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JOHN JACKSON

## Kangchenjunga Jubilee ~ Indian Style

*The Himalayan Club was founded on 17 February 1928 and despite the radical changes following the partition of India in 1947 it has continued to flourish, with honorary local secretaries in 11 locations in India and in 14 other countries around the globe. In 2003 it celebrated its 75th Anniversary.*

*Nanda Devi was the highest peak in the British Empire, but when in 1975 Sikkim became India's 22nd province, Kangchenjunga, so wonderfully visible from the popular hill resort of Darjeeling, became India's highest peak. Well ahead of time, the Himalayan Club resolved to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of its first ascent on 25th May 1955 by Charles Evans' Expedition. Several surviving members of the team received letters of invitation from the Club to attend seminars in February 2005 in Mumbai and Kolkata (formerly Bombay and Calcutta) followed by a few days in Darjeeling.*

*The moving spirit behind this generous invitation was our friend and honorary AC member Harish Kapadia. In the event, three of the 1955 team were able to accept, accompanied by their wives: George and Susan Band, Norman and Enid Hardie, John and Eileen Jackson. John Jackson wrote this account of the visit just a few months before he died on 2 July 2005. An obituary of 'Jacko' will appear in the next AJ.*

Early morning Mumbai – temperature rising to 85 degrees. Quickly we were transported to Panchgani (Five Hills), a cooler hill resort at 1200m in the Western Ghats. Harish Kapadia had written the guidebook to the area, *Trek the Sahyadris*. This revealed that the rugged scenery, eroded over millions of years, was made up of some of the oldest rocks in the world capped by basalt lava flows. It was a trekking and rock-climbing playground for the Mumbai section of the Himalayan Club.

This time it was the hill fort of Kenjalgad (1302m) that was the focus of attention, with an ascent designed to celebrate the 50 years since Kangchenjunga was first climbed. Well planned. One group, including George and Susan Band, made the two-hour walk to the top, whilst the halt and the lame, Norman Hardie and myself on sticks, plus our wives Enid and Eileen, stayed down below. Chaperoned by Veneeta Muni, we were able to visit a huge earthen dam enclosing a lake supplying water to many towns and cities in the area of Pune (Poona). Below the dam was an ancient Shiva temple; peaceful and with little eagles, weaver birds, long-tailed drongos and a small minivet adding interest to the scene.

We returned to Mumbai the following day refreshed and ready for the three days of seminars to follow. The British Council provided the first

day's evening venue at the Mittal Tower. Tanil Kilachand opened proceedings and I gave the Kaivan Mistry Memorial lecture. Kaivan was a young and enthusiastic mountaineer, a member of many expeditions. In 2000, he was drowned in the ice-cold river issuing from the Siachen glacier. Eileen and I were in Nubra in Ladakh at the time but didn't know of the tragedy. Back in Leh we met a distraught Harish Kapadia and his team. This then was the memorial talk for Kaivan. For me it was a touching experience, the more so when Kaivan's mother spoke from the platform and expressed the hope that more young people would go out and experience the wonderful environment of the Himalaya.

The second day opened with an address by the Governor of Maharashtra, Shri S M Krishna. George Band then gave a splendidly illustrated talk, 'Kangchenjunga Revisited', describing the 1955 climb as well as later excursions in Sikkim including an abortive attempt to emulate Douglas Freshfield's 1899 circumnavigation of the Kangchenjunga massif. After tea, the film *The Elusive Mountain Gya* was shown, featuring an ascent led by Motup Chewang when the discovery of a piton driven into the summit rock revealed an earlier first ascent. In the final talk of the day, Harish gave a survey of the history and politics of Sikkim, backed up by many fine photos.

All three of us 1955 veterans contributed to the final day of seminars. When a film was cancelled, George Band stepped in with a beautifully illustrated talk of trekking and climbing in Bhutan in 1991. He neglected to say that Susan had also been on the trip, whereupon all three ladies were called to the platform to speak briefly about their experiences and were then given a standing ovation. Norman Hardie's slides, showing the construction of the Silver Hut below the Mingbo La at 5800m, were outstanding. He went on to illustrate early attempts on Makalu and ended with dramatic slides taken on the first ascent of Ama Dablam in 1961.

Col Ashok Abbey, Principal of the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute in Uttar Kashi, revealed a keen interest in history as well as mountain training, with an overview of K2 from its early exploration to present day attempts on many different routes. I gave the final illustrated talk, describing a journey from Everest to Kangchenjunga in 1954, partly through Tibet. The closing vote of thanks was by the Vice President of the Club, Tanil Kilachand.

The reception in Kolkata on 8 February was as enthusiastic as in Mumbai. An 80-page souvenir booklet celebrating the first ascent of Kangchenjunga was presented to each of us. The Himalayan Club is to be congratulated on this fine publication, which includes reprints of *Himalayan Journal* articles from the 1920s through to the present day. It opens with a message of support from A P J Kalam, President of the Republic of India, stressing the benefits of adventure tourism in schools so that young people may become aware of the Himalaya and its varied environment. The value of this type of experience was evident when Apurba Battacharya gave a splendid account



11. Sherpas of Darjeeling host Kangch climbers and their wives on Observatory Hill, 2005. (George Band collection)

of the first ascent in 2004 of Tingchen Kang, a 6000m peak near Pandim in Sikkim. All nine of the team were young and enthusiastic members of the Kolkata section of the Club. They showed what could be achieved with good leadership and teamwork.

