

My Himalaya: An Introduction

The fact that many a man who goes his own way may end in ruin means nothing. The only meaningful life is a life that strives for the individual realisation, absolute and unconditional of its own particular law.

—Carl Jung

For me, the attraction for the mountains developed slowly. There was no love at first sight. Living in a congested area of Bombay till I was 28, I could have missed the mountains totally. The area, like the city, was noisy, crowded and polluted. But all of this perhaps acted as a catalyst that drew me to the freedom of the hills, for a little distance away were the hills of the Western Ghats, or the Sahyadris. A strange attraction developed for this range since my young days.

I was almost 15 when the second series of rock climbing training courses were to be held near Bombay in 1960. I enrolled for the four-day course. Nawang Gombu, who was to go on to climb Everest twice, in 1963 and 1965, was my instructor. He was lively and tough. We were three students under him. During the course he grilled us thoroughly, so much so that I was scared of high, serious rocks for a long time. But the foundations for very safe and sound techniques were laid. The other instructor with him was Ang Kami. With his liveliness and exuberance, he became a good friend instantly. Thus my grooming as a mountaineer started with these two famous Sherpas, for Ang Kami was to become the youngest person to climb Everest in 1965.

To join this course there was a briefing. I entered the room as a young school boy, and a man who sat in immaculate Indian dress stared at me through his light handsome eyes. It was soon evident that he was thorough and enthusiastic beyond his mild-mannered talk in Gujarati. This was my first introduction to Jagdish Nanavati. He was the inspiration behind organising these training courses. With his Gandhian upbringing, he had high values and organising powers, both of which rubbed onto the youngsters who came into contact with him. I was continually guided by him all along in the future years.

As I entered college, my first trip to the Himalaya was undertaken. This was in 1963 and I was 18 years of age. Little did I realise then that till the age of 48, as of now, I would visit the Himalaya as many times as my present age; trekking, climbing and exploring. As I stood in front of the Pindari glacier then and looked at Nanda Devi, a deep attraction was developing. For the next four years I continued to trek to the different areas of Kumaon, Garhwal and Nepal during the summer vacations. This was the most enjoyable period. With little planning one could walk out with an old rucksack, a blanket and a leaky tent hired from a club. From the crowded areas of Bombay, this feeling of freedom was total.

For the first six years, I had one constant companion, Zafar Vasi, who studied with me in school and college. He loved to be out in the hills and the light-hearted company we shared made the mountains most enjoyable. He loathed any form of organisation or training. He refused to use ropes or any gadgets, proudly calling himself a 'pure' trekker. He continues trekking regularly in the local hills and in the Himalaya today in his pure style.

On our first trek to the Himalaya, Zafar and myself had carried a square tea-chest to pack kitchen utensils. This was loaded on a mule. On the second day of our trek, the mule was disturbed by the noise made by the utensils in this tea-chest. The box was dropped and would have been broken but for a middle-aged man who came from the opposite direction and saved it. We hired him to carry the box the

rest of the way. This was Pansingh, the sturdy local porter. For the next 15 years he accompanied me wherever I went in the Himalaya. When he was too old, his younger relatives and people from his village came along. On my last trip in 1992, the two Harsinghs who carried the loads were there because of this providential meeting with Pansingh in 1963. These sturdy villagers from Kumaon have served me very well and added to the success by their care and trust. If a letter is sent to them a month or so in advance, they will appear at the appointed place in Delhi to accompany my team anywhere. In 1985 between three of them they literally carried the entire expedition luggage after ten Ladakhi porters had deserted the team. Later, I added Pasang Bodh and Yog Raj as two high-altitude supporters, from Manali, Himachal Pradesh. Both have climbed many peaks with me. These proud and sturdy chaps have contributed to the fun and success in large measure.

In 1992 on Panch Chuli, one of them, Harsingh Jr. had climbed bravely in oversized boots to help in the rescue of Stephen Venables. As a reward, the British wanted to sponsor him for a training course in India or in Europe. When repeatedly asked whether he would go, his only reply was: 'At present I want to go back to my sheep. They have been unattended for a long time now'.

