
NAGADHIRAJ HIMALAYA

*A Personal Review of Mountaineering in the Indian
Himalayan Range*

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In the northern direction there is a noble souled mountain called the Himalaya. He is *Nagadhiraj*, the Lord of all mountains, with his two extending arms fathoming the eastern and western oceans. He stands unsurpassed as the measuring rod of the earth.

— Kalidas in *Kumarsambhava*

INDIANS HAVE ALWAYS LOOKED UP to the Himalaya as the abode of snow, which this name literally means. Like in the above quote by the famous Indian bard, since time immemorial the Himalayan range has been called the jewel of the world. There are Hindu shrines located here and they are visited by many. In the Hindu scriptures, spiritual tranquillity is always associated with these snowy mountains. The Indian Guru, Adi Shanrachaya, is recorded to have crossed Mana Pass from Badrinath to Guge district in Tibet in A.D. 800.¹ The Jesuit fathers from Europe have left a long record of crossing the Mana Pass into Tibet. Father Antonio de Andrade and Brother Manuel Marques crossed this pass to Guge in Tsaparang province in Tibet in 1624.

Many local villagers crossed the range for trade. But the exploration and climbing as we know today started with the arrival of the British. It was out of the necessities of the 'Great Game' in the Karakoram that explorers were first sent into the range. Then came the soldiers, the most famous being the Francis Younghusband expedition across Sikkim to reach Lhasa. They were followed by the surveyors as the Survey of India under the British officers systematically drew maps of each area and this resulted in the discovery of the highest peak in the world — Everest. Finally came the climbers. All the pre-war Everest expeditions, attempting the peak from the north, passed through Sikkim and climbed several peaks.

1. This was one of the earliest Himalayan travel recorded in the Indian range.

There are no 'Everests' to be climbed in the Indian Himalaya, for the only 8000er in India is Kangchenjunga. But if you are interested in the smaller peaks, of course many above 7000 m, out of the ordinary, difficult routes, historical perspectives and many unexplored valleys then the Indian Himalaya will be attractive. This article covers the brief (briefest!) history of Mountaineering in the Indian Himalayan range in last 100 years.²

The Range

The Himalayan chain is spread across the Asian continent, going southeast to northwest. Generally, the Himalaya, Karakoram, and the Hindu Kush are talked about as part of one chain. When we talk of the 'Indian Himalaya' we are talking of that part of the Himalayan chain which falls within Indian territory. Starting from the east, the Indian Himalaya originate from a knot between Burma-China and India, from where the Brahmaputra river enters Arunachal Pradesh. The chain continues till the borders of Bhutan. Beyond that we have Sikkim, which is a full-fledged state of India since 1974. It has many peaks, including the world's third highest peak, Kangchenjunga. The Himalayan ranges east of this are in the Nepalese area till we reach the borders of Kumaun and Garhwal. From here, without a break, the Indian Himalayan chain continues — Kinnaur, Spiti, Ladakh and lastly East Karakoram. The areas further west are controlled by Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The Early Years

Two officers were taking a stroll on the Mall below the Jakhoo hill in Shimla. From their casual talk, The Himalayan Club was formed in 1928 to help the visiting British mountaineers. Its main role was to assist mountaineering expeditions coming to climb in India.³ This was the beginning of the influx of more explorers and climbers. Some of the better-known early expeditions to this range were of Hugh Ruttledge, which explored Kumaun. In 1905 and 1907, Arnold Mumm and Charles Bruce spent five months in Garhwal and climbed several peaks. Trisul, 7120 m was climbed in 1907 by Dr Longstaff and it remained the highest climbed peak in the world for several years. Frank Smythe reached the summit of Kamet (7756 m) in 1931 to break the record. This was soon overtaken by the climb of Nanda Devi (7816 m) in 1936.

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2. This article is based on 40 years of personal mountaineering experiences of the author in the Indian Himalaya and it is by no way a definitive historical record.
 3. Today, after 72 years, the Himalayan Club is active and has its offices in Bombay and Hon. Secretaries at various places in the world.

