
THE INDIAN SIACHEN GLACIER EXPEDITION 1996

Patron : **Prof. Ardito Desio** (Italy)

REPORT

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SUMMARY

The expedition of five Indian mountaineers was organised to climb in the Siachen glacier area. The area, at present, is scene of conflict. After delays the team entered the Terong glacier valleys, one of the subsidiary glaciers of the Siachen. Halfway through the expedition schedule someone in the army hierarchy decided to cancel the permission and the team was called back and asked to vacate the area. Following is the full report.

DETAILED REPORT

The Siachen glacier in the East Karakoram is one of the longest glaciers in the world. It has number of peaks, side valleys and at its head lies the Indira Col, the divide between Southern and Central Asia. The Nubra river drains the glacier and ultimately joins the Shyok near Khalsar. On the west lies the West Karakoram (now under Pakistani control) and towards the east is the Shyok basin, forming a border with China. The northern slopes of the Indira Col leads to the Shaksgam valley. The Siachen glacier is not visited by the mountaineers in the recent years due to an ongoing conflict on its heights between India and Pakistan.

In the 1970s and early eighties Pakistan permitted several mountaineering expeditions to climb high peaks on this glacier. This reinforced their claim on the area and the mountaineers thus had a different role in it's history. In 1984, when the Indian army positioned itself on the heights of the Siachen glacier, the Government of India as a policy decided to encourage mountaineering expeditions to this glacier from the Indian territory. Expeditions consisting of Indian mountaineers or joint expeditions with foreign mountaineers were to be allowed there. We, mountaineers from Bombay, applied to climb on this glacier in 1996. After due consideration for six months permits were granted. We made preparations which were expensive, as everything, including porters, had to be flown to Leh because roads were closed. Finally on 5th June 1996 the entire team of five Indian mountaineers was in Leh.

Our expedition had two broad aims. First was to attempt peak Chong Kumdan II (7004 m). This peak rises above the South Terong glacier, one of the tributary glaciers of the Siachen. We had observed the peak from three directions during earlier expeditions and it seemed feasible. The other major aim, however, was to traverse the Siachen glacier fully and to reach the Indira Col, at present the northernmost point of India, apart from being a historic divide. In another side valley of the Siachen, the Teram Shehr glacier, lies "Col Italia" so named by an Italian expedition (led by Prof. G. Dainelli) in 1929 who had made the only reported crossing of this col.

Prof. Ardito Desio, who was to join this expedition in 1929, is one of the last surviving Italian explorer of the Karakorams. He was leader of the Italian expedition which made the first ascent of K2. Born in 1897 he, in hundredth year of life, kindly agreed to be a "Patron" of our expedition. We were determined to look for a memorial stone left by the Italian expedition near the Teram Shehr junction.

Ours was an experienced team, with at least three members having climbed in the East Karakoram before. Bhupesh Ashar and Vinay Hegde formed the lead team of climbers. Both were experienced mountaineers with several high peaks to their credit. Former had climbed five high peaks around the Chong Kumdan glacier in 1991, while the latter had climbed technically difficult routes on the Gangotri glacier mountains. Vijay Kothari and

Harish Kapadia (leader) had shared two expedition to this range before and had several years of experience of high mountain climbing and travel. Nawang Kapadia, a student, completed the team. With us we had five trusted porters from Kumaon and to supplement the climbing strength we hired three Sherpas from Leh. We employed 15 Ladakhi porters for few days during the approach.

We were received at the Leh airport by our liaison officer Captain Jashwant Lakra, an officer from the army Ordnance unit, who had volunteered to join our team. He was an English literature graduate from Delhi. We established contact with the army and submitted letters approving the expedition from the Ministry of Defence and the Indian Mountaineering Foundation. We were told that these letters have no meaning for the army as they will need clearance from their own channels. But that will be forthcoming, we were assured, and we were allowed to proceed to the Nubra valley. The expedition leader met the General Officer Commanding of the area and the Brigade Commander.

THE SIACHEN HURDLE

After two days of travel we established ourselves at tiny hamlet of Warshi on 12th June. The first aim of the expedition was to open a route through the Warshi nala, which drains into the Nubra about 22 km below the snout of the Siachen glacier. For next two days we tried to penetrate the Warshi nala, which looked broad on map. But in reality sloping rock slabs on both sides made going rather difficult. After detailed recce it was felt that going through this nala with the entire expedition luggage would be difficult task. The other possible approach, was through the South Terong glacier. For this approach we had to cross the army base camp at the snout of the Siachen glacier.

