

Exploration of Sentik la(5044m), Bara Zagnai Pass(4975m), and Barmal Glacier

By Zeeshan Mushtaq

The Nun Kun peaks, both 7000m high, are well-known among climbers, but fewer people are aware of the passes near the massif that connect the Mawrah and Warwan valleys of Jammu and Kashmir with the Suru Valley. When the idea of a trek from Warwan to Kargil is shared with others, even with pioneers of Trans-Himalayan travel in Kashmir, the commercial Warwan-Panikhar route via the Bhot Khol Pass typically comes to mind. My plan, however, was to do something entirely new. As a literature enthusiast, who loves to read about the history of exploration and the ancient travellers who passed through Kashmir, I found my inspiration in the past. My curiosity to read about the Nun Kun massif led me to the travelogues of Major C.G. Bruce, Dr A. Neve, and Fanny Bullock Workman. It was in their writings that I first discovered the route over the Sentik La and Bara Zagnai Pass. Fascinated, I decided to not only read about this forgotten path but to follow it myself. I believe this particular route has been largely forgotten because it's missing from both current toposheets and older Survey of India maps.

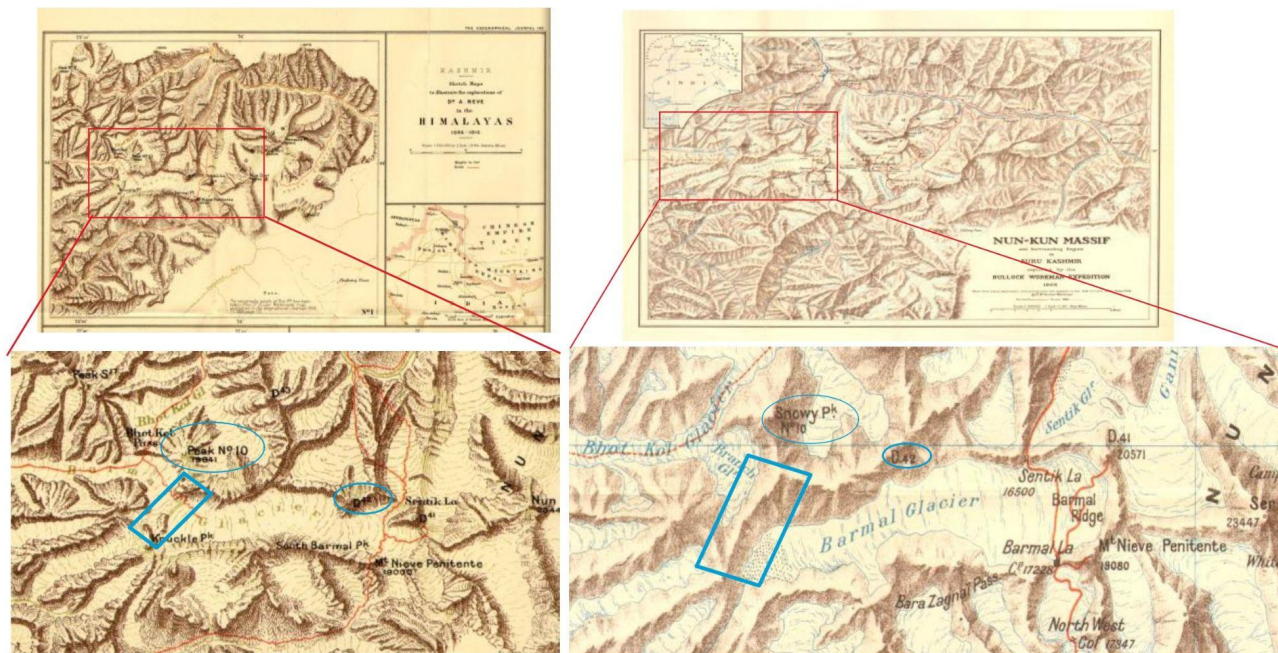
The Sentik la and Bara Zagnai Pass lie to the west Nun. These passes are separated by the massive, almost flat Barmal Glacier. Arthur Neve described this expansive ice field as so level that it looked more like a frozen lake than a glacier, stretching east to west for miles across the landscape. The Bara Zagnai Pass and another pass known as Barmal la are crucial entry points to the accumulation zone of this glacier from the Warwan Valley via the Jabbal Nala. To the north, the Sentik La sits on the main Himalayan watershed, creating a natural boundary between the Warwan and Ladakh regions.

