

## **This is His Life**

**Harish Kapadia**

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Smruthi Ranganathan

*An avid follower of music and poetry, Kapadia fondly recollects instances from school, where he was actively involved in dramatics and staged many plays. But for the mountains, he probably would have ventured into theatre and dramatics.*

A chance encounter at the yoga class led to an acquaintance with him. As I walked into class, the students of the earlier batch gathered around me enquiring about a loud bang that they had just heard. It was a mere tyre burst but somebody cheekily referred to me as ‘the bomb lady’. This was Harishbhai as he is known to most of us and it marked the beginning of my encounter with the Himalaya. For the uninitiated, he can easily pass off as any ordinary pensioner leading a sedate city life. If you were to meet him for the first time, you would be hard pressed to imagine how this jolly, happy-go lucky person who shuffled through the streets of Mumbai would be able to carry himself on arduous mountain trails.

As the topic veered towards mountains, he began talking about his fascination for Nanda Devi and went on to narrate the story of a major injury that had befallen him years ago. It was acquired during an expedition to Devtoli in 1974, when he fell into a crevice on the descent after a jubilant ascent to the top. Always eager to share anecdotes from his bag of stories, he went on to narrate how this was one of the best times in his life as he got all the attention and pampering that one could ask for. Two years after this fall, contrary to the initial medical prognosis of never being able to climb, he was back to trekking with full vigour. This was an early indication that the story sessions with Kapadia would be filled with all the twists and turns of a thriller. He cut the conversation short saying, “Want to know more about me, then trek with me, else, no more stories”.

Very soon, a group of us from yoga class were offered the chance to go on a trek with him. We had a first-hand experience of seeing Harish Kapadia the explorer at work. One of us commented, “We are

all on a vacation in the mountains, but Harish is busy working and looking serious". There in front of us stood a completely transformed man. Focused and clear, he seemed to be in complete control. Very true indeed! Kapadia had come home! Having spent more than five decades amidst the Himalaya, he is more at home here than elsewhere. His tryst with the mountains began when only a handful of Indians had forayed into mountain exploration. Till date, in spite of the years, his passion is still as vibrant and energetic as the teenaged boy who embarked on this journey waiting to unravel the mysteries of the mountains.

Introduced to rock climbing and scaling hillocks for the first time during a school picnic in the early 1960s the Western Ghats was soon his backyard. He and his band of friends started planning weekend trips to trek and climb extensively in these hills. The Sahyadris were their favourite training ground and this young group devoured each peak, cliff and gorge with great zeal and enthusiasm. Indeed, there was something that set Kapadia apart from his group. Right from his first trek, he catalogued details like routes, places, distances, heights, logistics and so on, a habit instilled in him while at school. Soon, he was a walking encyclopedia on the Sahyadris and was frequently inundated with enquiries from fellow trekkers. This led to the birth of the author in him and he soon published his still popular bible on the Western Ghats, *Trek the Sahyadris*.

He revealed to us that it was his alma mater, The New Era School, which paved the way by shaping his mind and providing him with the right opportunities to help him progress on his chosen path. The school regularly invited stalwarts from various walks of life to come and interact with students and share their experiences with them. These rich interactions with people like Shri Ravishankar Maharaj, a social worker from Gujarat, acting doyen Shashi Kapoor, radio legend Amin Sayani, senior politician V. K. Krishna Menon, and so on had a strong bearing on his development. In addition to instilling in him a broader outlook towards life they also furthered his interests in geography, geo-politics and history.

