

## INDIAN HIMALAYA THE NAGADHIRAJ

We think of mountaineering as an expression of a man's strength and health. There is no more need to explain his motives than there is a search for the 'élan vital' of life itself. To do is to touch chords, which should remain hidden in the inmost recesses of the human heart. One thing only stands clear and irrevocable before any mountaineer: the goal. And the greatest goal of all is the mighty Himalaya. No mountaineer can ever forget them, or lose the chance of pitting his strength against them when he feels the moment ripe.

Paul Bauer on visiting the Indian Himalaya in 1930, *Himalayan Campaign*

The Indian Himalaya extends westward, roughly from the point where the Brahmaputra river flows into Arunachal Pradesh. Dense forests pervade the eastern areas till the Bhutan border; the thick vegetation probably the reason why high peaks such as Kangto (7,042 m) and Nyegi Kangsang (6,983 m) in Arunachal Pradesh have not been attempted through India. To the west of Bhutan, the Indian Himalaya constitutes; Sikkim, Kumaun, Garhwal, Kinnaur, Kullu, Kishtwar and Kashmir, and further north and north-west the trans-Himalayan regions of Spiti, Lahaul, Ladakh and East Karakoram. There are no Everests in the Indian Himalaya, and the only mountain higher than 8,000 m is the Kangchenjunga in Sikkim. However, the innumerable peaks, many above 7,000 m, the challenging routes, the glaciers, the dramatic gorges and the unexplored valleys form an area of unrivalled beauty and ruggedness that offers numerous challenges to the intrepid explorer. With all the high peaks in the Himalaya being climbed often, perhaps the paradigm shift in the climbing attitudes will start from here to climb smaller but challenging mountains.

Today's mountaineer owes a great debt to the travellers and surveyors who went before him, exploring regions that were unknown, unmapped and entirely inhospitable. Driven by wanderlust and the urge to chart out new territories, these brave explorers made difficult journeys and were ill equipped to face the hardships that came their way. Nothing had prepared them for the unforgiving terrain, the harsh climate and the deteriorating health conditions caused by high altitudes. Their efforts to gather information were further encumbered by the suspicion and hostility of the local people, who were averse to any foreign presence and were unwilling to share their knowledge of these ranges. Unequipped with the modern gear that mountaineers are blessed with today, they had very little to depend on but their courage and their will to survive.

People had been traversing the Himalayan ranges as far back as the 17<sup>th</sup> and the 18<sup>th</sup> century, especially the Jesuit fathers who crossed high passes such as the Mana in Garhwal, the Rohtang in Kullu and the Baralacha La in Lahaul during their missionary journeys to Ladakh and Tibet. Local villagers too had been travelling in this region for trade and pilgrimage, however explorations began in earnest only in the 1850s, long after the arrival of the British in India. For most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century,

Britain and Russia were preoccupied with the Great Game in Asia, and to counter Russia's plans of expanding south through Karakoram and Kashmir, British explorers such as Sir Francis E Younghusband made reconnaissance tours to the Karakoram. In his famous 1887 expedition, Younghusband crossed the Great Karakoram range through the Mustagh pass at 5,490 m, to the far west of Karakoram pass, reaching the Baltoro glacier south of K2, and Baltistan and Kashmir.

Other significant journeys to the Karakoram were made around the 1820s by British explorers, William Moorcroft and George Trebeck, who journeyed from Shimla, crossed the Baralacha La into Rupshu in east Ladakh, moving on to Karakoram pass, thus linking the region to Central Asia. In 1914, Sir Filippo de Filippi, an Italian traveller, explored the Rimo glacier in East Karakoram, and Dr Ph C Visser and his wife reconnoitred the Saser mountain group in 1922, moving west and extensively surveying the region in their subsequent journeys till 1935.

