

FOURTH EDITION

HARISH KAPADIA

HIGH HIMALAYA UNKNOWN VALLEYS

Foreword by
Sir Chris Bonington, C.B.E.



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GLOBETROTTER ADVENTURE GUIDE: TREKKING AND
CLIMBING IN THE INDIAN HIMALAYA

A PASSAGE TO HIMALAYA (Editor)

Call No. 910.954

Acc. No. 3957

1st Edition 1993

2nd Edition 1994

3rd Edition 1997

4th Edition 2001

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ISBN 81-7387-117-5

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Published by M.L. Gidwani, Indus Publishing Company
FS-5, Tagore Garden, New Delhi 110027, and printed at
Elegant Printers, Mayapuri Indl. Area, New Delhi

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Foreword

You get to know someone especially well on an expedition, particularly in the event of a crisis. On Panch Chuli in 1992, we certainly had our share of crises, when Stephen Venables had an eighty metre fall while descending Panch Chuli V. In the subsequent rescue, working with Harish Kapadia as co-leader of the expedition, we built a strong friendship based on trust, respect and enjoyment of each other's company. In spite of the crisis, it was one of the happiest expeditions I, or for that matter all the other members of the team, had ever undertaken.

Harish Kapadia, as this book shows, has an extraordinary knowledge and experience of the Himalaya. He is a mountaineer in the classic mould, both traveller and pioneer, with a deep interest in the history, legends and people of the Indian Himalaya. As editor of the *Himalayan Journal* he has been able to bring this breadth of knowledge to make the *Journal* the most full and authoritative channel of Himalayan information, available today.

Some of the most attractive mountains in the Himalaya are amongst the lower peaks in the 6000 metre range. The Indian Himalaya is particularly rich in this respect with a wealth of hidden valleys, superb peaks and complex glaciers that have barely been explored by mountaineers. In his story he takes us off the beaten track to places where few climbers have ever been and where, if you want to follow in his footsteps, you would probably have the mountains to yourself.

Climbing with Harish is a delight. His sharp, yet gentle sense of humour, helps keep the team together. He has been climbing and exploring with a group of friends from Bombay for the last twenty years; he has also employed the same group of porters from Manali and Kumaon area, inspiring in them a strong loyalty. He is also profoundly fond of his food. On Panch Chuli, the cuisine was excellent, and the approach to the mountain a delight. A few days in Bombay

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were spent in exploring the best of Gujarati cuisine, whilst making final arrangements for the expedition, and on the journey through India to the foot of the mountains, every opportunity was taken to savour the best of regional cooking.

His planning and organisation are superb. He has that deft touch, where the team members are barely aware of all the work that has been done, everything runs so smoothly. *High Himalaya Unknown Valleys* takes the reader on a journey that is both delightful and immensely informative; as enjoyable as the expedition I was lucky enough to share with Harish.

CHRIS BONINGTON

Preface to the Fourth Edition

WANDERLUST

*When I was a little lad-
Sometimes I feel it still-
A yearning strange I always had,
To see beyond a hill.
What would I find?
It seemed, I must reach the other side.
And so, for many, many years,
I travelled far and wide.
Seeking things beyond the hills,
Seeking something new,
But always on the other side,
More hills came into view.
So I travelled on and on
And like the rolling stone,
No moss I gathered on my back
Nor much else did I own.
In my own home now I sit
And pass my idle time,
By thinking of the things I've seen
And putting them in rhyme.
But sometimes I grow restless,
My heart with longing fills,
And once again I get the urge
To see beyond the hills.*

—Ernest Jack Sharpe

I started trekking in the Himalaya as a young boy. What started as a curiosity to see beyond the hills developed into a passion. Soon it became a necessity for existence. Today it is a way of life I cannot do without.

This book covers treks and climbs in the Himalaya undertaken by me from 1969 to 1991. They have been arranged according to the areas; for chronological order see Appendix II at the end. My second book *Meeting the Mountains* covers the other trips which I have undertaken. The popularity of this book, requiring a fourth edition, shows that the interest in the Himalayan trekking and climbing is shifting towards the unknown. The new areas in the Himalaya, which I was lucky enough to explore, are now attracting many mountaineers. The sport of climbing higher peaks will certainly go on, but at the other level these middle-height peaks will form the basis for strong climbing pleasure of the future. This would be a healthy development for the sport. The next millennium will attract more and more people to these lovely unexplored areas.

In the past volumes of the *Himalayan Journal* where most of these articles first appeared, many photographs and panoramas were printed to go with them. There are 31 photographs in this edition to enliven the accounts. More photographic reference is available in the *Himalayan Journals*.

It is intended to prepare a separate book for each region with pictorial and historical references based on my climbs and travels in each of the Himalayan regions. This would allow for detailed references to be included and more complete coverage. The first series of such books are already in print, *Spiti: Adventures in the Trans-Himalaya* and *Across Peaks and Passes*—as series of four books, covering the Indian Himalaya.

