

# Tragedy of Bethartoli Himal

1970

THE TRAGEDY came slowly, almost absurdly. Looking back now in 1992, after 22 years, the Bethartoli Himal and Trisul expeditions of 1970 seem so far away. But the memories of the tragedy and its aftermath are still fresh. Death on a mountain is always a serious business and my only experience of losing friends in the Himalaya is still painful.

Ang Kami almost did not join the expedition. He had climbed Everest in 1965 and was considered a 'national hero'. He was the youngest person to have climbed Everest. What would he do on a 6352 m mountain, we thought, and did not invite him. He came to Bombay in December 1969 to conduct his 10th rock climbing course in Bombay. After all the students were back to the camp, the two of us finished the last rappel and sat down.

'Why have you not invited me to Bethartoli', Ang Kami asked with some pain.

'You are already a famous man used to bigger expeditions and their habits. . . .'

'I know all that'. He cut me short, like the good friend that he was. 'If Nanavati, Rekhadidi and you are going, I will come to Bethartoli, *whether you invite me or not*'. He joined with the best selected Sherpas and equipment. He worked so hard for the expedition that we were put to shame for not asking him in the first place. But Ang Kami did not return from Bethartoli.

We were a six member team which attempted the two peaks of Bethartoli Himal (6352 m) and South (6318 m). A four-member ladies team climbed Trisul (7120 m) ensuring a height record for the Indian ladies and its leader Dr. Meena Agrawal. The Scottish Himalayan Expedition in 1950 had briefly attempted the North peak of Bethartoli Himal (5831 m), while the Germans had climbed the South peak in 1956. In 22 years since our trip, Bethartoli Himal has been climbed only once, by the Italians (Renato Moro) via the northeast ridge in 1977, and the South peak has been climbed a few times. Except for these climbs, the group has been left alone. Such is the strength of Bethartoli.

We were a happy team led by Prof Ramesh Desai and fortified by the presence of the meticulous Jagdish Nanavati. Zerksis Boga and myself had good climbing experience. Arun Samant and Nitin Patel, both student engineers, were well-trained, eager mountaineers. Dr. Prabhakar Naik provided the medical cover.

The ladies team and our's travelled together to the mountains. In those early days very few mountaineers were seen in these areas, and ladies almost never. As we stopped at an army transit camp, almost 500 jawans stood silently watching the ladies. A six-foot tall military policeman, in charge of the situation, softly spoke in Hindi; '*Jawanbhailok yahan nahin khade rahenge*' (Jawans will not stand here). In minutes they all disappeared in unbelievable silence. It reminded us of the famous scene in 'Dr. Zhivago' (David Lean's famous movie) where Alec Guinness did a similar trick as he dispersed the Russian mob by the snap of a finger.

Before beginning our trek we spent our last civilized evening at an Army mess at Joshimath. All the re-packing was done and we relaxed as the army officers looked after the ladies. We boys sat in one corner. When we politely refused the second round of rum there came a loud order from a moustachioed Colonel from the other end: 'Nobody drinks one peg in my mess, drink the bottle'. 'Yes sir'. We had to be carried back on the shoulders of jawans with two lanterns throwing light in the front. All I remember of the walk back is Boga murmuring, 'I am the Governor'. He was referring to the habit of a Bombay Governor who took evening walks at hill stations with aides holding lanterns in front of him.

But there were no lanterns ahead of us from here on. We crossed the Dharanishi and Malathuni passes on the famous Nanda Devi trail. Bethartoli Himal peaks are situated on the outer walls of the Nanda Devi Sanctuary. To its south rises Trisul which was climbed early this century. The eastern approaches to Bethartoli peaks rise from the Trisul nala. To reach this, the expedition had to follow the famous but difficult trail. Turning south at Deodi en route, the base camp at Tridang was reached in about five days, on 28 May 1970. Both the teams started working on their respective mountains. By this time we had formed a good team, and all the members were ready to climb as a cohesive group. With Ang Kami there were Pasang Temba, a very senior Sherpa, Chewang Tashi a young climber and four Sherpa H.A.Ps.

On 30 May Camp 1 (5600 m) was put up on a small ridge facing both the Bethartoli peaks. With so much support, the camp was stocked up very quickly. Ang Kami suggested we take advantage of the prevailing good weather to tackle Bethartoli South directly from this camp. This would give a clear idea of approaches on the main peak as well.

