

CLIMBING IN MILAM

(1968)

In 1968, when I was still at the University of Bombay, studying for a B.Com. degree, I was involved in the Hikers' and Mountaineers' Society. It organised its first expedition during May-June that year.

Though the idea of organising such a venture had a place in our thoughts and had been toyed with for a long time, the actual preparations started a few months before. After considering various suggestions we finally decided to attempt an unnamed, unscaled peak of 6992 m(22,940 ft)¹, 8 km southwest of Tirsuli at the head of the Milam glacier. After checking and rechecking our detailed plans, we were ready to start on 8 May.

We reached Tejam, the roadhead, via Kathgodam and Almora after we had collected our inner line permits from Didihat. 'The Himalaya are better for trekking rather than for driving' was our unanimous verdict as we proceeded in an open truck on our way to Munsiary. A day was spent there buying local necessities, distributing loads, taking 'civilised' baths and in enjoying the sunrise over Panch Chuli and Rajrambha peaks.

The trek to Lilam was all downhill. We reached Gori ganga and encountered countless flies, the only apparent inhabitants of Lilam. For the next 16 km to Bugdiar we saw a variety of flowers and birds. A black bear visited us that night. Walking amidst rhododendrons, we encountered some patches of snow before reaching Rialkot for the night. At 2440 m it was surprising to find snow at this time of the year.

The way to Milam was beautiful and cool. The giant faces of Nanda Devi and Nanda Kot towered above us. The villages of Bilju and Martoli were deserted. In the evening we reached Milam, our last contact with civilisation. This was once a flourishing trade centre on the Indo-Tibet trade route, to which the Scottish Himalayan expedition 1952 had made many references, including to the *Milam-ki-Nachnewali* (the dancing girls of Milam). But now, a deserted village with a few army and police establishments was all that remained to face the biting, cruel winds.

The following day was spent in marking the route ahead for the mules to journey on the moraine of the Milam glacier. We reached the glacier on 19 May and established a base camp at Nital Thaur (4270 m). These sturdy mules climbed over the slippery narrow paths, with ease, living up to their reputation of being good climbers.

Our base camp was below Nital Thaur peak and we could see a host of surrounding peaks rising over the Milam glacier including Tirsuli, Hardeol and our unnamed objective at 6992 m. It was a place of glorious sunrises, and a flat unspoilt wilderness. We were frequently disturbed by distant avalanches, and singing birds. Our regular visitors were the mountain goats, the bharals. It was a place one could wish to live in forever.

But we had to get down to prepare for the task ahead. The muleteers were paid off and we were left alone with our kit bags and crates. A recce was carried out in the glacier to find a site for camp 1. We could avoid the first icefall by climbing near the steep rocky slopes besides the Surajkund glacier. Camp 1 was established opposite Ikualari glacier (4730 m). This was exactly opposite and across the glacier, to the camp 1 site of earlier Tirsuli expeditions. On our return we found some steps and struggle marks in a crevasse. These were made, we learnt, by one of our porters who wanted to sleep in the unknown. Camp 1 was occupied on 22 May.

The only approach to our peak 6992 m was to reach the col it made with the ridge of Hardeol which was to its north. The approach to the col was guarded by an icefall of about 800 m. It was not only the height but the obvious hazards of the icefall that loomed before us. Avalanches were catapulting down from both sides. So we had to tackle that icefall in the central area only and even that with utmost care.

Two Sherpas, Wangchuk and Janterey, Vallabh Meghpara² and I moved into the icefall. After a gentle rise it was criss-crossed by crevasses and laden with hanging boulders. We fixed rope for 100 m and returned after opening the route for about 200 m in all. The next day, joined by Prof. R.G. Desai and Bharat Merchant, we went another 200 m on, but our progress was very slow. The route was broken one. Without ladders we were helpless. The wide crevasses were too wide. We were exhausted and discouraged. After a day's rest we attempted to climb the icefall once again. To our dismay, we found that an avalanche had erupted in the central area that we had targeted. Careful observations revealed that beyond the icefall was a steep wall with some hanging boulders. It was felt that that might prove much too difficult for our limited resources. That mountain, from our side would require a much bigger expedition and a more experienced team than ours, we guessed.³

We still had 10 days left before the onset of the monsoon and the weather was kind to us. So we focused on another objective. Facing our camp 1, on the left of the Ikuarali glacier was a peak of 6069 m. Its broad, rising ridge seemed possible for our team. So we decided to give it a try.

The first summit team, consisting of Sherpa Wangchuk, Prof. Desai, Vallabh Meghpara and I started off on 27 May. After crossing the Milam glacier at the foot of the Tirsuli ridge, we climbed up through an ice and rock wall to establish camp 2 (4880 m). We were alone on this vast snowfield with our campo-pack rations for food.⁴ In the evening I wrote in my diary, 'the sunset poured out a whole range of vibrant, myriad hues and every curve of rock, every snow flake and ripple of falling glacier caught fire and colour and contributed its own varied light to the illumination.'

The next day we started climbing the ridge. After a steep ascent on a rocky spur, the angle lessened. Climbing slowly with the Ikuarali glacier on the right and the snow slopes leading to the Tirsuli valley on the left we gained height.