While still at school, his group that was seeking an opportunity to trek in the Himalaya was introduced to Jagdish Nanavati who has been credited with introducing many youngsters to the mountains. Immediately, Nanavati became Kapadia's mentor, philosopher





Harish at his family run establishment with Nawang (1998)



Marine Drive, Mumbai - Recovering from an injury (1989)



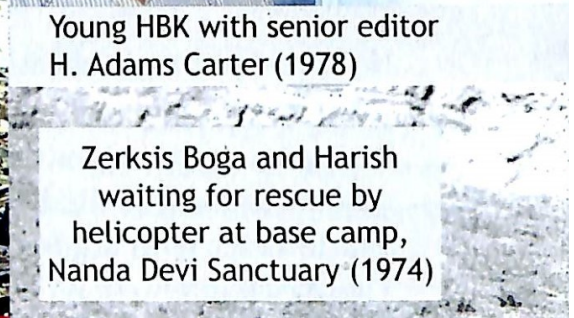
Harsingh Sr. and Jr. from Kumaun - Harish's trusted porters for over four decades (2007)



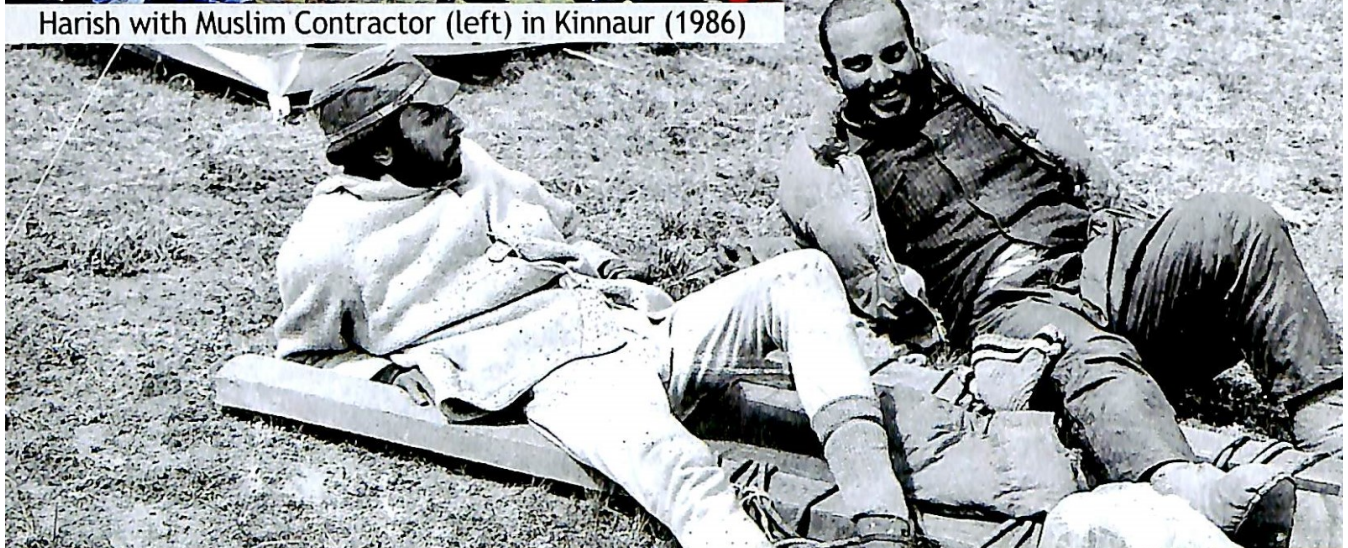
Young HBK with senior editor H. Adams Carter (1978)



Harish with Muslim Contractor (left) in Kinnaur (1986)



Zerksis Boga and Harish waiting for rescue by helicopter at base camp, Nanda Devi Sanctuary (1974)







