

The Himalayan Mountaineering Institute Darjeeling at 40

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Life Begins at Forty

Celebrating 40th Year of HMI (1993)

The foundation stone of the Institute was laid by Shri Jawaharlal Nehru on 4 November 1954

We sat around a roaring campfire. Raymond Lambert was visiting Sikkim as a special guest of Tenzing Norgay, and we, the students of the basic training course of the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute, were entertaining the guests in exchange for superb Scotch whisky. The Indian pre-Everest expedition was also there. Students and Sherpas mingled with leading mountaineers of India, taking in the ambience of food and fun. As the fire turned to embers, the night passed into memory; but the bonds of friendship forged on that evening back in 1964 have lasted me a lifetime. This would probably be the experience of many students of the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute (HMI).

The training for the basic or advanced courses lasts for about 35 days and includes lectures on many aspects of mountaineering, trekking to the base camp and learning various skills. Adventure courses for young people aged between 12 and 17 are also available. To round everything off there is a 'graduation ceremony' at which a specially invited guest presents a badge and a certificate to each successful student. Like the question 'What do you do after climbing Everest?', it is important to ask what you do after completing your course at HMI. For me, the HMI provided far more than physical training alone. Meeting famous Sherpas, hearing their stories and being exposed to the world of mountains has had a lasting spiritual effect on my life.

When Tenzing Norgay and Edmund Hillary climbed Everest in 1953 the whole of India was in raptures. To commemorate that historic event, India's then Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, agreed to create this Institute. Nehru realised the great potential of the Himalaya as a training ground for Indian youth to help turn them into self-reliant, disciplined and courageous citizens. He said: 'There will be no lack of adventures of the mind and body for those who are prepared to venture into uncharted seas and climb unknown peaks.'

With advice from Arnold Glatthard, Principal of the Swiss Mountaineering School, Tenzing Norgay chose Darjeeling, home of the Sherpas, to become the home of the HMI. The Institute was sited on the western spur of Darjeeling where it commands a panoramic view of Kangchenjunga and its famous range. Dзонгри in 87. Three famous Sherpas of the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute.

Sikkim was selected as the training ground, and Nandu Jayal, one of the foremost mountaineers of the time, became the first Principal, with Tenzing Norgay as the first Director of Field Training. Jayal and Norgay, along with six experienced Sherpas, were

sent to Switzerland for training, and by the winter of 1954 HMI was ready to receive its first students. The list of instructors included veterans like Angharkay and the youngest of the lot, Nawang Gombu. Others were Topgay, Gyalzen, Ang Temba and Da Namgyal. Between them they were the living history of Himalayan mountaineering.

For many years Tenzing Norgay remained the most powerful influence on the HMI. With his Tibetan dogs, he accompanied most of the courses and took a keen interest in the training programmes. Without him the HMI might not have made such a flying start. But despite international recognition after climbing Everest, Tenzing remained a simple Sherpa at heart. He was the rallying point for the Sherpa community, who looked upon him as their leader; he acted as the father figure of the HMI until his death in 1986.

Today, the Institute carries on basically the same type of courses in the same area. The advanced course climbs a high peak (around 6000m) as part of the training. The HMI has a well-stocked library and a museum, and the courses are highly subsidised by the government. But it is always the men who make an institution, and the HMI has seen many famous names on its rolls.

Nawang Gombu, Tenzing's successor, has climbed Everest twice and is one of the most celebrated Sherpas today. I cherish the talks I had with Sherpa Wangdi during my course, way back in 1964. He talked about his first ascent of Jannu with Lionel Terray, and about climbing on Makalu and a near-death experience with the Swiss on Kedarnath. On that course, we had famous instructors like Ang Temba, Da Namgyal, who almost climbed Everest in 1953, and Gyalzen who had climbed many mountains. By their mere presence and talk, this great band of Sherpas conveyed the benefits of their experience to young students like us and this was another major attraction of the course. We were able to lay the foundations for a life-long climbing passion. Sadly, there have been losses, and some of the instructors who joined climbing expeditions have lost their lives.

Ang Kami, who, in 1965, was the youngest to have climbed Everest, joined my expedition to Bethartoli Himal in 1970. He was a well-loved instructor at the HMI and charm personified. Perched in a high camp on the mountain, we discussed many aspects of Darjeeling, the HMI and Sherpa life. Little did I know that the next morning Ang Kami would be killed in an avalanche. The entire Sherpa community was plunged in gloom. This was perhaps the worst jolt to the HMI. Earlier, its first Principal, Nandu Jayal, was delayed on his way to Cho Oyu after finishing a course. He double-marched to catch up with the main team and died of pulmonary oedema; not much was known about this disease in the 1950s. Phu Dorje, another instructor at the HMI, slipped on Nanda Devi East and was killed instantly. And in 1993, Lopsang, one of the most charming personalities of the HMI, was killed on Everest.

Age and time have also taken their toll of many senior and well-known Sherpas; many have passed away, including Pasang Temba, Nawang Phenjo and Chewang Tashi.

But the HMI continues to be active and energetic. In addition to Nawang Gombu, the present Director of Field Training, there are two deputies, Dorjee Lhatoo and Nima Tashi. Both have excellent climbing records and a high calibre of technical expertise. Lhatoo has climbed Everest and kept himself abreast of the latest technical developments. He has also climbed Chomolhari, Nanda Devi and other peaks. From his regular contacts with the world climbing scene, he is well placed to keep the HMI updated. Among the younger instructors are Pasang Namgyal, Nima Norbu and others. All of them will help to keep the HMI in the forefront of the Indian climbing scene. The Principal of the Institute looks after the administrative aspects and generally controls the HMI. Some well-known personalities have occupied this chair: Col B S Jaswal, Col N Kumar, Brig D K Khullar and Col Amit Roy, amongst others. All of them have contributed to the growth of the Institute in large measure. The present Principal, Col Ajit K Dutt, has been guiding the Institute for the past three years. No institute worth its name would be without its critics, and the HMI also has its share.

There are those who believe that it needs to revise its courses and regularly update the training schedule. What was good four decades ago, they say, may not be useful for the future. And there is concern that many Sherpas who retired after a long tenure of service to the HMI (Da Namgyal and Gyalzen, for example) received no help from the government and were reduced to selling sweaters in the streets of Darjeeling for their meagre needs. It is also felt that the HMI should look into the future, particularly as the traditional role of Sherpas as instructors is now changing. These are the views of well-meaning people who have the good of the HMI at heart, and the Institute can learn from them. The HMI has played a wider role in developing the entire Indian climbing scene. It sends out instructors all over the country to train youth for rock-climbing nearer their homes. The first and the longest of such a series of courses was held around Bombay, and I know of many climbers there who have enormously benefited from their interaction with the Sherpa instructors. The HMI instructors have participated in various national and international events and the Institute has held mountaineering conferences. Also, literally millions of tourists have visited the HMI and its museum and have come to know something about the Himalaya through their visits. In the future, there is an abiding and fruitful role to be played by the Institute, with its experience, maturity and a young generation of instructors. Life, as they say begins at forty, and the HMI will continue to fulfil its famous motto: 'May You Climb From Peak To Peak.'