

AROUND KAILASH IN FOURTEEN DAYS

HARISH KAPADIA

IN THE HINDU MYTHOLOGY, Kailash is the legendary home of Shiva. And perhaps because of that many ranges have peaks named Kailash. Kailash (20,020 ft) above Manasarovar in Tibet is the holiest, believed to have been climbed by the Chinese. For those who could not make the arduous pilgrimage to Tibet there is 'Baba Kailash' (20,740 ft) near the Tibetan border between Darma and Kuthi valleys. In Garhwal (Gangotri) we have Sri Kailash (22,742 ft), the easiest of Shiva's abodes. It was first climbed by the Austrian team in 1938. More to the west is Kinnaur Kailash (21,240 ft) above Kalpa, a fearsomely difficult peak climbed by an Indian Army team in 1974. Last comes Kailash (18,556 ft) in Chamba district of Himachal Pradesh. It is also called Mani Mahesh Kailash after the holy lake to its west. This is perhaps the most difficult of all the abodes. Changing houses must be difficult, even for Shiva!

In the winter of 1983 we decided to invite ourselves to this last home of Shiva. A traditional route circuits the mountain and it is usually only possible to do so during September. It is an 80 km *parikrama* over a high pass of 16,200 ft. It was also our aim to climb the peak. Kailash was reported climbed by a large Indo-Japanese Ladies Expedition in 1968.¹ Upon studying their article

1. See Himalayan Mountaineering Institute (Darjeeling) Journal, 1968, Vol. 4, No. 2, p. 54.

and photographs the peak seemed an easy climb, even in winter. However, we were to learn that they were uninvited guests!

We prepared for the trip in earnest, having not much experience of winter. Ultimately we found that it was best to follow the early travellers. 'In our outfit we were much more fortunate. We had learnt from experience that the secret of true comfort lies in the elimination of the unessential rather than in the collection of masses of material. I hasten to add that our standard of food and warmth was high!'²

On 3 December 1983 we were at Chamba. It was cold, deserted and wore an autumn look. A local *panwala* enlightened us about various legends of Kailash.

'The mountain shakes when someone tries to climb it. The *jatra* takes place in early September and on the appointed date at 4 a.m. there is a sudden flow of water in the lake and everyone jumps in to take a bath.'

The area abounded with Kailash legends. Everything bore relation to Shiva — there were pictures, stories and names.

On 4th we left for Brahmour. Bus left us at Khadamukh where a bridge is incomplete for last two decades!

'The local M.P. is always from the opposition, and hence our bridge is not completed.' 'Doesn't Shiva do something about it?'

'He is the God of destruction and not construction! Anyway Shiva had elected a representative of the ruling party this election and the bridge will be hopefully completed in few years.'

At Lahal we had the first and the only view of Kailash (west face). It looked frightening, isolated and massive. Brahmour was cold and the famous Kailash temple complex looked deserted. We made final preparations, loaded our 35 kg rucksacks and started for Hadsar (13 km) on the jeepable track, Autumn was in full glory and reaching Kugti (13 km) on 6th was a pleasure beyond words and pain beyond complaining due to the heavy loads and cold. We turned south here and followed Bhujla nala for two days to establish ourselves at the junction of Nikora and Kailash nala. On 9th, Muslim and Kartik moved along the valley to reconnoitre our route. Dhiren and I climbed up an adjoining mountain ridge to observe Kailash. In the southwest a shapely snow-peak appeared and we recognized it from the pictures from the ladies team which we were carrying. This was the peak between Khidja Galu and Chobu pass, and climbed by the ladies in 1968. To its north (difference of 15° from that snowy peak, to be precise) towered a huge monolith of rock and ice. It had most steep gradient and complicated rock-pinnacles. No route appeared feasible on that. Dhiren lost a compass-bearing-reading bet and we firmly established that the stupendous monolith was the true Kailash peak. It was certain that the

2. 'A Chukkar in Himalaya', by Captain H. L. Wyndham H.J. Vol. VIII, p. 119.

ladies could not have climbed this in one day (8 hrs) from the camp at 14,750 ft at its base. The photographs corroborated the identification. *Panwala* was right. He had challenged; 'No one can climb Kailash. If the ladies had climbed it in 1968 we would have rejected Shiva as God! And if you climb it now in the cold I'll treat you to a free *paan*!'

