

The Himalayan ethic—time for a rethink?

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The Himalayan chain swings in a 1500-mile arc through Asia, a geographical feature containing the world's highest mountains and presenting the ultimate possible in mountain experience by man on this planet. The recent reopening of Nepal to climbing parties and, to a lesser extent, a slight relaxation of the 'no-entry-possible' policy by neighbouring governments, has signified the commencement of a new chapter in the story of high altitude-climbing. Yet in no field of mountaineering endeavour is there being exhibited such woolly thinking, antiquated philosophies or clouded motives as in present-day activity in the Himalaya. During the enforced lull of the latter years of the 60s, occasioned by access problems, climbers the world over had time to think carefully about the path of future developments amongst Asia's giants. There was the chance, once exploration was allowed to recommence, to bring to bear the by now well-tried and proven concepts of modern mountaineering worked out and refined throughout other ranges such as Alaska, the Andes and Yosemite. What a wealth of knowledge has been gleaned in a decade! improvement of winter techniques, an equipment revolution, a break down of psychological barriers. Instead of utilising to the full these exciting innovations, we have seen at the start of this new era the continuance, and even a further dangerous entrenchment, of the dull plod, plod, plod of what I will call the Himalayan expedition mentality.

Annapurna was climbed in 1950 and Everest in 1953, and since that date we have witnessed astonishing progress in climbing technique and equipment; making the approach and style of application of these two ventures as relevant to this day as the stage coach to jet travel. But expeditions are still being planned and executed on exactly the same cumbrous scale! This is not progress, for we should be trying to do more, much more with much less, yet most climbers in the field are bogged down in an ethic of the past. For many years there has been the argument of the justification for attempting any mountain or any climb with a large, sponsored, heavily equipped, no-expense-spared party. At the time of the 1953 success of Everest, some mountaineers were not happy that the 'conquest' of the mountain was a worth-while exercise, and since that date modern technical developments have swung the balance further against such ventures. We have now reached a stage where it is possible to declare, albeit tongue in cheek, that nothing is unclimbable providing sufficient resources are thrown against the objective. A téléférique to the summit of Everest, K2 or Kangchenjunga is not beyond man's new found abilities, and unless the trend to ever-larger, heavier-equipped parties is reversed their achievements will eventually mean nothing and make nonsense of Himalayan development. We must acknowledge that it is how a mountain is climbed which is paramount, not that it is conquered. The tragedy of no-expense-spared expeditions is that they have swallowed, and continue to subjugate, good objectives; once a mountain

or a particular route is ascended it cannot be unclimbed, whatever methods have been used in achieving the first success.

The justification by those taking part seems to be that the scale of the objectives necessitates large parties, even though the story of Himalayan climbing is already rich in success by small, unsupported parties, e.g. Buhl and Diemberger on Broad Peak, the British on the Muztagh Tower, the Messners' fantastic descent of the Diamir flank of Nanga Parbat last year, and so on. To put a large party into the field requires some form of sponsorship, with immediate overtones of commercial interest or nationalism, which to those taking part must be undesirable, placing the emphasis on the seeking of a victory or a conquest. Large parties are thought to be safer for such ventures, but in high mountains the statistics of disaster show otherwise. The more people at risk, the bigger the disaster if things do go wrong. The fast-moving, ultra-light-weight party is safest, for it is a simple equation of numbers and time involved, for no one will deny that the bigger the mountain the more the depth of commitment if climbing at comparative standards. Once one abandons the concept of a normal mountaineering ascent, made by teams of unsupported ropes, then one immediately becomes involved in large-scale planning and statistics in a vicious circle. The longer a man is on a high mountain, the more food and supplies he needs. If he is preparing the way for a caravan of followers, a man will be needed to carry the equipment of the man who is actually climbing, a man will be needed to carry the food of the man carrying the equipment, a man will be needed to carry fuel for the other three, and so the build up goes on. The worst aspect of involvement in the sort of extravaganza we keep witnessing must be the attempt at smothering individual idiosyncrasy on behalf of the common cause. Though team spirit can play an important role, it sometimes fails to work out, and we occasionally hear, in more revealing moments, of battles of fisticuffs at 6000 m. On the other hand, I have yet to hear of a Himalayan expedition comprised of two persons fighting each other!

In the light of present Himalayan trends one must, sooner or later, face the problem of the misuse of Sherpa porters. No one could be more loyal, hard-working, cheerful or willing than the average expedition Sherpa. But they are not, in the main, highly skilled mountaineers, at least not in the sense of modern climbing standards in Europe, the U.S.A. or New Zealand. Parties planning difficult ascents should bear this in mind, for recent deaths of Sherpas on expeditions are a tragedy which should be mourned by the whole climbing world. Most Sherpas do not climb mountains because they love climbing, a few might, but the majority do not; it is for them merely a lucrative way to earn a living for a short while. The Sherpas, through centuries of living at high altitudes amongst mountains, have developed an amazing facility for travel and



