

## THE BETHARTOLI HIMAL EXPEDITION, 1970

By PROF. RAMESH DESAI

THE mountaineering history of Bethartoli Himal peaks begins in 1950 when a Scottish expedition under W. Murray attempted to reach the North peak (19,131 ft.) and then across the north-west ridge towards the Main peak (20,840 ft.). They were stopped at a little over 19,000 feet before reaching the North peak. Since then there had been no other expedition to the Main peak. Bethartoli Himal South (20,730 ft.), which is by no means a mere subsidiary point, was climbed only once in 1956 by Hieber, a German climber. After attempting these two peaks we were to climb the celebrated peak of Trisul (23,360 ft.) also, which after the first ascent by Dr. Longstaff in 1906 has been climbed at least eight times.

Our team consisted of (1) Prof. Ramesh Desai, Leader, (2) Harish Kapadia, Deputy Leader, (3) Jagdish Nanavati, (4) Zerxis Boga, (5) Dr. Prabhakar Naik, (6) Arun Samant and (7) Nitin Patel. The expedition was accompanied by Instructors Ang Kami and Passang Temba from the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute, Darjeeling, and two Sherpa climbers, Passang Lhakpa and Chawang Tashi.

The entire party with members of the Ladies' Trisul Expedition reached Joshimath on 20 May and left for the last post of civilization—Lata—the next day. The village Lata (7,600 ft.), nestling amidst terraced fields, is about 600 feet above the road that follows the Dhaulī Ganga leading towards the Niti Pass. After spending a day for arranging local porters and goats the expedition started on the 23rd, with a large caravan of 11 members, 4 Sherpas, 10 Sherpa porters, 45 Garhwali porters and about 150 goats carrying a total load of over 3,000 kgs.

The first march took us to Lata-Kharak (12,100 ft.), an open broad grassy saddle which is always windy and cold; but it is the obvious camping place for the expeditions around the Nanda Devi Sanctuary. Lata-Kharak, true to its reputation, offered us one of the finest snow views next morning and we had the first glimpse of the northern face of Bethartoli Himal and the Trisul massif extending to its south. On the 24th, we crossed Dharansi Pass (13,950 ft.), the outer curtain of the Nanda Devi



- Sanctuary, which is supposed to be well guarded. The terrific gorge of Rishi can be entered only through this 'back door' of Dharansi. Actually Rishi Ganga meets Dhauri Ganga at the village of Reni just before Lata but there the direct entrance is very difficult, if not impossible. Fortunately the pass was not snow bound. We got the first glimpse of Dunagiri (23,184 ft.) while approaching the pass. Immediately after crossing the pass we were received by Nanda Devi.

As soon as we reached the camp site of Dharansi alp (13,600 ft.) in the early afternoon the weather became cold and windy and then came the expedition's first snow-fall. During the night it snowed quite heavily and by the next morning there was about 6 inches of snow.

From Dharansi the path initially climbed to the Malatuni Pass (13,900 ft.) where we were greeted by the western face of Hanuman (19,980 ft.), and then descended to the ever hospitable meadow of Dibrugeta (11,480 ft.). After two days of long arduous marches the third day was easier and more enjoyable.

The next day the track rose steeply for about 9,000 feet, then contoured for four miles along the northern bank of the Rishi gorge and finally crossed it over a permanently built wooden bridge at Deodi (10,800 ft.), a few spurs before Trisul Nala enters the gorge. At Deodi there are three different camp sites, one for Ramani-Bagini glaciers which we had used for the Hanuman expedition four years back, another for entering the Sanctuary and the third for the Trisul-Bethartoli direction.

From Deodi the track ascended through a pine forest and then traversed over the spurs to enter the Trisul Nala. At the entrance of the Trisul Nala we had the best possible view of the route entering the Nanda Devi Sanctuary and its mighty peak. Thereafter the path was through a thick forest of juniper and birch. Bethartoli camp site (12,500 ft.) was situated at the base of the north-east ridge of Bethartoli. In clear weather we could see the Bethartoli glacier, the ice-fall above it and then the east ridges of the Main and the South peaks of Bethartoli.

On the 28th, the path for the final day's march was a broken one. It passed through a veritable mass of stones and boulders, first across the terminal moraine of the Bethartoli glacier and then along the true left bank of the Trisul glacier. Patches of landslides were negotiated. Like the lower parts of all the Himalayan glaciers we had seen, these glaciers were invisible under a great depth of scree. After passing Deotoli (13,500 ft.), the absence of any vegetation gave us the feeling of being in a



glaciated country. As soon as we reached Tridang (15,500 ft.), the Base Camp, we paid off most of the Garhwali porters and the goat-wallas leaving only five Garhwali porters and ten Sherpa porters with us.

Though theoretically the next day was a rest day we all were extremely busy with the reorganization and recce. Nitin, Passang Temba and Chawang Tashi carried out recce for the route ahead and for the site of Camp I. At a conference around the evening meal we decided our strategy for the Bethartoli peaks and the details of our programme for the next week.

