

**Speech for the ALPINE CLUB SYPOSIUM ON THE INDIAN  
HIMALAYA.**

**2nd November 1996 at Ply-y-Brenin**

Dear Friends,

It is indeed a pleasure to be here with so many mountaineers. Things were a little different when Sir Bonington invited me at first. It was on hot morning in May that he phoned me inviting for this gathering. I was happily sitting enjoying an alphonso mango. But as we know Sir Bonington is a persuasive man and specially so with his friends. So here I am. When I landed at the Heathrow my first thought was, with apologies to Robert Browning, 'Oh to be in England, now that winter is here'! I think the British winters are made for mountaineers. It is cold, and colder than many places in the Himalaya at present. So I am sure you will be comfortable viewing the slides and discussing.

You can relax as this is not a Keynote address in true sense of the word, though announced as such. You can relax further because there are no Everests to be climbed for the only 8000er we have in India is Kangchenjunga, that too by one route. But if you are interested in many smaller peaks, of course many above 7000 m, different and difficult routes, historical perspectives and many unexplored valleys than the Indian Himalaya will be attractive to you. That is what I intend to cover in my lecture today, with slides.

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 those part of the Himalayan chain which falls within the Indian territories. 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 borders of Bhutan. After 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 Himalaya east of this are in the Nepalese area till we reach the borders of Kumaon 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 later by Afghanistan.

We Indians have always looked up to the Himalaya as abode of snow, which literally this name means. There are shrines, which are visited by many and a spiritual tranquillity is always associated with these snowy mountains in Hindu scriptures. Many local villagers crossed the range for trade. But the exploration and climbing as we know today started with the arrival of the British. First out of the necessities of the Great Game in the Karakoram that explorers were sent in 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 including 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.

In 1928 The Himalayan Club was formed. Its main role was to assist mountaineering expeditions coming to climb in India. This was the beginning of the arrival of more explorers and climbers. Some of the better-known early expeditions to this range were that of Hugh Ruttledge, which explored the Kumaon. In 1905 and 1907 Arnold Mumm and Charles Bruce spent five months in the 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 in 1931 to break the record. It was soon overtaken by the climb of Nanda Devi. The exploration of the Nanda Devi Sanctuary was a great piece of exploration in the Indian Himalaya undertaken by Shipton and Tilman in 1934 and 1936. After the war and the Indian independence in 1947 there were serious doubts whether the sport will continue to flourish. Some of the persons who 'stayed on', like Jack Gibson and John Martyn enthused Indians into climbing and the sport continued. One of their students, Gurdial Singh climbed Trisul in 1951, the first peak to be climbed by an Indian and Indian expedition. In 1953 Everest was climbed and one of the summiters, Tensing was an Indian. To celebrate this event a mountaineering Institute was established in Darjeeling which trained many Indians. Now at least three such Institutes operate to full capacity and this has led to much growth of sport. In 1955 the Indian Mountaineering Foundation was born and was recognised by the government to deal with the sport. At present I will stop at this and individual history of the areas are best illustrated with slides.

There are different types of expeditions in India. Amongst all the Himalayan nations only Indians climb mountains for pleasure. Nepalese, Sherpas join expeditions for financial reasons. Pakistan has only very few known mountaineers. While in India there are almost 200 purely Indian expeditions every year. Moreover thousands trek in the range. There are generally two broad types of expeditions from India. There are expeditions organised and totally funded by government agencies, the army, the Indo-Tibet Police Force or individuals selected by the Indian Mountaineering Foundation. The style and functioning of such expeditions are totally different, they are most structured. Then there are many small Indian expeditions organised by private enthusiasts, like here in the west. They climb because it is there and despite financial crunch, meager availability of equipment and other difficulties they have achieved much and contributed to the knowledge and exploration of the range.

There are about 150 expeditions to India each year what are called foreign expeditions. They are from many countries of the world, specially from Europe, US, Japan and Korea. There have been several joint expeditions also, that is expeditions consisting of Indians and foreign mountaineers. I have participated in five such joint expeditions, four with British mountaineers and one with the French. For such joint expeditions IMF has a set of rules. In fact in certain areas which are otherwise restricted, only such joint teams are allowed to climb there. If you want to join with Indians you have to suggest the group you want to join and arrange everything with this group. A joint expedition can be a happy experience. In fact I never enjoyed better in the mountains than with my British friends. But to achieve this certain major factors need to be borne in mind. First of all there is difference in culture. For example we Indians have different food habits. We always share food or at least offer to do so. Even in trains it is always customary to offer food to a stranger before you start eating. Of course it is also equally customary to refuse. On my earlier expeditions I always used to wonder why Victor Saunders was not offering me chocolates till I realised that I can grab it from him without a protest.

Some joint expeditions had problems due the delays in final clearance on ground. The Indian leader, generally from the official defence forces, is unable to present the case strongly with the local officials. Some co-operation between two leaders can do a lot. In 1985 we were delayed at Leh by the army. For almost 4 days our liaison officer will arrive in the middle of the night, when were to start, and announce a delay. On the last day Dave Wilkinson and myself planned a joint action. When one more delay was announced we woke up the commandant in the middle of the night. In front of him Dave started protesting to me in no uncertain terms, reminding him of fees paid and threatening to talk to the BBC. I kept a straight face and pleaded with the Commandant in local language that this British leader means business and if we are now delayed further I will be in trouble. We were cleared to proceed within hours and Dave and I were smiling and drinking coffee to that little drama.