My grateful thanks to the Himalayan Club for permission to use material from the *H.J.* The line drawings in the book are specially prepared by my wife Geeta Kapadia. Most of the sketch maps were originally drawn for the *H.J.* by late A.P. Samant.

It is an honour to have the Foreword written by Sir Chris Bonington, C.B.E., a family friend and someone I shall always admire.

Many climbers, reviewers and researchers have shown a keen interest in this book. As the reviews mention, it was well received by the critics as well as the general readers. I am grateful to all of them.

Since the expeditions covered in this book, till 1991, I have already undertaken twelve more trips to the Himalaya (till 2000). Like the quote above I still have that urge to see beyond the hills.

HARISH KAPADIA

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All photos by Harish Kapadia.

My Himalaya: An Introduction

The fact that many a man who goes his own way may end in ruin means nothing. The only meaningful life is a life that strives for the individual realisation, absolute and unconditional of its own particular law.

—Carl Jung

For me, the attraction for the mountains developed slowly. There was no love at first sight. Living in a congested area of Bombay till I was 28, I could have missed the mountains totally. The area, like the city, was noisy, crowded and polluted. But all of this perhaps acted as a catalyst that drew me to the freedom of the hills, for a little distance away were the hills of the Western Ghats, or the Sahyadris. A strange attraction developed for this range since my young days.

I was almost 15 when the second series of rock climbing training courses were to be held near Bombay in 1960. I enrolled for the four-day course. Nawang Gombu, who was to go on to climb Everest twice, in 1963 and 1965, was my instructor. He was lively and tough. We were three students under him. During the course he grilled us thoroughly, so much so that I was scared of high, serious rocks for a long time. But the foundations for very safe and sound techniques were laid. The other instructor with him was Ang Kami. With his liveliness and exuberance, he became a good friend instantly. Thus my grooming as a mountaineer started with these two famous Sherpas, for Ang Kami was to become the youngest person to climb Everest in 1965.

To join this course there was a briefing. I entered the room as a young school boy, and a man who sat in immaculate Indian dress

stared at me through his light handsome eyes. It was soon evident that he was thorough and enthusiastic beyond his mild-mannered talk in Gujarati. This was my first introduction to Jagdish Nanavati. He was the inspiration behind organising these training courses. With his Gandhian upbringing, he had high values and organising powers, both of which rubbed onto the youngsters who came into contact with him. I was continually guided by him all along in the future years.

As I entered college, my first trip to the Himalaya was undertaken. This was in 1963 and I was 18 years of age. Little did I realise then that till the age of 48, as of now, I would visit the Himalaya as many times as my present age; trekking, climbing and exploring. As I stood in front of the Pindari glacier then and looked at Nanda Devi, a deep attraction was developing. For the next four years I continued to trek to the different areas of Kumaon, Garhwal and Nepal during the summer vacations. This was the most enjoyable period. With little planning one could walk out with an old rucksack, a blanket and a leaky tent hired from a club. From the crowded areas of Bombay, this feeling of freedom was total.

For the first six years, I had one constant companion, Zafar Vasi, who studied with me in school and college. He loved to be out in the hills and the light-hearted company we shared made the mountains most enjoyable. He loathed any form of organisation or training. He refused to use ropes or any gadgets, proudly calling himself a 'pure' trekker. He continues trekking regularly in the local hills and in the Himalaya today in his pure style.

On our first trek to the Himalaya, Zafar and myself had carried a square tea-chest to pack kitchen utensils. This was loaded on a mule. On the second day of our trek, the mule was disturbed by the noise made by the utensils in this tea-chest. The box was dropped and would have been broken but for a middle-aged man who came from the opposite direction and saved it. We hired him to carry the box the rest of the way. This was Pansingh, the sturdy local porter. For the next 15 years he accompanied me wherever I went in the Himalaya. When he was too old, his younger relatives and people from his village came along. On my last trip in 1992, the two Harsinghs who carried the loads were there because of this providential meeting with Pansingh in 1963. These sturdy villagers from Kumaon have served me very well and added to the success by their care and trust. If a letter is sent to them a month or so in advance, they will appear at the appointed place in Delhi to accompany my team anywhere. In 1985

between three of them they literally carried the entire expedition luggage after ten Ladakhi porters had deserted the team. Later, I added Pasang Bodh and Yog Raj as two high-altitude supporters, from Manali, Himachal Pradesh. Both have climbed many peaks with me. These proud and sturdy chaps have contributed to the fun and success in large measure.

In 1992 on Panch Chuli, one of them, Harsingh Jr. had climbed bravely in oversized boots to help in the rescue of Stephen Venables. As a reward, the British wanted to sponsor him for a training course in India or in Europe. When repeatedly asked whether he would go, his only reply was: 'At present I want to go back to my sheep. They have been unattended for a long time now'.