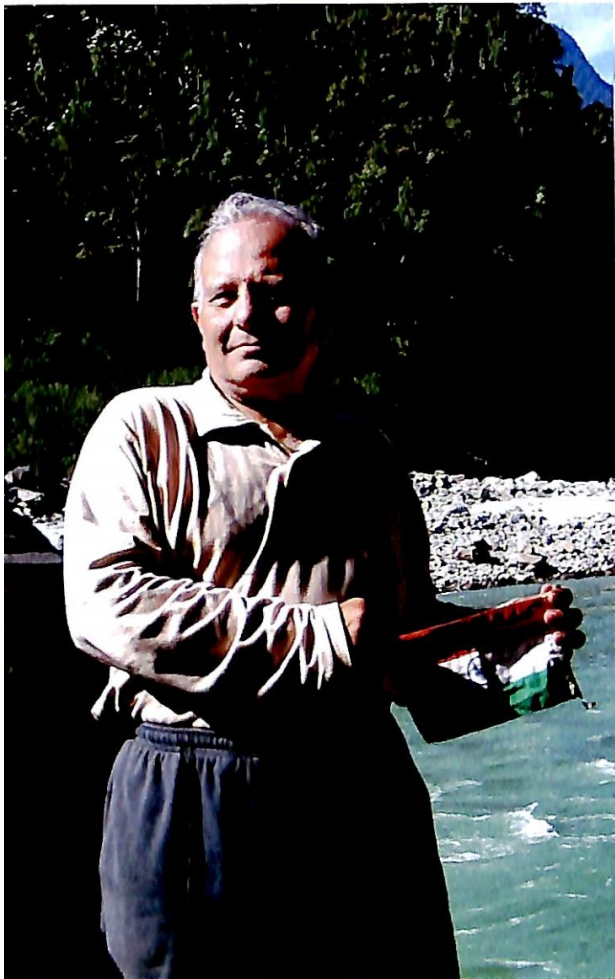
First ascent of Lungser Kangri- the highest peak of Rupshu, Ladakh (1995)



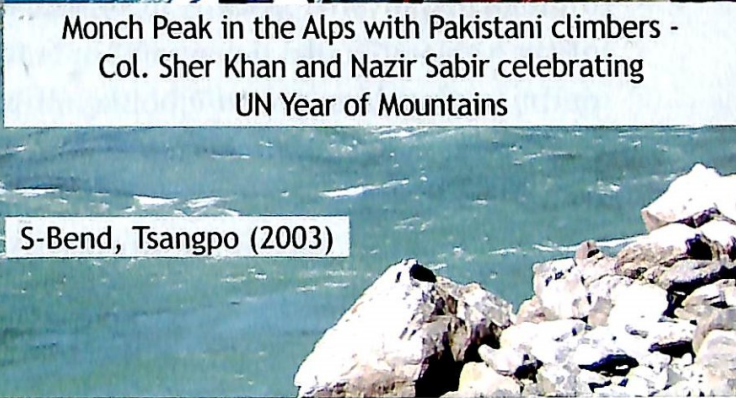
Harish standing on the Saraswati Col overlooking Mana Pass (1990)



Standing on Indira Col



Monch Peak in the Alps with Pakistani climbers - Col. Sher Khan and Nazir Sabir celebrating UN Year of Mountains



S-Bend, Tsangpo (2003)



and guide, the one who instilled in him a deep love and devotion for the mountains. The first trip to Pindari glacier in 1963 was a challenging one and gave the group valuable lessons, but, above all, gave Kapadia his mission in life. He soon enrolled at the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute in Darjeeling and completed his basic mountaineering course in 1964. Here, he had the opportunity of training under well-known Sherpas - Tenzing, Nawang Gombu and Ang Kami who had proved their worth by summiting challenging mountains including Everest. In 1967, he completed his advanced course at Uttarkashi's Nehru Institute of Mountaineering and met Wangdi Norbu, another great Sherpa at a training camp. Rubbing shoulders with these world famous mountaineers all along and learning from them laid a firm foundation.

The first peak that he summited post training in 1968 was Ikualari (6059 m) and in the excitement of looking at the Nanda Devi peaks, he unfurled the national flag upside down. A momentary lapse, but this glimpse strengthened his will to climb. Since then, he has climbed 35 peaks, many of them virgin - the likes of Devtoli (6788 m), Bandarpunch West (6102 m), Parilungbi (6166 m), Kalabaland Dhura (6105 m), and Lungser Kangri (6666 m), the highest peak of Rupshu in Ladakh. Grill him about why he never attempted any of the 8000 m peaks and he instantly responds, "They never interested me". He was always keen on following in the footsteps of erstwhile explorers like Eric Shipton, H W Tilman and Dr. Longstaff. Inspired by their exploits, he began visiting and exploring unknown and never before visited valleys and passes in the Himalaya between Kashmir and Arunachal Pradesh trying to fill in the blanks on the map. "It's my life's mission", he says, "To see the entire range with my own eyes and write about them". Kapadia's explorations have been a treasure trove of information for a generation of trekkers and climbers, since obtaining detailed maps of the region from the Survey of India is very difficult. His invaluable expedition logs and diaries are the foundation of the various books on mountain travel that he has authored. His output comprises over 17 books all related to his exploits in the Sahyadris and the Himalaya. His book *Siachen Glacier: The Battle of Roses* is a distinctive effort, as very few expeditions have ever been permitted to this part of the world. His other popular books namely