Explorations continued in other remote areas of the Himalaya in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, making these regions more accessible. Around 1865, G W Traill, the deputy commissioner of Kumaun, crossed a difficult pass (5,312 m), named the Traill's pass after him, on the ridge between the Nanda Devi and the Nanda Kot, thus opening another trade route to Tibet. Towards the east, in Sikkim, Major L A Waddell, from the Indian Army Medical Corps, made several journeys between 1886 and 1896, and in 1890, Claude White, Sikkim's first political officer, reached the Talung glacier from Guicha La, moving towards the Teesta river, closely surveying the area. A large expedition in 1899 led by the British explorer, Douglas Freshfield, explored the region around Kangchenjunga (8,586 m), recommending its north-west face for an ascent. Vittoria Sella, the expedition photographer who accompanied him, brought back detailed photographs of the peak.

### **Surveys, Soldiers and Mountaineers**

Exhaustive surveys complemented these initial journeys, and soldiers further opened up the region. The most famous was the Francis Younghusband army expedition in 1903-04 across Sikkim to Tibet that enabled surveyors to demystify this area. During the Great Game period, surveyors systematically reconnoitred and mapped each region, and the 'Pandit' explorers ('Pandit' standing for a learned man) dominated the scene between 1865 and 1885. Recruited and specially trained in surveying techniques in Dehra Dun by the Survey of India, they penetrated territories such as Nepal, Tibet and Karakoram, which were inaccessible to foreigners, and adopted the religious and cultural practices of the region, bringing back valuable information that helped in charting out the area.

A technique that was pivotal in the mapping of the Himalayan region was the gridiron system of triangulation, conceived by Sir George Everest, after he succeeded William Lambton, the founder of the Great Trigonometrical Survey of India, in 1823. This system formed a rigid framework for a detailed survey and paved the way for modern maps. The surveyors worked in difficult conditions, and equipped with very basic apparatus, they climbed several of the peaks to establish the triangulation points, setting up observation stations wherever required. Many of them such as Fazl Elahi, Grant Peterkin and Khan Saheb Afraz Gul Khan played an important role in surveying this largely unexplored area in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Reconnaissance established the nature of region, surveyors and soldiers made inroads into what had been an impenetrable terrain; now it was the turn of the

mountaineers. The first organised expeditions arrived in the 1920s, gravitating towards Mount Everest, at 8,848 m the highest peak in the world. One of the early expeditions to the Everest took place in 1924. As Nepal was not open for exploration from 1885 to 1949, all Everest expeditions prior to it attempted the peak from the north, passing through Sikkim to Tibet and on to the base of the mountain.

Being a convenient starting point for Everest, and containing within its territory the formidable Kangchenjunga, Sikkim was one of the first areas in the Indian Himalaya to receive serious attention. In 1930, an expedition led by Professor G O Dyhernfurth, a German explorer, crossed the Zemu glacier to approach the Kangchenjunga by its north-west face, as recommended by Douglas Freshfield in 1899. This attempt proved to be unsuccessful, however, the team moved north, making first ascents of Jongsong (7,483 m), Nepal Peak (6,910 m), Chorten Nyima (6,927 m) and Ramthang (6,701 m) along with a number of lower summits, thus covering the northern reaches of Sikkim.

Further east, in North East Frontier Agency (NEFA), now Arunachal Pradesh, in the year 1913, Captains F M Bailey and H T Morshead journeyed an area not explored before and ever since. They crossed the Dibang watershed, and moving northwards, into Tibet, travelled along the Tsangpo river to Chayul Dzong, from where they turned south to enter India, coming down to Bomdila village in Arunachal Pradesh. The route they took was named the "Bailey Trail", and the Chinese army in 1962, swept down part of this route, almost reaching the plains of Assam. The botanical explorations of naturalists F Kingdon Ward and F Ludlow in the Subansiri headwaters acquainted people with Arunachal Pradesh, the farthest eastern section of the Indian Himalaya. The Arunachal Himalaya<sup>1</sup> also remained largely unexplored as none of the high peaks such as Kangto (7,042) and Takpa Shiri (5,735 m) could be easily approached due to the thickly forested valleys.