On the 30th after exchanging good wishes with the members of the Ladies' Trisul Expedition we set off for the higher camp. After climbing over 500 feet we arrived at a broad patch of broken rocks and fields of snow. Then alternately we traversed and climbed over rock and snow. Thence the way lay entirely over snow. The route being quite safe we were all unroped. Before we crossed half the distance, veils of mist began to envelope the ridges and it started snowing. Quite frequently avalanches were pouring down from the north-east subsidiary ridges of Trisul. That is how the untrodden terrain greeted us.

Camp I (18,400 ft.) was established on a rolling upland, the crest of which separated the Trisul glacier from the Bethartoli glacier. It was situated on the edge of the névé of the east ridge of Bethartoli separated by a steep arête. From Camp I the view around was stupendous. The twin peaks of Bethartoli with their east ridges and the eastern cwm between them appeared very close. The summits were still some 2,500 feet above us and the approach promised technical difficulties. As anticipated the approach to the south col of the Main peak was through a narrow avalanche prone, heavily broken, crevasse-ridden and east oriented ice-fall. Further, the routes above the col or anywhere upon the southern slopes of the east ridge of the Main peak appeared very steep and at places close to the vertical or overhanging. However, avalanches appeared less probable on the true extreme left as the sun had already cleared the rocks of the snow. But if the fresh snow got accumulated? As anticipated, the third alternative in our mind of traversing to the south summit appeared beyond possibility as both distance and difficulty were obviously too great.

On the next day, i.e. 31st, we were to attempt Bethartoli South directly from Camp I as part of a recce. By 4 a.m. we were out of our sleeping-bags, hoping to make an early start. But the mountains were concealed in the clouds and the lowering



- clouds threatened to snow. At last at about 6.30 the weather showed some signs of improvement and Arun, Ang Kami, Phurba Tharkey and myself were off. Traversing over the snow slopes for an hour we were in the vicinity of the south face of the east ridge of Bethartoli South. I was rather off-colour and decided to stay back. The remaining rope instead of following the south ridge climbed an intermediate rock spur. Then a steep climb over a patch of hard snow took them to the middle of the east ridge. This ridge, which leads all along towards the pyramidal snow cap of the South peak, was heavily draped with enormous cornices. When Arun tried to take a photograph of the Main peak a cornice gave way and Arun went down about 70 feet. Phurba with a great presence of mind just managed to dig his ice-axe deep into the snow with the hand loop in it. Arun was pulled up by Ang Kami and Phurba. He had lost his ice-axe and camera. It was then 2 p.m. The weather had started worsening and they decided to give up the attempt and return. Since they had not reached Camp I by dusk, a support-cum-search party left for them. Soon all returned amidst heavy snow-fall. The attempt had proved the necessity of an intermediate Camp II.

Meanwhile on the 31st, Passang Temba and Chawang Tashi carried out recce of the Main peak in the eastern cwm and selected a site for Camp II. They also went very close to the col and selected the site for Camp III. During the recce they had close views of all the southern slopes of the east ridge of the Main peak and what they saw led us to think that Bethartoli Main might be attacked with a good prospect of success. In the meantime, Nitin and Boga joined us at Camp I from the Base Camp.

On 1 June, Harish and Nitin with two porters ferried loads to Camp II at the entrance of the cwm. The rest of the members took rest. We were expecting Jagdish and Dr. Prabhakar to join us at Camp I, but instead the porters brought the news about the ever worsening sickness of Dr. Rekha Parikh of the Ladies' Trisul Expedition, who had remained behind at Base camp to overcome the effects of altitude and severe bronchitis. Initially we had hoped that someone from the ladies' team would return to look after her. But ultimately on 1 June when we got the news of her deteriorating health, Ang Kami volunteered to go down for the removal of Rekha to lower camps, if necessary. The circumstances were such that Jagdish and Dr. Prabhakar had to accompany the patient, who had to be evacuated next morning to Deotoli, 2,000 feet below the Base Camp, where she recouped after a few days.



In the evening we heard on the radio the news about the tragedy that had befallen the British Annapurna Expedition. Ian Clough was reported killed by a fall of an ice-block. Ian had spent nearly a week in Bombay on his way to the mountains. Harish, Boga and others had had many rock-climbing outings with him and we were sad to learn about his death.

On the 2nd we were scheduled to set up two camps for the Main and South peaks. But the clouds threatened us from early morning. It was very close to snowing. Finally a strong wind defeated our plans and dictated a rest day. By the afternoon Ang Kami had returned to Camp I after making arrangements to send Rekha to Deotoli. On that day we had also to make a difficult decision about the composition of the summit parties. Due to uncertain weather we decided to send only two members to each of the peaks. According to the initial plan Harish and Boga were to form the summit party for the Main peak. But fate had decreed otherwise. Harish all those days was suffering from acute cough and could not have stood the strain of the Main peak. So Harish was selected for the South peak. Boga had stomach trouble and was never at his best. He had to remain behind. Arun was not much shaken by his narrow escape on the South peak and Nitin was the fittest of us all. So Nitin and Arun formed the team for the Main peak with Ang Kami and Passang Temba.