On the 31st, Arun, Ang Kami and Phurba Tharkey left Camp 1. Traversing snow slopes for an hour they reached the vicinity of the south face of the east ridge. They climbed an intermediate rock spur. A steep climb over a patch of hard snow led

them to the middle of the east ridge. It led further to the summit pyramid but was heavily corniced. Soon the mountain lured a false move. Arun, trying to take a photo of the main peak, stepped on a cornice which broke, throwing him 20 m down. Phurba held him on the belay, and with Ang Kami, pulled him up. Arun had lost an ice axe and a camera and was badly shaken. It was 2 p.m. and hence they retreated to Camp 1.

On the same day, a recce of the main peak from its eastern cwm was carried out. From Camp 1 it involved a descent to a cwm between the Bethartoli peaks. The cwm was crevassed in the middle. The experienced Pasang Temba located a route through the crevasses. He selected sites for further camps as well. Boga and Nitin now joined the party at Camp 1 and we were in full strength.

The next ill-omen was on the radio. Ian Clough was killed on the Annapurna South Face expedition. Ian had stayed at Bombay for some time before leaving for the mountains. We had a few training sessions with him and had even planned a joint expedition the next year. Boga, particularly, had become a good friend. He was severely shaken, to the extent of opting out of further climbing. Perhaps his intuition saved his life.

By the evening of 1 June we had further bad news. Dr. Rekha Parikh, who was not acclimatising well, had suffered an attack of acute bronchitis at the base camp. Doctors had suggested to wait, but the experienced Ang Kami advised evacuation to the lower camp immediately. Even one extra night could prove fatal. So he left for the geetbase camp. Next day Rekha was carried 600 m down. This possibly saved her life. Leaving the base camp on 2 June, Ang Kami climbed up all the way to Camp 1 again by the afternoon, to continue climbing. That evening we sat down to plan the future moves as the weather was still excellent.

With my cough, I was selected to go for the easier South peak with Prof Desai, Chewang Tashi and Phurba. Arun and Nitin were to join the experienced Pasang Temba and Ang Kami to attempt the main peak. They were supported by 3 H.A.Ps. Both the teams were to move to their respective higher camps and to attempt the peaks on different days. The die was cast.

We all sat together in the evening sun. Though I knew Nitin only a little, he suddenly opened up, talking about his family and life. He hailed from a small town in Gujarat and had retained the simplicity of the place. As night encroached on our talks we wished each other luck. In the tent I slept between Pasang Temba and Ang Kami, listening gazals on the radio. Ang Kami made fun of them and sang his Sherpa songs. His last couplet was:

*Sheetal mathe ni, Sheetal bhayo ri,  
Lau lau lau, bhatku chha maya lai.*

(It is cold above me and cold all around. In such inhospitable surroundings I am roaming with my maya (desires)).

The next morning after an hour our routes parted. I shook hands with Ang Kami and Nitin. I never saw them again.

### *Bethartoli South*

3 June. Our party established Camp 2 (5950 m) for the South peak on the névé that feeds the main glacier. After an uncomfortable night we left by 7.30 a.m. for the summit. The chief difficulty was a 10 m high ice wall, almost vertical. It was guarded by a bergschrund. I fell into a crevasse but was held by Chewang Tashi. After a little struggle and by fixing some rope, the summit was gained at 11.15 a.m. We enjoyed the view and looked around. On the final slopes of Trisul (7120 m) we could see three dots nearing the summit. But there was no trace of anyone on the Bethartoli Main peak. Clouds gathered and we descended quickly. By 3 p.m. we reached Camp 1. Usually the afternoon storm cleared by the evening. But not this time. The snowfall started gently, it was followed by a strong wind and finally turned into a blizzard. It lasted without a break for 70 hours. It was impossible to stay calmly in those old-fashioned high tents which we had at Camp 1. No stove could be lit and, slowly, the blizzard was sapping our strength.

More bad news followed on the radio. A team from Bombay had lost 2 climbers in Kumaon, quite near us. We knew them and the shock waves it created in us were unnerving. On 5 June the blizzard did not abate. We were filled with doubts and anxiety. What would be the fate of the other team on the main peak? Would Bethartoli strike?