A very full programme for the Kolkata day included talks by Harish and myself and a joint presentation by George and Norman entitled 'Kangchenjunga Climbed, 1955'. Col Narinder Kumar showed slides of only the second ascent of Kangchenjunga, made in 1977 by the Indian Army via the north-east spur. These were very revealing of the difficulties faced by the historic German expeditions of 1929 and 1931. Another highlight of the day was the talk by Dorjee Lhatoo, 'Round Kangchenjunga', describing the fourth circuit of the massif, completed in November 1992. His description of the move across the Nepalese border into India when the expedition was nearly fired upon by their own Indian troops was most dramatic. Meher Mehta, who, with his two committees, had worked so hard organising the event, gave the final vote of thanks.

Moving on to Darjeeling, we stayed at the old Windamere Hotel owned by the Tenduf La family. Very little had changed throughout the 50 years we have known the hotel. Sadly, Mrs Tenduf La, who would have been 100 years old in March 2005, died in November 2004. But it was good to see the old values are being kept up and that the family is still going to celebrate her birthday.

Gloomy cloud cover did not auger well for our hopes of seeing Kangchenjunga, so off we went to the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute. Major Dhillon, the Principal, made us welcome and showed us round the impressive exhibits of the early Everest mountaineers and their equipment. Our next visit was to the home of ever hospitable Nawang Gombu and his wife Sita. The room filled quickly and soon it seemed as if the whole Tenzing family was present. Talking to Eileen, Susan and Enid was Jamling Tenzing, Tenzing Norgay's eldest son, who in 1996 reached the summit of Everest and described his experience in *Touching My Father's Soul*. It was also good to see the youngest son, Dhami, who with his wife and other children was enjoying Jamling's visit to Darjeeling. Dorjee Lhatoo joined in the conversation along with Gombu and his daughter Yangdu. There was a general 'buzz' all round and the hours sped away.

The following day was clear for rest and shopping but in the afternoon a visit from Pem Pem, Tenzing's daughter, proved very entertaining. She described a trek she had made with her son, Tashi Tenzing, through the Karta Valley to her father's birthplace. She pinpointed every stopping place on the route, by dotting the air in front of her, thus producing a 'map' which we could follow well to the east and south of Everest's northern base camp. It was a magical performance by a delightful lady.

The final morning of 13 February was clear with a blue sky. Would we see the Kangchenjunga massif at last? We did! Jannu and Rathong stood out boldly, then the summits of Kabru began to show. Further east, Pandim

and Tingchenkang were impressive. But the 'Five Treasures' were playing hide and seek so that only fleetingly did they show themselves. It was enough. In the early morning, streams of people were making the ascent of Observatory Hill for a special puja. For the Hindus, it was to Durga, a consort of Shiva, and for the Sherpas, a celebration of the Buddhist New Year. Dorjee Lhatoo, Gombu and Sita with their daughter Yangdu, led us up the long flight of steps. The reception there was overwhelming. A huge parachute tent had been erected and at one end a banner proclaimed:

1<sup>st</sup> Ascent of Kanchanjunga  
 "50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary"  
 Sherpas of Darjeeling Felicitate the Climbers

Here was the whole Sherpa community expressing their appreciation of all mountaineers with whom they had shared days of endeavour, hardship and friendship on the mountains. We three represented thousands from countries far and wide. It was a touching moment and the Sherpas had got it just right.

'Have some chang!' Cups full to the brim were handed to us and quickly refilled, if we were not careful, or followed by chasers of rakshi. A never-ending stream of Sherpas and Sherpanis came to offer more, and to place gold and silver threaded katas around our necks. Ominously, a 20 gallon drum of chang stood nearby, already filled to overflowing. Somebody was going to do some serious drinking on this, the Sherpas' New Year's Day.

Dorjee and Gombu began to bring Sherpas and Sherpanis to meet us. Here was the youngest sister of Ang Tsering who chuckled happily when I told her he had been my sirdar in 1954. Now who was this with such a familiar face? 'He is the son of Gyalgen Mikjun,' (Big Eyes) said Dorjee. He was a foot shorter, but the face was identical to his father's who had been with me on Nilkanth in 1952. Where was Ang Nima, we asked. Sadly he died some years ago and his family had gone away. It was the same answer for Ang Dawa V, son of Ang Tsering III. But Kanche is still living in Namche Bazar, said Gombu, and Ang Norbu, who had carried to Camp VI on Kangchenjunga in 1955, is still living in Pangboche.

At last the greetings came to an end and we strolled through the main area, where the pujas were still being celebrated. There was a riot of colour and a great feeling of happiness. Thousands of varied-coloured prayer flags were strung up high into the sky. These Lung-Ta 'Wind Horses' fluttering in the breeze were sending their messages of peace and goodwill around the world.

The kindness and enthusiasm of all Himalayan Club members was exceptional. We who were invited to take part in the Indian celebrations of the 50th anniversary of the first ascent of Kangchenjunga will remember with gratitude the friendship and the exceptional generosity of our fellow Club members who were our hosts.