With the establishment of the Himalayan Club in 1928, the Indian Himalaya saw an influx of British and European climbers. The club's objective was to encourage and assist mountaineers in their quest of attaining high peaks and to perpetuate knowledge about a region that still remained vastly unexplored. In 1931, a strong team led by Frank S Smythe, a British explorer, climbed Kamet in Garhwal. At 7,756 m, it was the highest summit to be scaled at that time. In 1936, H W (Bill) Tilman and Noel E Odell, British mountaineers, overtook this altitude record by making an ascent on Nanda Devi (7,816 m) in Kumaun. Another major European expedition explored the Gangotri area in 1938, reaching several high peaks and paving the way for other mountaineers.

### **After Indian Independence**

India's independence in 1947 proved to be a landmark event in Himalayan mountaineering history. The occasion was marred by the country's partition that left many areas outside the purview of Indian mountaineering. Also, it seemed as if it was the end of the sport in the subcontinent, which had almost entirely been a British preserve till now. However, a few British climbers such as J T M Gibson and R D Greenwood stayed behind and devoted their time fostering the growing Indian interest in mountaineering.

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<sup>1</sup> Earlier this range was classified as the Assam Himalaya, a general classification. With formation of the State of Arunachal Pradesh it is appropriate to call this range with the new name as all high peaks lie here. For detailed classification refer to Appendix.

The 1950s began with a long Himalayan exploratory trek organised by four Scottish mountaineers. It was led by the legendary explorer W H (Bill) Murray, who was responsible for generating a great deal of interest in the range. The team travelled from Ranikhet in Garhwal, climbing the Uja Tirche (6,202 m), attempting Bethartoli Himal (6,352 m) in Kumaun and travelling further east via the Unta Dhura pass. They took the Ralam pass moving on to the Darma valley, taking a close look at the Panch Chuli group of peaks, in this way covering the entire eastern Kumaun area.

In 1951, an expedition organised by R D Greenwood and Gurdial Singh climbed Trisul I in Kumaun. Gurdial Singh performed a head-stand (*shirsasana*) and R D Greenwood a hand-stand to match his effort on this 7,120 m high summit, marking the subtle shift in attitudes to mountaineering. This was the beginning of the age of mountaineering for the Indian climbers. Expeditions were taking on a different hue as they were no longer driven by the need to survey an area, and more and more people were beginning to climb for adventure.

In 1952, the highest peak at the head of the Gangotri glacier in Garhwal, Chaukhamba I (7,138 m) was scaled for the first time by a French team. A year later, on 29 May 1953, Sir Edmund Hillary and Tensing Norgay made the first ascent of Mount Everest, as part of a British team led by Lord John Hunt. Tensing Norgay, an Indian, was the first to have climbed the Everest, and this momentous event gave a great fillip to a sport still in its infancy. The ascent of Kangchenjunga by a British team of four summiteers led by Charles Evans followed in 1955, marking the rush to conquer the world's highest mountains that had begun in 1950, with the ascent of Annapurna I (8,091 m) in Nepal. With no peaks above 8,000 m at that time, Sikkim being an independent kingdom, India was spared this deluge, although climbing continued on several excellent mountains. The uncharted territory of Spiti in Himachal Pradesh was explored in 1955 and 1956 by Sir Peter Holmes' small British team, which climbed Ratang Tower (6,312 m) and examined eight other smaller peaks. With each passing decade came further knowledge about the Indian Himalaya.

The establishment of the Indian Mountaineering Foundation in 1958 based on the successful expedition of Cho Oyu (8,153 m) on the Nepal-Tibet border, encouraged Indian climbers, although the death of one of its members due to carelessness, emphasised the need for observing safe practices. By the end of the decade Indian mountaineers had begun to take on the challenge of high peaks on their own; Nanda Kot (6,861 m), climbed by an Indian team in 1959, was a case in point.