With the Patron's Medal, RGS (2003)

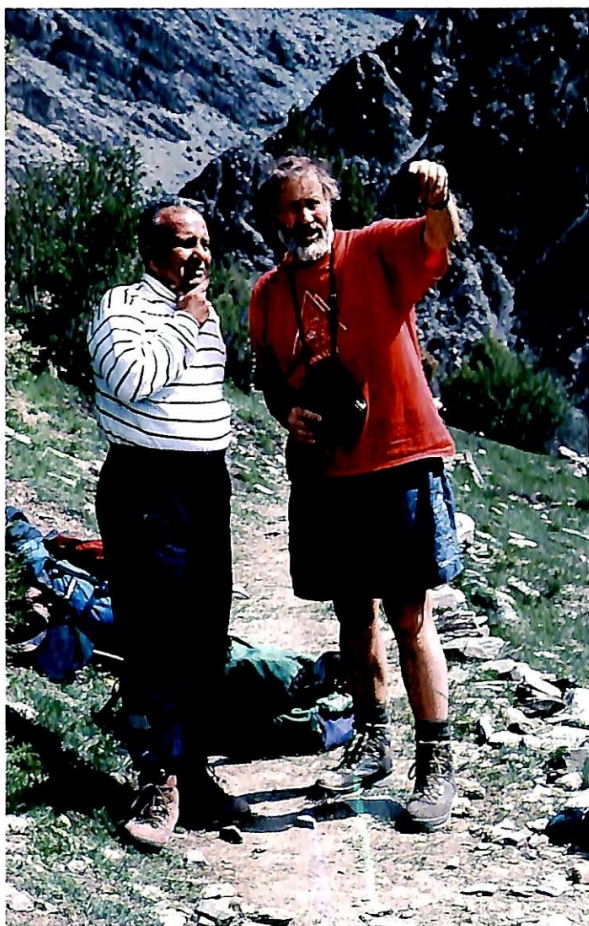
*Exploring the Hidden Himalaya* (with Soli Mehta) and *High Himalaya, Unknown Valleys* (1993), including the series *Across Peaks and Passes, Into the Untravelled Himalaya* (2005) and *Exploring the Highlands of Himalaya* (2006), have all been instrumental in making mountain lovers aware of the little-known areas in the range. The book *Trekking in the Himalayas* is a record of all treks in the Himalaya undertaken by him. His most recent publication *Legendary Maps from the Himalayan Club* recaptures the charm of cartography in this age of satellite mapping and brings the focus back on some of the fascinating climbs, explorations and expeditions spread over several decades.

Befittingly, he is India's most celebrated mountaineer. He was awarded the Royal Patron's Medal in 2003 by the Royal Geographical Society for his immense contributions towards geographical exploration. His most famous one has been the tracing of the course of the river Tsangpo to India and physically completing the exploration to confirm that Brahmaputra is indeed the same river. This quest was of significant value as it was a century old quest initiated by Pandit Nain Singh Rawat during the days of British rule, but never completed as nobody had ventured to explore the region. Tracing the true course of the river on the Indian side, Kapadia and his team literally cut



through the thick animal infested forests to reach the famous S-bend where the river enters India and to name it so. This ground breaking exploration won him accolades world over. He was awarded the King Albert Mountain Award by the King Albert I Memorial Foundation, Belgium, the Lifetime Achievement Award for Adventure by the President of India and the Gold Medal by the Indian Mountaineering Federation. The latest feather in his cap, the Piolets d'Or Asia Lifetime Achievement Award from the Union of Asian Alpine Associations, duly celebrates his life and his devotion to his beloved mountains. He is Honorary Member of leading Alpine Clubs across the world: British, American, Polish and the Japanese. His achievements are a true testimony to what one can achieve by following one's passion.

