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MINISTRY OF SCIENCE.TECHNOLOGY AND INNOVATION

NUKLEAR MALAYSIA

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TAJUK ARTIKEL	NANDA DEVI'S NUCLEAR SECRET		
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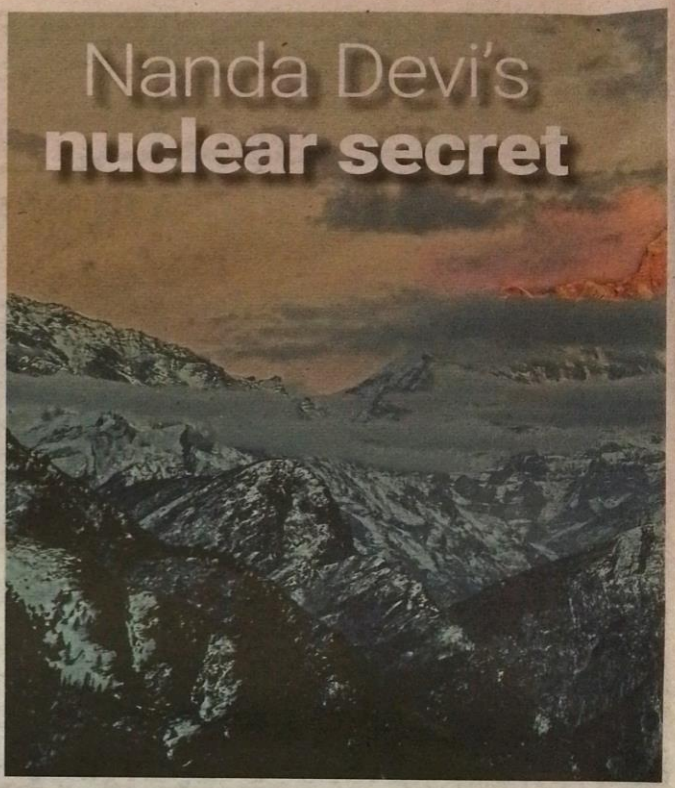
BIDANG	NUCLEAR	RADIOACTIVE FUEL, NANDA DEVI, HIMALAYA	

The banks of the Ganges River in Varanasi, India. — Atul Loke/The New York Times

Nanda Devi's nuclear secret



By JEFFREY GETTLEMAN and HARI KUMAR

THE mission demanded secrecy.

A team of CIA-selected American climbers, trained for skill and silence, trudged up Nanda Devi, one of the Himalayas' highest peaks. Step by step, they edged along razor-toothed ridges, a single slip threatening a 600m drop.

Just below the summit, the Americans and their Indian counterparts prepared the equipment: an antenna, cables and the SNAP-19C, a 22kg, beach-ball-sized portable generator powered by radioactive fuel – similar to those used in space missions.

The mission: spy on China, which had just detonated an atomic bomb.

As the team readied for the final push, a blizzard swept in. Nanda Devi vanished under sheets of snow and ice.

From advance base camp, Capt MS Kohli, the highest-ranking Indian, barked into the radio: "Camp Four, this is Advance Base. Can you hear me?"

Faint static replied. "Yes ... this ... is ... Camp ... Four."

"Come back quickly. Don't waste a single minute," he ordered.

Kohli made a fateful decision. To save lives, he commanded the climbers to secure the equipment and descend, leaving the nuclear device behind.

The climbers scrambled down, abandoning a generator containing nearly a third of the plutonium used in the Nagasaki bomb. It hasn't been seen since – and that was in 1965.

Buried in the ice and rock lies a Cold War secret: a portable nuclear device, lost and forgotten. Its disappearance raises haunting questions: how dangerous is it, and could it poison the Ganges?

The entire operation was wrapped in deception.

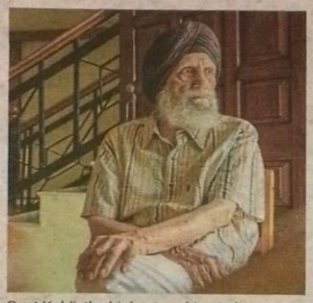
Files discovered in Montana reveal how National Geographic photographer Barry Bishop built a cover story for the expedition – and how plans unravelled on the mountain.