In the evening Muslim confirmed our observation; 'The true Kailash is so steep from the higher camp that my neck is sprained looking up to it.'

We moved up in two camps to 14,200 ft. The cold increased and the weather deteriorated. We intended to climb the 'Ladies Peak' which is about 17,000 ft and then complete the *parikrama*. On 13th Dhiren and I opened route till Chobu pass, c. 16,200 ft. It was a steep route over scree and the last traverse under overhanging rocks scaring away all but the staunch devotees. The view to north revealed a number of shapely peaks on Lahul-Chamba divide. There are famous passes. This area can be a trekkers' and climbers' paradise.

We gathered at the upper camp, and from that evening we were tent-bound for the next 3 days. A violent snow-storm engulfed us. Those were miserably cold, long three days. Temperature dropped to -25°C at times.

At night it was fearfully cold. In spite of wearing an undergarment, woollen shirt, pullover and being rolled into a sleeping-bag, we were frozen. We joked with each other to forget the cold.

'I have read somewhere that the more clothes one wears the colder one feels.'

'This is no time to go stripping.'

'How does Shiva stay atop just in a loin-cloth?'

To us, in one of these moments of insane optimism which no amount of cold experience was capable of shattering, it seemed that we might, with a little luck, still complete at least the *parikrama*.

17th was clear and looking at the thermometer Dhiren shouted to the other tent.

'It is quite *warm* today. Temperature has risen to -12°C .'

Muslim's reply was unprintable! We had no time to wait. With hard labour we were at the pass in 7 hours. It was most fatiguing on the soft snow. On the other side a semi-circular basin plastered with fresh snow covered the route down. On the southeast we could see the snowy peak climbed by the ladies. It was 800 ft higher and a kilometer traverse led to it. Half an hour later I led the descent. After a distance of 80 ft a soft but unmistakable noise and the full snow-slope under me in the semi-circular basin had avalanched. I was luckily riding on the top of it. It generated speed, tossed me around and stopped after 600 ft, burying me a little. I scrambled out, unhurt, and looked up the path of the avalanche for signs of my companions. I could see no one and had the scare of my

life. Where do I look for them under such vast debris? There was a shout from above — they were above the line that had cracked! They glissaded down the avalanche path and enjoyed the fruits of my involuntary labour. We plodded till late and camped at 15,000 ft thoroughly exhausted.

Snow-plod continued on 18th. In 3 hrs we were at the holy Mani-Mahesh lake at 13,680 ft. Cold biting wind pushed us steeply down. The track was well-made for the pilgrims. But few ice-runnels invaded the track and it was complicated to overcome it on watery-ice. We camped on the track at Dancho. Next morning Dhiren slipped on an ice-runnel and was carried down a hundred feet in a flash. Only the rucksack saved him from serious injuries.

We trekked down steeply and at last on 19th evening we were at Hadsar where a jeep picked us for night at Brahmour.

We were back at Chamba.

'You could not have done the *parikrama* in this cold.' *Panwala* did not believe us. Kartik threateningly pointed to his cold tips and toes as proofs.

'All right, even though you could not reach the abode, have a free *paan*.'

We were happy to be warm and well-fed. Now we ate at Kailash dhaba, travelled by Kailash express, saw a movie at Kailash theatre and Muslim even gave admiring glances to damsel Kailash. We could afford to, after those cold days around the real Kailash!

Team: Harish Kapadia (leader), Muslim Contractor, Dhiren Toolsidas and Kartik Bhagat.

