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India 1996

Compared with 1995, when many new peaks were climbed, 1996 was quieter. The year was particularly noted for poor weather and plenty of rain, even in late October, which defeated many expeditions. According to Hindu customs and calendar, which is based on the phases of the moon and has 30 days, an extra month is added every three years to compensate for the difference of one day. Whenever this month happens to occur during the monsoon there are supposed to be heavy rains. 1996 had that extra month in the rainy season and it rained like never before. This may have been a coincidence but worth research. The good news is that an extra month in the rainy season is not due to return for the next 13 years. So climbers in 2010 beware!

Assam and Sikkim

The Assam and Sikkim Himalaya saw three expeditions. An army team from the Gorkhas climbed **Gori Chen (6858m)** which is now becoming popular and most of the teams climbing in this range seem to be attempting it. Another team from Calcutta climbed the **E Gori Chen (6422m)** in mid-October.

A British team, led by Doug Scott, operated in the **North Sikkim** area during October 1996. Though some teams have been climbing on the Zemu Glacier, the Britishers were the first to be allowed to **Chombu (6362m)** and the Donkhya La areas. The team, comprising Doug Scott, Lindsay Griffin, Phil Bartlett, Julian Freeman-Attwood, James Novak and Mark Bowen, was accompanied by liaison officer Col. Balwant Sandhu. In spite of consistent bad weather, they reached the saddle on **Gurudongmar (6715m)** and **Sebu La**, and climbed **Chombu E**. Peak fees were paid to both the Indian Mountaineering Foundation and the Government of Sikkim.

Garwhal and Kumaon

Two seven-thousanders were climbed in this area. A 9-member Korean team climbed **Chaukhamba II (7068m)**, situated at the head of the Gangotri Glacier. This peak received its first ascent in 1995 when an Indian team of instructors from the Nehru Institute of Mountaineering at Uttarkashi climbed its NE Ridge. The Koreans climbed a new route via the NW Ridge on 14 May. Cho Chul Hee and Lee Byeonju were the summiters. A Malaysian attempt on this peak in October was foiled by bad weather and retreated from 5300m.

The other high peak to be climbed was **Nanda Devi East (7434m)**. A South Korean team climbed the S Ridge via the Longstaff Col and reached the summit on 1 September. The summit was reached by Jeong Jeon-Mo, Su-Jin Lee, Nati Sherpa and Mingma Sherpa. The S Ridge route was first climbed by a Polish expedition in 1939. Since then this technically difficult route has been repeated many times. The Korean team was successful at the height of the monsoon, although they were on the mountain from July to September.

On the **Gangotri Glacier** several other peaks were attempted and climbed. Prominent among them was the first ascent of **Chaturangi III (6393m)** on 18 May by a Spanish team. Vidal Miguel Angel climbed it solo via the S and the SW Ridge. This peak lies in the **Khalipet Bamak**. The 10-member team approached the peak via Vasuki Tal.

Mana Parbat II (6771m) was climbed by a Korean expedition. The 10-member team operated in the area during August/September 1996. A high camp was established at 6200m from where B R Cho and J K Lee reached the summit of **Mana Parbat II** on 12 September 1996 by the W Ridge. This was the same route followed by the Indian team in 1995. Conditions on their main objective, **Mana Parbat I**, were unsuitable for an attempt.

Three teams failed on the popular **Bhagirathi III W Pillar** route. All were snowed out by late October weather. The same fate befell expeditions to **Kamet**, **Nanda Ghunti**, **Gangotri II**, **Trisul I** and **Thalay Sagar**.

The area north of **Changabang (6864m)** has recently been opened. After initial difficulties in obtaining clearance a British team attempted the magnificent N Face. Roger Payne, Julie-Ann Clyma, Brendan Murphy and Andy Perkins attempted this 1600m-high face during May/June 1996. The first two nights on the face were spent in precarious and uncomfortable sitting bivouacs. They then spent three nights perched in small tents in poor weather on the central icefield, before traversing towards the upper icefield. On this traverse Andy Perkins' health worsened, and they had to turn back from 6200m on 15 June. (*See MEF Reports, ref. 96/12.*) They plan to return next year.

Four peaks of the **Panch Chuli group** had been climbed by 1992. Only **Panch Chuli III (6312m)** remained unclimbed. This was attempted by an Indian team from Bombay this year. They approached this peak in the Pyunshani Valley during May 1996. Divyesh Muni, Cyrus Shroff, E Theophilus, Fulton Nazareth and Joe Menenzes made their approach from the true L of the Madkini river. The team attempted to reach the col between **Panch Chuli II** and **III** from the Panch Chuli Glacier. Advanced Base Camp was established at 4000m. They fixed 400m of rope to reach Camp 1 (5000m). Another 500m rope was fixed towards Camp 2 before an avalanche swept off E Theophilus while he was leading a pitch. He had a miraculous escape and survived virtually unhurt after falling almost 800m. The expedition was called off after the accident.