In 1964, I joined the 'Basic Training' course at the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute, Darjeeling. Sherpa Wangdi Norbu was my instructor. He was the champion of Lionel Terray. He talked of his first ascent of Jannu, of being on Makalu and Annapurna. With the Swiss team on Kedarnath he was left alone for a night after being injured while the rescue was being organised. He had cut his throat to die, thinking that he was deserted. Along with the training, these talks from him and other famous Sherpa instructors laid the foundations to my knowledge about the history of mountaineering and about other mountaineers.

Along with Wangdi, Nawang Gombu and Ang Kami, now my good friends, were there to make the joy complete. As we returned from the 45-day course at Yoksum, the Indian pre-Everest team met us. This team included all the would-be famous names in Indian mountaineering. The selection was done then for the 1965 Indian Everest expedition team, when 9 Indians reached the summit. Capt. M.S. Kohli, Col. N. Kumar and others I met there as a young student, continue to be my friends today. Raymond Lambert, the famous Swiss mountaineer, was present as a personal guest of Tensing Norgay. He offered us whisky from his stock if we presented a damn good camp-fire. No doubt we students won the bet on that memorable night, which ended late with many sprawling near the embers and Dorjee Lhatoo singing a *gaza*. The friendships made then, as with Col. Prem Chand (of Gorkhas), have lasted me a life time.

As most Indian mountaineers are advised to, I went for the 'Advance Training' course in 1967. This included climbing a peak and organising an expedition. I was a student at the newly formed Nehru Institute of Mountaineering. After many days of training, we attempted Bhagirathi II (6512 m), climbed only once, by the Austrians in 1938. Finally, Vallabh Meghpara (who unfortunately died in 1968 while rock climbing near Bombay) and I reached the base of the last pinnacle, led by instructor Jamait Sinh Rana. The two of us sat down at the base as Rana climbed unroped. His hands touched the final slope when we saw him last. He suddenly fell to the snows below but landed safely. We could have easily gone up again. But not being sure that this was the summit, we retreated with him, badly shaken. To our regret, when we saw a picture of the first Indian summiters of this peak a year later, they were standing atop the same pinnacle. We had missed the ascent by 30 m of easy ground.

Next year, the University of Bombay organised an expedition to Kumaon. As the Chairman of their Hiking and Mountaineering Society, I was an organiser and member of the team. After various struggles I was standing on the peak Ikualari (6059 m) on 29th May 1968. This was the first time that I stood on a Himalayan

summit. As I looked at the Nanda Devi peaks again from the summit, the resolve to climb was firmer.

During the decade of the 1960s, Indian mountaineering was under the patronising tutelage of the government. There were only a few expeditions which had not depended on government grants and support. The Indians had climbed Everest in 1965 but there was not much enthusiasm for the smaller peaks or newer areas. Social attitudes treated the activity as almost suicidal. Consequently, a successful mountaineer was treated as a hero and he in turn looked for promotion in his job and other rewards. Thus many were trained at the courses but without a government sponsorship through the Indian Mountaineering Foundation, not much was being done. The I.M.F. 'selected' a team on a 'national' basis. This was something I always wanted to avoid and, instead wished to climb with my own group. With this thought, I have all along avoided the large sponsored expeditions. That meant smaller peaks and new areas within limited means. It has been fun all the way and brought excellent results too.

The first such venture was to the Sunderdhunga valley. Jagdish Nanavati supported the plans as a friend but was reluctant to sponsor the team as the President of the Climbers Club, Bombay, to which we all belonged. To the Club, mountaineering was a gentleman's sport where one had to spend from one's own pocket and not through others. Finally, we young members won the arguments against the almost Victorian attitudes, and the earliest sponsored expedition was born to attempt peak Tharkot (*see Article 11*).