A Historical Look at the Nun Kun region

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, the Nun Kun region became a popular destination for explorers and mountaineers. They were all eager to climb peaks and cross passes that no one had ever explored before. Two of the most important people at this time were **Dr. Arthur Neve** and the Americans **Fanny Bullock Workman** and **William Hunter Workman**. They helped create better maps and made it easier for people to understand the geography of the area. The **Neve brothers**, Arthur and Ernest, were especially helpful. They became the go-to people for information and support for many climbing trips. The Workmans also made a huge impact with their book, *Peaks and Glaciers of Nun Kun*, even though some of their ideas and maps were debated by other climbers. The history of exploring this area is as fascinating as the landscape itself:

- **1898: Major C.G. Bruce** was among the first to explore this route, crossing the Sentik La and following the Barmal Glacier down to Bhot Khol and eventually to Warwan.
- **1902: Dr. Arthur Neve** and **Rev C.E. Barton** traversed the Sentik La from the Suru Valley, traveling from Tongol and descending south into the Bara Zagnai Valley, now known as Jabbal Nala.
- **1906:** The renowned explorers **Fanny Bullock Workman** and her husband, **William Hunter Workman**, visited the Nun Kun area. They meticulously mapped the glaciers and peaks, but their work sparked considerable controversy in the mountaineering community at the time.
- **1910:** Dr. Neve returned to the region to conduct further observations, continuing his documentation of the area's geography. Dr. Neve's explorations were instrumental in expanding the existing

geographical knowledge, and also led to the correction of inaccuracies in contemporary maps.



This is a comparison of two historical maps of the Nun Kun region around the Barmal Glacier. On the left is a map by Dr. Arthur Neve, and on the right is one by the Workman couple.

The key difference is how they drew the **Barmal Glacier**.

- **Workman's map (right)** mistakenly shows a ridge—a line of mountains—that separates the Barmal Glacier from the Bhot Khol Glacier. This ridge does not exist in reality.
- **Neve's map (left)** is more accurate. It correctly shows that the Barmal Glacier flows from east to west and then curves to the northwest, going around a specific peak. Neve's drawing matches what is actually there.

Fanny Bullock Workman, along with her husband William Hunter Workman, visited the Nun Kun massif in 1906, after Dr. Arthur Neve's initial explorations. They conducted an extensive tour of the area and claimed to have ascended Pinnacle Peak, which she referred to as the "second highest peak" of the group, reaching an altitude of 23,300'. The Workmans also produced a map of the Nun Kun region based on their expedition. However, their work faced controversy, particularly regarding the accuracy of their claims and the usability of their map. One significant point of contention, also noted by Major C. G. Bruce after his 1898 expedition, was the mapping of the Barmal Glacier. The old Survey map depicted the Barmal Glacier originating south of they referred to as Snowy Peak No. 10 and flowing eastwards before turning northeast towards the Suru river.

Dr. Arthur Neve, following his journey in 1902, pointed out a discrepancy in this mapping. He observed that the Barmal Glacier originated in a rocky cirque south of Peak D 41, flowing westwards past Peak D 42, and then changing direction north-westwards to join the Bhot Khol glacier. He asserted the connection between Peaks No. 10, D42, and D41 by a rocky wall and suggested that the Barmal Glacier was essentially the upper part of the Bhot Khol, referring to the entire ice extent as the "Great Western glacier of Nun Kun".

While no new Survey map was immediately published, Dr. Neve's correction was acknowledged. Later, in 1910, Dr. Neve revisited the Nun Kun region specifically to prove the accuracy of his topography. He ascended the Barmal Glacier from the Bhot Khol and, through photos and observations, confirmed that the "*great Barmal glacier flows from the outlying buttresses of the Nun Kun massif, and with a length of some 15 miles enters the head of the Wardwan valley*". This effectively validated his earlier correction regarding the glacier's flow and destination. In all this exploration Neve and Bruce placed their knowledge at the disposal of later comers, who not always acknowledged their debt to the pioneers.

More than a century after Dr. Arthur Neve's legendary traverse, I was filled with a mix of excitement and anticipation. The opportunity to follow and document a historic route filled me with a deep sense of passion and excitement. I was joined on this journey by two good friends from Chennai, Yuvraj and Vikram.

This expedition report documents a rapid, self-supported traverse to re-document a historic route and gain critical access to a cluster of **unexplored peaks** bordering the Greater Himalaya watershed.

The team began the journey from **Srinagar**, enduring a multi-stage, 160-kilometer drive to the start point in **Mungli, Warwan Valley**. Following a final meal at Inshan Warwan, the trek commenced around 3 p.m., marking the start of a five-day traverse.:

- **Day 1-2:** The team successfully crossed the 4,200m Tramsar Pass, descended to the Thandi Nadi valley and camped at Sangam confluence, positioning the team at the entrance of the long Jabbal Nala valley.
- **Day 3:** The entire 25km length of the Jabbal Nala was traversed in a single push. This extended navigation brought the team to the head of the valley, where the landscape underwent a dramatic transition, signalling the approach to the Greater Himalaya main crest. Reaching the valley head provided the first view of **Nun (7,135m)**.
- **Day 4:** The team established a high camp just below the 4,975m **Bara Zagnai Pass**.
- **Day 5:** After crossing the Bara Zagnai Pass, the team traversed the **Barmal Glacier**, then crossed the **Sentik La** and descended to **Tongol** on the main road in the Suru Valley, from where they immediately took a taxi to Kargil, arriving that night.