As we had clearance to cross the base, or so we thought, we opted for this route. Little did we know what difficulties we were putting ourselves into.

The army clearance from the "official channels" had not arrived. From 15th to 17th June we camped on a sandy area, about a 1 km before the base camp. The only news we received was that clearance is being obtained. Finally we were allowed into the camp when to our misfortune weather closed in for three days. We had to wait out in tents amidst rain while Ladakhi porters were arranged.

Finally we could move on 20th June, now almost 10 days behind schedule.

THE TERONG VALLEYS

As part of the Indo-British Expedition Kapadia had entered this valley in 1985. Now we camped at the same camping ground, Gyazgo, at the turning into the Terong valley. Next day we had to cross the river, which during return in 1985 had posed many difficulties. Now we found some old ropes strewn across the river tied to expansion bolts. Ashar went across these old ropes carefully and on 22nd June we fixed new ropes. Slowly the entire

team with all the luggage went across on Tyrolean traverse and camped on the right bank. About 4 km ahead was the snout of the Terong glaciers. We had to turn south to enter the South Terong valley and hence chose the left bank moraine.

Halfway through our Ladakhi porters, known for their difficult nature, called it a day and we were dumped in middle of the moraine on the 23rd. For next two days we ferried loads to the beginning of the South Terong glacier and were established at a pictureous ground with lakes, ibexes and greenery on the 25th.

We did not waste anytime and by the 27th June pushed our camp ahead. This camp was established about 3 km below the Darrah Chushku camp of 1985. Chong Kumdan II looked tentatively close and inviting. In next two days we would be at the foot of the mountain we wanted to climb. We hoped to finish the climb in a week. But, alas, that great leveller, the Karakoram weather intervened. It snowed heavily for next two days, 29th and 30th, and to conserve stocks we all decided to move down to the Terong Lakes. The weather cleared on 1st July but by then we had other considerations.

By now we were 14 days late in our schedule. Hegde, who is an advocate in Bombay High Court had to return home. There was a discussions about either going back to Chong Kumdan II or trying our strength on the Siachen glacier. It was felt that the permission for the Siachen glacier and to reach the India Col was too important and rare. We can always climb peak or two on the Teram Shehr glacier. Hence it was agreed to withdraw and try our luck on the Siachen.

THE SHELKAR CHORTEN GLACIER

This glacier is situated between the two Terong glaciers. In 1985 Stephen Venables had entered this glacier, solo. He traversed the icefall and climbed a peak, Chorten (6050 m), at its head. We had three days in hand and it was thought that we can climb a peak or two here. On 2nd July we moved on this glacier early and with food for three days. All went well till 11 a.m. and we zigzagged through a fascinating icefall weaving our way through seracs. Suddenly we reached a point where side moraine was completely broken and the centre offered no escape. It would have been possible to open a route, but not in a hurry. It was no place to rush through for three day climbs. We had to return and camp at the junction with the North Terong glacier.

THE NORTH TERONG GLACIER

On 3rd July, Kapadia moved up this glacier to visit the site of the 1985 base camp which was near a moraine lake. This lake was mentioned from the time when Dr Ph. C. Visser visited the glacier in 1935. The North Terong glacier had many ice-penitents and 11 years before party had to weave a way through them, having fun on these 6 feet high ice-towers. Now there were none! The entire valley was flat, icy beneath and looked very different. The moraine looked completely changed and black. At the old base camp site there was no lake either. What had existed for five decades at least was gone in one. Perhaps these are signs of global warming or effect of human intrusions in the area.

However one thing that had not changed here was the view of the majestic Rimo group of peaks. Two of the high peaks of the group could be seen towering above the glacier.

By afternoon the lower camp was wound up and in a long day the party withdrew near 'the ropes'. Crossing the river on pulleys once again we were settled at Gyazgo. Hegde, with porters carrying our extra equipment left for the Siachen glacier snout. They were to meet us Camp 1 of the army with fresh supplies. We were all eagerly awaiting to start the historic part of our trip on the Siachen glacier.

