

NORTH SIKKIM, 1976

By HARISH KAPADIA

IT all began on a Sunday morning. Zerksis Boga and I were asking each other, "Where to this year?" Suddenly Sikkim was thrown open to Indian mountaineers. By a coincidence, I was reading a book on Sikkim and that helped us to make up our minds on a long trek to North Sikkim. We trekked to Green Lake (16,190 ft) and crossed four high passes Tangchung La (16,900 ft - 5150 m), Theu La (17,200 ft - 5212 m), Lungnak La (16,520 ft - 5035 m) and Sebu La (17,560 ft - 5852 m), in all covering 240 kilometres. We were two of us, under the aegis of "The Mountaineers", Bombay.

We reached Gangtok, still uncertain about the permits, as there were no precedents on procedures available. Four days of hectic activity of telegrams and telephones to Delhi followed. At last, Mr H. C. Sarin, the President of The Indian Mountaineering Foundation, came to our rescue and we were allowed to proceed. We were the first mountaineers in the region after a closure of 15 years.

Gangtok to Chungthang (1561 m), a 96 km journey, was covered in 12 hours in a crowded bus. Next day, amidst pouring rain, we reached Lachen (2728 m). We arranged for 9 Tibetan porters, with Kondup Lama as a guide-cum-Sirdar. He was middle-aged, but very tough and knew the area like the back of his hand. These Bhotia porters were a great asset. They were sturdy in build and noisy in manner.

At Lachen dak bungalow, going through the Visitors Book was like a glance through mountaineering history. There was mention of all the expeditions to Kangchenjunga and of the pre-war expeditions to Everest. These Everest expeditions passed through from Lachen in March and returned by late August. Sadly, in the return entry, some names were missing of those who had died on the mountains.

Zemu Glacier and Green Lake (16,190 ft - 4984 m)

Four miles ahead of Lachen, at Zema, the route to Zemu glacier bifurcates to the west. On a small bridge, we crossed the Zemu Chhu, which was to be our constant companion from now onwards. Soon, we ran into a difficult route over landslides, for 8 miles, making our progress slow. We were to encounter this kind of terrain almost throughout, as Zemu Chhu has swept its banks during the floods of 1968. By late afternoon, we reached Tallem where the Lhonak Chhu from the north meets Zemu Chhu. We camped on a little clearing as it poured down all night. Next

day, we had the first view of Kangchenjunga (28,208 ft - 8598 m). Even at a distance, it appeared great enough to be majestic in form and bold in outline. We crossed a small bridge to Jedang and climbed up to Shobuk. This route is a walk in paradise. We passed at least twenty different kinds of rhododendrons, varying in colour from white to the deepest red, and in height from trees of 20 ft to scrubs of not more than a foot. We were particularly lucky in that so many varieties were flowering at the same time. After leisurely climbing, we descended to Jakthang at the bank of the river, exactly opposite the valley leading to Kishong La.

Next day, we crossed a small bridge over Thomphyak Chhu, where we met a Lepcha shikari, who had possibly crossed over from Kishong La (15,700 ft - 4785 m). He looked bewildered and seemed like a figure wandered out of an earlier world, where man were closely allied to nature. He disappeared after giving us a long stare. After the bridge, the original route has been washed out by floods and it is boulder-hopping all the way to Yabuk (13,050 ft - 3978 m).

On the 13th, we made a late start with cloudy weather, wind blowing ceaselessly and the terrain getting more rugged. We passed three long moraine fields, looking like deserts, past the Rest Camp (14,990 ft - 4569 m), to camp at about (15,500 ft - 4724 m).

It cleared for a while in the morning. In the front was Siniolchu (22,597 ft - 6888 m), tilting against the sky, lifting its silver spear. There is no other mountain that can equal Siniolchu in beauty and boldness. We understood how it was that Douglas Freshfield, who had seen many mountains on earth, spoke of it as the most beautiful peak in the world and the most superb triumph of mountain architecture. The impression it made on us was indelible. We made a delayed start for Green Lake, which was rather close and which we reached in 8 hours. The Green Lake proper has disappeared after the floods. We camped at 16,190 ft. (4935 m) on open ground.

15 May started with a thick fog and wind. We decided to hold the fort for the day and we literally had to hold on to our tent poles as it turned into a strong blizzard by late afternoon. The mist lifted only next day, revealing to us, for the first time, walls of the great amphitheatre at the head of Zemu glacier. We were face to face with Kangchenjunga, the highest peak in India¹ and the third highest in the world. It rose, 8 miles off, to a height of 28,000 ft above us in a broad line of cliffs of terrific steepness.

After drying our equipment and a quick lunch, we decided to move up 2000 ft above us for better views. This we did in the next 4 hours, trudging in snow and on rock. We were rewarded with a grand panorama of the whole Kangchenjunga divide and distant Chomolhari in Bhutan.

We were down the next day for lunch and divided ourselves in

1. Now that Sikkim has become part of India.—Ed.

two parties. Boga, with a porter, started off towards the Nepal Gap glacier. He could observe the Nepal Gap, the Zemu Gap and the glacier system to the north. I, with another porter, descended to the bed of Zemu glacier and proceeded towards its junction with the Twins glacier. The Zemu glacier has receded almost to the base of Kangchenjunga wall and it was an all-moraine walk with many small green lakes. It is said to pose a big threat to Sikkim, as when it melts or pours heavily it can cause unprecedented havoc through floods.

That evening, we lit a huge camp fire and sat around watching the colours of the sunset. We noticed, more than once, a peculiarity referred to by Sir J. Hooker, the false sunset in the east, where a glow, as strong as that of the sunset appears as a separate source of illumination. We saw a magnificent full moon, with Kangchenjunga radiating the glow. The romantic beauty of the landscape was almost beyond belief.

