

# The Himalayan Club

## 80th Year Celebrations

*The Himalayan Club celebrated its 80th anniversary with a two-day event at New Delhi. On 14 March 2008, lectures, an art exhibition, get-togethers and dinner were organised. On 15 March Mrs. Sonia Gandhi graced the main function as Chief Guest (she is the chairperson of the United Progressive Alliance, the Congress-led ruling coalition in India). The meeting was addressed by Suman Dubey, President, Hon'able Sports Minister, Shri Mani Shankar Aiyar, Sir Chris Bonington, Mrs. Sonia Gandhi, and Tanil Kilachand, Vice President of the Club. The special film made for the occasion, 80 Years on the Top was premiered.*

*The celebration was preceded by events in Mumbai (including a harbour cruise, lectures, visit to the Himalayan Club Centre and the Annual Dinner). A rock climbing and trekking outing to Pachmarhi, Central India was also organised.*

*The New Delhi celebrations were followed by a trek to Dayara Bugyal and a visit to the Nehru Institute of Mountaineering at Uttarkashi. In July a gathering of about 600 mountaineers and trekkers from Maharashtra celebrated the 80th year of the Club in Mumbai.*

*Excerpts of the addresses of the President and the Chief Guest at New Delhi follow.*

### From The President

Madam Chairperson of the UPA, Mrs Sonia Gandhi,  
Hon'able Sports Minister, Shri Mani Shankar Aiyar,  
Sir Chris Bonington, Ladies & Gentlemen

It is with great pleasure that I welcome you all this evening to celebrate 80 years of the Himalayan Club. We are aware of the enormous demands on your time, Mrs Gandhi, and are deeply honoured that you have been able to grace this occasion. Since Shri Aiyar and I happen to have been schoolmates, he had very little choice. But we are delighted, Sir, that you are with us today.

When the idea was first mooted, I wasn't sure that an 80th anniversary merited remembrance. After all, just the other day, we'd

marked our 75th. But I know from experience that people who like to spend their spare time in the frozen wilderness also tend to look for any excuse to have a party. And besides, who can say how many of us will be around to mark the Club's centenary when it rolls along in 2028.

When we were founded in 1928, mountaineering and mountain exploration were in their infancy in India. Of course, the British were already obsessed with Mt. Everest. But the highest summit ascended was Trisul, at 23,360 feet, and there were more blanks on the Himalayan map than detail. Exploration, first ascents, finding routes to and getting up the highest summits were the bread and butter of the early Himalayan Club years. This continued into the 1970s. I have no intention of reciting a history of the Club because some of that is more entertainingly told in the film you will see shortly. Instead, I want to put forward a few thoughts on the way mountaineering has been faring in India.

Today, very little - if anything - remains unknown of the Himalaya, the Karakoram, the Hindu Kush and the other ranges that make up the world's highest mountains. All the significant summits have been reached, and while there are scores of unclimbed peaks, climbers have sought new and increasingly more difficult routes up well trodden mountains. There seem to be no limits to raising the bar in our sport. The first time, in 1953, it took two months to climb Everest from its base. Now it's been done in just 10 or 12 hours. People think nothing of running up the world's highest mountains, barely pausing for a breath let alone for food and rest. We have no world cups, no audiences cheering us on, but we still manage to speak of records being broken, and make dramatic headlines.

Leading international climbers are increasingly shifting to alpine style ascents, that is to say reaching summits without siege tactics - no string of camps, no fixed rope, no reliance on porters and professional assistance. Most expeditions, I daresay, still want to climb the easy or normal routes in the traditional manner, but the centre of gravity, so to speak, has shifted. Once, we climbed 'because it is there'; that attitude has given way to a new 'because I can do it' or 'because no one's done it before' approach.

This is probably natural, driven as everything now is by competition and a desire to test human limits. But the wonderful thing about our sport is that it has room for everyone. Each climber and every trekker can and does find her or his own place in it. We may be inspired by or envious of the great achievements, but we are able to enjoy ourselves at whatever level we're at, and experience the exhilaration that comes from standing atop a new summit, even exploring a new valley or crossing a new pass - whether it has been easy or difficult.

The Himalayan Club has always encouraged its members to go out, climb and explore in a manner befitting their abilities, to enjoy themselves as much as to push the envelope. I am happy to say that our Indian members have also begun to distinguish themselves on difficult mountains and on difficult routes.