A few years subsequent to my first trek with him, I had the opportunity to take along my kids, then aged ten and seven. This trip saw a septuagenarian transform into a child who partook in all their petty squabbles including the ones over candies with great zeal, narrating



Harish and Chris Bonington discussing a peak location (1994)

stories to them and coaxing them to return the favour. A memorable trek and we could see how easily he could relate and converse with people of different age groups. Maybe, this is what makes him endearing to so many mountaineers, Indian as well as foreign. Amongst the innumerable expeditions organized by him, are six major joint expeditions with international climbers of great repute which he values greatly as they helped him forge lifelong friendships. He has always trekked in the company of close friends starting with Zafar Vasi during his school



days to Kaivan Mistry, Muslim Contractor, Zerksis Boga, Vijay Kothari and eventually climbing legends like Sir Chris Bonington, Steve Venables, Tom Nakamura to name a few. Bonington, with whom he shares a special bond, has been on eight expeditions along with him. Some of his major expeditions have been to Sudarshan Parvat, Panch Chuli, Chiring We, East Karakoram and multiple tours of Siachen and Arunachal Pradesh.

Himalaya which has been the source of his greatest joys, has also given him his fair share of heartburn. He has lost close friends in the mountains - Vallbha Meghpara, Kaivan Mistry while crossing the river Shyok, four co-climbers in an avalanche in 1970 during the ascent of Bethartoli Himal South, including the legendary Ang Kami, his ex-tutor. In the year 1969, while climbing in Tharkot in Kumaun, the entire party was struck by an avalanche, but fortunately everyone survived. Recently his friend for years Dr Pravin Shah<sup>1</sup> passed away. Harish's fall in 1974 into a crevice during the descent of Devtoli and his subsequent rescue are nothing short of a miraculous escape. Though a very difficult phase in his life, he feels his recovery mentally and physically was possible due to his encouraging and supportive spouse Geeta and group of friends, and above all, the mountains which have always bestowed him with good health and humour. In the year 1989, despite being fitted with a screw in the heel following a climbing accident, he immediately took off for a trek in East Karakoram. This prompted his Army liaison officer to ask him if the screws were fitted in his head! A few years later, while trekking in Arunachal Pradesh, he slid about 150 feet off the edge of the mountain, and fortunately escaped with minor bruising.

It was on one of the treks in the early years that he met his wife, Geeta, through common friends. A painter and a trekker herself, it was her whole hearted support that enabled Kapadia in pursuing his passions. Some of her sketches and artworks feature in his books.

Harish Kapadia got involved with the *Himalayan Journal* as an assistant editor to Soli Mehta in the year 1975. The mantle of editor was thrust upon him when Soli Mehta had to relocate to Sudan. Still raw and untrained, he took over the job under the watchful eyes of Honorary Assistant Editor R.E. Hawkins, a legendary editor

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1 See Dr. Shah's obituary by Harish Kapadia elsewhere in this volume.



himself. The team is credited with having brought up the quality of the publication at par with modern publications. He published 21 editions of the journal and currently, as Editor Emeritus, continues to actively support the journal and write about his own explorations. Akin to mentoring many young climbers, he has also mentored the current editor of the journal Nandini Purandare, helping her take the journal to newer heights.