Interviews with participants and documents from American and Indian archives show the full scale of the debacle and the high-level efforts to cover it up.

China had tested its first atomic bomb in October 1964. The US, desperate for intelligence, sought a Himalayan perch to intercept Chinese missile telemetry. The CIA envisioned an unmanned station atop a mountain to capture signals from hundreds of kilometres away. Keeping it running required the radioactive SNAP-19C.

Bishop, a veteran mountaineer and National Geographic photographer, was tasked with leading the climb. Americans, including Jim McCarthy, a former lawyer and rock climber, trained secretly in Alaska, North Carolina and Baltimore, learning explosives, high-altitude physiology and the nuclear generator.

India's cooperation was essential. Only a handful of officials knew the mission.



Capt Kohli, the highest-ranking Indian on the mission, at his home in Nagpur, Maharashtra, India. — Atul Loke/The New York Times

Kohli, a decorated naval officer and Everest veteran, led the Indian team. He was immediately sceptical.

"It was nonsense," he later recalled. "Whoever advised the CIA was a stupid man."

The CIA first proposed Kanchenjunga, the world's third-highest peak. Kohli and McCarthy scoffed; it had been climbed only once, and the equipment would never make it.

Bishop waved off concerns, crafting a cover story: "Sikkim Scientific Expedition", ostensibly for atmospheric and physiological research, backed by letters of support from the American Alpine Club, National Geographic and a Kennedy aide.

Urgency escalated. China detonated a second, larger atomic bomb. Time was short.

In mid-September 1965, the climbers arrived at Nanda Devi's base at 5,000m. They were immediately struck by altitude sickness, dehydration and nausea, with no time to acclimatise.

Packs were heavy with equipment and plutonium capsules, which Sherpas surprisingly treasured for the warmth they emitted, dubbing the device "Guru Rinpoche" after a Buddhist saint.

But the danger was real: frostbite, blizzards and exhaustion stalked the team.

Handwritten notes from Bishop's files record the ordeal: "High winds", "Tent was lost", "Short of food", "Snows all day", "Very discouraging evening".

By Oct 16, as they attempted the summit, a blizzard trapped them. Snowdrifts rose to their thighs; visibility vanished.

"We were 99% dead," said Sonam Wangyal, an Indian climber. "The snow was up to our thighs; we couldn't see the man next to us, or the ropes."

McCarthy recalled shouting at Kohli: "You have to bring that generator down!"

But Kohli, guided by Indian intelligence chiefs, insisted they leave the device secured on the ice ledge and descend. The Americans had no choice.

> "You can't leave plutonium by a glacier feeding into the Ganges! Do you know how many people depend on it?"
>
> Jim McCarthy

A few days later, the climbing season ended. The generator would have to wait for spring – but when the team returned months later, the equipment was gone, likely swept into the glacier by avalanches. McCarthy believes it "buried itself in the deepest part of the ice".

Despite the failure, the CIA pressed on, setting up a lower, more accessible station in subsequent years, but the original SNAP-19C remained lost, its plutonium core lying somewhere under Nanda Devi's snow and rock.

The story remained secret for over a decade until reporter Howard Kohn uncovered it in 1978, exposing the mission without naming the climbers. The US government, while internally acknowledging the danger, publicly refused to comment.

The lost generator wasn't just a relic of Cold War recklessness; it became a diplomatic and environmental problem.

In the 1970s, Prime Minister Morarji Desai faced angry Parliament sessions and public protests. Demonstrators held signs: "CIA is poisoning our waters." Lawmakers demanded answers.

Desai assured citizens there was "no cause for alarm" and commissioned a scientific committee, which concluded radiation risks were negligible.

But behind the scenes, US officials were frantic. President Jimmy Carter privately praised Desai for defusing the situation and meeting to discuss broader cooperation while sidestepping the missing device, noting he was "glad that neither of them had been involved".