There is also difference in climbing standards between joint expeditions. Many of us Indian climbers put on crampons once in a year and it would be suicidal to try to compete with leading ice experts. Many times we have selected different routes and different mountains even to climb. At the same time there have been difficulties when either party has forced the issue. One major joint expedition to East Karakoram had several problems, some caused by genuine difficulties and some due to cultural differences. A book was written about it which blamed only the Indians and the Indian bureaucracy for all the troubles. But the book never mentioned what had caused such difficulties. It turned out that the foreign side was equally responsible, uttering bad words, cursing the army and the liaison officer which caused an extreme reaction.

This brings us to the problems of bureaucracy and rules for climbing in the Indian Himalaya. There have been several areas of complaint about the Indian bureaucracy despite the efforts to change. As Dr. Gill, president of the Indian Mountaineering Foundation put it, the elephant of bureaucracy moves slowly. After all it is Lord Curzon's legacy to us. It will help to understand how this elephant operates. The Himalayan areas are classified into several segments. Each is controlled by different states in which they fall. The initial permission is to be granted by the government in Delhi and then to be forwarded to the local states. For clearance the government has recognised the Indian Mountaineering Foundation as the central body. They have huge building and office set up in Delhi. Many times visiting their headquarters I have wondered how many famous mountaineers have set in these chairs and what saga of adventure and courage lay buried in their files. But the answer is bureaucracy, bureaucracy and bureaucracy.

It must be appreciated that the IMF cannot on its own powers clear any foreign expedition. They are a body to forward papers to the Ministry of Defence and Ministry of Home. That's where the fun starts. These ministries have almost no knowledge about mountains, mountaineers and mountain areas and they are as efficient and as slow as elephants are. There are few things to be remembered about these ministries. First they do not know any reputations. Once I walked in front of a babu there with no one lesser than Sir Bonington for clearance of our joint expedition. The babu greeted us with 'So he is your British leader'. Before I could introduce Sir Bonington further the babu, trying to be polite, asked the fatal question, 'So Mr Bonington, have you been climbing for long?' To them only the papers matter and one have to be most patient.

Secondly they do not understand the location and intricacies of mountain areas. Recently a Japanese wanted to climb Deo Tibba peak solo. The peak is far away from any borders but the powers felt that a lone Japanese will be a security risk. The IMF appealed again pointing to them the current style of solo climbing. They made the final ruling, 'Let him go but appoint two liaison officers'. Similarly two Koreans wanting to climb Thalay Sagar were sent with two Los, thank God not three ! Distance and locations of the mountains are also not easily understood. In the East Karakoram in 1991 Dave Wilkinson and I had applied for permission for a six weeks to climb Chong Kumdan whose base camp was about 12 days away from road. But a German team climbing a small peak just two days ahead was given a three-week permission in the past. So the babu was most reluctant to entertain our application. 'What will you do there for so long. Does Mr Wilkinson want to build a house there?' he inquired. We had to solve many such hurdles before you take on the peak. I had to return from the Siachen glacier this year because after all the clearances one brass in the army felt that we should not be there. Once a decision is made these bureaucrats stick to it and defend each other, sometimes with the weapon of total non-reply.

It will be good know some background these restrictions. The Himalaya are not only mountaineer's paradise but for Indians it is a chain that defends the country from hostile neighbours. At least three major wars were fought in them and hence the need for security. Along with the international border, which no one is allowed to approach, there is a parallel line drawn on map, which is called the 'inner line'. This was originally established by the British to prevent anyone from crossing into Tibet and it runs about 10 to 40 km from the borders. Certain areas were completely banned to visitors. Once established Lord Curzon's elephant took over and it was only in 1974 that Ladakh was opened and in 1993 many areas like Spiti, Kinnaur and South Parvati were freed. In the areas which are designated as open areas any foreigner can climb after a clearance which is generally granted. While for climbing within the inner line areas either a joint expedition with Indians has to be organised or a special permission obtained. All these takes time.

Recently Government of India has been insisting on a special visa for mountaineers wishing to climb in India. They have to obtain what is called an X visa. This is issued after a long procedure and has caused some heart burn. But it must be remembered that such stringent rules are formed to cover troublemakers, which there were some, and as a result many others have suffered. The government had to take all types of climbers in view and insist on certain minimum requirements. If you follow certain rules than problems can be eliminated.

Apply early, do not change your team later specially do not add new names, this is treated as a fresh application. Study the area and position of peaks, for example it will be wise to avoid peaks in Kashmir and Kishtwar at present due to political uncertainties. Finally take dealing with the babus and bureaucracy as a part of the experience. No paradise is gained easily and Rudyard Kipling's Kim also had to hassle with Huree babu to gain access to the inner areas.

Now I would like to start with the real thing; the mountains of the Indian Himalaya. For any mountaineer visiting 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 invade a country without understanding its music'. I would similarly argue that a climbing trip to the Indian Himalaya can be more enjoyable if you appreciate its rich history and diverse culture. I will endeavour to show with slides the mountains of the Indian Himalaya, its individual history and other joys of exploration that still awaits.