Early on the 3rd morning we were all set for moving to Camp II for Bethartoli South and the Main peak. Weather had improved a little. At that stage we discussed whether to move up to upper camps and seize the first opportunity for the final climb or to wait at Camp I for the weather to clear up completely. All the Sherpas were for the first option and so we finally decided to move up in two groups. When we started it was clear and wind was calm. Harish and myself with Sherpas Chawang Tashi and Phurba Tharkey established Camp II (19,500 ft.) for South peak on the névé that feeds the Bethartoli glacier. The other party of Arun, Nitin, Sherpas Ang Kami, Passang Temba and porters Pemba Tshering, Gnappa, Chawang Phinzo established Camp II (18,200 ft.) at the entrance of the eastern cwm.

The terrain between Camp I and Camp II towards Bethartoli South was not very treacherous but had occasional concealed crevasses. We were tied on ropes. At Camps II we were within striking distance of both the summits. That afternoon and night were cloudy and therefore not very cold. Thunder rumbled



in the surrounding mountains the whole night. None of us slept well and were uncomfortable with suffocation. Thus everything was set for the struggle.

Morning of 4 June was misty. Heavy blanket of mist clung to the slopes and veiled the snow-capped peaks. It was not a pleasant thing to attack a peak in that disappointing weather. But we decided to leave with the hope that the weather gods would be kinder later on. It was windy, and fixing on crampons was a considerable task. At 7.30 a.m. we left Camp II. Our route went up the south-east face of the mountain which led directly to the top. Chawang Tashi led the rope of four persons. The snow was firm and at places ankle-deep. After an hour we were confronted with a large bergschrund which ran right across the line of ascent. Beyond it was an ice-wall of about 30 feet with an angle as steep as  $80^{\circ}$ . Fortunately, a few yards to our right, the bergschrund was narrow enough so that it was possible to walk over an insecure snow bridge. Then we negotiated an ice face of about 50 feet where we had to fix rope. There was a small crack beyond and, when Harish followed Tashi, the snow gave way and Harish sank into a crevasse but was held by Tashi and Phurba. Thereupon Phurba took the lead. At 11.15 a.m. suddenly the slope ended and we found ourselves standing on a flat topped dome of snow. To crown this satisfying moment the sun came out from behind the clouds. We planted the National Flag and the flag of the Climbers' Club, our sponsoring body. Harish placed a silver Ganesh idol. We took several pictures of few giant peaks peeping out of a veil of clouds covering the valley. Anticipating some movements on the Main peak and Trisul we gazed minutely. The Main peak showed no signs of any trail. However, on Trisul far beneath the peak three dots were seen toiling up. How small they looked! How painfully slow they were! And finally they disappeared. After 20 minutes the clouds again started gathering in all directions. It became windy when we started descending at 11.45 a.m. While the ascent had taken over four hours the descent to Camp II took hardly an hour and a half. From Camp II we immediately started moving down to Camp I. The weather deteriorated rapidly. While returning we had to change the route at a number of places since new crevasses had opened up and some others had widened. We descended to Camp I by 3 p.m. It was already snowing, which later developed into a blizzard. Thereafter, an unusually heavy blizzard lasted with scarcely a break for over 70 hours. The blizzard kept us



imprisoned in our tents and cut all communications between camps. It was almost impossible to breathe out in the open and it seemed to cut into our flesh like a knife. We could not light the stove in our tents and there was every possibility of tent ropes giving way. Tents were no longer wind-proof and everything in the tent was covered under a shroud of snow dust. Bethartoli Himal had started defending itself with its most punishing weapon. Indescribable pandemonium reigned at Camp I. What must have been the case at Camp III in the cwm? And to add to our restlessness we heard over the radio about the shocking death of two of our friends from Bombay in another expedition in Kumaon.

On the 5th morning we became concerned about the other party and doubts began to grow. Would they be able to get back safely? The upper team was the strongest. We spent hours without proper sleep and food with a feeling of helplessness. The wind was furious and about two to three feet of snow had accumulated. In those conditions to go up would have been sheer lunacy. Snow blizzard would have prevented climbing altogether. Snow continued to fall like a thick white veil for the whole day.

For two days, 4 and 5 June, no one could come up from Base Camp. All movements were paralysed. In order to avoid consumption of stores at Camp I, Boga went down on the 5th, to Base Camp with Thansing. For the same reason Harish and Phurba left Camp II on the 6th at about 2.15 p.m. Just 15 minutes after their departure a whistle blown by Arun was heard. The Bethartoli Main party finally reached Camp I. But they were only three. What happened to the remaining four persons? Passang was almost snow-blind and Pemba appeared to be badly injured. Passang narrated the story of their fate, just the bare essentials, with great difficulty and often interrupted by exhaustion.

According to Passang on the 4th they had established Camp III (19,200 ft.) in the cwm, about 600 feet below the col. On the 5th morning in spite of bad weather Ang Kami, Passang and Nitin made a summit attempt. The climb was difficult and at times severe but not impossible. They managed to reach about 19,800 feet and fix rope of over 400 feet. At that place they waited for over two hours for the storm to subside. The weather was continuously deteriorating and they had to return. They reached Camp III at 5 p.m.