After the war and Indian independence in 1947, there were serious doubts whether the sport would continue to flourish. Some of the people who 'stayed on', like Jack Gibson and John Martyn, enthused Indians into climbing and the sport continued. One of their colleagues, Gurdial Singh climbed Trisul in 1951, the first peak to be climbed by an Indian on an Indian expedition. In 1953, Everest was climbed and one of the summitters, Tensing was an Indian. To celebrate this event, a mountaineering institute was established in Darjeeling which has trained many Indians. Now at least three such institutes operate to full capacity and this has contributed to the growth of the sport. In 1958, the Indian Mountaineering Foundation was born and was authorised by the government to deal with the sport. With its base of Government bureaucrats and other officers, it set up procedures and for 23 years was managed by H. C. Sarin. He was responsible for the growth that Indian mountaineering achieved during these years. Today, a fine building and strong foundations of the IMF stand as testimony to his efforts.

Kumaun

If I were asked to name one Indian peak which I like the most — I would name Nanda Devi. I have seen it from almost all directions and at close quarters. In fact, it is the centre-piece of the Indian Himalaya. The exploration of routes to its base by Eric Shipton and Bill Tilman in 1934, its ascent in 1936, and all other subsequent expeditions are part of mountaineering history. They left a permanent mark on history.⁴ To its east lies the Milam glacier. The Poles, who climbed in this valley in 1939, made the first ascent of Nanda Devi East but two of them were unfortunately killed later whilst climbing Tirsuli peak. Further east in Kumaun stands the 'Mountain of Long Life' — Chiring We, on the Kalabaland glacier. My team from Bombay made the first ascent of Chiring We in 1979 and it has not been climbed since. There are several peaks on the Kalabaland glacier which are attractive. A special mention must be made of unclimbed Suitilla, which could be called the 'Changabang of Kumaun'.

To the west of Nanda Devi, on the outer rim of its Sanctuary, stand the Bethartoli Himal peaks. In 1970, I climbed the South peak but we lost four climbers on the main peak in an avalanche. One of them was Ang

4. In a novel experiment at a recent Indian Mountaineers Millennium Meet all the members were asked to vote to select the - 'Indian Himalaya Millennium Person' - the person who has contributed most to progress of mountaineering in the Indian Himalaya in the last 100 years. The list included several leading mountaineers, explorers, administrators and others. Happily, the person voted to this coveted honour was: Eric Shipton (1907 - 1977)

Kami, a charming personality from Darjeeling.⁵ Bill Murray had tried this main peak first, in 1950. Finally, it was climbed by the Italians, after our attempt. Nearby stands Trisul, the 'Longstaff Mountain'. In 1907, Longstaff had climbed it speedily and it remained a 'height record' for a long time. To my mind, it was when Gurdial Singh climbed Trisul in 1951, that the age of mountaineering for the Indians began.

The inner Sanctuary was closed to expeditions whilst some nuclear device was being carried to be placed on the summit of the goddess. Once that period was over the first expeditions entered the abode in 1974. Chris Bonington and his Indo-British team climbed Changabang, the northernmost peak of the inner Sanctuary. It was an extraordinary achievement by any standards. The southernmost peak of the inner Sanctuary, Devtoli, was climbed by my team within a few days of the above climb. Whilst returning from the summit, I fell in a crevasse and was carried on a makeshift stretcher or piggyback for 13 days to be finally evacuated by a helicopter. As I wrote then — looking at the peak from air — 'Devtoli, the honours are even'!

In 1992, the honours went to two brave Indian Airforce helicopter pilots as they rescued injured Stephen Venables from the higher slopes of Panch Chuli V. With snow slopes inches away from the helicopter blades they landed one ski of the chopper and lifted Venables to safety. This Indian-British team had climbed Panch Chuli II and made the first ascent of Peak V when the tragedy had struck Venables. A loose piton made him tumble hundreds of feet injuring knee and ankle, till the spirited historic rescue saved his life.