Himachal Pradesh

The same storm that had caused problems in the Garhwal also troubled the teams in the areas of Kinnaur, Spiti and Lahul. A team of bureaucrats climbed **Kullu Pumori (6553m)** at the head of the Bara Shigri Glacier. Seven people reached the summit in two groups on 20 and 22 July. A tragic and unusual accident claimed the life of deputy leader Premlal while returning. After reaching the summit with the second group, he was crossing the Karcha nala with Alka Sharma on 25 July 1996. Late in the evening, while they were crossing the nala with the help of a 6m fixed wire rope, Sharma got stuck. Premlal tried to help her but in the process fell in the river and was almost swept away. Sharma caught him and tied him to the wire rope but he still remained in the water up to his shoulders, and within a few hours he was dead. After hanging on the rope all night Sharma was rescued by other team members at 8.30am next day.

Elsewhere in the Himachal Pradesh there were some notable ascents and attempts. **Dharamsura** was climbed by a Japanese expedition, a team from Bengal climbed **Dongrimo** in the Losar nala, **Manirang** and **Gya** were attempted by a team from Bombay, and popular peaks like **CB13**, **CB14**, **KR4**, **Gangstang** and **Karcha Parbat** were climbed by Indian and foreign teams.

Gya (6794m), situated on the international border, was attempted by three teams. A Bombay and Delhi team followed the SW and N routes respectively: both were unsuccessful. An army team from the Dogra regiment claimed a first ascent, but their photos and report made it clear that they had climbed another peak and had not even approached Gya. Such misidentification was surprising – given the helicopters, latest maps and all the resources at their command. The matter was studied by J C Nanavatia from Bombay, popularly known as a ‘mountain inquisitor’, who took some convincing before rejecting their claim.

The best climbs in the area came from the **Parvati Valley**. An Indo-American team led by Alope Surin and Don Goodman enjoyed themselves enormously in the south of the valley, climbing five peaks up to 5805m. They also attempted the monarch of the area, **S Parvati Peak (6127m)**, which has not received many attempts. This expedition, sponsored by the Himalayan Club, took photographs of the whole area and their explorations of the side valleys should be a useful reference to all future teams. The Parvati Valley is now free from any restrictions.

After being denied permission elsewhere at the last moment, a British team decided to undertake the small but challenging **Kullu Eiger (5646m)** in the Parvati Valley. The team, consisting of Graham Little, Jim Lowther, and Scott Muir, was in the area during September 1996. The N Face was climbed in Alpine style between 19 and 21 September. During their earlier attempt, between 12 and 14 September, 300m rope was fixed on the first rock band. The total height of this face of rock and ice is 1900m. The team named the route *The Mask* and the estimated grade is Alpine TD. This was the first ascent of the peak and illustrates how much fun awaits on smaller peaks. (See *MEF Reports*, 96/24.)

Later in winter, in the Himachal, the 2-member team of Rajesh Gadgil and Harish Kapadia approached **Hansbeshan (5240m)**. This peak, almost Matterhorn-like in appearance, was attractive but too difficult in the prevailing conditions. They approached the mountain from Nachar, their roadhead, and entered the Dagar Ghatang nala. The peak is at the head of the valley and is a technically difficult proposition. This is the highest peak of the Gangdari dhar of the middle Himalaya. In the cold winter conditions they laboured to the base of the peak. The steep rocky massif was very impressive at close quarters. They reached a high point of 4270m and explored the approaches thoroughly before retreating. With the sky cloudless for more than a week, they could observe several small but sharp and difficult peaks. This area of the **Kinnaur Valley** could be a major playground for climbers if height is not the only consideration. It is completely like the Alps in character – easy to approach, no restrictions, base villages and rest houses available, and challenging climbs.

Ladakh and Zaskar

Apart from popular and routine climbs of **Nun** and **Kun** the only two other expeditions of note were on unnamed peaks in Zaskar. The first was a British

team on **Peak 6026m** on the Durung Drung Glacier. They were caught up in the bad weather in August and retreated from 5600m.

There was an unusual tragedy on an **Unnamed Peak (6318m)** near Shingo La, Zanskar. This beautiful peak, situated south of Shingo La, is sometimes referred to as **Ramjak Peak**. The 4-member team attempted this mountain during July and August 1996. The base camp was established at Chuminakpo (4660m) where they spent 15 days acclimatising by climbing many times above 5000m. Camp 1 was established on a small piece of level ground on the eastern slopes of the peak. On 20 August Makarand and Rajesh reached 5600m which was the high point of the attempt.