Zerksis Boga and myself had trekked and climbed regularly in the hills of the Sahyadris. As he lay injured, near death, on Tharkot, I had stayed with him. Once down he recovered and we formed a strong bond of friendship. We went on most trips together till 1985 when he migrated to the U.S. for greener pastures. With his lean and strong frame he put in excellent climbs like Chiring We and Sudarshan Parbat, the former not repeated yet. Everything seemed possible with Zerksis. He was the one who came down the crevasse to rescue me in 1974. During the two-man trip to North Sikkim in 1976 (*see Article 13*) we hardly talked to each other. The beauty was staggering and we as friends knew each other too well.

After the tragic accident on Bethartoli Himal and its aftermath (*see Article 4*) we gave up active association with the Climbers Club. It was a blessing in disguise, seeing it with the benefit of hindsight. Jagdish became active in the Himalayan Club and today he is the longest serving Hon. Secretary of the Club with international membership. With other friends like Vijay Kothari and Dr. Pravin Shah, I formed our own club 'The Mountaineers, Bombay' in 1973. With the independence that it gave us in the Indian mountaineering set up, it continues to support all our plans. When the window was closed, doors were flung wide open!

The injury on Devtoli in 1974 (*see Article 7*) almost crippled me. Walking for two years on crutches was an experience which had a human face. Suddenly, I was noticing all the persons walking with crutches on the road. The human face of a hectic city like Bombay was seen during these trying times. Friends and well-wishers supported me through it all. What I have learnt in these two years of human kindness is a rare treasure. I often wonder how on earth I continued with the Himalayan climbing after this. Losing a friend in rock climbing accident in 1968, falling in an avalanche in 1969, facing the tragedy of the deaths of four friends in 1970 and a serious personal injury in 1974. The Himalaya were testing me.

In 1977 we tasted the first failure. An earthquake, poor teamwork and difficult terrain summarily defeated us on the Kalabaland glacier. But returning there in 1979 (*see Article 10*) was another success story.

Till now all my trips had been to Kumaon, Garhwal, Nepal and Sikkim, I had not seen the trans-Himalayan barrenness. This prompted me on a trek to Ladakh and Zaskar (*see Article 23*). With just one other companion, Bhupesh, we crossed

many valleys and covered 520 kms in a long push. It was a wonderful experience and later on I was to visit these areas many times. I had tasted my first *momoes* and Tibetan tea.

During the late 1970s, I ventured to write a guide book *Trek the Sahyadris*. This was the first and only book giving routes in the local hills, forts and pinnacles. Based on my personal experiences, it was an authentic record of the area where none was available, particularly as all the maps were (and still are) restricted. It became an instant success and by now the fourth edition is in print. Thrity Birdy had worked hard on this book. While I was injured and was on crutches for two years she encouraged me with the writing and supported me. She was a reputable mountaineer herself. It is only due to her untimely sudden demise in 1979 that we did not climb together more in the Himalaya.

The first writing and publishing experience led to much more. Soli Mehta, Hon. Editor of the *Himalayan Journal (H.J.)* was proceeding abroad for a few years. The Journal needed a mountaineer editor. I was approached, with R.E. Hawkins as the assistant editor. Hawk had a life long publishing and printing experience but he insisted on playing the assistant in the mountaineering journal. I took over the editorship after persuasion from Jagdish, and now *H.J.* has become a part of my life. With Hawk and Soli (later on his return) I forged a good bond and learnt a lot and enjoyed a lot. Both passed away in 1989 within three weeks of each other. *H.J.* has been hard work since their deaths.

But, again, fate played its hand. A French student named Jean Rene Odier came to Bombay for studies. I met him accidentally and we trekked together in the Sahyadris. This association led to the first international expedition for me. We joined the French to climb Sudarshan Parbat (6507 m) and other peaks (see *Article 5*). Though Jean himself could not join us, his brother, Bernard Odier, was my co-leader and we continue our association to date.