Sikkim

After two years on crutches, to recover from the injury suffered on Devtoli, I was on my way to north Sikkim. Sikkim became an Indian State in 1976 and we were amongst the early trekkers allowed there. On our visit to the Green Lake, Zerksis Boga and I went across high passes to the Lhonak valley. Freshfield had written that the July snowstorms here are 'proverbial'. We were spared a sample. Once, as we neared Thangu, Boga suddenly sat down near a bridge. The slope before us was covered with yellow rhododendrons in bloom. Such are the pleasures of Sikkim. I took one photo when he firmly stopped me: 'No more photos please. This loveliness must belong only to memories, Harish', he said.

While trekking in Sikkim, I was often reminded of the history of this region. Pre-war expeditions attempting Everest from the northern approaches passed through Sikkim and thus many famous names were registered in the Rest House log-books. Calcutta was the headquarters of

5. This accident led to a controversy in the Indian climbing circles.

the British Raj so the approach to Sikkim was easy and quick. Cooke, Hunt, and Kellas had done some excellent climbing here. The Himalayan Club built a hut at the foot of the Sela pass. That allowed trekkers to go across from Lachen to Lachung valleys without carrying a tent or much food. When I visited the hut, it was in ruins, but I could imagine the echoes of memsahibs ordering khansamas to fetch tea!

Kangchenjunga is the prime attraction of Sikkim Himalaya. Paul Bauer and his German team repeatedly attempted it but were stopped by the northeast spur, which they could not cross. Finally it was in 1977 that an Indian army team crossed that spur to reach the summit from this side. Kangchenjunga rises steeply from the Zemu glacier — too steeply even for the setting sun to be visible from late-afternoon. Doug Freshfield, who was here in 1899, wrote about an ‘Eastern sunset’, which we witnessed years later. The steep rise of Kangchenjunga blocks the western horizon and the sun disappears behind it. Thus, early in the afternoon, dark shadows gather over the glacier. The east, upto Bhutan, remains brightly lit for a long time with its changing colours, creating a unique illusion.

Assam Himalaya

Further east, the thickly wooded valleys of Arunachal Pradesh have not been much explored. The only areas which are visited often are in the Tawang valley, famous for its monastery. Tilman visited the area in 1939 and wrote of his experiences in ‘Assam Himalaya Unvisited’. In 1913, F. M. Bailey and H. T. Morshead had made an attempt to reach the base of Gorichen. The route was named as the ‘Bailey Trail’. In 1962, the Chinese came down this trail and the ensuing war put this area out of bounds for civilians. The army has constructed ‘ALGs’ (Advance Landing Grounds) to guard the area, avoiding the overgrown valleys. In recent years, the peak of Gorichen has been climbed by different routes. Routes to Kangto and Nyegi Kangsang have also been explored. But still a lot remains to be seen and done here.

In Arunachal Pradesh, the expedition to Nyegi Kangsang in 1995 became mired in controversy. It was an expedition led by Col. M. P. Yadav and sponsored by the IMF. This peak is on the border of unknown Arunachal Pradesh and Tibet. The team crossed into Tibet and the summiteers reached a point about 600 m lower than the real summit. Faced with evidence and studies, the leader and summiteers had to admit that this was the case. Dr. M. S. Gill the President of IMF, who stood for the truth of climbs during his tenure, did everything to correct records.⁶ But then this was the second most controversial affair in the last Millennium in which I was involved.

6. Dr. M. S. Gill is now the President of the Himalayan Club.

Controversies

Every range has its share of controversies. Indian climbers have had more than their share perhaps. I must record the other 'jewel' before Nyegi Kansang.

The claim of the ascent of Nilkanth in 1961 by a team led by Col. N. Kumar is one of the most infamous episodes. This expedition had no prespective of this peak and its summit ridge which they claimed to be a 'gentle trudge'. A 'first ascent' was claimed on 13 June. When confronted with substantial evidence by J. C. Nanavati, President Emeritus of the Himalayan Club, the bureaucracy moved to defend itself. Under political pressure, the then President of the IMF, H. C. Sarin, remained adamant and did not accept the findings. In fact, even the *Himalayan Journal*, rather curiously, did not record the correction until Soli Mehta and myself were editors late in the Seventies. For the past four decades, the world has accepted the fact of the non-ascent while officially it remains otherwise.