If the 1950s was the decade of awakening, the 1960s took off with a vengeance, with several expeditions being undertaken by small Indian parties. However, after the 1962 war between India and China, many areas such as the Nanda Devi Sanctuary in Kumaun, Ladakh in western Himalaya, and Arunachal Pradesh in the east, came within the 'inner line', restricting the movement of mountaineers. During the first half of the decade, three attempts were made by Indian mountaineers to reach the summit of Everest. The first expedition in 1960 was led by Brigadier Gyan Singh, and was followed by Major John Dias's attempt in 1962. However, it was the 1965 team led by Captain M S Kohli that was successful, managing to put a record nine climbers on the summit, a feat rarely possible given the logistics involved.

Between 1961 and 1967, the Kullu region in Himachal Pradesh saw a great deal of exploration, and Robert Pettigrew, a British mountaineer, climbed several peaks in the area. In 1966, an Indian army team ascended the remote and unknown Gorichen

(6,488 m), one of the first ascents in the North East Frontier Agency. By the end of the 1960s, all areas in the Indian Himalaya had been identified, and many peaks above 6,000 m had been climbed.

The run for scaling the 8,000 m high peaks that had begun with Annapurna I, ended in 1964 with the ascent of Shisha Pangma (8,013 m) in Tibet. Attention was gradually shifting to smaller peaks and harder routes instead of the most straightforward ones, and the 1970s were witness to this trend. Sir Chris Bonington demonstrated this paradigm shift in attitudes when he scaled Annapurna I via the difficult south face even though an easier route was known. His team continued with this approach by climbing Everest in 1975 from the South-West face, the 'hard way up' as he called it, instead of the tried and tested South Col route.

In 1974, Ladakh, to which entry had been restricted after the 1962 India-China war, was thrown open for exploration, and in 1975 Sikkim became a part of India, thus making accessible vast areas for climbers and trekkers. The decade which had begun with India's war with Pakistan in 1971, ended with three army expeditions into the restricted Siachen glacier in Ladakh; the Teram Kangri group in 1978, Apsarasas in 1980 and Saltoro Kangri I in 1981, bringing to fore the unpalatable fallout of political tensions along the border. However, this decade would be primarily remembered for the climbs that had been achieved, particularly by small Indian teams.

### **Last Two and Half Decades**

By the 1980s, Indian mountaineers had carved out a distinct place for themselves, and they were climbing for adventure. More than fifty Indian expeditions took place in a year, not to mention the hundreds of treks. Some of these were more structured as they were organised and funded by government agencies such as the Indo-Tibet Border Police, the Indian Army or the Indian Mountaineering Foundation. There were also the small expeditions arranged by private enthusiasts, who carried on regardless of meagre financial resources, lack of equipment and bureaucratic hurdles, pursuing their passion to explore uncharted areas and scale new heights.

Indian mountaineers also teamed up with their foreign counterparts to achieve common goals. These joint expeditions could be happy as well as troubled experiences as differences in styles of climbing, culture and personalities had to be resolved. An Indo-French expedition successfully attempted Sudarshan Parvat (6,507 m) in the Gangotri area in 1981, and in the same year, an Indian-New Zealand team undertook the traverse of the entire Himalayan range. They were followed by an Indian Army team, which completed another traverse of the range in 1981. Difficult peaks in remote areas were being approached through challenging routes; some of these were the Thalay Sagar in Garhwal, Hagshu in Lahaul and Phabrang in Kishtwar. Indian teams explored Spiti again in 1983, 1987 and 1993, after Sir Peter Holmes's journeys in 1955-56 and the peak of Gya (6,794 m) was discovered and photographed from close quarters. From 1984, Indian troops were permanently stationed on the long Siachen glacier surrounded by high peaks, curbing exploration and climbing in a region that held so much promise. The Nanda Devi Sanctuary was once again closed off in 1983 for foreigners and Indians alike.