Tangchang La (16,900 ft - 5151 m)

On the 18th, we moved down to a little below Rest Camp. We were now to follow the high-level trade route of olden days, now absolutely out of use. It follows via Kishong La, Tangchung La, Theu La and Naku La into Tibet. We started climbing steeply towards Tangchung La. The Bhotia porter has, through practice of generations, become so indifferent to the angle of his track, that he prefers a ladder path to any reasonable zigzag, even when heavily laden. Many a time, we lost the path and had to resort to maps, as our guide was also repeating the route after a number of years.

All along the route, we came across what appeared to be cairns marking the route. On closer approach, they proved to be plants, stalks of the giant rhubarbs *Rheum nobile*. The plant measures 45 inches in diameter at the base of the cone and is about the same height. We crossed Yakjuknamteng ground and reached the pass over rocky terrain and strong winds.

The Tangchung La is a broad, but not deep gap, guarded on both sides by rocky eminences. One of the neighbouring crags has a curious resemblance to a large bird. The summit, east of the pass, Tangchung Khang (17,398 ft - 5303 m) could be easily climbed when free of snow and would afford a grand panorama. In the north, was Theu La (17,100 ft - 5212 m) separated from us by a gulf of 3000 feet.

On the other side, was a steep descent in deep snow. We passed three lakes and then the last slopes of thick scrubs of juniper and rhododendrons. We camped at Theulacha, after crossing the river Thomphyak Chhu.

Theu La (17,100 ft - 5212 m)

20 May dawned cloudy and it was snowing till noon. As it cleared a little by late afternoon, we decided to climb up to the pass and camp there. We followed a steep ridge, flanking

a nala and then crossed three long boulder-filled fields to camp 100 ft below the actual pass. We were up and about early next day and climbed up to the pass. A magnificent panorama opened in front of us. On the north-east was Lungnak La (16,250 ft - 5035 m), Khangchengyao (22,603 ft - 6889 m) to the north, Naku La (17,290 ft - 5270 m) leading to Tibet and the proper continuation of the trade route we had been following. To the north-west, was Chorten Niyma (22,729 ft - 6928 m). To the south, the tips of the peak of Zemu shot up over the white shoulders of the intervening ridge of the Tangchung La.

We descended to Langbo to meet our first yaks. We lunched luxuriously on a hillock looking over a spread of wide valley, gravelly and flat. We were in Lhonak. There are no trees, no rhododendrons, no shrubs, except for a few stunted junipers, no turf, only sparse grass, good enough for yaks. The slopes below the snow were brown and yellow, the flats, pale and grey. We crossed the long wind-swept plateau to Teblhe and Muguthang (14,830 ft - 4520 m) after fording the ice-cold Langbo Chhu in knee-deep water. Muguthang is a place of nine winter months and its July snowstorms are proverbial. It is a land of moraine and a monument of diminished glaciers.

Lugnak La (16,520 ft - 5035 m)

From Muguthang, we turned to the east, off the trade route we were following. In two hours of gentle climbing, Charub Chho lake was reached. The angle steepened from here onwards, with soft snow. Two steep climbs led us to a sharp depression in the ridge, which was the pass. Lugnak La was first crossed by White, the political officer in 1895 and again by Dr Kellas in 1910, who pronounced it as too difficult and dangerous for laden porters. On the other side, the slopes were as a rule so steep that, though we often plunged above our knees, gravity helped us to get forward. A long descent led us to the valley floor to Chhoptra bridge ahead to Thangu (12,860 ft - 3920 m), where we had a day's rest.

Sebu La (17,560 ft - 5352 m)

From Thangu, we decided to move north-east to Sebu La, leading into the Lachung valley. The terrain ahead was a huge plain with mud and water, climbing up gently. We camped near the ruins of the Himalayan Club hut, in the company of a yak-herd.

We made an early start on the 25th. The route followed a steep scree slope till we reached the snow-line, deep with fresh snow. For the first time, the sturdy porters started complaining. Boga led off on a small rock wall and fixed ropes to haul up the loads. Looking behind, we could see the whole Kangchenjunga divide. After an hour of trudging on snow, suddenly the worst of Sikkim weather came to our rescue, as clouds started rolling in with strong winds. This consolidated the fresh snow enough to restore some confidence in our porters. Soon we were scrambling up

on all fours. At the top, it was difficult to locate the pass exactly and we were now waiting for a clearance in the weather. After an hour, we hit the correct pass and went down steeply on the other side to Sebu Chho lake. The upper lake, surrounded by the ice-fall of Chombu Peak, caused havoc in 1950, through floods. By late evening, we were comfortably settled at Mome Samdong hot springs (15,170 ft - 4624 m).

In bright sunshine, we walked down to Yumthang, with excellent views of Donkya Ri (20,310 ft - 6190 m) and Paunhari (23,385 ft - 7128 m). Yumthang dak bungalow is the biggest and the best in the region, with hot springs nearby. We walked through the most beautiful countryside to Lachung, where we 'surrendered' to the army hospitality and a lift back to Gangtok via Chungthang. The adventure is now a memory.



Photo : Harish Kapadia

9. Kangchenjunga from Green Lake plain, Zemu glacier. *Article page 181.*

10. Simvu from Zemu glacier. *Article page 181.*

Photo : Harish Kapadia





Photo : Harish Kapadia

11. Siniolchu and Little Siniolchu from Green Lake plain, Zemu glacier. *Article page 181.*