

## **EAST KARAKORAM AND THE SIACHEN GLACIER - THE LAND OF RUBBLE AND ROSES**

To a normal man, any high place is an invitation. Of course, not all men can become mountaineers. And though the calculating and practical man of the world has little use for the exploits of the mountaineer, the world owes little to its practical men, whereas great is its debt to its adventurers.

G K, *Canadian Alpine Journal*, 1928

As one stands on Khardung La in Ladakh, at 5,602 m one of the highest motorable pass in the world, the view in all directions is stupendous. At its foot, the river Shyok, flowing from the east meets the Nubra river from the north, near Khalsar. It then makes its way to the west, merging with the Indus near Skardu. Rising between these two river valleys of the Nubra and the Shyok, and in the area to the east are the mountains of East Karakoram. The high peaks of the Saser Kangri group are seen on the horizon, and to the east are the relatively unknown summits of the Arganglas area, first explored as recently as 2001 by an international team that ascended the Yamandaka (6,218 m) and visited the Arganglas, Rassa and Yah glaciers in the Arganglas valley, proving that exploration in the real sense of the word is still possible in the Indian Himalaya.

This forbidding land with its harsh winters, flooding rivers, deep valleys and rough tracks, is one of the northernmost areas of the country. Situated on the eastern tip of this area is the Karakoram pass. At 5,569 m, this highest of all passes is a bleak, almost insignificant dip in the ridge, and contains nothing except the black gravel. There is no vegetation here and nothing comes to view, disappointing for such a historic point from which the entire range gets its name. The eastern valleys of the Shyok river are crowded with large glaciers such as the Chong Kumdan and the Rimo. Several high peaks such as the Chong Kumdan, Rimo, Shahi Kangri and Kataklik stand here. To the west of these valleys lies the Col Italia, which connects them to the Siachen, a 76 km long glacier that is fed by the Terong and Saltoro glaciers amongst others, and is surrounded by several high peaks such as the Saltoro Kangri, Ghent, Depak and K12.

### **Karakoram Trail**

Across the Khardung la, a metalled road from Leh goes to Sasoma in the Nubra valley, the beginning of the famous Central Asia trade route (one of the feeder roads to the Silk Route) leading to Yarkand across the Karakoram pass. Sasoma is the starting point of the Karakoram trail that climbs to Tulum Puti La, a steep rocky track up the Nubra valley, a passage rendered easier by the engineering efforts of Ali Hussain, commissioned by the sultan of Yarkand at the behest of the traders in the 19<sup>th</sup> century who had grown weary of negotiating this route. The track leads to the glacier-ridden Saser La (5,330 m) into the Shyok valley. After descending and crossing the Shyok river, the trail turns towards the Murgu gorge (gateway to hell) to reach the Depsang la. The final stretch passes through the Depsang plateau, a vast plain at about

6,000 m, at the end of which lies the Karakoram pass to Central Asia. On this last stretch, bones of men and animals, who probably perished due to the severe cold and high-altitude exhaustion, are the only route markers. At the end of the plain, across the Chip Chap river, is a camping ground, DBO, the initials signifying Daulat Beg Oldi, which in Yarkandi means "a place where a rich person died". A little beyond this is Polu, where three mud huts were discovered containing the body of Yarkandi traders in a sitting position, the unfortunate ones who did not make it to the pass. The severity of the Karakoram trail is difficult to comprehend today as army posts dot the route at regular intervals.

The Karakoram trail also ran along the Shyok river in the east. The river had to be crossed several times and hence it could be used when water level was low, and was given the name the 'Winter Trail'. British tried to blast a proper mule-trail on the east of the river and blast marks can still be seen. An eastern valley on this trail is named as the 'Galwan Valley' after Gulam Rasool Galwan, an Argan who accompanied the Commissioner of Ladakh in 1899. This is a rare instant where a valley was named after a local explorer. The first waves of Chinese attack in 1962 started from this valley.

Ahead on this trail stands the ancient Yugolak fort, now in dilapidated state. The fort, situated about 100 m above the river, looked across the entire valley and was believed to have been built to protect against invasion of the Mongol General Chengiz Khan, known to Ladakhis as 'Tsogpo Golden Chhang'.

In recent decades mule caravans trek along the Shyok in winter to supply forward posts of the army. The only expedition to have trekked was in 2002 (Harish Kapadia and Hiroshi Sakai) when the Indo-Japanese party passed en route to Upper valleys and passes.

Nobody knows who really pioneered this trail across the Karakoram pass, but the earliest records dating back to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century indicate that Mecca pilgrims from Yarkand, Kashgar and other places in Central Asia journeyed over the pass down this route. Before winter set in, they had to reverse their trail, and those who forced their way across regardless, found themselves trapped in a dreary land, slowly succumbing to the ill effects of rarefied air and punishing cold.