Like the French, many others visited Bombay over the years. The earliest visitor was Ian Clough on his way to Annapurna South face in 1970. During the week-long stay, he imparted training and exposed us to the international scene. Unfortunately, he died on the expedition or else the first Indo-British expedition for me would have been much earlier. There was a chance to interact with famous names. Noel Odell spent a day at home in 1974 and saw my slides of Nanda Devi, the first views of the peak for him after his first ascent in 1936. When asked why he did not write an autobiography, his reply was: 'Let's say I am not a public entertainer. My experiences are too personal for me'. There were many others, Heinrich Harrer, T.H. Braham, Doug Scott and Aamir Ali, just to name a very few. And of course most of the members of the joint international expeditions I participated in, stayed with us. My balcony has housed almost ten Everest-summiters, to cool them in hot Bombay! These visitors shaped ideas and we shared a lot of camaraderie.

Somehow I have been more fascinated by the unknown valleys and areas than with climbing peaks. Many peaks were climbed only to obtain a better perspective of the unknown terrain. In this age of satellite photography, there are areas in the Indian Himalaya which are not seen by human eyes at close quarters. One such valley was Lingti in eastern Spiti. We explored it partly in 1983 and finished the explorations in 1987 (see *Articles 19 and 20*). These explorations were some of the most satisfying trips I have undertaken.

On these later trips my main companion was Muslim Contractor. We had trekked together in Darma valley and had enjoyed crossing the difficult passes. Now in these trans-Himalayan areas he came into his own. For such difficult, long explorations, there is no better company than Muslim. When in his element (with his pipe), he can turn a depressing barren trans-Himalayan terrain into green pastures. In fact he enjoyed barrenness so much that later in Kumaon he was heard complaining about the greenery of the *bugiyals*. After the death of Hawk and Soli, Muslim joined me as

the Assistant Editor of the *Himalayan Journal* and the *Newsletter*. We have enjoyed almost a decade of mountaineering and editing together now.

I have been following the Scottish Himalayan expedition (1950) routes to the different areas of Kumaon and Garhwal. Working with the *H.J.* one liked to follow its pages and the trips recorded in it. In 1988 it was Girthi ganga (see *Article 2*) exactly on the Scottish route, with some variation in the valleys thrown in. When we were rained-out on Danu Dhura, we were following the route suggested in *H.J.* Vol. XIII, going backwards to the route suggested by Hugh Ruttledge in *H.J.* Vol I! Though we failed, the pass was reached in 1992 by another team from Bombay. It has been a pleasure to suggest such plans to other teams and give support by way of information and photos. Many new areas that we opened have been visited again and based on the knowledge brought in, many teams have flourished. My second book *Exploring the Hidden Himalaya* was written by Soli Mehta and me in 1988, to celebrate the Diamond Jubilee of the Himalayan Club. It contains most of the unknown areas and peaks explored by me. This passing on of knowledge and experience is a satisfying, continuing tradition.

During the 1970s and 1980s, Indian mountaineering continued to grow, but not always in the desired directions. The pre-occupation with huge expeditions, Everest and 'nationally selected' teams continued. Some expeditions landed up with bureaucratic problems and some with quarrels. They had nothing to do with the previous history or future vision. But there were a few which broke new ground. More than giant teams, my respect will always be for those small teams which climbed in a new area. With climbers of many nationalities approaching the Himalaya, many challenging climbs were undertaken. But Indians took a minor part in these changes. Being independent of the official scene I was lucky to interact with many of them.

Some of the smaller peaks and areas of Himachal Pradesh are easily accessible. Here I could combine business with pleasure. Col. Jimmy Roberts used to finish his Friday evening army parade at Dalhousie cantonment and reach the foothills of the Dhauladhar by car for the night. I tried my 'cloth merchant version' from Bombay. I could arrange a business visit to Amritsar on a Wednesday. Next day a car would drop me at Dharamsala, 4 hours away. Friday and Saturday I could trek and climb up to the different passes of Dhauladhar. Coming down on Sunday, a taxi would ensure catching the night train to Delhi. A Monday morning flight would see me at my shop by noon, turning me into a cloth merchant again. Expanding the idea into a week long trip, a lot was done quite economically (see *Articles 14 to 18*). It could be a 'hurry hurry' trip to Kult, a winter excursion to Kailash or Yada or a sojourn to Kinnaur. All pleasures were possible, who says that the days of the Raj are over!