- The next morning the weather was still bad. There was no question of a further attempt so they decided to evacuate Camp III and move down to Camp I. They left Camp III at about 8 a.m. The return route had to be a compromise between the two hazards—the avalanche zone to the left and the ice-walls and crevasses on the right. The snow was waist-deep and visibility was poor. They were ultimately forced to follow the hazardous left flank since the blizzard had blown away all the marker flags in addition to obliterating the steps. They could hardly cover the descent of 300 feet in over two hours, wading through waist-deep and unreliable snow. A few minutes after 10 a.m. they were startled by a loud violent sound. All of them instinctively knew that it meant an avalanche. In a second they were in it and there was no way out of it. The avalanche did not give them any time to scramble to safety. They could offer no resistance. The ground was slipping under their feet. They were helpless.

The avalanche came from the southern slopes of the east ridge of Bethartoli Himal. The party of seven persons was tied to one rope of 165 feet. All other ropes were already fixed in securing the route on the summit attempt and could not be retrieved while descending to Camp III. The avalanche sent them hurtling down for about 200 feet. Ang Kami, Gnappa and Chawang Phinzo were entrapped into crevasses and buried under the avalanche snow. Nitin was found dead with his upper half buried in snow. Arun found himself safe on the snow surface. Passang Temba was thrown into a crevasse and was hanging against the ice-wall of the crevasse.

Luckily he was not buried by avalanche snow. He was rescued by the rope given by Arun. After releasing his knot and with the rope given by Arun and his own ice-axe, Passang managed to come out. The survivors had practically lost everything—snow goggles, hand gloves, rucksacks. Only Passang had his ice-axe. They were still a long way to safety. They found no trace of Ang Kami, Gnappa and Chawang Phinzo and they had to proceed to Camp I with anguish and heavy hearts. After a bitter struggle, Passang brought Arun and the injured Pemba Tshering to Camp I.

Our meeting almost defies description. Chawang Tashi started weeping without restraint. I pulled myself together with a mighty effort. It must have been a terrible experience for young Arun. Injured Pemba was taken straight to my sleeping-bag. For some time we massaged his numbed limbs with every reserve



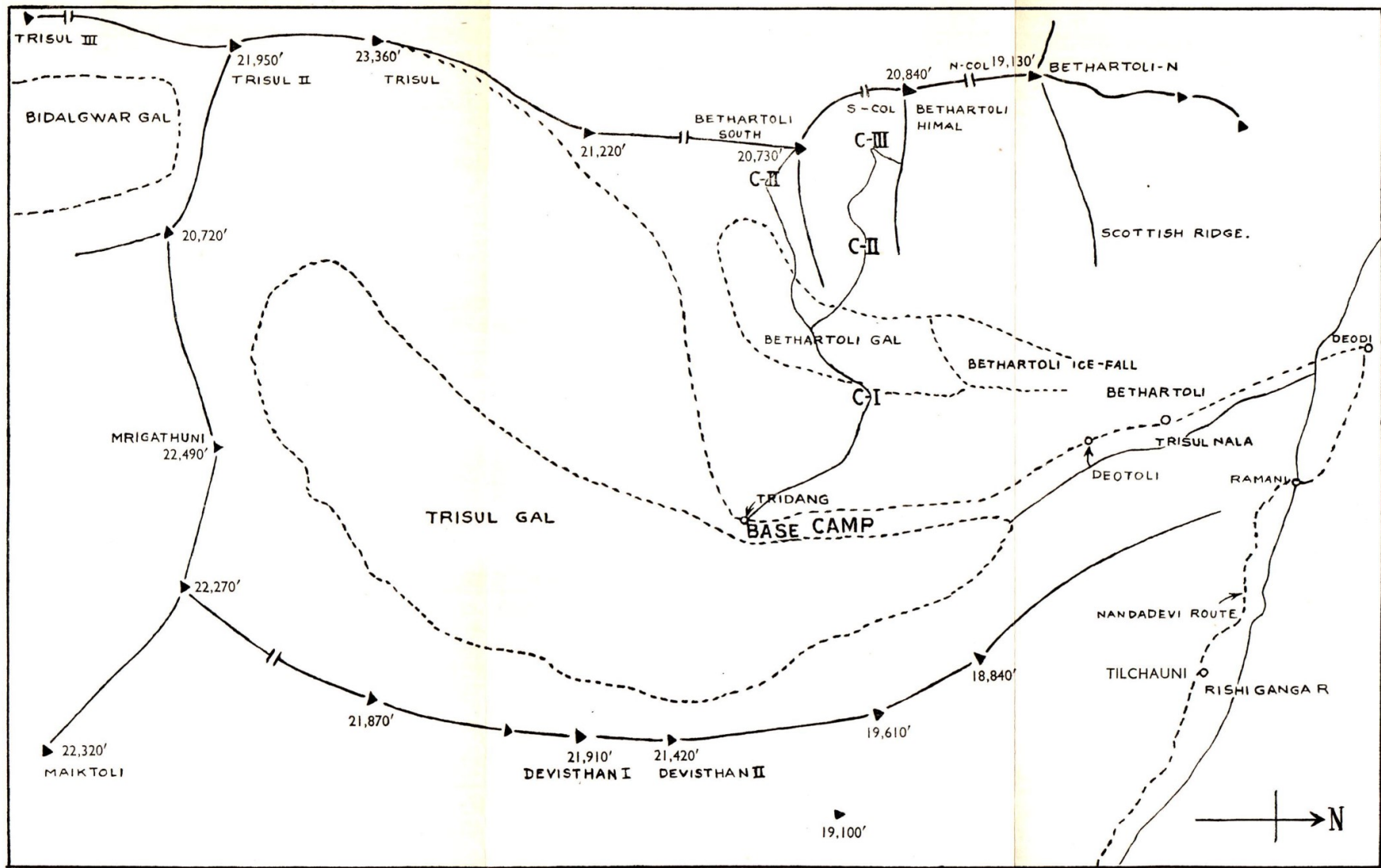
of will-power we could summon up. After inquiring with Passang, it was clear in that weather and soft snow condition the question of sending a rescue or search party immediately was neither practicable nor would it have served any purpose. The rescue party would have taken at least six hours to reach the site of the accident and thus would have invited many more risks. Therefore, after Tashi recovered from his initial shock, he was sent down with Passang to Base Camp. They left Camp I at 3.30 p.m. for Dr. Naik (who was at Deotoli) and to send up some supplies the same night. I knew it was not possible. I stayed at Camp I to look after the survivors, Arun and Pemba, who was semi-conscious and was groaning with pain. We gave him some medicines including a dose of Coramine tablets which gave him some relief. All through the evening, night and next morning the blizzard tore at the tent. It was a long, painful, horrible night with only one air-mattress and two sleeping-bags for three persons.