To the south of DBO, the Chip Chap and the Chong Kumdan rivers empty into the Shyok, known as the river of death. Over the last two centuries, the long Chong Kumdan glacier to the river's west has gradually advanced, a movement of mass so forceful that it blocked the flow of the Shyok, causing a huge dam to be formed. During the summer months, when the pressure of water was high due to ice melts, the dam would burst and a flash flood would follow wreaking destruction along the route of the river. It is recorded that in the year 1841 floods reached as far as Attock Fort, 1200 km downstream, wiping out a Sikh regiment camping on its banks. Such dam-bursts have occurred five times in the 19th century and the last one took place in 1929. No bursts have occurred after that as the glaciers in this region are receding.

On the Chong Kumdan glacier is the 7,071 m high Chong Kumdan peak, scaled in 1991 by an Indo-British expedition that also climbed several other

peaks. Chong Kumdan II at 7,004 m remains one of the high, unclimbed mountains in the area. The other important peaks scaled on the Karakoram trail were the Mamostong Kangri (7,516 m) in 1984 and the stupendous rock monolith of Aq Tash (7,016 m) in 1993. On Aq Tash, in what were some of the most difficult routes, two Japanese mountaineers took the vertical south-west face, while their Indian counterparts climbed the peak from the south ridge.

### **Siachen Glacier**

To the west of this area stands the Siachen glacier, which was inspected by William Moorcroft, an early British explorer, who passed near its snout at Pra on his way to the Karakoram pass in 1821. Sir Francis E Younghusband during his second famous Karakoram journey to the Muztagh pass, west of K2, in 1889, reached foot of a pass on the northern ridge of the glacier by trekking through the Shaksgam valley; today the pass is known as Turkistan La. The exact extent of the Siachen glacier was a matter of conjecture then. The British explorers, T G Longstaff, Arthur Neve and Lieutenant Slingsby, first traversed this glacier in 1909, confirming its true extent, with its head fixed at the Indira Col and the snout at Pra. They first approached it from the west, reaching Bilafond La, and observed the Teram Shehr peaks – Singhi Kangri, Teram Kangri and Apsarasas, each above 7,000 m – at the junction of the Teram Shehr and the Siachen glaciers. In the second part of the journey, they came from the Nubra valley to the south, almost reaching the same spot and observing the same peaks. Longstaff concluded that the foot of the ridge reached by Younghusband on Turkistan La was the true extent of East Karakoram and not the Bilafond La as was previously believed. This was an important discovery as it established the true dimensions of this area.

The next explorers to the Siachen glacier were an American couple, Fanny Bullock-Workman and William Hunter Workman in 1911-12, who had earlier journeyed to West Karakoram and Zaskar. They cycled all over the Indian subcontinent, and when the plains grew hot, they moved to the mountain ranges, making several journeys to Nun- Kun, the Mustagh area and Hispar glacier in the west Karakoram, and twice to the Siachen, exploring and climbing peaks such as the Junction peak (6,350 m) with their Alpine guides. Accompanied with a retinue of more than 400 porters, the Workman couple camped on the glacier in style, reaching almost all corners of the Siachen. Their photographs show Fanny Workman as a well-dressed lady in a long skirt and hat standing on the Indira Col, a high pass marking the end of Siachen, that she had discovered and named the Indira Col after goddess Lakshmi. The Workmans discovered remains of ancient Yarkandi settlement on the glacier and in turn the area where all early explorers camped was discovered in 2002 by the Indian army. Name of the Italian explorer Dainelli was found inscribed on a huge stone.

During the expeditions of Workmans in 1911-12, surveyor C Grant Peterkin reconnoitred the peaks of Singhi Kangri, Saltoro Kangri, Sherpi Kangri amongst several others, and based on Peterkin's surveys, surveyor Khan Sahib Afraz Gul Khan completed the examination of the Siachen, while accompanying Visser's expeditions in 1935.

The Siachen glacier was explored again in 1930 by an Italian expedition led by Professor Giotto Dainelli, linking the Siachen and Teram Shehr glacier systems to the Rimo glacier to the east by crossing the 5,920 m high Col

Italia. Professor Dainelli and his only companion, Ms. Ellen Kalau, who was an expert skier like him, spent two months on the glacier making geological and botanical surveys. By then the Nubra river, through which they had reached the glacier, was flooded and blocked their return. The party ascended the Teram Shehr, a branch glacier to the east, and crossed a pass at its head, naming it the Col Italia. They descended the Rimo glacier to the Depsang plateau, the area Professor Dainelli knew well because of his journey there with the Filippo de Filippi expedition in 1913. For seventy years, the windswept Col Italia between the Siachen glacier and the far east Karakoram remained inviolate, till it was reached by Huzefa Electricwala, Kaivan Mistry and Harish Kapadia (of Indo-French team) in the year 2000, and used by an Indo-Japanese team (Harish Kapadia and Hiroshi Sakai) in 2002 who crossed over to Siachen glacier to make the first ascent of Padmanabha (7,030 m) on the Teram Shehr glacier. The north Terong glacier to the east of Siachen was inspected by the Dutch explorer, Dr Ph C Visser, who made three journeys to the Karakoram in 1935 and observed the Rimo group at close quarters.