We established camp 2 on a flat piece of rocky ground and sat around soaking in the sunlight at 5460 m. We could see the mighty Tirsuli and Hardeol, peak 6992 m, and the icefall, which, in its entirety, appeared even more frightful than we had judged.

We woke up to the sound of our transistor radio, shivering. Getting ready in the cruel cold was not easy. After eating some biscuits, we commenced the final lap of our climb. As we were situated towards west of a steep ridge, it was a long time before we were in sunlight. It was very chilly. We advanced slowly in the strong wind. We had to cut steps in some places. It was a tiresome ridge of ice and rock. Resting frequently and remembering all the good and warm things back home, we reached the point where our ridge met the one coming from Kholi peak. A little ahead was a flat plateau: our peak of 6059 m.

We advanced ahead on the plateau for about a kilometre, On our left was a huge cornice hanging over the valley below us, and on the right a very sharp ridge led to another peak of 6160 m. We stopped there.

The panorama was staggering. Huge mountains against a spotless blue sky. Our reward! The giant Tirsuli and Hardeol were facing us. The peak of 6992 m, our original objective, looked very awesome. The depression between Tirsuli and Hardeol seemed hollow. But there were innumerable other peaks in view with the majestic Nanda Devi being the best of them. On our right, facing us, was Nital Thaur and Nanda Gond with its characteristic sharp ridge. After some rest we took

photographs and set our bearings. Then began the descent at 10.30 a.m. The slope was steep, our progress was slow. We spent that night at camp 2.⁵

We spent a restless night. We were dehydrated. We descended further to camp 1 to meet the second team on its way up. On 31 May, the second party, consisting of Sherpa Janterey, G. Kapadia, Bharat Merchant and Prof. Moghe climbed the peak.

We had more unexpected thrills coming. Next day at camp 2 we saw our porter Kishansingh buried upto his neck in snow. He had dug his own grave and jumped into it. According to him he saw the ghosts of the two Polish members who were killed on Tirsuli in 1939. The ghosts wanted to kill him, he said, but because of the timely intervention by his goddess, who advised him to be buried in snow, his life was saved. We carried him down.⁶

In two days, Kishansingh was able to walk down to the base camp. We evacuated camp 1 and jumping over wide crevasses reached the base. A caravan of loaded mules and porters trekked back for civilisation. It was hard to forget those exciting preparations, the scatter of stores at the base camp, those hard tasteless 'chapatis', those soft sleeping bags, the fierce looking crampons, the colourful tents, their bearded occupants and the broad grins of the porters. And of course those fuel-tablets, which dehydrated me as never before.

NOTES & REFERENCES

1. This is actually the northern-most peak in the inner Nanda Devi Sanctuary. Its northern face falls in the Milam valley, making a huge cirque with Hardeol peak. The valley leads down to a formidable icefall. This peak was climbed by a Japanese expedition in 1975. They approached it from the north Nanda Devi Sanctuary and climbed the west ridge. It was named 'Rishi Pahar' (6992 m).
2. Vallabh Meghpara was a farmer from Saurashtra, Gujarat. He was studying for a degree in Bombay. He was strong and had undertaken a course in mountaineering a year before. He rarely spoke in English but his simplicity charmed everyone. He proved to be an exceptional climber. We became good friends.
Immediately after returning from this expedition, we went out climbing near Bombay in the Mumbra hills. After completing the climb three of us were standing on a huge rock on the summit of the Parsik Pinnacle. The rock moved suddenly, two of us jumped towards the face of the mountain and survived. Vallabh, who was on the edge fell to his death on 28 July 1968.
3. This was true of the expedition that followed us. In 1974 an Indo-New Zealand Ladies expedition, led by Ms. Shashikanta and Ms. Margaret Clarke attempted Hardeol through this icefall. They had not studied our pictures. After a look at our photographs by Capt. M.S. Kohli, they were advised to leave the icefall well alone. They reached 5500 m on Hardeol and abandoned it because of an avalanche hazard and an accident to a member. However they were tempted to climb a consolation peak, that is Pk. 6992 which we had attempted, through the same icefall. A huge avalanche killed four ladies in the middle of the icefall. Those killed were: S. Kundu, V. Ramchandran, J. Tremain and V. Thompson.
4. At that time some odd army rations were available in India, called 'campo-packs'. They were dehydrated items of various types. They were accompanied by small tablets, called 'campo-fuel', which burned slowly. We had only such food and fuel for a major part of the expedition. I remember being ever hungry and was more dehydrated than on any other of my trips. The fuel vapour rarely left the user unharmed. In fact we had to allot porters to use 'campo-fuel' in turns and be 'sick' because subsequently he would be unable to carry loads for at least a day.

Luckily this was the only expedition we used them on and they may well be called the cause of the failure of this expedition.

5. We named the peak 'Ikualari Peak' after the glacier.

6. A Polish expedition had visited this area in 1939. They climbed Nanda Devi East, a brilliant first ascent. In the second part of the expedition they came up the Milam glacier to attempt Tirsuli (7074 m). After a recce of various options a high camp was established. When the second party reached this camp they found the tent at camp 3 covered in avalanche-debris. Leader A. Karpinski and S. Bernardziewicz were killed. See *Himalayan Journal*, Vol. XII, p. 78.