On the 7th a rescue party consisting of Passang Lhakpa and three Sherpa porters came up and by late afternoon all of us reached Base Camp. Immediately the injured Pemba and Arun were thoroughly checked and treated by Dr. Naik and Dr. Meena Agrawal. On receiving the message of tragedy, Dr. Naik and Jagdish had come up from Deotoli on the morning of the 7th. Already in the morning Harish had sent a special runner with telegrams to Nitin's father, the Climbers' Club, I.M.F., and our relatives and friends at Bombay and Darjeeling, giving the tragic news. The runner also carried letters to the Civil and Police authorities at Joshimath.

Since the weather had cleared up a search party consisting of Passang Temba, Lhakpa, Tashi and Phurba was sent up on the 9th. After spending a night at Camp I they visited the site of the accident in the early morning of the 10th. In spite of all efforts they could not find anything more than what was expected. Nitin's body was given a snow burial and they descended to Base Camp at 1 p.m.

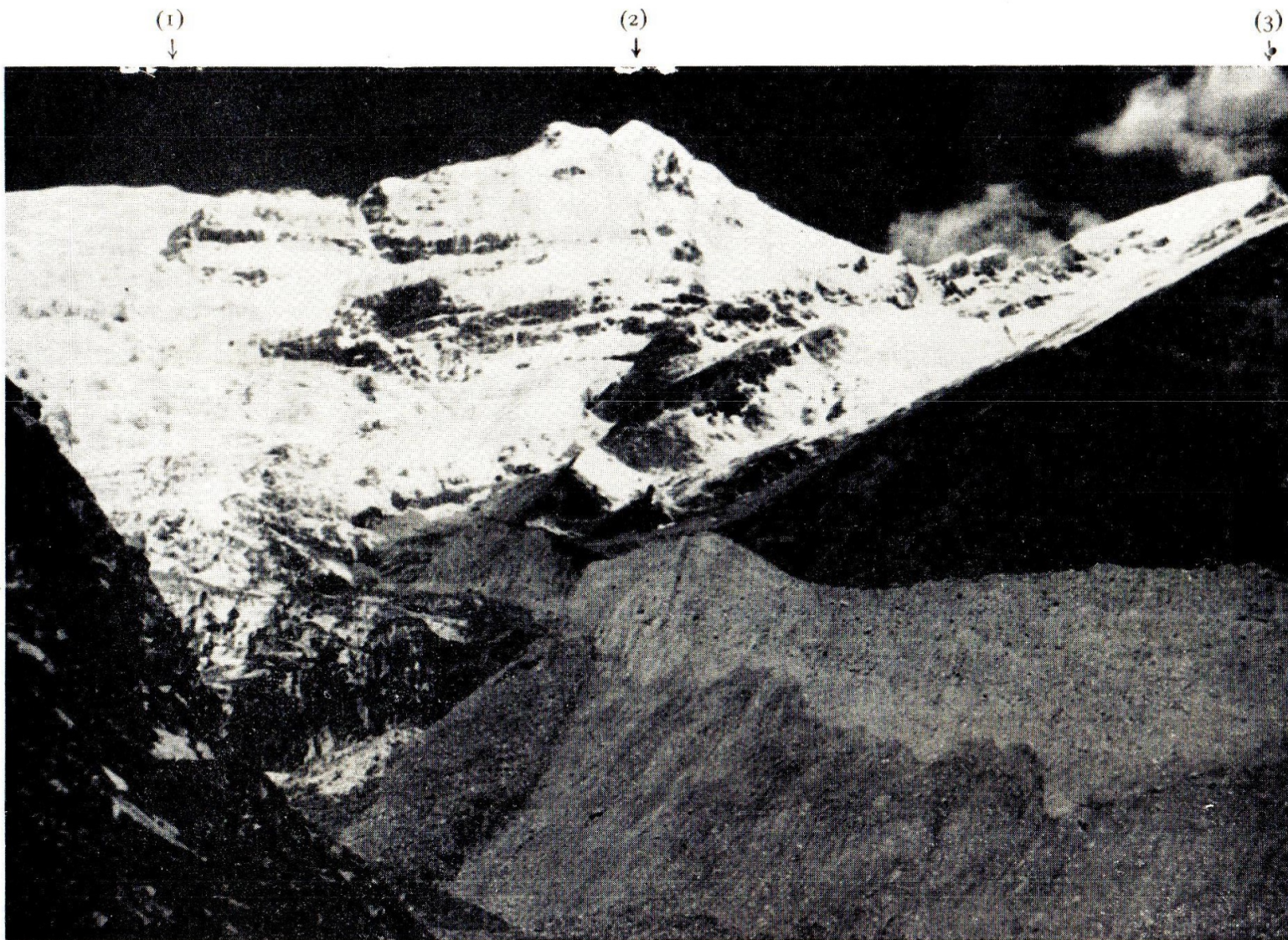
On the 11th we started our return march and reached Lata village on the 15th afternoon amidst heavy rain. Thus ended a brave attempt which succeeded in the first Indian ascent of Bethartoli South (20,730 ft.) and reconnoitring the Main virgin peak of Bethartoli Himal (20,840 ft.). With a little more luck it might have been a grand triumph. The weather gods were not kind to us.