It must be noted that in both the above infamous cases and many other such cases, there was enough internal expertise and interest available in India itself to set the house in order.

Garhwal

Back to the central Indian Himalaya. The Gangotri glacier is one valley where a lot of trekking and climbing has been done. Satopanth, Chaukhamba, Sudarshan Parvat, Shivling and Thalay Sagar are just a few of the peaks that are the pride of this area. The mountaineering history of the area can fill up an entire volume. Here I must mention a story. A group of four sadhus, barely clad and with sparse food, crossed the Kalindi Khal to go from the shrine of Gangotri to Badrinath. At the same time, André Roch, the famous Swiss mountaineer was climbing several peaks in the area. He met the party, was impressed by this feat and presented an altimeter to them. This instrument was passed on, like a baton, to successive generations of Indian mountaineers with the condition that when one stops climbing it must be passed to the next active mountaineer. It has reached me after a long journey.

Another landmark in Garhwal is Kamet which stands tall over the Saraswati valley. It was from this valley that early travellers like the Hindu guru, Shankracharya, and the Spanish priest, Father Andrade, crossed to Tibet over the Mana pass. The peak of Kamet was attempted several times and finally, in 1931, Frank Smythe and Eric Shipton reached the summit along with some others. R. L. Holdsworth, who was with them, smoked a pipe on the summit, which I believe still remains a height record for smokers. (— unless someone has had that pleasure on Everest!).

Moving towards north Garhwal, first comes the Jadh Ganga valley, which was surveyed by J. B. Auden. I visited the valley in 1990 and we climbed Trimukhi Parvat East, a shapely peak. Monesh, my young companion, wanted to catch a leopard-cub and keep him warm in his sleeping bag — like Auden had done. I was worried that the mother wouldn't like that — this was their territory, Valley of Snow Leopards. Luckily wiser counsels prevailed.

Western Garhwal can be called 'Gibson territory' — as a testimony to his training of young Indian mountaineers. Here on the slopes of Kalanag and Swargarohini, Indians learned the sport of climbing. More importantly they also learnt about the flowers of Har-ki-Dun, the birds in the Tons valley and the culture of Garhwal. Gibson was a firm believer in small and friendly expeditions and I wish we Indians had remained firm followers of his philosophy.

Kinnaur

The Himalayan range, onwards from Garhwal, takes a northwesterly turn. It enters what is loosely called the western Himalaya. Immediately to the north are the valleys of Kinnaur. This is where Rudyard Kipling sent his agent-boy *Kim*, in the book of the same title. Travelling on the Hindustan-Tibet road, now motorable, he exclaimed, 'this is no place for man'. The bungalow at Kalpa was a favourite haunt of Lord Dalhousie. He drew plans for the Indian Railways sitting in front of Jorkanden peak under the pines. A most unlikely place to think of when you sit in an express train in Bombay!

Amongst mountaineers, Marco Pallis comes to mind when one mentions Kinnaur. He climbed Leo Pargial in 1933 and wrote a wonderful book, *Peaks and Lamas*. Several peaks here have attracted mountaineers — Jorkanden, Gang Chua and Rangrik Rang — the highest of the Racho group. It was on the last peak that Chris Bonington celebrated his sixtieth birthday. The Indian-British expedition was led by Chris and me. The peak was climbed in style with every one enjoying the effort. We played cricket at base camp. Needless to say, we Indians defeated the English team at their game — for we had the porters fielding for us!

Spiti

To its north are the barren valleys of Spiti or the trans-Himalayan region. In 1983 and 1987, we explored the Lingti valley in eastern Spiti, one of the largest unvisited valleys at the time. Though several peaks were climbed by us, the elusive Gya could only be photographed.

