

## **THE HIMALAYAN CLUB**

### **A Continuing Tradition**

**HARISH KAPADIA**  
**(Hon. Editor, The Himalayan Journal)**

“And so the Himalayan Club is founded and we hope great things of it; the geographer that the blank spaces on our map may be filled in, the scientist that our knowledge of the Himalaya, its rocks and glaciers, its animals and plants, its peoples and their way of living, may continually expand; the artist that its glories may continually inspire fine pictures. The mountaineer may dream of the ascent of a thousand unclimbed peaks, the shikaries of record heads shot in nullahs yet unknown. My own hope is that it may help to rear a breed of men in India, hard and self-reliant, who will know how to enjoy life on the high hills”.

So wrote Geoffrey Corbett the first Hon. Secretary of the Club, in his article in Vol.1 of the **Himalayan Journal**.

**The Himalayan Club** (HC) was founded on 17th February 1928 in the room of Field Marshall Sir William Birdwood, the then Commander-in-Chief of the Indian Army.

The idea of the Club took shape in Simla when Sir Geoffrey Corbett took the initiative in the matter. Sir Geoffrey was a member of I.C.S. and held the post of Secretary for Industry in the Government of India. He wrote to Major Kenneth Mason of the Survey of India and the Chief of Army Staff who also showed great keenness. Corbett and Mason drew up a list of all the most important people that they could think of as connected with the Himalaya and invited them to be founder members of the club. A list of 127 founder members contained Sir Thomas Holdisch who pioneered the survey of the frontiers, Sir Francis Younghusband who crossed the Gobi Desert to enter India through the Muztagh Pass in Karakoram, Brig. Gen. Bruce of the Gurkhas, Brig. Gen. Sir George Cockell of the Survey of India, Sir Martin Conway, Norman Collie, Douglas Freshfield, Sir Aurel Stein, Duke of Abruzzi, Sir Pilippo de Filippi, the Duke of Spoleto, Mr. Visser of the Dutch Foreign Service. In India founders included the Vicerey Lord Irwin, Governor of the Punjab Sir Herbert Emerson, Surveyor General Brigadier Tandy, Director of Archaeological Survey, Sir Edwin Pascoe, General Sir Alexander Lobbe C-I-C Northern Command, Raja of Jubbal, Field Marshal Sir William Birdwood, Bast. Commander-in-Chief who readily agreed to be the President of the Club.

From these small beginnings the Himalayan Club (HC) started helping the expeditions coming from abroad. It supplied information, arranged porters and sometimes members of the club accompanied the teams to smoothen out things. Paul Bauer's two famous German expeditions to Kangchenjunga were a case in the point. Many other expeditions owned a debt to HC in those days.

With the Independence of India in 1947 gradually all the Britishers left India. But HC was well served by Indian members and those who stayed in India. Today, after 62 years, still the largest membership of the club is from England.

More than 75% members of the club reside abroad amongst them some of the finest mountaineers in their times and at present.

With times role of HC has changed drastically. Permission, liaison officers and other official work are no longer handled by the club. In fact, during the sixties there was even a talk of winding up the club. But every crisis has its hero. So it was Soli Mehta who kept this international club alive by performing many functions with some local help from Calcutta like K.K. Guha and M.L. Biswas. By early 1971 Club's headquarters were moved to Bombay. Jagdish Nanavati who took over as Hon. Secretary displayed great concern and enthusiasm with Gulab Ramchandani, Aspie Moddie and K. N. Naoroji. It was largely due to the efforts of such stalwarts that by the time the Club was 50 years old in 1978 it was on a very firm footings.

### **Himalayan Club and the Indian Mountaineering Foundation**

With the formation of the Indian Mountaineering Foundation at New Delhi the role of HC changed. When IMF published its own **Indian Mountaineer** it was even suggested that the **Himalayan Journal** (HJ) should be wound up ! But both continues to flourish. IMF with the Government patronage, functions as a semi-Government body to issue permits, arrange liaison officers and perform all the official functions. HC continues to be the custodian of the knowledge about the Himalaya. With many leading mountaineers on its rolls HC has a wide recognition as **the** international body in the sport. **Indian Mountaineer** is now 35 issues old (in 22 years); while HJ is about to publish its 58th issue in 74 years. In fact editors of both the publications have worked in close co-operation. Both the organisations, like the publications, have also enjoyed a great rapport.