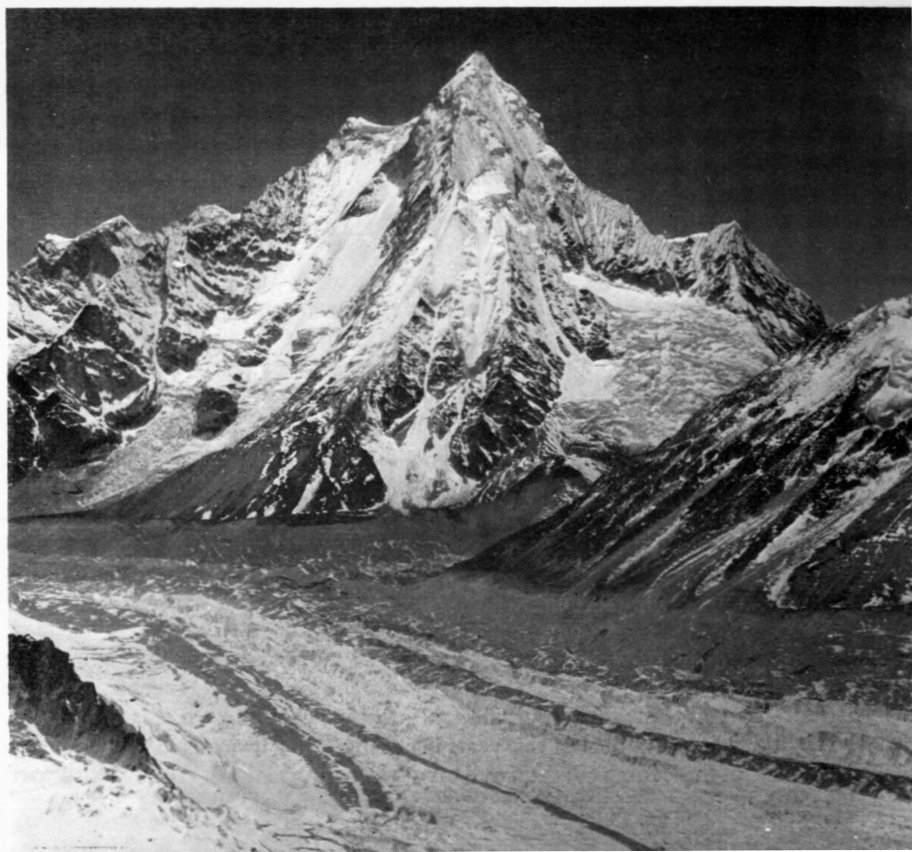
58 *Shivling*. Photo: Alpine Club Collection

acclimatisation. With the same sort of rigorous programme undergone by mountaineers in, say, Europe, many of them could undoubtedly become outstanding climbers, but most are at present little more than beginners. To take these fine people into situations of great danger or high technical difficulty is little short of manslaughter in the event of an ensuing accident. That this is being done the record unfortunately speaks for itself, with six Sherpa deaths from one village in the last climbing season. The onus must be on all Himalayan parties using any type of outside labour never to expose this really uncommitted element to any great danger. In the last decade, on some expeditions, besides doing all the donkey work in load-carrying and camp chores, the Sherpas have led their 'sahibs' almost every inch of the way up their objectives without ever receiving credit for their efforts afterwards. The whole question of porter

employment and usage needs urgent attention by mountaineers. In my opinion, as harder and harder ascents come to be tackled, it is time that the major organisations of the mountaineering world spent their time and money ensuring that potential expedition porters are given a chance to train under first-class instructors to high standards of mountaineering competence. Until this happens the use of porters to climb on highly difficult or dangerous ascents should be frowned upon.

It is perhaps fortunate for today's generation of young climbers, and even those yet to follow, that, as in other ranges of the world, the highest mountains in the Himalaya are neither the most difficult to climb, the most spectacular nor the most beautiful. Contrary to popular opinion the best peaks in the whole Himalayan chain have yet to be attempted or climbed; due partly to political

59 *Menlungtse*. Photo: A. Gregory





60 *Gauri Sankar*. Photo: E. Schneider

difficulty of access but also because of the aforementioned expedition mentality. If quality of mountaineering is the yardstick, then the fabulous lesser peaks of the Himalaya such as Shivaling, Changabang, the Ogre, Menlungtse and Gauri Sankar will provide the most rewarding climbs in mountaineering history. At the time of writing no party has been successful in climbing one of the extreme lesser peaks, these are waiting, some even unapproached, till man can sort out his petty squabbles. It is very important, though, that when these objectives, the true 'Everests' of the mountain world, are attempted they are approached in a spirit in keeping with the essential challenge of mountaineering. I hope they are to be climbed by our successors and not subjugated, as might be the case if they were attempted under the existing Himalayan ethic.

I am aware that there are today many small parties at work throughout the Himalayan chain, as even in a period during the middle 60s it seemed as if the desirability of some form of limitation to party size, and even aids to be used, might develop. But the last two years has seen a swing away from such methods by many of the leading climbers and mountaineering nations. We have witnessed

mammoth and costly expeditions capturing the world's press and dominating the climbing scene; the youthful tyro wishing to take his part in such exploration might be forgiven for believing that this is the only way possible to attempt major Himalayan problems. What does it now matter in terms of mountaineering development if thirty men, adequately equipped, fully sponsored and using oxygen, climb Everest by any route? It would be truly worth-while for a party of four climbers, unsupported, to achieve the same feat. It sounds impossible, but is it?

Before concluding, I would like to commit myself to some further suggestions which future parties to the Himalaya might like to consider. With modern techniques and 'know-how', is it necessary, or even justifiable ethically, to include in any party more than four climbing members for any peak under 7300 m, or even six men for any mountain anywhere? Should oxygen be used to climb below 7900 m?, I think not. Oxygen should be carried below this height only for medicinal purposes, to be used in physiological necessity but not to forward an ascent. It has been shown that for peaks below 7900 m oxygen is unnecessary as long as great attention is paid to acclimatisation. The secret of success in the climbing of high peaks without oxygen is to begin with a very slow build up or advance and to climb high but sleep low until such difficulties are over.

Two things only should perhaps condition any approach to a future Himalayan climb, the safety of the party and the style of the ascent. I have stated already that to the discerning success means nothing, only the way it has been achieved matters. We must recognise the truth in our own climbing and teach it to those who would follow us; a glorious failure is worth more than a certain victory.