It was at Camp 1 that a member of the team, Dinesh Shertate, suddenly died on 22 August 1996 without showing any prominent symptoms. He was fit, experienced and had acclimatised for almost two weeks to the height of 5600m where he died. The team was unable to give him any medication because of the suddenness of his death. According to the post mortem report, he died of cerebral and pulmonary oedema. His death baffled and saddened many.

Later, Dr Charles Clarke explained that brain oedema does sometimes occur without any previous acute mountain sickness and at a relatively modest altitude, such as in this case. If the oedema occurs in a relatively robust part of the brain nothing very much happens, but in particularly sensitive areas, ie the central part of the brain which controls respiration, this can precipitate a coma and relatively sudden death. There is nothing much one can do to prevent it, and treatment would probably not be very useful, although the steroid drug Dexamethasone could be given in this situation.

Eastern Karakoram

An expedition of five Indian mountaineers from Bombay was organised to climb in the **Siachen Glacier** area under the leadership of Harish Kapadia. The area is currently a scene of conflict between the armies of India and Pakistan. We had applied to the Government of India almost a year in advance and obtained permission from them, from the Indian army, and from the Indian Mountaineering Foundation.

After delays the team entered the Terong Glacier valley, one of the subsidiary glaciers of the Siachen. To our great surprise and dismay, halfway through the expedition schedule, someone in the army hierarchy decided to cancel the permission and the team was called back and asked to vacate the area. Angry but helpless, we rushed down to the army base camp. Faced with many questions, loss of international credibility, heavy expenses and puzzled at the army's behaviour, we reluctantly returned to Bombay. Protests were lodged but no one has even bothered to reply!

Up to now Pakistan has allowed more than 18 expeditions to climb on this glacier, which has been in a disputed area under a military conflict for the past 12 years. India has managed to allow only one expedition (American, joint with the Indian army) on the upper glacier (**Teram Shehr** and nearby). One expedition, jointly led by Doug Scott and Commandant Sonam Paljor of the ITBP, was diverted by the army to the Terong Glacier. This expedition had many critical things to write about their experience. Now, an expedition consisting only of Indian mountaineers has been turned back unceremoniously.

It is a sad commentary that after 12 years of being on the glacier at such expense, even Indian mountaineers could not be allowed to climb there.

The military commitment has not solved the dispute to India's advantage, causing untold misery, expense and loss of lives. More civilian (Indian and foreign) expeditions to this range must be encouraged. This will go a long way towards establishing peace in the area and in the entire East Karakoram belt. The Government of India has already decided on this policy, but is being thwarted by the Indian army. Those intending to climb in the area in future should take these factors into consideration. Permission from the IMF is almost useless here.

The war on the glacier threatens an environmental disaster. The Siachen Glacier snout has receded by about 800m in the last 11 years. The glacier looked more barren and is without snow cover. The Terong glaciers, particularly the North Terong Glacier, seem to be receding fast and most of the ice *penitentes* and lakes have disappeared during the last decade. With so many humans living on the glacier the accumulation of garbage is appalling. Much of it is put into crevasses or dumped on rock and snow. The worst offenders are tetrapacks in which fruit juices are delivered on the glacier. These aluminium foils, which cannot be burnt or destroyed, are a major eyesore. Some serious thinking needs to be done about environmental concerns on the Siachen Glacier.

Bureaucracy Peak fees for climbing in India were revised steeply towards the end of the year. A special environment fee and deposit has been enforced. According to the report of the Mount Everest Foundation, only 13% of applicants to them were climbing in the Indian Himalaya (compared with almost 30% in Pakistan).

Books *Mountain of Happiness* by Brig D K Khullar describes the Indo-British army expedition to **Saser Kangri** group in 1988. *Spiti: Adventures in the Trans-Himalaya* by Harish Kapadia narrates his experiences in this remote area, spanning a decade and almost all the valleys. The second edition of *Ladakh: Cross-roads of Asia* by Janet Rizvi is also rather useful.

Sport Climbing India has entered the world of rock sport. Several climbing walls have been built and this year a National Championship was held at Delhi.

Deaths During the year Brigadier Gyan Singh (ret'd) passed away. He was responsible for establishing two of India's premier mountaineering training institutes at Darjeeling and Uttarkashi. He was leader of the first Indian Everest Expedition in 1960 and later did a lot to promote the sport. Ms Leela Dayal, who passed away in her nineties, was a collector and lover of Himalayan arts. Her knowledge will be sorely missed but her house continues to display the artefacts collected by her in a museum.

Mention must be made of several mountaineers of the older generation who passed away in Britain and had contributed to the early exploration of the Indian Himalaya. W H Murray (Garhwal-Kumaon, 1950) and C R Cooke (Sikkim) passed away this year. V S Risoe was an old India hand and was Hon Secretary of the Himalayan Club in Britain for many years.