The main peak party had entered the eastern cwm between the two Bethartoli peaks on the 4th. They established Camp 3 (5850 m) about 180 m below the col between the two peaks. This route was recceid by the experienced Pasang Temba earlier. It passed near a crevassed zone between the two peaks. Caught in the blizzard they made a cursory attempt on the peak the next day. With the ferocity of the winds increasing, they debated over whether to withdraw now, in 1 m of fresh snow, or to wait. But then there could be more snow and they would be trapped in the broken cwm. The wind had blown-off all the marker flags and obliterated their tracks. Pasang Temba advised waiting, while Ang Kami was opting for getting out

immediately, before the food and fuel ran short. Finally youth won over experience. They decided to retreat the next morning. They tempted fate.

### *Avalanche*

They could hardly go down 100 m in deep snow in two hours. Ang Kami was the soul of the party, unroping himself to help anyone in trouble. But a little after 10 a.m. a violent sound was heard. A huge avalanche came from the southern slopes of the east ridge of Bethartoli Himal. The party of 7 was tied to a 60 m rope to remain together. They were hurled down 70 m before anyone could do a thing.

The snow settled. The party was thrown over a deep crevassed zone. To avoid this zone they had specifically turned nearer the slope, which avalanched. The devil had struck to throw them in the 'deep sea', so to say.

Arun and Pemba Tsering were the only persons on the surface. Arun freed himself and dropped his rope to Pasang Temba who was hanging by a small piece of rope against the ice wall of a crevasse. Slowly he came up by the rope dropped by Arun. There was no trace of Ang Kami, Gnappa Sherpa and Chewang Phinzo. Nitin's body was found, the upper part half buried in snow. He must have died instantly. The death had struck selectively. Almost each alternate person on the rope was killed with Ang Kami in between.

There was no time to waste. Pasang Temba led Arun and Pemba Tsering through soft snow. They were badly shaken and had only one ice axe between them. At 2.30 p.m. a loud whistle was heard at Camp 1. They were escorted to the camp. Chewang Tashi started weeping without restraint. After inquiring with Pasang Temba it was decided that in the present snow conditions, and with the blizzard still blowing, it was not possible to send a rescue team immediately. The survivors were taken down to the base camp. A team reached the accident spot later in clearer weather. But they could only find the body of Nitin Patel, which was photographed and given a snow-burial.

A haggard and emotionally shattered party reached civilization. Pasang Temba was always drunk and crying. We members had to remain sane. But back at Lata village on the last night on the trail, almost everyone broke down. The tragedy was too stunning. As the fire turned to embers each fell off to sleep utterly exhausted. But the tragedy was to take different shapes from now onwards.

Back to civilization, the expedition was faced with explaining the tragedy. It was not easy to explain the wrath of the unkind mountain Gods and inclement weather to those who did not understand the sport. The gloomy mood that we were in made things harder. As our leader reflected in an article later on.

Where had we gone wrong in planning the expedition? The objective had never been beyond our physical powers or technical skill. We had taken every precaution for safety.

In the face of prevailing conditions an expedition, large or small, ever-so-well equipped could have fought better for survival. Had we paid the penalty of underestimating weather conditions? If so, the punishment had been severe. My thoughts went to Bombay, Darjeeling and the base-camp. Would those at home understand the spirit of our expedition? Would they understand that the Himalayas are still capable of making nonsense of man's efforts to conquer some of its peaks?

But back at Bombay we realised that some armchair commentators did not understand the intricacies of the actual decision making process and movements on the mountains. Some of them started a vicious campaign against the expedition leadership. Unfortunately, instead of sympathetically understanding the trauma the team had undergone, the Managing Committee of our sponsors, 'The Climbers Club', Bombay, almost after a year, decided to pass certain strictures. Within the Managing Committee there were endless debates as Jagdish Nanavati and myself tried to explain the fallacies of their contentions and protested against their refusal to adopt a fair procedure.

