

India 1983-1984

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Mountaineering in the Indian Himalaya operates in different categories, sometimes quite separate, almost watertight, and though much is known about certain excellent climbs often too little is known about others.

As far as climbing areas are concerned, there are two bureaucratically distinct divisions: within and without the 'inner line'. N Sikkim, E Kumaon, Kinnaur, Spiti, N Ladakh and parts of N Garhwal are within the 'inner line'. Only Indian nationals are allowed into these areas, and that only with great difficulty, paper work, bureaucracy and wastage of time. The few open areas are thronged by many expeditions. The resulting overcrowding is undesirable and tends to spoil the cultural and ecological balance there.

The climbing teams are in three distinct divisions: foreign teams; large Indian teams; and small Indian teams.

The foreign teams, with their superior techniques and equipment, climb the hardest routes in the areas allowed to them. These climbs are achieved in 'style' and are noteworthy for the difficulties they attack.

Then there are the Indian expeditions which are entirely organised and financed through public funds and government. Defence forces and various government agencies mount large assaults with huge budgets. Sometimes a full contingent of jawans has ferried loads on such expeditions which claim to be porterless. The teams are selected by committees and there is no question of ethics. Many giant mountains have fallen to such expeditions and perhaps Indian mountaineering has become synonymous with this style of climbing.

On the other hand, there are a large number (over 100) of small Indian parties which attempt several of the smaller peaks, sometimes in remote areas. Their constrained finances are met by small Government subsidies and personal contributions. They may be cramped in climbing style but not in spirit. Often their objectives are easy but they serve to keep the true interest alive. Unfortunately these parties are little known and sometimes unrecorded.

1983 The year 1983 saw the closure of the Nanda Devi Sanctuary for 'repairs'. The ecological damage was evident and closure was made more necessary as energetic Lata shepherds had discovered an easier route bypassing the Rishi gorge to enter the inner sanctuary over a high col on the Devistan ridge. This was a historic bypass but it gave access to herds of sheep to the inner sanctuary and would have caused irreversible damage. Some were more happy than others with the closure as it stopped the 'cultural pollution'. The simple people of Reni and Lata in foreign jackets had become spoilt beyond recognition and a Karakoram-type portage situation was on the cards. Can the closure reverse this trend or will it just transfer the inevitable to other areas?

With the political situation in Punjab making travel difficult to Kulu and Kashmir, the Gangotri region became the major climbing area. The ascent of the

W summit of Shivling by Bonington and Fotheringham set the tune. In a strong push the duo achieved a most notable first ascent. A British team completed a fine route on Bhagirathi I, unfortunately marred by a death. The Japanese attempted Kedarnath by the S face, a trendsetting first. Many giant peaks of Garhwal like Chaukhamba, Thalay Sagar, Mandani are untouched by their S approaches though they are open. Perhaps the finest climb was the ascent of Thalay Sagar by its NE ridge by a Polish-Norwegian expedition. Satopanth like the other high peaks of Nun-Kun was assaulted with boring regularity. Chaukhamba I (7138m) a high peak, was climbed without much fuss by a team from Assam.

The Indian Army concentrated on high peaks, as usual. In N Sikkim two important peaks fell to their onslaughts. Jongsong (7474m) received an ascent after 45 years. A large team approached from Lohnak valley and repeated the route of G. O. Dyhrenfurth's 1930 expedition. Pauhunri (7125m) on the border of Chumbi valley was also climbed, by a new route from the NW. Dr. Kellas and C. W. F. Noyce climbed it first from the NE, from Chumbi valley. The early Everest expeditions passed through this area and these peaks were admired and climbed by them, but now only the resources of the Army can achieve such climbs in such a sensitive area. Kamet and Abi Gamin also received soldiers as at many times in the past. One of the routes of ascent was a new variation.

The apex of Indian climbing activity was the selection trials for the Everest team. In the semi-finals, Gangotri I and Kabru Dome were climbed and a sixty member team was finally selected to attempt Mana by the W face. It was a big exercise in bureaucracy which consumed much attention without much climbing. When the team was announced with a surprise leader, quite a few heaved a sigh of relief. As Churchill might have said, 'Never in the field of mountaineering were so many involved to select so few'.