BETHARTOLI HIMAL-TRISUL REGION



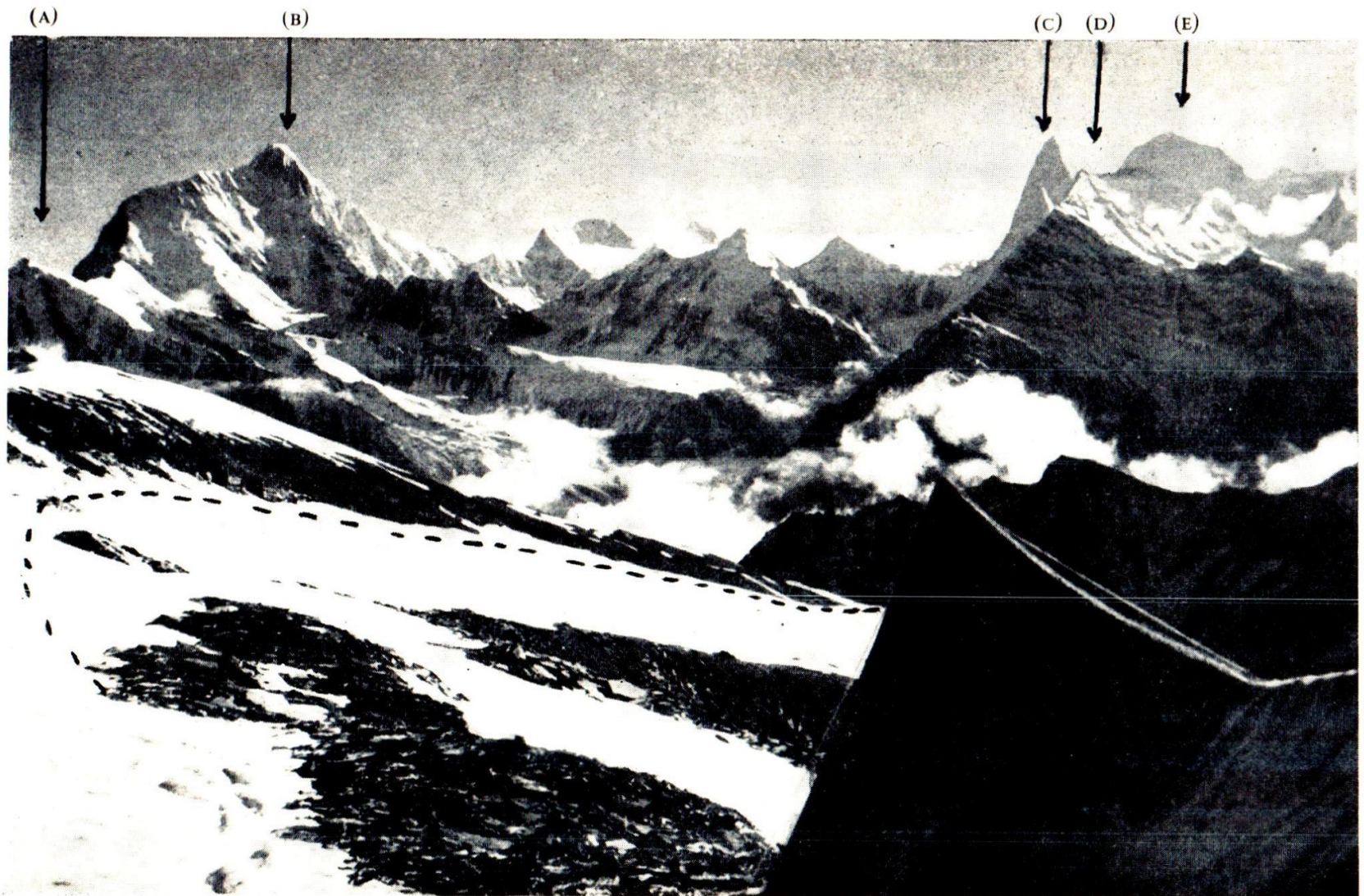


*Photo: Harish Kapadia*

VIEW FROM BETHARTOLI GRAZING GROUND (3,822 M.)