The advent of the 1990s saw a change in the attitude towards the mountains. If earlier the motto had been 'mountain for millions', there was now a call for the

protection of the ranges. The summits had steadily become more accessible with better roads and several trekking and climbing expeditions being arranged by agents. All this exerted a lot of pressure on the fragile ecosystem, and some areas such as the Nanda Devi Sanctuary remained closed, creating a furore among the local people as it deprived them of grazing rights and earnings from expeditions. Environmental issues were gaining importance and various forums were organised to press home the need for more environment-friendly expeditions.

In 1995, it was claimed that the summit of Nyegi Kangsang, at 6,983 m a high peak in the Eastern Himalaya, had been reached, an assertion that proved to be wrong. The probe that ensued marked the culmination of an academic interest in these ranges that had begun with a thorough examination and refutation of an erroneous claim made on the Nilkanth in 1961. A false claim could result from incomplete or incorrect information, inaccurate maps, bad weather conditions and sometimes, unfortunately, it arose out of dishonourable intentions. Much study goes into disproving any such wrong claim, and in each case the Indian mountaineering community rose to the occasion, with enough expertise to correct the mistaken mountaineers.

As the century was drawing to a close, a ladies team traversed the Himalayan range from east to west in 1997. After difference of opinions they broke up in two teams, one reaching the Indira Col on the Siachen glacier and the other, Karakoram Pass. But more than that steep, rocky and difficult peaks were being climbed; Parvati Parvat and Dibibokri Pyramid in Kullu and Arwa Spire and Arwa Tower in Garhwal. However, the Kargil war between India and Pakistan in 1999 disrupted mountaineering in the Indian Himalaya, as had the earlier wars with China (1962) and Pakistan (1947, 1965 and 1971). These unfortunate developments played havoc with the environment, destroying the flora and fauna, and in fact the very fabric of life in the region. Gurdial Singh expressed the anguish felt by millions when, in a private conversation, he said: "We are talking of war, men, material, territories and economics, but who is going to look at the environment, destruction of thousands of species of plants, of mountains being fired upon, of birds, of flowers and of a long cultures which are now lost and which cannot be protected."

At the turn of the new century, climbing in the Indian Himalaya continued unabated. In 2000, Rimo IV was scaled once again after 1984, the Karakoram pass was reached, and so was the Col Italia after almost seventy years of its first crossing in 1930. Discussions about the opening of the Nanda Devi Sanctuary were on, and two defence teams visited the Sanctuary in 2000 and 2001 to study the effects of closure, and climbed the Nanda Devi. In Ladakh, near the Pangong lake, many remote peaks such as Kangju Kangri (6,725 m) and Kakstet were scaled by an army team in 2001. The valley of Arganglas was explored for the first time by an international team that included Indians, and its two American members ascended the steep rock of Yamandaka (6,218 m), one of the finest climbs to kick-start the century. Shivling, at a height of 6,543 m, was descended by skis in 2001 in a pioneering effort, and the first ascent of Tirsuli West, the last unclimbed 7,000 m peak in the state of Uttaranchal, was achieved in the same year.

The sport continued to thrive in 2002, marked by the United Nations as the International Year of Mountains. Peaks such as the Ramjak (6,318 m) in Zaskar, Suj Tilla (6,373 m) in Kumaun and Padmanabh (7,030 m) in East Karakoram were climbed for the first time this year. In last three years same trend continues with climbs of Argan Kangri (6,789 m), Karpo Kangri (6,540 m), repeat ascent of Chiring

We (6,559 m) and a new stunning route via the north west buttress of Thalay Sagar (6,904 m). The icing on the cake was provided by an exploration of the "S" bend on the Tsangpo from Assam. The bend from where the Tsangpo flowed into India to be known as the Siang was physically reached, completing the age old exploration. In the Subansiri upper reaches an Indian team explored the historic routes to Takpa Shiri, a mountain holy to both to Tibetans and Arunachalis.

However, exploration in an area as vast as the Indian Himalaya is far from over, and many summits still stand unconquered, beckoning to the mountaineer to take on their challenge.