THE SIACHEN IMPASSE

It was drizzling in the afternoon of 5th July. We all relaxed in tents. Suddenly a porter arrived from the army base camp with a note. It was from Hegde.

“There is some shocking news. After we entered the Terong valley someone in the army has cancelled our permits for the area. Please come down, we are asked to vacate the area.”

Angry, fuming but helpless we rushed down to the army base camp. There was a talk of sending troops to pull us down. No one in the field had the authority to help us as the orders came from a higher officer. All attempts to contact higher authorities were futile. We had to return to Leh.

We made representations to army authorities at Delhi from Leh but nothing seem to be happening for the next two days. We sold our balance food stuff and wound up the expedition at Leh. On 10th July 1996, an evening before we were to fly from Leh, army approached us inquiring whether we will be interested to go back to the Siachen now ! We had to decline, explaining to them that we were not soldiers on duty but mountaineers. Faced with many questions, loss of international credibility, heavy expenses and puzzled at army's behaviour, we returned to Bombay by 13th July.

THE SIACHEN TRAGEDY

India's claim to the Siachen glacier stands disputed by the Pakistanis and the conflict in this area is in eyes of the international community. In 1984, when the Indian Army first landed on the glacier a Japanese expedition was approaching the area from Pakistan to climb Rimo peak, rising over the Terong valley. They were stopped and in 1985 we organised an Indo-British expedition to the same peak. At height of the conflict we had full support from the army.

Upto now Pakistan has allowed more than 18 expeditions to climb on this glacier, and even allowed some trekkers. India has managed to allow only one expedition (American, joint with the Indian army) on the upper glacier (Teram Shehr and nearby). One expedition jointly led by the world-famous climber Doug Scott, (with Commandant Sonam Paljor of the ITBP), was diverted to the Terong glacier from the Base Camp by the army. This expedition had many critical things to write about their experience. Now, an expedition consisting of only Indian mountaineers has been turned back unceremoniously. It is a sad commentary that after 12 years of being on the glacier at such an expense, even Indian mountaineers could not be allowed there.

The military commitment has not solved the dispute to India's advantage, causing untold misery, expense and loss of lives. It is essential that India's National Security interests are reinforced by other means, such as visits by the Indian mountaineers. These “other means” are cost and result effective. More civilian (Indian and foreign) expeditions to this range must be encouraged which will go a long way to reinforce claim over the area and sovereign rights over the entire East Karakoram belt. The Government of India has exactly decided on this policy which is thwarted by the army.

Civilians are also patriotic and serve the Nation in many different ways. Our experienced team of Indian citizens would have been to a great advantage. We, as mountaineers understand the harsh environment conditions, security considerations, and privations and sufferings of the Indian soldiers. As Indians (speaking the same language) we could have only supported them as our National flag bearers.

There is openness amongst India's neighbours as regards permission to mountaineers in the border areas. The Chinese this year gave a quick clearance to the Indo-Tibet Border Police team to climb Everest from Tibet. ITBP has word "Tibet" in their name and the force was specially raised to fight the Chinese! Travelling on the disputed Aksai Chin road Japanese tourists camp on the Pangong Lake, partly controlled by India. In 1993, French skiers reached foot of the Indira Col from the north, visiting the Shaksgam valley without even an liaison officer. The Pakistanis allow mountaineers to climb peaks near the Siachen, overlooking the glacier. Trekkers are allowed to visit the area of conflict from Pakistan and at the height of 1971 war author Dervla Murphy was trekking on the Shyok. Such examples should be eye-openers and should make everyone rethink "security" in the days of satellite technology.

It was our painful turn to suffer, at great expense, what others did in the past. Representations have been made to the highest military and civil authorities about our plight. The matter of turning us back by the army officers, despite clearance from the Ministry of Defence, the highest civil authority in democratic India and the Indian Mountaineering Foundation should be inquired into.

It is sincerely hoped that these concerns will be discussed and not put under wraps of "National Security". It will be worthwhile if some positive views are taken.

ENVIRONMENT

The entire area of Ladakh and the East Karakoram seems to be undergoing a changing weather pattern. East Karakoram is no longer a rain shadow area and it receives several inches of rainfall. In 1995 there were heavy downpours and the Manali-Leh road could not be opened this year due to landslides.