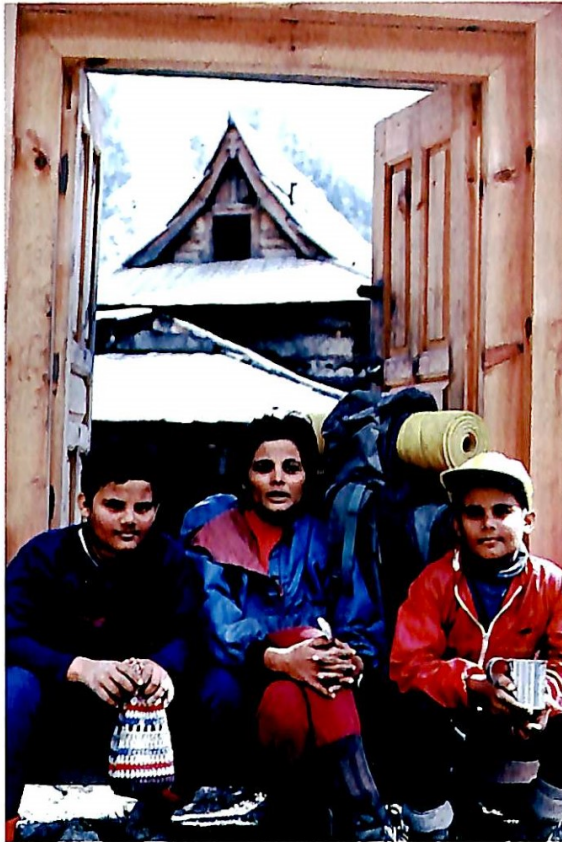
As a cloth merchant, Kapadia had the good fortune of being away in the mountains for extended periods. One Nepali magazine wrote an article on him with a trendy headline, 'Kapda Bechnewala Parvatarohi' (A cloth seller mountaineer). His constant lament about "today's impatient generation" is its inability to take time off from work to explore mountains at leisure or undertake extended treks. In their rush, everybody sadly misses out on the beautiful settings offered by Mother Nature.

An avid follower of music and poetry, Kapadia fondly recollects instances from school, where he was actively involved in dramatics and staged many plays. But for the mountains, he probably would have ventured into theatre and dramatics.

Some of his remarkable explorations have been in the Siachen and Arunachal Pradesh. Since many of these areas like the Tsangpo gorge, Siachen glacier, Chaukan pass on the Indo-Burmese border are restricted to trekkers, these explorations are of immense value. Having witnessed the Indo-Pak conflict in Siachen at close quarters during his many trips to the glacier, and its impact on both humans and nature, he actively continues to propagate the idea of a peace park to bring stability and peace to this region.

His explorations, literally spread over an era, have enabled him to witness the changing times and socio-economic developments amongst various mountain tribes and communities. For instance, in Arunachal Pradesh, he has recorded progress of local communities from a traditional to a more modern one in terms of attire as well as lifestyle. Sadly, it marks the passing of an era as one rarely spots locals in their indigenous attire.

The Kapadia family faced grave tragedy when their younger son Lt. Nawang Kapadia of the 4th Battalion, Third Gorkha Rifles, made a supreme sacrifice as he was killed in Jammu & Kashmir during an



Kapadia family in Kinnaur. Sonam, Geeta and Nawang (1986)

encounter with terrorists. Since then, the Kapadia family has played a major role in supporting and working with families of slain army personnel and in raising awareness about the lives of soldiers posted in harsh conditions like Siachen. His wife Geeta continues to counsel bereaved families and their elder son Sonam, maintains a website and library collection of rare mountain books and maps in Nawang's memory, who was a budding mountaineer himself.

In the meantime, having fully recovered from a hip replacement surgery to correct his earlier injury, Harishbhai is back to doing what he does best. A lifetime is too short to get a fill of these mountains. But he sure knows how to enjoy them, with a book in his hand, tuned into his favourite radio service - the BBC news in Hindi!

## Summary

This is the first of a planned series. Harish Kapadia is the most famous Indian mountaineer and a prolific writer. In this article, we get to know about him, what drives him and some of his countless achievements.

## About the Author

Smruthi Ranganathan contributes to the *Himalayan Journal* and has been collaborating with Harish Kapadia on his projects, including his recent book, *Legendary Maps from the Himalayan Club*. A regular trekker, she is a Bharat Natyam stage performer and a yoga practitioner.