Oh Gangadhar! Here under this peepul tree one of the greatest problems of my life has been solved." Then he explained his extraordinary realization, which has been pondered over by posterity since—the Oneness of the Macrocosm with the microcosm, and the vision of the whole universe within an atom. Swamiji later expounded these deep thoughts in many of his lectures in the West. This place, Kakri-ghat, is 25 km. from Almora by road. Even today the natural surroundings are picturesque. The peepul tree which sheltered and was sanctified by one of the greatest sages of our time is strong and healthy. Many devotees visit the spot and look on it with awe and wonder. A bright feather in the crest of the glorious Kumaon!

When they were about four kilometres

away from Almora, Swamiji suddenly felt desperately weary, footsore and famished. He sank down on the ground, almost collapsing. The place was near a Muslim cemetery. Akhandananda was naturally alarmed at the condition of Swamiji and went in haste to find food and water to revive him. Luckily, there was a keeper of the cemetery, one Zulfikar Ali, a fakir, who lived in a hut close by. Passing that way, and happening to notice the plight of the unknown sadhu, he brought a cucumber which alone he could provide. Vivekananda asked the fakir to put cucumber into his mouth, saying that he was too weak to do so. The man remonstrated saying, "Holy sir, I am a Muslim!" "That does not matter at all," said the Swami with a smile, "are we not all brothers?" After having been thus fed by the fakir, the Swami felt much refreshed. Speaking later of this incident he used to say, "The man really saved my life; I had never felt so exhausted."⁴ When, long afterward Swamiji again visited Almora, the second time, honoured as a national hero, he recognized the same fakir standing in the crowd, approached him and embraced him. He gave him money also. The credit of this noble deed belongs to Kumaon.

Almora town lies on a ridge of the hills, at an altitude of 5500 feet. Besides being the headquarters of the district, the town is one of India's popular hill resorts. Almora was first under the rule of the *Katyuri* kings who ruled from Katyur-Baijanath (Almora District) from the eighth to the twelfth century. The name *Katyuri* is derived from Katyur valley, the Sanskritized form of which was *Kārtikeya Pura*. During this period Almora was a village and was called *Khasiyā Kholā*. The villagers of the place used to supply to a nearby sun temple a kind of grass, *Almodi*, and therefore these people came to be called *Almodias*. Later

4. *Ibid.*, page 251.

the village assumed the name of Almora. Katyuri rulers were famous for building hundreds of Siva and Durga temples in Kumaon, and their particular architectural style is called Katyuri art. In the twelfth century A.D. Kumaon was invaded by the Mallas of Nepal. It marked the liquidation of the Katyuri kingdom. This paved the way for the rise of several independent principalities. These principalities struggled with one another for political supremacy till the Chandra kings of Champawat subdued all their adversaries. It was King Rudra Chandra (1565-1597) who brought the entire Kumaon hill region under his suzerainty, and it was King Bhisma Chandra (1512-1530) who initiated the transfer of his capital from Champawat to Almora. It was easy to rule from a central place like Almora. The completion of the new capital at Almora took place during the time of Kalyan Chandra III (A.D. 1545). The Gurkhas captured Almora in 1790, but suffered a defeat by the British in 1815. Britishers wanted Almora for the expansion of their commercial and economic power. They helped to a great extent in the town's development.

When Swamiji visited Almora the population of the town was less than 6000. Amidst the stillness of the mountains and surrounded by forests, the town nestled quietly on the lap of bounteous nature. Life was unhurried and leisurely. Swami Saradananda and Swami Kripananda, who had already been in Almora for some time, were overjoyed to meet their leader. Lala Badri Shah, a pious and wealthy citizen of Almora, took Swamiji into his home. During his short stay at Lalaji's house a curious event took place. Someone informed Lalaji that a certain person was possessed by a *devatā* (*demi-god*). Lala Badri Shah hurried to the spot, and Swamiji was also curious to see the phenomenon. Seeing a sannyasin, a group

of people gathered at the place called out, "Here is a sadhu, and he will cure the man." Swamiji had not expected this. The people pressed and fell at his feet, and finding no other recourse Swamiji placed his hand on the sick man's head and prayed. Strangely, after a while the man completely recovered.

Vivekananda stayed on at the house of Lalaji for a few days and then took leave of him and of his brother-disciples, and retired to a solitary cave above a mountain village to perform most severe spiritual disciplines. In the stillness of the cave and undisturbed by anyone, "he had higher and higher spiritual illuminations, until his face shone with celestial fire."⁵ About seven kilometres away from Almora City, on the top of a hill there is *Kāṣār*, or *Kāṣār Devī Durga* temple. Around the temple are a few caves. It is said that the original temple was inside a natural cave, and about 25 years ago it was reconstructed here. The hill is called in the *Skanda Purāṇa*, *Kāṣāya Mountain*. The *Purāṇa* says: Between *Kauśiki* (present *Kośi*) and *Śālmali* (present *Suāl*) rivers stands the holy *Kāṣāya* mountain, and to the West of this lies the region of *Viṣṇu*.⁶ According to an inscription found here, the temple was built sometime in the seventh century A.D. It is believed that Swamiji must have done his *tapasyā* here. Vivekananda could not remain immersed in sublime beatitude, he had a mission to fulfil. That great force brought him back again and again. But his happiness this time was marred by a telegram which brought him the sad news of his sister's tragic death. Because of this he suddenly left Almora in September 1890, with other monks, for Garhwal on his way to Badrikashrama.

5. *Ibid.*, page 252.

6. कौशिकि शालमली मध्ये पुण्य काषाय पर्वतः ।
तत्र पश्चिमे भागे वै क्षेत्र विष्णोः प्रतिष्ठितम् ॥