The CIA conducted several recovery attempts over the years, including expeditions in 1967 and '68 using alpha counters, telescopes, infrared sensors and mine sweepers. Nothing was found. Kohli and McCarthy believed the generator had melted slowly into the glacier, burrowing deeper as the plutonium radiated heat.

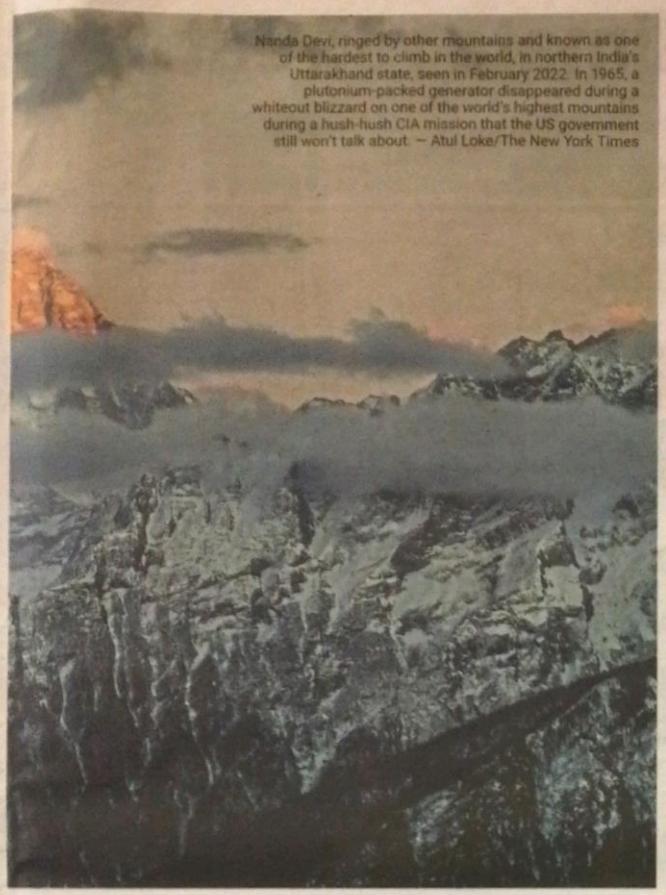
Technological change soon rendered the mountaintop spy station obsolete.

By the mid-1970s, satellites could capture signals from space, eliminating the need for Himalayan installations. The CIA quietly abandoned further attempts.

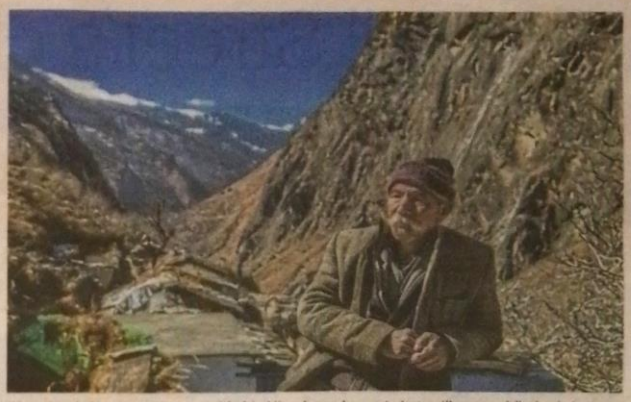
Still, the device's existence lingered as a spectre. Villagers feared it could leak into streams feeding the Ganges. Global warming accelerated glacier melt, raising the possibility that the plutonium might resurface.

Amrita Singh, a local farmer, was swept away in a 2021 landslide, which some locals feared was connected to the generator's lingering heat – though scientists attribute the disaster to climate change.