Gya soon became a prized objective and built an aura around it towards end of this Millennium. Attempted from the Lingti valley and from Chumar

in the north, soon its North peak and Gyasumpa (third peak) were climbed. But the main peak suffered wrong claims and defied mountaineers. Finally, a team from the Indian Mountaineering Foundation ascended it in 1999, and behold, found a piton and a flag on the summit! Despite poor reporting and poor photographs, the army climbers did reach the summit in 1998. Thus Gya was climbed twice over. But not without a price. A Bombay climber, trying to be 'first' had died on the lower peak around the same time. With different routes still unclimbed Gya, is set to test climbers in the next Millennium too.

Spiti was brought to the knowledge of mountaineers by Jimmy Roberts and later by two expeditions of Sir Peter Holmes, in 1955 and 1956, to the western valleys of Ratang and Pin. It will give you an idea how remote these valleys are that the next persons to go to these valleys were Kaivan and me in 1993.

Spiti is generally spoken of in the same breath as Lahaul, for administratively they are linked. They have a common district headquarters at Kyelong in Lahaul. Lahaul is on the western side of Kunzum La. Its centrepiece is the Chandrabhaga region with several peaks above 6000 m and large valleys which are a climber's paradise. Trekkers visit Chandrata often and now the Manali-Leh highway passes through Lahaul. It is a popular jeep-safari route. Western Lahaul has some interesting peaks like Mulkila and Phabrang before the range merges with Pir Panjal.

The Chandrabhaga flows into the Kishtwar and is thence called the Chenab. Kishtwar could have been India's answer to the Alps, though the peaks here are much higher than of that famous range. Unfortunately, for a decade now, the region, like the other valleys of Kashmir, is in political turmoil and mountaineers are advised not to visit it.

Kullu

To the south of Rohtang lies Kullu valley, the most accessible of the Himalayan valleys. Since the days when General Charles Bruce passed from the Dhauladhar to Kullu and went across Rohtang, several climbers have visited these valleys. Bob Pettigrew is credited with several climbs and explorations in these ranges. After his climb of Papsura he fell and was carried for 13 days over passes to Manali for an operation. I exchanged notes with him, for we had both suffered the same type of injury — a dislocated hip — under similar circumstances.

Zanskar

If Kullu valley is the most accessible, Zanskar remains the valley visited mostly by trekkers. Many throng to cross Shingo La, reach Padam and proceed ahead to Leh. En route is the jewel of the area — Phuktal

monastery. Built high up, almost inside a cave, it has a long history like many of the monasteries in this area. The Hungarian scholar, Csoma de Koros, stayed here for many years. Visitors are proudly shown a stone carved in his memory.

Nun and Kun peaks were first eyed by mountaineers in 1898. Kun was climbed in 1913 while the first ascent of Nun was made by Monsieur Bernard Pierre's team in 1953. Zanskaris are a hardy lot and brave the cruel winter there, although cut off from all sides. As the summer approaches, they traditionally follow a route along the Zanskar river to Nimo. On this route, called 'Tchaddar', they are now sometimes joined by trekkers.

Ladakh

Leh is at the crossroads of Asia. Being the central place of Ladakh and on the trade route, caravans met here. Traders came from all directions: Buddhists from Tibet in the east, Hindus from Kullu in the south, Muslims from Balti valleys in the west and caravans from Central Asia in the north. Today, even with plane-loads of tourists landing here, it has not lost any of its charms. There are many places in the valley for trekkers and mountaineers. The southeastern valley of Rupshu has several peaks; the highest of them Lungser Kangri (6666 m) was climbed by us in 1995. Three of the other high peaks, Pologongka, Kula and Chhamser Kangri were climbed in quick succession by mountaineers of various nationalities. Still, many peaks, like Chakula and others are awaiting climbers. Wide barren valleys, the blue waters of Tso Moriri lake, the attractive nomads (Changpas) and exploratory treks: that's what Rupshu offers.