On the many joint expeditions that Himalayan Club members have organised, Indian climbers have accomplished difficult climbs. But I have to say that the gap between the skills and technique of leading Indian and leading foreign climbers is large and shows no sign of closing. As an international club, we are proud to have in our ranks some of the greatest climbers from abroad. Many of them have set new standards of climbing skills.

The first thing we need to learn is that today's leading climbers did not acquire their skills in institutions or on high mountains. They were learned by doing, and by doing repeatedly. So I would say that for a new generation of climbers to reach global standards we need to jettison our obsession for high mountains, epitomised by our own Everest obsession. I did far more interesting and challenging climbs in my first season in the French and Swiss Alps in 1964 than I had done in two months above base camp on Everest in 1962.

Of course our mountains are high and difficult to reach. They demand time-consuming acclimatisation. But we do have accessible rock and ice in the lower ranges in Kullu and Kashmir, for example, on which to develop our climbing skills. Climbers in other parts of the world have access to mountain huts and to climbs that can be done over extended weekends or short, frequent vacations. We need to create such facilities, maintained, perhaps by the mountaineering institutes. Young climbers need to be encouraged not to go up six and seven thousand

metre peaks, but to experience a variety of conditions and challenges on lower, accessible and more interesting mountains.

Perhaps to upgrade our skills we need to turn the concept of joint expeditions on its head. In this day of globalisation, what prevents Indian climbers from experiencing the Alps in Europe, the north American ranges, even the Japanese and New Zealand mountains that are the school of so many of the world's top climbers? As for me, I'm waiting for the day when an Indian climber will make the first Indian ascent of the Eiger north wall in Switzerland (which, as we saw yesterday, Chris Bonington did almost half a century ago) or one of the many such benchmark climbs around the world.

The authorities too need to think afresh. There are no gold medals to be earned in mountaineering, and the closest anything comes to a being a national team or winning national honours is a successful ascent of Everest. This probably explains why in India vast amounts are spent on sending people to climb a mountain that is routinely ascended by complete novices willing to pay to be guided up. That sort of money spent more wisely could far better help our climbers become more skilled.

And while on the subject of the authorities, may I also plead for a review of restrictions that date back to British times and have little relevance today. Restraints such as the Inner Line, the absence of maps of the mountains, the ban on photography and filming in some places are surely obsolete in the age of satellites and Google Earth.

On behalf of the international members of the Himalayan Club, I would also like to plead for easier access for foreign expeditions. We are saddled with time consuming and cautious bureaucratic processes, ostensibly for security reasons. In keeping with the times, surely we need a spirit of reform. Access to mountains on the border in Arunachal, for example, is almost wholly denied, but the Chinese have no hesitation in letting people climb them from their side. Such constraints have greatly reduced the number of expeditions our overseas members organise to the Indian Himalaya; it is easier to organise climbs in Nepal, China and Pakistan.

The lack of opportunities, the high cost and time needed, are surely reasons why mountaineering in India has not become a popular pastime. Our sport, let alone our Club, is not attracting the young in

anything like desirable numbers. Mountain climbing and exploration are wonderful sports, but sadly they remain the preserve of a very small minority.

The Indian climbing scene needs to evolve in other ways as well. The Himalayan Club would like to address environment issues. Our Club is very small and global warming is a huge problem, but we want to work with institutions and authorities to bring about a change of attitude. Last month, an expert from the Swiss Alpine Club discussed with us how clubs such as ours might be able to take up projects that help the cause of environmental protection. As climbers, we do take care that our footprint is as benign as we can manage, because we know that once the snows and glaciers recede, we will no longer have the Himalaya.

As climbers and mountain travellers, we also recognise that we owe a great debt to the mountain communities who over the decades have enabled us to visit and enjoy the mountains. The Sherpas are well known for their ability and tremendous record as climbers. But other mountain people, be they from Ladakh, Himachal, Uttarakhand or Sikkim are fast catching up. The Himalayan Club is pledged to doing what it can to enable people who carry loads to become guides and guides to evolve into expedition organisers.

It is my hope that 20 years from now, when a future President addresses the Himalayan Club Centenary celebrations, he or - preferably she - will have many positive things to say. I hope that the Centenary address will affirm how climbers of all nationalities can come and go freely in our greater Himalayan region. I hope by then the President will be able to report that the average age of our membership has fallen significantly, and that many of our most active members will be people living in the mountain regions.

I hope we will hear of environment protection projects successfully accomplished, and how Indian climbers are in the forefront of putting up new and challenging routes, and are no longer obsessed with Everest or just the big mountains climbed by the easiest routes. And, yes, I hope by then we will have had more than one Indian ascent of the Eiger north wall.