The Siachen glacier snout has receded by about 800 m in last 11 years. The glacier looked more barren and without snow cover. The Terong glaciers, particularly the North Terong glacier seemed to be receding fast and most of the ice-penitents and lakes have disappeared during the last decade. Icefalls of the Safina valley (which we had crossed in 1985) and the Shelkar Chorsten valley seemed to be more broken and difficult.

The Sias, (roses) from which the glacier takes its name, were seen in plenty near the snout and in the Nubra valley. Inside the Terong valleys they grew even higher up on the rocky slopes. Some herds of ibexes were noticed in the Terong valleys, but none on the main glacier.

With so many humans living on the glacier the accumulation of garbage is in abundance. Much of garbage is put into crevasses or dumped on rocks and snows. Worst offenders are tetrapacks in which fruit juices are delivered on the glacier. These aluminium foils, which cannot be burnt or destroyed, line the routes which are traversed and are a major eye-sore. Some serious thinking needs to be done about the environment concerns on the Siachen glacier.

SUMMARY

Area : The Siachen glacier and the Terong glaciers, East Karakoram.

Peak : Chong Kumdan II (7004 m) was to be attempted from the South Terong glacier.

Members: Harish Kapadia (leader), Bhupesh Ashar, Vinay Hegde, Vijay Kothari and Nawang Kapadia with Captain Jashwant Lakra (*liaison officer*).

Period: From 2nd June to 13th July 1996

Sponsored by : The Mountaineers, Bombay.

Result: The expedition approached Chong Kumdan peak from the Warshi nala and later from the South Terong glacier. The Shelkar Chorten and North Terong glaciers were visited.

The Indian Army withdrew the permits sanctioned to the team suddenly, forcing the members to cancel the expedition and return.

HARISH KAPADIA (Leader)

POWER OF THE DREAM

The 1996 Atlanta Olympics has adopted the theme, 'Power of the Dream'. Let us share the dream about which Aamir Ali has written. It is hoped, someday soon there will be peace on the Siachen glacier. Roses (Sias) will grow wild, ibexes will roam freely and mountaineers can explore and climb.

What is ineffably sad is that the Siachen glacier should now be the stage for a stand-off between the armies of India and Pakistan. Soldiers face each other, both sides have artillery, though the rarefied atmosphere makes nonsense of ballistic data; millions of rupees are spent daily to maintain these forces where casualties due to the altitude and cold are nine times higher than those due to combat. ('Elements torture man and machine in battle for glacier', by Christopher Thomas, *The Times*, 13 February 1993). And when we complain about the garbage dumps at mountaineering expedition base camps, can we imagine what dumps must be like in these high altitude army camps ?

To the layman, all these seems like utmost folly - but then, when did warfare not seem like utmost folly?

Men must harbour dreams sometimes, even foolish foolish dreams, 'I have a dream,' said Martin Luther King in the greatest of his speeches 30 years ago. So let us also dream that the mountaineers of the world persuaded India and Pakistan to withdraw their armies and to establish an 'International Park of the Rose'(Sia). This was placed under guardianship of the United Nations and the International Union of Alpine Associations. And the ibex and roses are reintroduced and they flourished.

Transnational parks of 'Transboundary Protected Areas, to use the language of the specialists, are not just an airy-fairy dream. The first was probably the Waterton Glacier International Peace Park established by the US and Canada in 1932. In the same year, Czechoslovakia - which now has third of its frontier covered by protected areas - established nature reserve on the Dunajec river to match the Polish one on the other side. Indonesia and Malaysia have transboundary reserves in Kalimantan; there is an international area for peace along the San Juan river between Nicaragua and Costa Rica; a peace park on both sides of the Evros river boundary between Greece and Turkey.

Recently the Belovezhskaya in Belarus was added to the Bialowieza in Poland, to form an extensive World Heritage Site. The demilitarised zone between North and South Korea has become a wildlife refuge; a park adjoining Pakistan and China has been under consideration. Efforts have been underway for some years by France, Italy and Switzerland to establish an International Mont Blanc Park. All in all, there are some 70 border parks in 65 countries; some of them have served as 'peace parks' and have decreased political tensions and national conflicts. (Report of the IVth World Congress on National Parks and Protected Area. International Union for Conservation of Nature, 1992. IUCN has offices in New Delhi and Rawalpindi also).