### **The Glacier War**

From the beginning of the World War II till 1971, when hostilities broke out between India and Pakistan, the Siachen glacier was more or less left alone. After the war, India and Pakistan signed the Shimla Agreement in 1972, and a ceasefire line was demarcated till the now famous 'Grid Reference Point NJ9842' near Hundar. However, the political boundary further north, along the Siachen glacier, remained ambiguous, and several mountaineering expeditions, particularly Japanese teams with Pakistani army officers, explored the Siachen glacier between 1978 and 1983, notching up some fine ascents of high peaks such as Apsarasas, Teram Kangri and Singhi Kangri. Mountaineering activity in the region was curtailed after 1983, when the Indian Army occupied the vantage points on the glacier. However, in 1985, the Indian government allowed mountaineers to the area, and soon the first expedition on the Siachen glacier arrived from Ladakh. The Indo-British team traversed the Terong valley to attempt the Rimo I (7,385 m), the highest peak in the area. British mountaineers, Stephen Venables and Victor Saunders climbed the exposed and steep south-east ridge and reached 7,000 m, from where the summit was an easy walk. However, while manoeuvring to establish the last camp there, Venables' rucksack that contained all the gear accidentally fell down the wrong side of the mountain, preventing them from continuing further. This episode drew attention and announced that now International teams were arriving to the glacier from India, which controlled the glacier. Thus the fallen rucksack played a part in the Indo-Pakistan relations !

One of the last foreign expeditions to the Siachen glacier took place in 1986, when an Indo-American team visited the glacier. The Indian soldiers with this team made an ascent on the Sia Kangri (7,422 m), amidst being fired upon by the Pakistani troops from the west. It was a long time before mountaineers returned to the glacier. The only peak to be climbed recently, in 1998, was the Bhujang (6,560 m), on the western edge of the Teram Shehr plateau by an Indian group. Two trekking teams which reached the Indira Col in 1997 and 1998. The Teram Shehr, a vast and unusual plateau at a height of 6,100-6,200 m, spreading for about 16 km and about 8 km wide on an average, is lined with high peaks on the east, west and south, the highest being the Padmanabha (7,030 m) in the south. In 2002 the Indo-Japanese team, crossed

over from Col Italia, climbed Padmanabh and made exploration of the Teram Shehr Plateau making a complete journey of this complicated area. The other peaks in the Siachen glacier that remain to be scaled are Ghent (7,343 m) and Salto Kangri II (7,705 m), one of the highest unclimbed peaks in the world.

At the snout of the Siachen, near the rubble and the snow, an amazing sight greets visitors; wild roses growing in abundance in the harsh Karakoram climate. The valleys to the west are inhabited by the Baltis, who have an interesting legend about the destruction that was wreaked on a small Yarkandi village, near the point where the Teram Shehr glacier joins the Siachen glacier, the meeting point of Yarkandi and Balti traders. The Workman couple found the walls of such a settlement in 1912. Provoked by the misdemeanour of some Yarkandis who had abducted a Balti woman, the Baltis sought revenge and went to a famous mullah or priest, Hazarat Ameer, who gave them an amulet whose power he said would punish the Yarkandis. He instructed them to place it on the Bilafond la and return via a different route, through the Nubra valley. The Balti villagers did as he had asked, but disregarded his instructions about the route they were to take on their return. Soon, a great storm hit the Siachen glacier, causing immense destruction. It is believed that had the priest's directions been followed, the storm would have completely devastated Siachen. As it was, the snout of the glacier, where the wild roses grew, and the lower valleys were spared, and the name Siachen 'the place of roses' (Sia-rose, in Balti and chen-place) originated.

However, the priest had made another prediction; if, due to human folly, the storm did not cause total annihilation, another wave of destruction might visit the glacier. Today, Siachen suffers from enormous environmental damage as the Indian Army troops are stationed here. In winter, the snow camouflages much of the ugliness on the glacier – old tents, used cans, kerosene oil – the summer once again exposing the unseemliness of this accumulated garbage. If the glacier and its mountains are given a chance, the world will be richer for one the finest mountain areas. Hopefully, some day soon, there will be peace on the Siachen glacier; roses will grow profusely, ibexes will roam without fear and mountaineers will climb freely.