In conformity with their prejudiced minds, the leader was not asked to explain anything and a majority decision was taken to condemn the leadership without even inviting the leader for a discussion prior to such a condemnation. Only on a strong insistence by Jagdish was a communication sent to the leader for his views on the adverse comments already passed. The leader's reply was deliberately suppressed from simultaneous publication in *The Climbers Club Bulletin*<sup>1</sup> along with the 'Comments'. Indeed, no consideration was given to the reply as it was not even mentioned anywhere. Evidently there was a closed mind functioning here. Even the note of dissent by the Club President was deliberately withheld from publication along with the 'Comments', as normally required under canons of any fair inquiry. It betrayed a totally biased attitude, far from the declared purpose of listing 'certain principles for the benefit of future expeditions'. The presence of inherent hazards on the mountains was not appreciated nor the compelling circumstances under which decisions and actions had been taken. It is erroneous to cast any blame by hindsight. In protest Jagdish, Ashvin Mehta (Hon. editor) and I resigned from the Managing Committee. The 'Comments' were fittingly replied to and published in the next issue of the Club Bulletin,<sup>1</sup> though belatedly. The entire climbing community within the Club supported our stand and condemned the Managing Committee by

writing in the Bulletin.<sup>2</sup> The unfair and petty-minded methods adopted by the Managing Committee stood exposed. The episode achieved nothing. The discord caused disaffection within the active membership and sowed the seeds which made the Club gradually defunct and ultimately extinct.

As predicted by Soli Mehta,<sup>3</sup> no wonder there were no takers for the Climbers Club's sponsorship by any expedition subsequent to what befell the Bethartoli Himal Expedition!

For us, the younger and more active climbers, life and mountaineering had moved on. But it was hard for Jagdish Nanavati, who had formed and nurtured the Club and was its current President.

Mountaineering as a sport was still in the growing stages in India in the 70s. The concept of 'calculated risk taking' and the fact that mountaineering involves a certain amount of risk even to life, was not accepted by those whose views were formed 'by the book' and not through experience. There is nothing much one can do against *vis major* when a mountain strikes. This is the fundamental basis of the sport and its attraction.

Some members of Nitin's family had met us at Joshimath during our return. They were shocked. Facing them, explaining to these simple folk the destructive power of the mountain was an impossible task. When they returned home and informed Nitin's mother of the tragedy, she refused to believe that her son was dead. Arun visited Rajkot to console the family. However, Nitin's mother, like a truly pious Hindu lady, believed that one day Nitin would emerge from the Himalayan mountains and come home. For almost 15 years that we inquired, the same state of shock and hope persisted with her. One day a headline in the local newspaper stated 'Dead Nitin returns alive'. It was a story of a sadhu, who had come from the Himalaya and consoled the grieving mother. She saw her lost son in him. Little do we mountaineers realise the extent of tragedy caused by a death.

Most of us lived in joint families. The sport of mountaineering was pursued as a hobby and not as total commitment. Everyone found it difficult to explain the tragedy to their near and dear ones. Jagdish, though not involved in the accident at all, found himself in turmoil with the affairs of the expedition later on. With his family pressures he did not visit the Himalayan range, even for a trek, for twelve years. Arun as a young student was interested in participating in serious climbing. But after an expedition of such a tragic nature he could not return to active climbing due to the wishes of the family. Such was the impact on the society that all of us had to explain the events but were not understood easily. It is the lure and attraction of the

mountains that allowed Jagdish and Arun, in particular, to return to active trekking and climbing later. They had continued an active academic interest in mountaineering and perhaps that kept the flame alive in them.

Ang Kami's death had sent shock waves in the media, in climbing circles and, particularly, in the Sherpa community. He had a charisma that had won many friends. His mother was 70 years old and she was inconsolable at the loss of her only unmarried son. Rekha and I had gone to Darjeeling to take part in the final death rituals of Ang Kami, Gnappa Sherpa and Chewang Phinzo.

Even with the traditional free flow of *chang* the gloomy atmosphere did not subside. The Sherpas had lost their prince. After the ceremonies, Ang Kami's mother left for Kalimpong. In the later years she did not come much to Darjeeling. It reminded her of her lost son. Though we did not speak the same language her intense pain always came across. We took care to assist her till she died at the age of 86 years.

Pasang Temba, the brave survivor was a broken man. He had brought up Ang Kami almost as a family member and after his death he hit the bottle. He lost his son later in another mountaineering accident. He passed away soon thereafter.

Thus the tragedy of Bethartoli extended much beyond the avalanche. Its human proportions were as high as a mountain, particularly in Indian society where death in a sport is not accepted easily. If the Hindu and the Buddhist belief of the rebirth is true, these brave mountaineers must be climbing somewhere today. Perhaps it is true, the Sherpa belief, that the mountain gods gather to themselves those they love.