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## Climbing with the Doon School

I was lucky enough to spend 1998 and 1999 on a teaching exchange at The Doon School in Northern Uttar Pradesh, India. The school is situated in the Doon valley, which rises in the Himalayan foothills, so it is perhaps hardly surprising that the school has been involved in mountaineering since its foundation in 1935. Indeed, the first headmaster, A E Foot, was a member of the Alpine Club, while other members on the early staff were J T M Gibson, J A K Martyn, later headmaster, and R L Holdsworth. 'Holdie', as he was known to generations of Doon School boys, held the high-altitude record for smoking a pipe, on the summit of Kamet after the first ascent in 1931. It was on the same expedition that Holdsworth established a ski-mountaineering record of 7162m by descending from Meade's Col.

The earliest recorded school mountaineering trip was in 1937 when Gibson, Martyn and Tenzing Norgay first visited Banderpunch (6316m) in Western Garhwal between the Tons and Ganges rivers. Holdsworth arrived at the school in 1940 and in 1942 he, Martyn and three boys – but without Gibson who had joined the Royal Navy – climbed in the Arwa Valley above Badrinath, reaching about 6000 metres. One of the boys was 'Nandu' Jyal, later to become Principal of the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute in Darjeeling, who died on Cho Oyu in 1958.

After the war, in June 1946, Holdsworth, Gibson, Tenzing Norgay and Dawa Thondup, with Nandu and another boy, reached 5900m on the SE Ridge of Banderpunch before the monsoon overtook them, forcing them to retreat. Banderpunch and the nearby Kalanag or Black Peak (6387m) became very much Doon School peaks. In 1950, a Doon School party, including boys who had, perhaps, 'stared enviously at the pictures so often displayed in Mr Gibson's classroom and gazed at maps where exciting contours reveal so much adventure', climbed the peak and also, possibly, Kalanag, although this may have been done later in the 1950s. The most recent visit by the school to Kalanag was in 1984. Dr S C Biala wrote:

June 9: Harshmani Nautiyal, the Nehru Institute of Mountaineering instructor, was guiding the summit party well. It was around 2.30pm, when everybody was very tired and standing in front of an overhang which seemed impossible to negotiate. Harshmani was planning something different. Immediately to the right was a small snow patch connecting the final ridge. But a little beyond that point was a hanging glacier and a drop of thousands of feet. Everybody was asked to make

an anchor. Harshmani moved forward, I was second in line followed by Arjun Mahey, Sunil, Divya and Kalu Singh, the Sherpa. After a pause, every individual moved one position ahead. After Harshmani reached the top, I was asked to move, while the first and third members were belaying. In this way everybody slowly reached the top of this hanging glacier, nervous and quite exhausted. But the peak itself was not very far, one simply had to follow the knee-deep snow ridge for another hour or so.

By 1950, Gurdial Singh, another Doon School master, was becoming active on the scene. In 1951, accompanied by Roy Greenwood, he led a school party which made a very rapid ascent of Trisul (7120m) in 16 days from Dehra Dun, which is pretty good going. That year also saw an ascent of the Matterhorn, by Doon School boys, in cricket boots, which prompted some raised eyebrows. A few years later Gurdial also led parties which attempted Kamet and were successful on Abi Gamin (7355m).

Jaonli (6632m) was another Garhwal peak that the school got to know well in the 1960s. Hari Dang, the leader, wrote:

It was while sleeping out on the small lawns of R V Singh's Landour house above Mussoorie on the ridge that we started taking an interest in Jaonli, an unclimbed 6600-metre mountain, which looked formidable from the south and was declared unclimbable by Gurdial. He advised against it, though we all toyed with the idea of climbing it. Looking at the map, the north face seemed gentler, and so in 1964 I got a group of boys together, took the Headmaster's [Martyn at that time] permission, and planned the first of the Jaonli expeditions. That attempt failed and so did the second, but they made it in 1966.

There seems to have been a lull in the 1970s, but with the arrival in the 1980s of Dr S C Biala, who claims to have written the only mountaineering textbook in Hindi, *Himalaya ki aur* ('towards the Himalaya') – near-annual expeditions restarted to Kalanag in 1984, Saife (6166m) and Koteswar (6080m) in 1987, Kokthang (6279m) in Sikkim in 1988, Bhagirathi II (6512m) in 1991 when Dr Biala's daughter Suchi was one of the summit party, perhaps making a first female ascent. In 1992 they went to Ladakh and climbed Stok Kangri (6254m) before returning to the Garhwal in 1995 and 1996 to attempt Trisul and climb Kedar Dome (6831m). In 1998 they climbed the popular trekking peak Island Peak, near Everest. In 1999, the objective chosen was a return to Bhagirathi II, first climbed by an Austrian party in 1938 and forming part of the Bhagirathi massif lying between the Gangotri and Chaturangi glaciers. It does not have an extensive glacier approach and is close to the roadhead at Gangotri. The party assembled at the school at the end of the summer term in May. Dr Biala had decided to

hand over the leader's role to a younger member of staff, Dr Aravindanabha Shukla, Aravind for short, who had been with Dr Biala on many school expeditions. Apart from myself, there was a young member of staff, Pankaj Joshi, who had some trekking but no mountaineering experience, and five boys, 17 or 18 years old. We also had two high-altitude porters, Vasudev Rawat and Mansingh, both very experienced, who came as guides. The school were a little wary of taking me on, because I was a good bit older than the rest of the party, but I managed to pass a step test run by the school doctor, which reassured them somewhat. Then there was the problem of the 'Inner Line'. Bhagirathi II was thought to be inside the Inner Line, so as a foreigner the school arranged to get me special clearance, but, it turned out, on the all-important map in Uttarkashi, the mountain fell outside the Line and the problem was solved.