H.C. Sarin, who retired as the President of IMF after 23 years, is also a Honorary member of the Club. In his farewell speech to the IMF he said "The Himalayan Club is more than 60 years old and has world wide affiliations. It has been doing commendable work. Its journal is recognised as possessing a high standard, we rightly raised no bogey of competition with it, in fact helped it and have been giving it our co-operation and support. I consider that this policy must continue."

Though in search of truth and records, sometimes these two great organisations have had their differences. But both in a close co-operation have been serving the same cause in different ways. Dr. M.S. Gill the last President of IMF is today the President of the Himalayan Club member. Thus both the organisation can look forward to much closer association

### **Himalayan Journal**

**Himalayan Journal** continues to be the prime activity of HC , First published in 1928, HJ has achieved a world wide recognition as the most authoritative source of reference on the Himalaya, Karakoram and Hindu Kush. Except for the war years it was continually published covering all the major expeditions. Over the years many expeditions are forgotten except those recorded in the literature and journals.

It had a string of great editors. Maj. Kenneth Mason of Survey of India was the first editor who produced HJ for 14 years. He set very high standards and when expeditions were few he gave a scholarly outlook to the publication. Mason set up a tradition that others continued. C.W.F. Noyce H.W. Tobin, T.H. Braham and Dr. K. Biswas were some editors who followed. Soli S. Mehta who took over editorship in 1967 brought fresh ideas and energies. He gave HJ a face lift and introduced many changes. Soli Mehta produced 11 issues before his untimely death in 1989. R. E. Hawkins was responsible for strengthening of HJ. As the Hon. Asst. Editor he set up editorial traditions and brought HJ in line with the other modern publications. Now a team of enthusiasts under editors Harish Kapadia and Monesh Devjani continue the HJ tradition.

**The Himalayan Club News letter** was started in 1951 to give brief information about events in the mountaineering world to HC members. Over the years and under Soli S. Mehta in particular it gathered strength and became a major reference work. It had a face lift in 1985 under Harish Kapadia and 55 issues are published till 2002. It continues to flourish.

**The Himalayan Club library** is also an institution by itself. With more than 2000 books, handwritten manuscripts and many magazines it is a major store-house of knowledge. After being shifted from Shimla to Calcutta and to Delhi, it finally rests at India International Centre at Delhi with sub-libraries at Bombay and Calcutta. It is continually up dated with new books. **Soli S. Mehta library** was started at Bombay recently based on a large number of books donated from late Soli Mehta's collection.

### **Celebrations :**

The Himalayan Club came of an age when it celebrated the Golden Jubilee in 1978. A series of lectures and exhibitions at Bombay, Delhi and Calcutta attracted many mountain lovers. HC was 60 years old in 1988. Far from being in the age of superannuation HC showed great vigour and in the celebrations Stephen Venables (UK) attracted large crowds at Bombay. Charles Houston (USA) was the chief guest at Delhi symbolising the international character of the club.

Soli S. Mehta and Harish Kapadia (editors of HJ) produced the book **Exploring the Hidden Himalaya** to celebrate the Diamond Jubilee. In a rare fitting gesture HC distributed a copy free to its 900 strong memberships as a memento.

Many great mountaineers from the world over has addressed the Club over the years. Eric Shipton, Doug Scott, Pertemba Sherpa, Capt. M.S. Kohli and H. Adams Carter to mention only the few of them.