In other areas the sport thrived. Kishtwar Shivling was the scene of a trendsetting climb by Venables and Renshaw. Peaks around the unknown Palphu Nala received a few ascents, Nandabhanar in open Garhwal was reconnoitred, and an Indian team penetrated the unknown and unvisited Lingti valley in E Spiti. They explored the upper gorge and observed the highest and virgin peak of Himachal Pradesh, Gyah (6794m), at close quarters. They climbed five small peaks in the vicinity of Shilla including a long traverse. Among others Arjun in Kishtwar was climbed by two extremely difficult routes by Poles. For those with enjoyment at around 6000m in mind there was plenty of activity.

While the mountaineers were busy on the mountains, the Indian Mountaineering Foundation celebrated its silver jubilee by organizing a Himalayan Tourism Meet in New Delhi. Founded in a small dusty room in the Ministry of Defence it has gradually progressed in stature and strength. At its new headquarters complex it boasts of a library, equipment store and a hostel. But what may interest mountaineers most is the compilation of all expedition reports of climbing the Indian Himalaya.

1984 The year 1984 will be most remembered for the opening of the Eastern Karakoram. This politically sensitive and highly restricted area was visited by three Army expeditions in the past. This year the Army was again active. Rimo (7132m) and seven surrounding peaks were climbed by the Army, a major effort on remote peaks. As recently as 1983 a few trekking parties visited the Siachen

glacier from Pakistan, whilst in 1984 a Japanese team was on its way to the Rimo peaks. An unnamed Saltoro peak (7428m) was climbed by a 54-member Army team as a selection trial for Everest 1985. Another attempt on Sia Kangri (7422m) at the head of the Siachen glacier was abortive but the plum was reserved for an Indo-Japanese expedition which made the first ascent of Mamostong Kangri (7516m). They approached over a high col and all the members reached the summit. The area promises a virtual mountaineering Olympiad and has been selectively opened at a special high royalty rate. With its political overtones, it will be in the limelight mountaineering-wise or otherwise for some time to come.

A Delhi-based team, traversed the unfrequented Rupshu district in SE Ladakh. They trekked around the beautiful Tso Morari lake and climbed Mata II. Cutting across barren Ladakhi plains, they brought back a most valuable photographic record. A two member team repeated W. H. Murray's climb of Uja Tirche in Garhwal by a different route. Tilly's Avalanche Peak in upper Garhwal was climbed by energetic students from Bombay, but Smythe's Nilgiri Parbat stopped a three member team. Small parties also climbed Jaonli, Bidhan Parbat and Kamet. Bandarpunch West (White Peak) which was attempted by J. T. M. Gibson and Tenzing Norgay in 1950, was climbed by a Bombay team after a 12km long glacial traverse. In Gangotri the difficult Sudarshan Parbat was climbed from the east by Indians by the route of the first ascent by the Indo-French team in 1981. The peak was also climbed by a new route, the SW ridge, by a Japanese team after attempts for the last two years. Perhaps the best climb was that of the W face of Bhagirathi III by a Spanish team. They went up a little to the left of the Fyffe-Barton line. Chandra Parbat and Sumeru Parbat were also climbed.

A major topic of discussion among the Indian mountaineering fraternity has been the Indian Everest expedition. Its successes included a woman on the summit, but there were shocking details of bribing Sherpas and strong competition amongst members. Brought up, as we are, believing in traditions of Sherpa loyalty, team spirit and all that, this was a shock. Perhaps for the first time the common Indian was having an insight into the true international game!

This year was singular for many accidents and deaths especially among Indian climbers. Two tough trekkers Lahiri and Ghosh attempted to reverse the Shipton-Tilman route of 1934 from Badrinath to Kedarnath. They left with a porter and were caught in a snowstorm never to be seen again. A climber fell to his death on Matri and others had to be rescued. The most tragic were the cases of cold injuries due to the poor quality of Indian equipment. Two boys underwent amputation and a young climber was crippled due to improper footwear. Their cases were not much helped by the lack of authoritative treatment for cold injury. A proper rescue system and proper education is needed but one must appreciate that Indians live in a close knit family group and death and injuries in sport, Indian or foreigner, are not at all understood. At most such accidents are dramatic enough for the local press to take some small interest in mountaineering.

For the future, let us hope that climbers are attracted more towards areas with smaller but difficult and enjoyable peaks. Lots of climbing awaits in Kishtwar, Dhauladhar, Chamba and parts of Kumaon.