

THE DARMA VALLEY EXPEDITION  
May - June, 1982

REPORT

Sponsored by "THE MOUNTAINEERS," BOMBAY.

The Expedition trekked to the upper Lassar, Darma, Kuthi and Kali river valleys in the eastern Kumaon Himalaya. The party climbed a 14,200 ft. peak in Panchachuli area, reached within 2000 ft. of Ralam Pass (18,470 ft), crossed Gangachal Dhura (16,570 ft) and Shin La (18,030 ft) and visited Anchri Tal (lake) (12,000 ft) and Jolingkong Lakes (15,200 ft).

LOCATION: The area lies in the Pithoragadh district of Uttar Pradesh. To the west lies Ralam/Milam valleys, to the southeast lies Nepal and to the north lies Tibet. The Upper Darma river valley is divided in two at Tidang, Lassar and Darma. It meets Kali river at Tawaghat, the starting point of the trek.

PEOPLE-HISTORY: The valleys are inhabited by people of Indian-Tibetan mixed origin and are called Bhotias. The upper Kuthi-Kali valley is known as Byas while the lower as Chaudas. All the valleys have high passes leading to Tibet (Gyanima-mandi, Manasarovar, Taklakot) which were used for trade. Some of the earliest travellers were geologists A.Heim and A. Gansser in 1936 ("Throne of Gods"). The Scottish Himalayan Expedition 1950 (W.H.Murrey) visited Darma. The other expeditions visited the Panchachuli group in the Darma valley. The upper Darma valley was also visited by a party led by K.Snelson in 1950 (Himalayan Journal Vol. XVII). In the last three decades no mountaineers are reported to have visited the upper valleys.

The Jolingkong Lake is locally worshiped as 'Manasarovar' and a nearby peak of 20,740 ft is known as "Baba Kailash". It resembles remarkably to the real Tibetan Kailash.

THE TREK: The party left Bombay on 9 May 1982. Changing trains at Mathura reached Kathgodam and reached Almora. After a day of rest at Khali Estate of Shri N.B.Parekh, Local Hon.Secretary, The Himalayan Club, they reached Dharchula and the road-head at Tawaghat (3700 ft). The trek started on 15 May with 8 porters. In 3 days the party trekked via Nyu (16 km), Sela (17 km) to Son-Duktu (19 km). The party reached the base of Panchachuli group at the junction of Sona-Meola glaciers (6 km) on 18th.

5 days were spent here to practice various snow and ice climbing techniques. Lower Sona glacier was reached. A 14,200 ft. ('Panchchuli Panorama Peak') was climbed on 22 May, lying on the ridge falling from Panchachuli V and to the South of the camp.

Returning to Son-Duktu, the party proceeded north to Sipu village (16 km) in the Lassar valley. Ahead the party turned west on the Nipchungkang glacier and after two camps reached at the foot of Ralam Pass (19 km), On the night of 27th heavy snow made the climb to the pass too dangerous for next few days. To keep the future schedule the party was obliged to retreat.

Reaching the Lassar valley again they proceeded further north to camp at Kharsa. The valley was full of snow and totally unhabited. Going was extremely difficult along the river(10 km) with difficulty Jhutan and Damolia glaciers were crossed to camp little before Nassa-14,000 ft.(10 km). On the return a night was spent at Anchri Tal (lake) (12,000 ft). It was in the most enchanting and beautiful surroundings.

On 3 June camp was shifted to the upper Gangachal camping ground. On the 4th they started early and after a 7 hour climb reached the pass. A most magnificent panorama unfolded on all the sides, covering a large area.

The descent to the Darma valley was over deep soft snow and very tiring affair. We camped near Dawe (14,400 ft) (10 km) and stayed next day confined to the tents due to a storm. Next day the party crossed Darma river and camped at Piungang (14,000 ft - 8 km). Porters brought up fresh supplies from our dump left at Go village.

On 8th the party reached Bidang and after lunch climbed up Bidang-nala. As weather was cloudy next day the camp was shifted by up by 700 ft at the base of the gully leading to Shin La. 10th June was clear. The climb to the pass was very tricky and risky. Keeping away from the huge wall which discharged loose stones the route went up the adjoining slopes. It was difficult to keep to the track and often necessary to resort to rock-climbing. The wall was topped by a snowfield. After labours of 8 hours the party reached the pass (18,030 ft). The view on both sides was magnificent and included Nanda Devi, Panchachulis and Sangthang. The descent again was over deep loose snow and very tiring. After reaching the valley the party climbed up 700 ft to camp near Jolingkong lake 15,200 ft (10 km), a most beautiful site.

After a day of rest, on 12th June the return march started. The party reached a Indo-Tibet Border Police Post. Thinking that Shin La is not crossable yet the jawans mistook them for Chinese and almost fired a machine guns ! After everything was resolved the party trekked down over snow to Kuthi -12,330 ft (14 km) and to Nahal (10,000 ft) (11 km). Next day passing Gunji (7 km), where Kuthi river Kali, passed Garbyang (9 km) to camp at Lamari (11 km). After many ups and down ('Curse of Kali') to Jipti (16 km), Sirkha (15 km), Narayan Ashram (4 km) and Tawaghat (19 km) was reached on the 17 June. The party returned to Bombay on 27 June.

ECOLOGY-WEATHER: Due to a late winter and early monsoon this year, lot of bad weather was experienced. All the valleys were full with snow and the snow conditions were rather bad. The locals and army had also not moved up the valleys. The monsoon arrived by about 15 June.

The Lassar valley had plenty of wood but well used by local shepherds. If not checked it will disappear in few years. The upper Darma valley has no wood left at all due to the continuous presence of the defence forces. In the Kuthi valley excellent forest exists on the true right bank as there is no track there ! The Kali valley is quite denuded of forests due to heavy felling. The opposite bank, which is Nepalese, contain excellent forest. Many varieties of birds and flowers were sighted.

SUMMARY: A 300 km trek, spread over 34 days covering 3 valleys, 3 passes and 2 lakes of Darma, Lassar, Kuthi and Kali river valleys of eastern Kumaon. Total ascent and descent of about 85,000 ft on foot. From 9 May to 27 June 1982.

MEMBERS: Harish Kapadia (leader), Jagdish Nanavati, Dr. Vasant Desai, Dhiren Toolsidass and M.H. Contractor.

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Bombay  
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