### **Present and the future :**

Any organisation is only as good as its members, particularly those who are at the helm of affairs. This is particularly true for a voluntary organisation like HC. All the members who spend a long time on the club affairs do so for love of the cause. HC has most leading mountaineers in the world on its roll of

membership and their collective achievements and experience go to enhance the prestige of the Club. It is not found essential for any member to necessarily climb under the Club banner. More than the waving the HC flag on the summit it is their sharing by way of articles, knowledge and feeling for what HC stands count more. Thus HC has kept a strong membership and it continues to grow. It's administrators attracts more young enthusiasts who voluntarily work for their love of the Club. Publishing HJ, Newsletter or organising talks and seminars, or maintaining the equipment store and all other functions are done by a team of people who often devote quite a large part of their time. And their tribe continues to grow.

The Himalayan Club has network of Hon. Local Secretaries world wide. They are the knowledgeable mountaineers who supply information to members in their respective countries and inform the Club about their activities. Annual Dinners at London where many famous mountaineers attend has become an important milestone. HC has many Hon. Local Secretaries in India, particularly in the Himalayan foot hills who continue to guide and help climbers there. Mandip Singh Soin, Hon. Local Secretary at Delhi has organised regular lectures and other activities. Bangalore Section is likewise active under Deepak Arya.

Apart from this the Club has a good store of trekking equipment which is offered to members. Maps of the Himalayan regions, mountaineering reference books, video film library, are amongst many other things the Club offers.

To fulfil the role envisaged by the founding fathers, HC has over the years, developed these various facilities. It's Hon. Local Secretaries and others at headquarters continue to provide information on many aspects. The amount of work done by the volunteers is enough to keep an office busy.

### **The Himalayan Club in new Millennium**

To greet the new Century the Himalayan Club presented a copy of **A Passage to Himalaya** selections from the all the past volumes of the Himalayan Journal—to all its members.

### **Honouring Sherpa 'Tigers'**

The Himalayan Club, fulfilling its historic role, awarded the "Tiger's Badge" to those Sherpas who had achieved outstanding success in mountains. The badge was awarded only to a select few, judged by many criteria.

HC records of the Sherpas, which were instituted by H.W. Tobin with the founding of the Club in 1928, were maintained as one of the chief occupations of Tobin's successors as Hon Local Secretary in Darjeeling. The Club organized a special function in Darjeeling to honour all legendary Sherpas alive in Darjeeling then (December 2000), a fitting tribute to their long association of the Club with them.

Then at the turn of the new Millennium, in February 2001, the Himalayan Club had invited these Sherpas at this special gathering to honour the last three living recipients of the Himalayan Club Tiger Badge. They are Ang Tsering (nearly 100 years in age), Nawang Gombu and Tobgay Sherpa.

Ang Tsering was on the expedition to Everest in 1924 when Irvine and Mallory were lost near the summit. In fact he is the only surviving participant of that pre-War expedition. He was also on Nanga Parbat when Will Merkl died in a storm. He was awarded German Order of Red Cross personally signed by Adolf Hitler.

Nawang Gombu is the most honoured and celebrated Sherpa in India today who has climbed Everest twice, the first person to do so. He is Honorary member of the Alpine Club, London. He has also received many National Awards and honours. His association with the Club is long.

Tobgay Sherpa has been an instructor at mountaineering Institutes, both at Darjeeling and Uttarkashi. There are many mountaineers who has learnt their early mountain craft from him.

This was a special function to honour these great names in mountaineering by the Himalayan Club and important event in the history of the Club.

### **Continuing Seminars**

Every year in February the club organises a special seminar, lectures series and film festivals for its members and others. Such functions are also organised in Delhi and Bangalore also. Last year Kurt Diemberger of Italy and Yoshio Ogata of Japan were invited as special guests and drew large crowds. Later the 'Kathmandu Mountain Film Festival' was screened in Mumbai to packed audiences. Thus apart from regular lectures such gathering serve to popularise the club.

The Himalayan Club continues to gather strength, to fulfil the stated object of the club. "To encourage and assist Himalayan travel and exploration and to extend the knowledge of the Himalayan and adjoining ranges through science, art, literature and sport." As the current President mentioned in his recent letter, the Club is "Alive Well and Rules OK".