

Acceptance Speech by Harish Kapadia

Acceptance Speech by Harish Kapadia at
The Royal Geographical Society, London,
on 2nd June 2003

Mr. President and Fellows of the RGS,

I am grateful to Her Majesty the Queen for awarding me the Patron's Medal of the Royal Geographical Society for the year 2003.

When I started enjoying the mountains, almost 40 years ago, any honour or achievement was far from my mind. Being in the mountains was good enough. Living in a busy city like Mumbai the need for mountains was felt with greater intensity. It all started with trekking in the Western Ghats, the range near my home and later I visited the Himalaya as a young schoolboy first time in 1962 and have continued going to the Himalaya ever since, every year.

Since early days I had two habits, which perhaps were helpful. I generally never liked to visit the same place or area again. Though there were favourite places to go to, but the serious ventures, the expeditions were more of an intellectual activity and not only physical exercise. Looking to a new hill or range gave me more pleasure than simply climbing a peak. Most of the peaks I have climbed were to look on to the other side of the mountain and look at the vast panorama. The second habit I developed since the early days was to maintain detailed notes of my activities. These notes ultimately allowed me to write about the visits to mountains and publish books. In fact writing about the mountains is almost as great a pleasure as visiting it. Like the passion to visit the mountains, I had to write when the need was felt, there was no escape from it.

I have shared mountain trails with many people. Today I remember all of them, though the list is too long to recall them individually. Many people and associations have helped me to enjoy the hills, from earliest mountain instructors and companions, to my devoted porters from Kumaun, each contributed to the pleasures. As it happens in any risk taking activity, I have lost a few friends and their loss was felt more as they were young and fit people. I myself survived two major injuries to continue with the passion.

I have been on joint expeditions with the French and the Japanese but it was great pleasure to go on six such joint expeditions with the British mountaineers, especially with Sir Chris Bonington. We discussed many topics, played cricket at the base camps, enjoyed ourselves and of course climbed few mountains in between. In fact one reviewer gave me the tribute that 'Harish is at his best when climbing with his beloved Brits!' I am particularly happy that the society of 'beloved Brits' are honouring me today.

In the last two decades I have explored the areas of the eastern Karakorams over several trips, specially the Siachen glacier where Indian and Pakistani armies are engaged in high altitude war. The war has led to major destruction of the environment and the human and economic costs have been heavy. I have been involved in proposing a Peace Plan to stop this war and save this great glacier and its peaks from environmental degradation that they are reeling under. It will be my great pleasure if such recognition leads authorities to consider such peace proposals more substantially. We are two nations linked by the Himalayan geography. Nations which do not understand and respect geography are condemned by history. Governments and -people of both the countries should realise that there is a humanity which binds us together. Whatever our game. And whichever our side of the fence.

When I started going to the hills my father Bhagwandas, amongst others, simply could not understand why one has to walk in the hot sun, climb mountains or take risks. But he never stopped me and looked after the family cloth business during my long absences. To him I owe a lot. My elder son, Sonam, now a banker, when young had no choice but to walk the trail with me in the hills. Today he knows all the stories I can tell, and with his sharp mind would not let me go wrong with any figures, like heights of peaks. Truly like a woman behind a man, my wife Geeta stood with me through thick and thin, and thanks to her our home became a welcoming hub for mountaineers from the world over, as we polished off mangoes before proceeding to the mountains every summer. I am indeed delighted that she is present with me today.

Decades ago on a summer day I stood *oh* top of a hill fort around Mumbai with my son Nawang who shared many trails with me. We saw our imprint on clouds as a Brocken Spectre. I could see in his eyes that a life of a city boy was not for him and he wanted to ride on clouds. He selected a different avenue than mine and became a Gorkha officer in the Indian army - to serve the nation. He died in Kashmir trying to save the life of a colleague and defending the Himalaya. I dedicate this award to him. He will be proud of it.

In the epic Hindu scripture, *Bhagavad-Gita* it is said that 'the splendour of mountains reveal God more than anything else. Every deed of heroism, sacrifice and every work of dedication is a revelation. The epic moments of man's life are inexplicably beyond the finite mind of a man.' I find this very true today as I recall the beauty I was fortunate enough to witness during all these years of explorations.

It is indeed a great honour to receive this Patron's Medal and join with many great explorers from whose writings I have learnt much, — they are my heroes. It is standing on shoulders of many that I have reached here. I hope this award will spur me on to more visits to the Himalaya and further explorations for which even one lifetime is not enough.

Thank you Sir Ron Cooke, President of the Royal Geographical Society for this great honour which I am happy to accept, specially as an Indian.