Sponsored by: The Mountaineers, Bombay.

Note: For 15 years it was recorded that Mani Mahesh Kailash was climbed by the Indo-Japanese Ladies Expedition in 1968. The expedition was sponsored by the Indian Mountaineering Foundation, New Delhi and was led by Ms Nandini Patel (now Pandya) and Ms Eiko Miyazaki. In the account in H.M.I. Journal Vol. 4, No. 2, p. 54 an article (without pictures) informed about the 'first-ascent' on 13 May 1968. The team claimed to have climbed the last 3800 ft from a camp at 14,750 ft to the summit in 8 hrs. On that single day all lady members and Sherpas reached the summit. After studying their photos of the summit ridge, timings and having observed the area first-hand we are certain that the above team climbed adjoining peak of c. 17,000 ft only. The peak of Kailash remained unclimbed towering 1500 ft north of Chobu pass. Didn't they see it?

All the persons we met on the trip; porters, villagers, local mountaineering instructors at Brahmour and Dharamsala and travellers, each of them remembered the expedition and refuted the

ladies' climb. They could all recall the expedition, being the only attempt on their holy peak and quoted various sources of references for basing their denial. The inviolate Kailash will yield to a superb rock-climber one day.

Photos 32 to 35



32. The west face of Kailash from Mani Mahesh lake.

Note 13

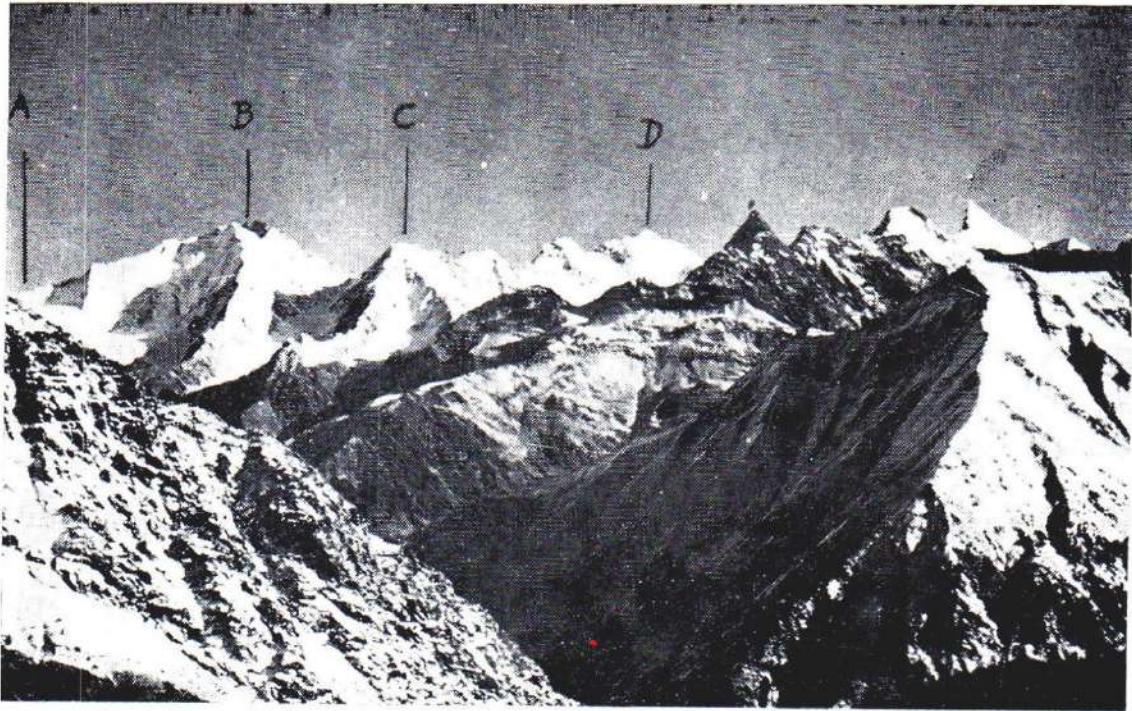
Photo : Dhiren Toolsidas



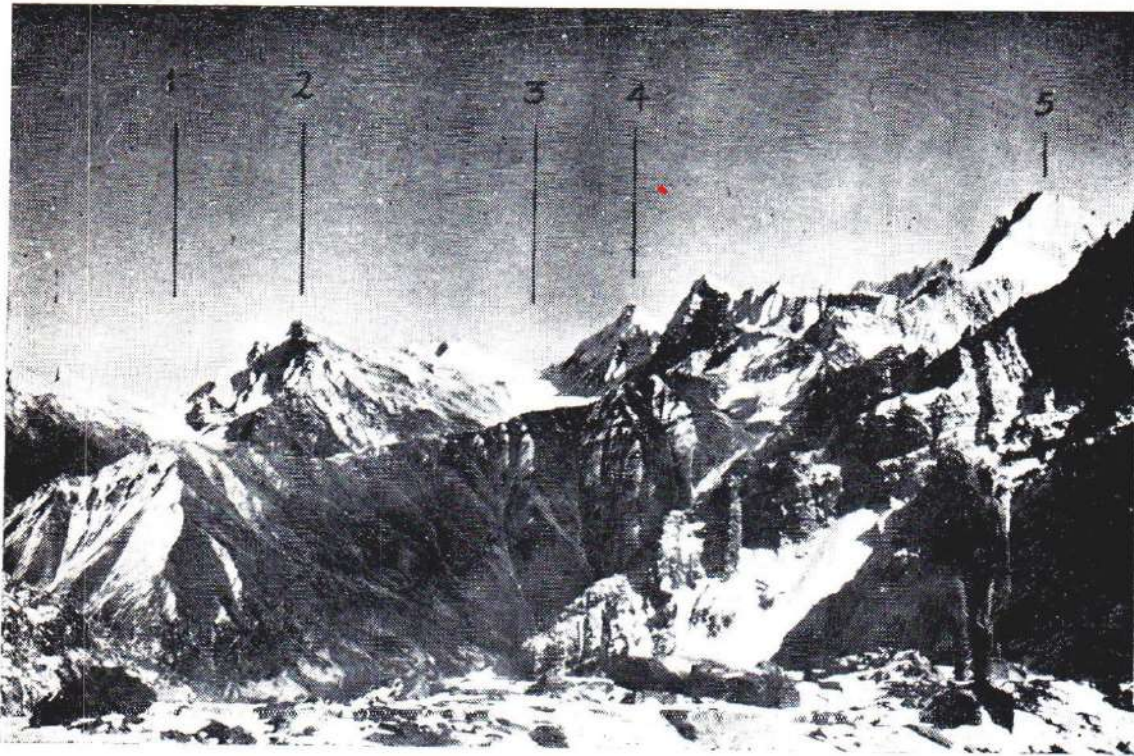
33. The east face of (Mani Mahesh) Kailash, 18,556 ft from Camp i.
The main peak is on left and the left hand skyline south
ridge leads to Chobu pass.

Note 13

Photo: Dhiren Toolsidas



34. View from Camp 2 east of Kailash looking north. A = Chobia pass 16,441 ft. B = Pt. 20,040 ft (Darbala Dhar). C = Pt. 18,745 ft (Deosah Dhar). D = Pt. 18,511 ft (Deosah Dhar).
Note 13 *Photo: Harish Kapadia*



35. View northeast on way to Chobu pass. 1 = Kugti pass, 16,536 ft. 2 = Pt. 17,701 ft (Dodans Dhar). 3 = Tal glacier. 4 = Pt. 18,707 ft (Dhog Dhar). 5 = Nikora, 17,769 ft.
Note 13 *Photo: Harish Kapadia*