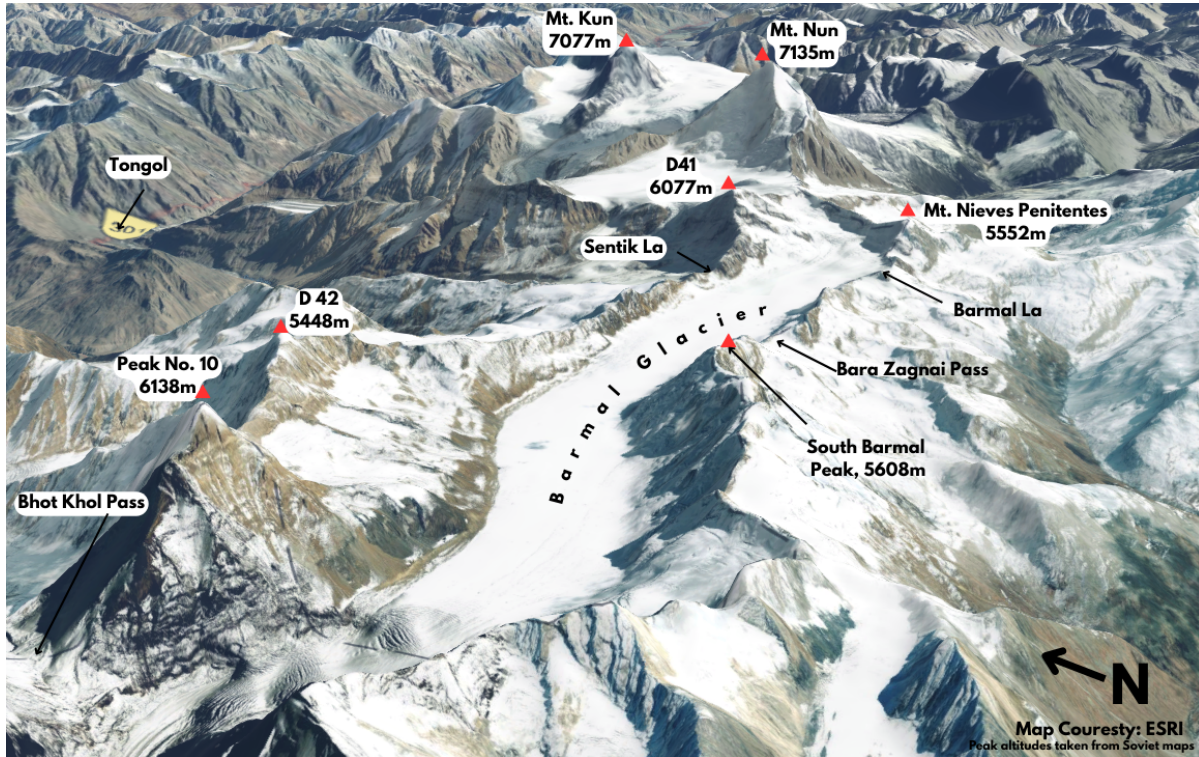
As well as the massive **Nun-Kun peaks**, as we descended to the **Barmal Glacier**, even more peaks were revealed. Crucially, the higher terrain revealed a collection of **unclimbed peaks**.

Peaks Surrounding the Barmal Glacier

The peaks in this region are all substantial, rising above **5,500m** in elevation. The provided altitudes are primarily taken from Soviet maps due to limited resources, and therefore, the exact height of the peaks may vary.

- **On the North Rim of the Glacier:**
 - **D41 (6077m):** This peak was first climbed by **Mr. and Mrs. Bullock Workman in 1906** and has seen recent climbing activity.
 - **D42 (5448m):** Located next to D41.
 - **Unclimbed Snowy Peak No. 10 (6,138m):** This peak is defined by its massive **Northwest Face**, a steep wall of rock and ice towering over **1,000m** high. Just below this imposing face is a large glacial lake, locally known as **Kalapari**. The lake is notably increasing in size.
- **On the South Rim of the Glacier:**

- **South Barmal Peak (5,608m):** This peak is located on the south side, along with the Bara Zagnai Pass and Barmal La.
- **Mount Nieves Penitentes (5,552m):** Situated immediately to the right of the Barmal La and was also first climbed by the Workmans in 1906.



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