East Karakoram

Behind the town of Leh runs the Khardung range, continuously from west to east. From the meeting point of the Shyok and Indus rivers and going eastwards, this range meets the Pangong range. North of both these ranges lies the East Karakoram. Some of the highest peaks in the Indian Himalaya are in this region. A motorable road, one of the highest in the world, crosses Khardung La to enter the Shyok valley. From the pass, Saser Kangri II is seen to advantage. Its west peak was climbed by the Indo-Japanese team while the east peak, at the same height (7518 m) remains virgin. The Saser group was explored by Jimmy Roberts and its main peaks have all been climbed, except one. Saser Kangri I has received ascents from both the eastern and western approaches and has a long record of climbs. Saser Kangri III was once climbed by an Indian team coming from the east. Peak 7287 m, which Roberts called 'Plateau Peak' is the major unclimbed feature here.

Going further north is the Central Asia Trade Route which cuts across the range to cross Saser La. This historic pass, whose moods vary with fickle weather conditions has killed many mules and some people. One is likely to find bleached bones on this pass as well as on the trail ahead, hence the nickname: 'Skeleton Trail'. On the trail and its subsidiary routes stands Mamostong Kangri, first climbed in 1984, and Aq Tash, a stupendous rocky pyramid. I have crossed the Saser La twice and, on the second trip, we went to the unknown Chong Kumdan glacier on the Shyok. Three peaks of the group, including the main peak at 7071 m, were climbed by us alongwith several others. Chong Kumdan is known for dams it created several times in the past on the Shyok. The advancing Chong Kumdan glacier blocked the Shyok in the winter. With the onset of summer the river swelled up causing the dam to break, and it caused floods and havoc over many hundred kilometres downstream. The trail continues to the Karakoram Pass and finally leads to Central Asia.

Siachen Glacier

Back to Nubra valley and Sasoma from where the trail had originated. Further north is Siachen glacier. This is one of the longest glaciers in the world and a major climbing ground. It has a long history. Sir Francis Younghusband, Bullock-Workmans, and Tom Longstaff were early visitors who brought back knowledge about its length, location and mountains. Several peaks on its western rim, like Saltoro Kangri I, K12, Sia Kangri and others were climbed by expeditions of different nationalities. In the 1970s, several Japanese expeditions crossed over Bilaphond La, in the west, to this glacier and made ascents of Teram Kangri I, Apsarasas, and Singhi Kangri. These visits, from the Pakistan side, prompted the Indian army to take action and in 1984 they stationed themselves on its heights. This was the beginning of the 'Glacier War' which is still on. Before that, some Indian army expeditions had been climbing on the glacier repeating ascents of the above peaks, now approached from the Indian side.

Several teams were allowed to climb on the glacier and in the side valleys from the Indian side. The first joint expedition (Indo-British) in the side valley was to the Rimo peaks in 1985. The team led by me and Dave Wilkinson climbed Rimo III and narrowly missed climbing Rimo I, which was climbed by the Indo-Japanese team the following year. An Indo-American team climbed Sia Kangri at the head of the glacier and then for several years no climbers visited the upper glacier. Saltoro Kangri II at 7705 m remains one of the high unclimbed peaks in the world today. When things are quieter there, a lot of climbing can be done in the area.

In 1998, I completed a dream while traversing the Siachen glacier to stand on the Indira Col at its head. It was a grand feeling to see the

historical mountains and points of reference to historical aspects. Despite the present hostilities surrounding the glacier, this is the range for the future.

The Indian Himalayan range stands on its own even though it does not contain high peaks of 8000 m for which leading mountaineers are queuing elsewhere. Most of the high peaks, including Everest, have now been climbed over a 100 times. Once the interest in them has waned, ranges such as those in India, will be the climber's playground in the next century — hopefully!

This was a brief personal outline of the history of events in the Indian Himalaya. There are many other aspects of the range apart from mountaineering. For any mountaineer interested in the range I have one suggestion. Normal Mailer is said to have once chided President John F. Kennedy after the Bay of Pigs fiasco. He said, 'you invaded a country without understanding its music'. I would similarly argue that a trip to the Indian Himalayan range could be more enjoyable if you appreciate its rich history and diverse culture. Though a lot has been done in the Indian Himalaya in the last century, a lot remains to be done. After all what is a 100 years for the Nagadhiraj Himalaya, standing there for centuries.

SUMMARY

A personal review of explorations and mountaineering in the Indian Himalayan range.