We finally got away from school on 30 May. It was at about this stage that I realised I was part of a very old-fashioned expedition. We had porters, high-altitude porters, cooks and guides. The contrast with my last trip to the Himalaya, with Andrew Russell in 1977 on Sisne Himal in western Nepal, where we had no assistance above base camp, could not have been greater. But I was a guest on an Indian expedition, and one, moreover, with boys. The Himalaya with boys would be a rather different experience to being with them on British hills, or even the Alps.

We occupied Advanced Base Camp (ABC) on 4 June after a more or less straightforward approach. It became apparent at this stage, by comparing photographs from the 1991 expedition, that there was much less snow around this year. We were worried about the effect such a lack of snow could have on the route higher up. The 1938 route went up a subsidiary spur, then up the east face to the summit, a snow and icefield in gradient 45-55°. I am not clear exactly what the school party did in 1991. There is mention of a route to the south, via a col between Bhagirathi II and III, but this may have been rejected because of stonefall, in which case they followed the 1938 route and in the conditions that year both the spur and east face seemed well covered in snow. Aravind had not been on the 1991 climb, though Vasudev had, but before we left Dehra Dun he sketched out two possibilities, saying that the col route might be easier but more dangerous and sensibly leaving the decision until we could see for ourselves.

We could not see the east face clearly until we got to Camp 1 which was established at the base of the spur at 5200m on 6 June. This and the spur were largely free from snow and at first the face above seemed so too. However, through binoculars the grey aspect, which we thought was ice or rocks underlying a thin covering of snow, was in fact *penitentes* which I had not seen since the Hindu Kush in 1971. This was much more reassuring than rock. We occupied Camp 1 on 8 June after two more body-numbing carries and that evening two boys, Karn and Rohit, and I went glissading on the edge of a snow bowl just above Camp 1. It all helped acclimatisation.

Camp 2 was placed at the top of the spur at 5600m and we made our first carry there on 9 June. Karn, Sushant and I had got away first and at the top of the boulder field we were faced with climbing the spur or *penitente* field to the left. The spur looked unlikely, but we were halfway up the *penitentes* when we heard shouts from Vasudev on the spur; he knew a cunning way through the difficulties and rapidly overhauled us as we were dodging round the now man-sized towers. Camp 2 was clear of snow when we reached it and we waited for the others to arrive in fine weather. Descent was by Vasudev's route.

It was now decision time about routes and the summit party. There didn't seem to be much discussion about the col route; attention centred on following the 1938 route from Camp 2. Nine hundred metres of *penitentes*, then hopefully more snow than ice, and finally breaking through the rocks at the top. As well as the two guides, Aravind and a high-altitude porter, the summit party would include Sushant, Karn and Rohit. I decided I wouldn't go. One summit more or less wouldn't make much difference and I had a feeling about the mountain – lack of bottle if you like – but too many of my friends haven't come back. I calculated that four adults would be enough for three boys, but I would see them off from Camp 2 and wait for them to descend.

I persuaded Aravind that the boys really ought to get some practice with crampons and ropes before the summit attempt, as it became clear that, for some, it was the first time that they had worn crampons. So we went to a slope above Camp 1 and had a happy afternoon falling about in the snow. It seemed that above Camp 2 the guides would fix ropes, then the boys would jumal up behind. I wasn't quite sure how they were going to descend; there was no mention of abseiling and we didn't practise it.

We reached Camp 2 on 11 June in reasonable weather. I had two boys in my tent, which was probably one of the few in the Garhwal to have guys and pegs. Jinbahadur the cook also came to Camp 2 and I was hoping we might be going for the chapati altitude record, but over-indulgence the night before rather restricted his culinary skills. The plan was that the summit party would get up for a 3am start. However, in the night a huge gale blew up with driving snow – one of those where the gusts feel as if an express train is coming into the tent. Three o'clock came and went without much movement. We crawled out at dawn to fresh snow and wind-driven cloud. The flysheet to Aravind's tent had blown off and was now probably in Tibet.

We squeezed into what remained and discussed what to do. Aravind was desperately disappointed as we talked over the options. The summit was certainly too dangerous for the boys in these conditions; as well as the wind, there was spindrift blowing all over the place. But we could not stay at Camp 2 because soon there might not be any tents to stay in. Perhaps I could take the boys down, while Aravind and the guides went up? I was happy, but the guides weren't keen. We reached the decision that the party

would stay together. We must go down, even though time and food would be against making another ascent. Rather than adorn the summit with Doon School and Indian flags, an abandoned Doon School sock marked our high point.

Gagan Bhatia and I had to get back to Dehra Dun. Karn had already gone, but could something be salvaged from the party's failure on Bhagirathi? We studied the map. Thelu (6000m), on the spur above Bhujbasa leading up to the popular but not-so-straightforward Sudarshan Parbat (6507m), looked a possibility. Without losing too much height, it could be reached by diverting up the side of the Thelu glacier on the way down to Gaumukh. Aravind and Vasudev calculated that there was just enough food left for a rapid ascent. Gagan and I waved the Thelu party goodbye as our paths diverged on the descent. The next day, 15 June, they made a successful ascent of Thelu while we returned to the heat of Dehra Dun. Two days later we were reunited with them in Dehra and the smiles on their faces told of their success and another chapter in the story of the Doon School and the Himalaya.

**Further reading:**

Much of the historical information comes from *The Doon School Sixty Years On*, New Delhi, 1996. See also Jan Baibicz's *Guide to the Peaks and Passes of the Garhwal Himalaya*, Alpinistyczny Klub Eksploracyjny, Sopot, 1990.