Thank you.

**Suman Dubey**  
President, The Himalayan Club

## From Mrs Sonia Gandhi

Shri Mani Shankar Aiyar, Shri Suman Dubey,  
Sir Chris Bonington, Members of the Himalayan Club,  
Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is a pleasure to be here this evening with so many lovers of the high mountains. I don't think I can describe myself as being imbued with your spirit of adventure, but like you, I delight in their serenity and splendour and I cherish the time I have been able to spend in the hills, gazing out across the valleys at the high peaks.

The beauty and power of the Himalaya has moved and inspired our people from the earliest times. Our mountains, rivers and forests have never been viewed simply as creations of nature. As our scriptures and legends so amply testify, they have been regarded as sacred entities in themselves, home to countless places of worship, including some of our holiest shrines. Over the centuries, our people left the world behind and journeyed to the heights in quest of inner peace and harmony. Our ancient sages didn't scale the summit; they explored their innermost depths in search of wisdom and emancipation.

As modern devotees of the high mountains you have added a very welcome contemporary dimension of sporting activity. Mountaineers too need to find resources such as mental strength and resilience, as well as high levels of physical fitness and endurance, to take them to their chosen goals. I hope that your efforts, and those of other clubs and institutions, to popularise adventure sports, especially mountain climbing and trekking, will bear fruit. These, after all, engender qualities of character building and help us become better human beings. We need to encourage them in our youth.

This was well recognised by Jawaharlal Nehru, who was instrumental in setting up the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute in Darjeeling after the first ascent of Everest in 1953 by Sir Edmund Hillary and Tensing. Nehru's own interest in the mountains went back to his roots in Kashmir. He seldom missed an opportunity to spend time in his beloved forests and valleys. It's largely forgotten now that in 1958, at the age of 69, he made the difficult trek from Sikkim across the Nathu la and Tibet's Chumbi valley into Bhutan to sign the first political agreements between our two countries.

A 42-year old Indira Gandhi accompanied him on that trip. When she became Prime Minister, she supported new institutions to help train young mountain climbers and expanded the government's conservation projects including national parks and wild life reserves. Rajiv Gandhi, too continued in that tradition and as prime minister, provided active encouragement to mountain sports, as many of you experienced for yourselves.

It is reassuring that the Himalayan Club is taking up the challenge of environment protection. This is an area which all of us, whether private or public, need to attend to urgently. While we may not be able to turn around the effects of global warming in the short run, there surely are things that we can all do. Problems such as deforestation, the pressure of human populations on fragile eco-systems, waste disposal and the effects of roads and infrastructure building need our urgent and serious attention.

Some issues are not amenable to easy answers. We need to be aware that people in large numbers, whether pilgrims or inhabitants, soldiers defending our borders or visitors to the remote regions, all leave an indelible imprint. Our efforts will be more effective if we are more conscientious as individuals, if we build public-private partnerships, if we all work together. The relative success in environment protection that we have seen in the Dehra Dun-Mussoorie region, for instance, has come from precisely such joint efforts.

At the same time we must keep in mind that the mountain regions are in need of sustainable development and sustainable livelihoods. In many districts new roads, new technologies, new agricultural and horticultural practices, and the ingress of much needed development have created job opportunities and brought prosperity. But in large parts, especially in the remote areas, living conditions are still inadequate, and economic development has yet to make an impact.

Organisations such as yours should come forward to work with the youth in schools and colleges. If you devise programmes that impart skills and training which will enable young people to find employment in adventure travel activities, I am sure my colleague, Mani Shankar Aiyar, and others in the government will not hesitate to help with resources.

The exemplary work of one of your own honorary members, Sir Edmund Hillary, who passed away only weeks ago, is an example of how much individual commitment and perseverance can do to help the mountain communities. And I see no reason why the corporate world would shy away from doing its bit if you take the lead.

As you go forward, I hope that all of you who love the mountains and care for their preservation will turn your attention to these issues. Mountaineers are after all consumers in the sense that they visit the mountains for enjoyment. At the same time, they need to be their guardians as well, because if the mountain environment is damaged in any way, it is all of us who suffer the consequences.

Once again, I congratulate the Himalayan Club on this important milestone in its journey. You will, I am sure, continue to excel in mountain exploration and climbing. It is also my hope that you will continue to care for the mountain environment and help improve the lives of those who live there.

Thank you.

**Mrs Sonia Gandhi**