Eastern Karakoram has been opened to mountaineers since 1984. But it had always been difficult to organise expeditions there. I had experienced the area in 1980. Going there with the British in 1985 (see *Article 24*) we had a lot to prepare. But it was worth it, as the final results were brilliant, and because of the friendships we made with Stephen Venables, Victor Saunders and Dave Wilkinson. On the Siachen glacier trip one of the chief achievements of the Indian team, apart from climbing, was to teach these Britons how to eat mangoes properly, in Indian style. If I had ever eaten mangoes like them in my childhood and spoiled my shirt, like Dave, I would have received a serious scolding. Dave continued to wear his white shirt with mangoes spread over it for the duration of the expedition. This inspired Victor to write about the different techniques to eat mangoes in his prize-winning book. A new happy chapter of my life, with the British, was beginning. Stephen visited Bombay few times later and became a familiar name to Bombay mountaineers.

In 1989, we were faced with many problems (see *Article 25*), but with the experience gained by then, we made a successful trip to Chong Kumdan (*Article 26*)

with Dave Wilkinson. These historic areas gave me a taste of army life too. For a man from Bombay this was something very unusual, but it enriched a different aspect of life.

In between these East Karakoram expeditions, I ventured to an area last visited by Dr. J.B. Auden, 51 years ago. The Mana gad and Trimukhi Parbat (*see Article 1*) was a wonderful trip. Everything that I loved in the Himalaya was there. The final execution of the trip was a delight.

And as 1992 approached, another Indian-British trip was planned, to the Panch Chuli peaks. I had seen these peaks in 1982 from the Darma valley (*see Article 9*), read about them and now undertook the happiest expedition there. Chris Bonington, the legendary mountaineer, was my co-leader and some great names in the world of mountaineering were part of the team. Going with Chris and the others was the *piece de resistance* of many years of climbing. From the Indian side, I had old trusted companions of many years. What better combination can one ask for. The words written by Chris Bonington in the report, after thirty years of climbing, should make every Indian proud: ' . . . it was one of the best and most enjoyable expeditions that the team members have ever taken part in.'

With such a hectic 60-day trip, I thought I had had enough for the year. But there I was, off to Kedarnath valley for a trek, just like a good *paan* (condiments wrapped in a betal leaf) eaten to digest a heavy meal!

So it goes on. A lot to do and write about in the future.

I was married after the Bethartoli Himal expedition. Geeta and I had met while trekking in the local hills. She continued to trek in the later years. Far from stopping me, she encouraged me to go to the Himalaya. She supported me through the injuries and welcomed all the friends. She knew what happiness all this meant. My father, Bhagwandas, had never stopped me from going to the hills, looking after the business while I was away. Our two sons, Sonam and Nawang, are named after my Sherpa friends and they love to be with nature. The family has welcomed mountaineers from the world over, and the home is always a hub of activity related to the mountains. In fact, everything surrounding me has been directed to the Himalaya and the Sahyadris. Most friends love to talk about it, share a trail or at least agree to suffer the repeated slide-shows. Of course I have non-mountaineer friends and business associates who consider me insane. During the day at work, selling cloth, one does not utter a word about the sport. It is the other hobbies like cricket, art-movies, plays, and classical music that lend a balance when in Bombay. This tight-rope walk between the chosen sport, family, business and other activities is quite a serious acrobatic feat in Indian society. I am lucky to have survived. In India, activities like mountaineering are not accepted easily, let alone understood. Many start young but give up after completing their education and later because of the constraints of work. More give up on marriage, some on suffering an injury. The survivors continue. I have been lucky to be a 'survivor'. Running a family business since 1969, being married in 1971, suffering injuries in 1974 and 1989, now I have no other barricades to stop me, except myself!

I have always wondered about one thing. Many friends who started with me over the years, loving the mountains with vigour, gave up suddenly. Not only did they give up going to the mountains but also reading about them, seeing slides or even talking about them. I have always wondered why? Mountaineering is a passion and, like all passions, either you have it totally or not at all. It is too painful to have anything to do with it, if it cannot be pursued in totality. Like a deep love affair.

I hope to continue with this passionate affair.