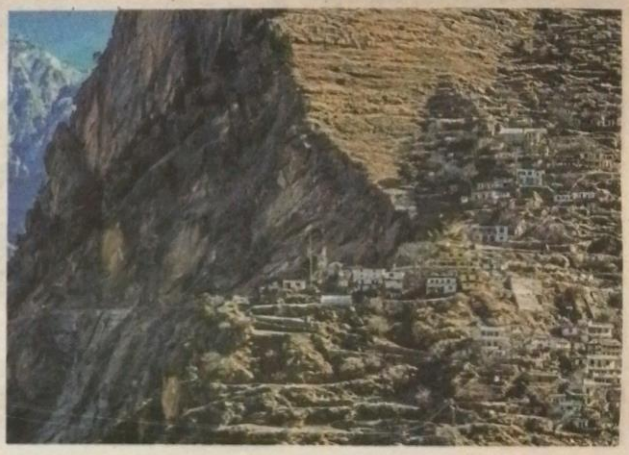
The spectre also haunted the climbers. McCarthy, now 92, expressed outrage

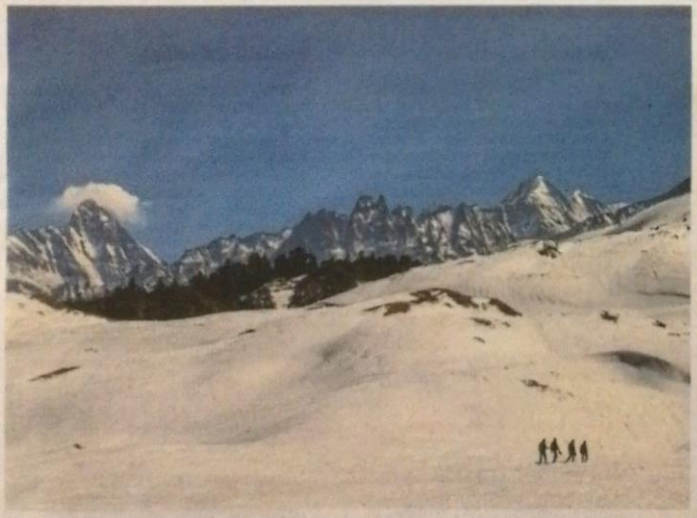


Nanda Devi, ringed by other mountains and known as one of the hardest to climb in the world, in northern India's Uttarakhand state, seen in February 2022. In 1965, a plutonium-packed generator disappeared during a whiteout blizzard on one of the world's highest mountains during a hush-hush CIA mission that the US government still won't talk about. — Atul Loke/The New York Times

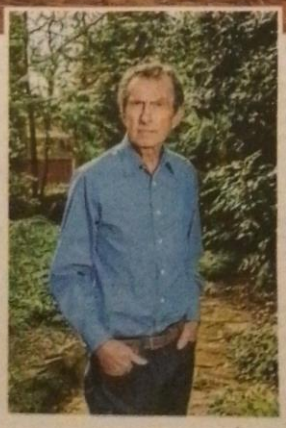


Dhan Singh Rana standing outside his Himalayan home in Lata village; and (below) the mountain village of Raini in Uttarakhand, northern India. — Atul Loke/The New York Times





Indian military personnel hiking below Nanda Devi in Uttarakhand. — Atul Loke/The New York Times



Kohn's article for 'Outside Magazine' in 1978, which was the first public disclosure of the secret mission. Kohn (inset) at his home in Tacoma Park, Maryland, United States, in 2022. — Jason Andrew/The New York Times

decades later: "You can't leave plutonium by a glacier feeding into the Ganges! Do you know how many people depend on it?"

Former intelligence officer RK Yadav combed archives and interviewed surviving team members. "This is a grave danger, lying there for all humanity," he said.

Indian authorities have occasionally discussed reopening Nanda Devi for climbers, sparking debate over the radioactive material.

Satpal Maharaj, spiritual leader and tourism minister, called for the device's excavation: "Once and for all, this device must be found and the fears put to rest."

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's office has not provided clarity. The Department of Atomic Energy claims no records of the device.

Questions persist – how dangerous is it, could it contaminate one of the world's most important rivers, could it fall into the wrong hands?

The saga of Nanda Devi illustrates the precarious dance of Cold War secrecy, human daring and environmental fragility. The CIA's gamble, India's cooperation and the climbers' heroism and fear created a story that spans decades – a tale of plutonium, ice and the human cost of secrecy.

Sixty years later, the mountains guard their secret. Beneath layers of snow and ice, the SNAP-19C lies somewhere on Nanda Devi, a silent witness to Cold War hubris and a reminder that some legacies can't be easily buried. — ©2026 The New York Times Company

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