

A WINTER FORAY

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MORNING OF 21 December 1981. Muslim Contractor and myself left Bombay for Chamba in the Himachal Pradesh. In the light of what was to follow it may be noted that we were starting at sea-level and perhaps from the warmest climate in India at this time of the year, 30°C. After changing to buses at Pathankot and a night at Chamba (122 km), we were at Jyura (52 km). A most terrible jeep ride deposited us at Holi (16 km). For this ride two of us were hanging on the rear foot-board on one leg, protecting each other with the other leg. I was staring down the river Ravi while Muslim up towards the cliffs. Under such circumstances all the mountaineering training was most useful. It almost ruined our trip. My sleeping-bag was torn by touching one of the overhanging cliffs. Luckily it was filled with Polarguard. Otherwise Ravi would have been polluted with feathers along with the many wooden logs it carried, and I would have been on my way back. This was on 23 December. In three days we were at 6000 ft and 0°C. Our winter climbing trip began.

Reading about the various winter ascents of high peaks recently, we wanted to try it out ourselves. We planned to move with our carefully selected gear and food of about 60 kg on our own.

Christmas eve 1981 saw us starting with some of the most beautiful forest along the Ravi. The forests literally began where the road ended. To walk on the pine-needles was fun. The autumn colours were magnificent. For the night we settled at a forest rest-house at Nayagram at 6500 ft.

We wanted to enter the Bara Bangal valley to our north. But the local advice was against doing so. A 500 ft wide rocky section is to be crossed. This when filled with water-ice becomes impossible to negotiate. It was easy to imagine this as we had to cross, even on the

first day, a few patches of water-ice. We were cutting steps and were about to put on crampons at this height. So we decided to turn south, towards Dhaula Dhar.

One reluctant porter agreed to carry with us. Again the beautiful forest accompanied us for 4 km, till we climbed and descended 1500 ft each to leave the Ravi and enter Jalsu valley. We passed a little below Surehi and camped at Chhani (8 km). A completely frozen waterfall presented a unique sight.

26th dawned cloudy and chilly. A steady climb brought us to Yada, 8500 ft. Our porter refused to move further, pointing to the sky, and even advised us to return. All along the way, villagers and officials alike advised us against proceeding. Such was the scare of winter for them. In the circumstances we decided to stay at the forest hut at Yada and declared that as our base camp. We were totally alone in the valley soon. The temperature dropped to -8°C .

On the 27th we decided on some climbing activity. We left at 8.30 a.m. and followed a ridge above us. Steadily we climbed up, at first through forest and then on snow. The snow was powdery and we sank up to our knees almost regularly and sometimes up to our waist. But this was totally 'dry' snow. For the next few days such snow conditions were constantly experienced. At last we emerged on the broad summit ridge and reached a cairn at c. 13,500 ft. We were on the top of Yada peak. We plodded back, falling regularly, to our B.C. at 5.30 p.m. In 9 hours we had climbed and descended 10,000 ft.

On 28th we followed the route to Jalsu pass to ferry luggage to our next camp at 10,000 ft. A very tiring affair on snow and long patches of water-ice in nullahs. We occupied this camp the next day. Wintery conditions were extreme and we recorded -17°C . This northern part of Dhaula Dhar does not receive direct sunlight for 2-3 months during this period of the year. Coupled with some bad weather and breeze it made things most unpleasant for us. But we noticed that as long as we kept ourselves hydrated with lots of hot soup and tea and filled with carbohydrates things remained manageable. It was never possible to drink cold water, even when available.

On 30th we could make our earliest start, at 8 a.m. With some efforts we reached the Jalsu pass at 11,000 ft in 3 hours. Now we were on the main crest of Dhaula Dhar. The route on the south dropped steeply to Baijnath and the Punjab plains. It had no snow. We followed a long ridge to the west. A long snow plod, some steep sections and we were on Jalsu peak, 14,100 ft. The view of Mani Mahesh range was excellent. For the return we followed a steep ridge to the north, rolling in snow, to reach the camp.

With weather threatening to break any time, we decided to withdraw. We spent the new year eve amidst forest at Chhani and sat talking round the fire. The dawn of 1982 was ushered in with clear skies and the two of us under lofty pine trees. In the next 4 days we were back to Chamba and Dharamsala. The weather broke immediately thereafter to give us a taste of what it could really mean. But

we were well entrenched with excellent Tibetan food and the memories of our winter climbs under our belt.

Summary: A two-man expedition in 1981-82 winter to Dhaula Dhar: climbed Yada, c. 13,500 ft and Jalsu 14,100 ft.

Members: Harish Kapadia and Muslim Contractor.
(Sponsored by 'The Mountaineers', Bombay)