- (1) BETHARTOLI SOUTH (20,730 FT.) (6,312 M.)      (3) BETHARTOLI NORTH (19,130 FT.) (5,831 M.)  
(2) BETHARTOLI HIMAL (20,840 FT.) (6,352 M.)      BETHARTOLI ICE-FALL IN FOREGROUND



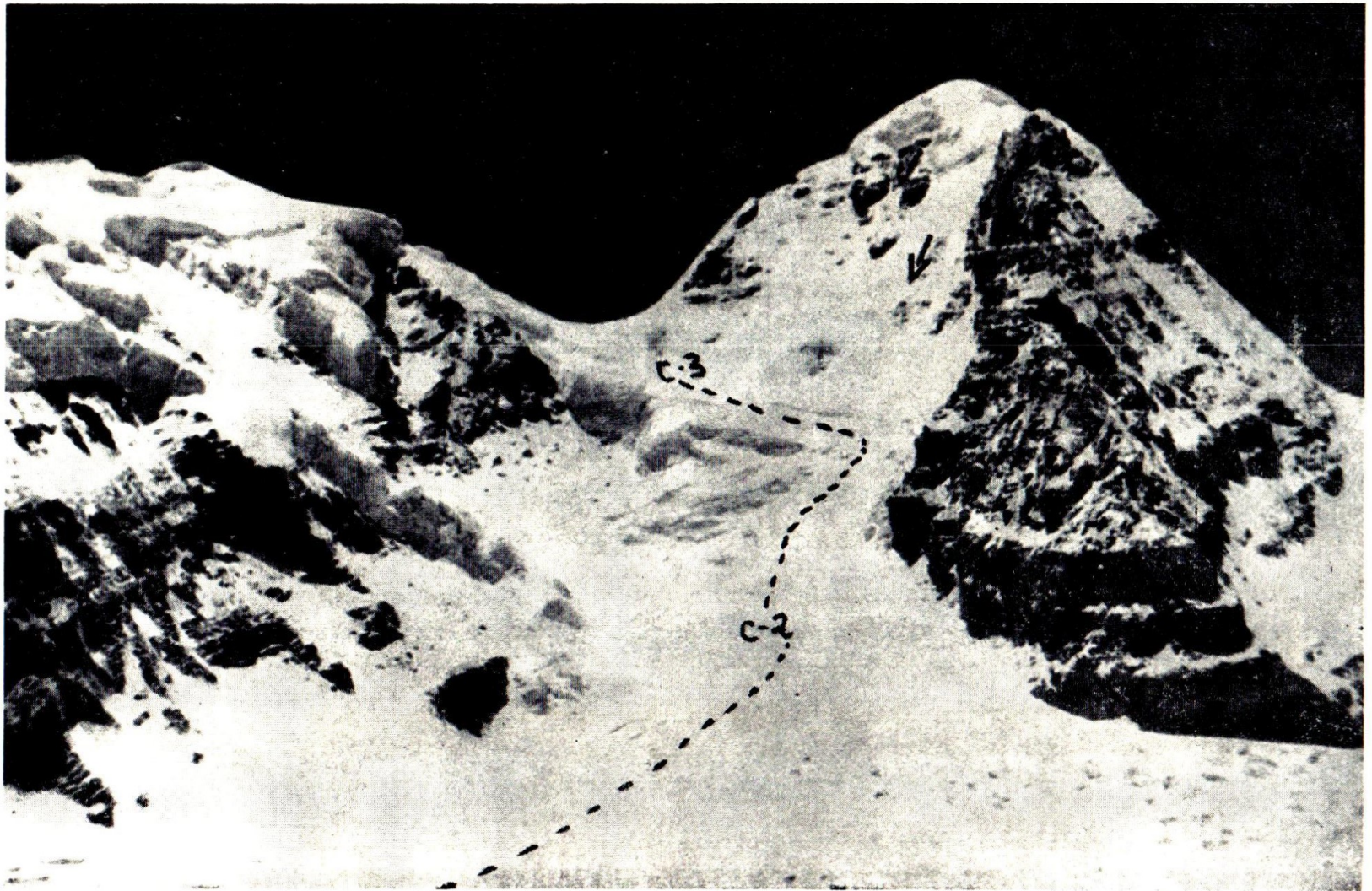


*Photo: Harish Kapadia*

VIEW FROM CAMP I ON BETHARTOLI HIMAL. ROUTE TO BASE CAMP IN FOREGROUND

(A) HANUMAN PEAK (19,930 FT.) (6,075 M.)	(D) RISHI KOT (20,460 FT.) (6,236 M.)
(B) DUNAGIRI PEAK (23,184 FT.) (7,066 M.)	(E) KALANKA PEAK (22,740 FT.) (6,931 M.)
(C) CHANGABANG PEAK (22,520 FT.) (6,864 M.)	

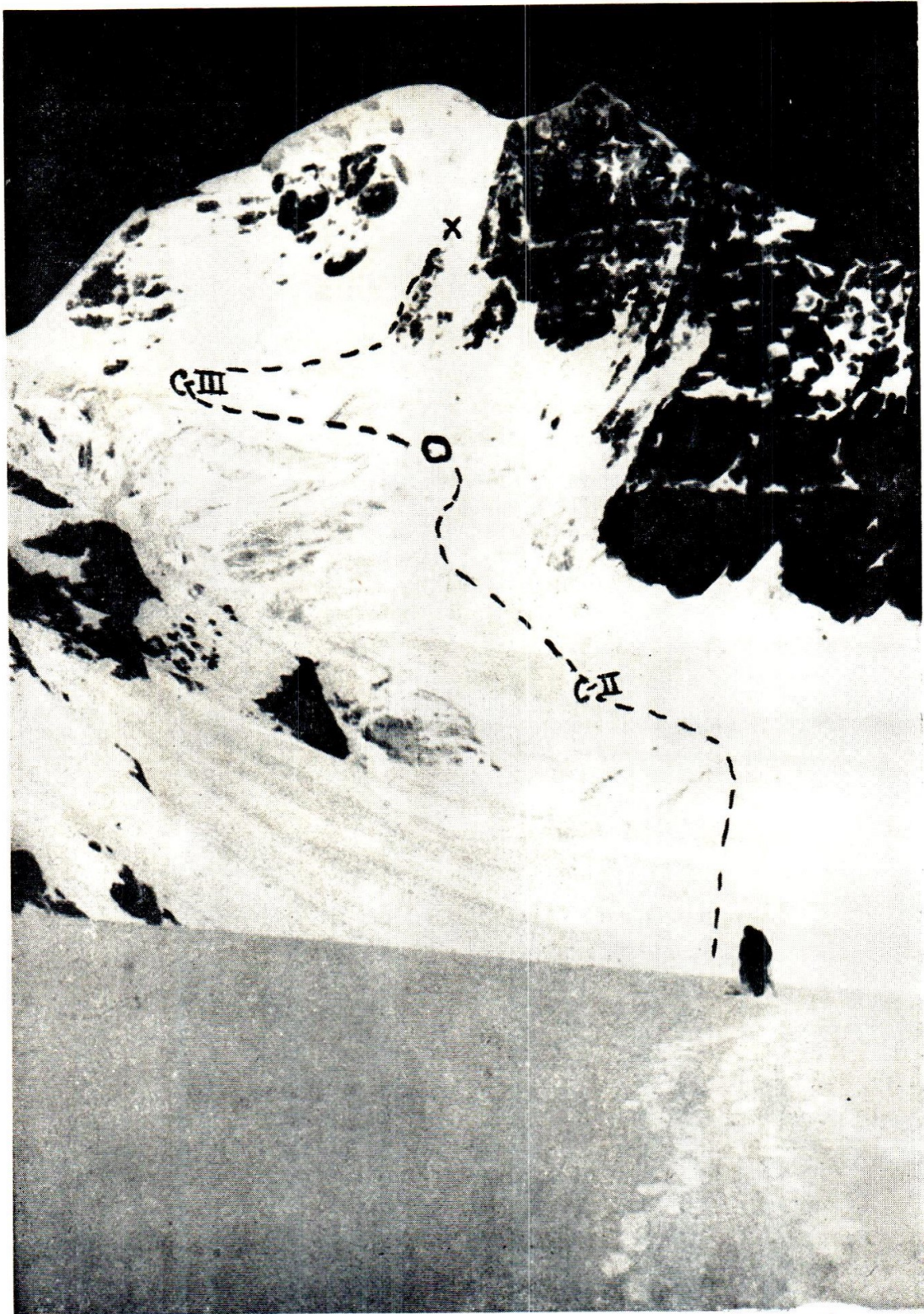




*Photo : Harish Kapadia*

BETHARTOLI SOUTH (20,730 FT.) (6,312 M.) AND BETHARTOLI HIMAL (20,840 FT.) (6,352 M.) FROM CAMP I. THE SOUTH COL AND THE ROUTE OF THE EXPEDITION. THE ARROW SHOWS THE FACE FROM WHICH THE AVALANCHE CAME ON 6 JUNE 1970





*Photo : Harish Kapadia*

BETHARTOLI HIMAL (20,840 FT.) (6,352 M.) EAST RIDGE AND SOUTH-EAST FACE

-----ROUTE OF THE EXPEDITION WITH C-II AND C-III

X--THE HIGHEST POINT REACHED ON 5 JUNE 1970

O--THE SITE OF THE ACCIDENT ON 6 JUNE 1970