In 1964, I joined the 'Basic Training' course at the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute, Darjeeling. Sherpa Wangdi Norbu was my instructor. He was the champion of Lionel Terray. He talked of his first ascent of Jannu, of being on Makalu and Annapurna. With the Swiss team on Kedarnath he was left alone for a night after being injured while the rescue was being organised. He had cut his throat to die, thinking that he was deserted. Along with the training, these talks from him and other famous Sherpa instructors laid the foundations to my knowledge about the history of mountaineering and about other mountaineers.

Along with Wangdi, Nawang Gombu and Ang Kami, now my good friends, were there to make the joy complete. As we returned from the 45-day course at Yoksum, the Indian pre-Everest team met us. This team included all the would-be famous names in Indian mountaineering. The selection was done then for the 1965 Indian Everest expedition team, when 9 Indians reached the summit. Capt. M.S. Kohli, Col. N. Kumar and others I met there as a young student, continue to be my friends today. Raymond Lambert, the famous Swiss mountaineer, was present as a personal guest of Tensing Norgay. He offered us whisky from his stock if we presented a damn good campfire. No doubt we students won the bet on that memorable night, which ended late with many sprawling near the embers and Dorjee Lhatoo singing a *gaza*. The friendships made then, as with Col. Prem Chand (of Gorkhas), have lasted me a life time.

As most Indian mountaineers are advised to, I went for the 'Advance Training' course in 1967. This included climbing a peak and organising an expedition. I was a student at the newly formed Nehru Institute of Mountaineering. After many days of training, we

attempted Bhagirathi II (6512 m), climbed only once, by the Austrians in 1938. Finally, Vallabh Meghpara (who unfortunately died in 1968 while rock climbing near Bombay) and I reached the base of the last pinnacle, led by instructor Jamait Sinh Rana. The two of us sat down at the base as Rana climbed unroped. His hands touched the final slope when we saw him last. He suddenly fell to the snows below but landed safely. We could have easily gone up again. But not being sure that this was the summit, we retreated with him, badly shaken. To our regret, when we saw a picture of the first Indian summiters of this peak a year later, they were standing atop the same pinnacle. We had missed the ascent by 30 m of easy ground.

Next year, the University of Bombay organised an expedition to Kumaon. As the Chairman of their Hiking and Mountaineering Society, I was an organiser and member of the team. After various struggles I was standing on the peak Ikualari (6059 m) on 29th May 1968. This was the first time that I stood on a Himalayan summit. As I looked at the Nanda Devi peaks again from the summit, the resolve to climb was firmer.

During the decade of the 1960s, Indian mountaineering was under the patronising tutelage of the government. There were only a few expeditions which had not depended on government grants and support. The Indians had climbed Everest in 1965 but there was not much enthusiasm for the smaller peaks or newer areas. Social attitudes treated the activity as almost suicidal. Consequently, a successful mountaineer was treated as a hero and he in turn looked for promotion in his job and other rewards. Thus many were trained at the courses but without a government sponsorship through the Indian Mountaineering Foundation, not much was being done. The I.M.F. 'selected' a team on a 'national' basis. This was something I always wanted to avoid and, instead wished to climb with my own group. With this thought, I have all along avoided the large sponsored expeditions. That meant smaller peaks and new areas within limited means. It has been fun all the way and brought excellent results too.

The first such venture was to the Sunderdhunga valley. Jagdish Nanavati supported the plans as a friend but was reluctant to sponsor the team as the President of the Climbers Club, Bombay, to which we all belonged. To the Club, mountaineering was a gentleman's sport where one had to spend from one's own pocket and not through others. Finally, we young members won the arguments against the almost Victorian attitudes, and the earliest sponsored expedition was

born to attempt peak Tharkot (*see Article 11*).

Zerksis Boga and myself had trekked and climbed regularly in the hills of the Sahyadris. As he lay injured, near death, on Tharkot, I had stayed with him. Once down he recovered and we formed a strong bond of friendship. We went on most trips together till 1985 when he migrated to the U.S. for greener pastures. With his lean and strong frame he put in excellent climbs like Chiring We and Sudarshan Parbat, the former not repeated yet. Everything seemed possible with Zerksis. He was the one who came down the crevasse to rescue me in 1974. During the two-man trip to North Sikkim in 1976 (*see Article 13*) we hardly talked to each other. The beauty was staggering and we as friends knew each other too well.

After the tragic accident on Bethartoli Himal and its aftermath (*see Article 4*) we gave up active association with the Climbers Club. It was a blessing in disguise, seeing it with the benefit of hindsight. Jagdish became active in the Himalayan Club and today he is the longest serving Hon. Secretary of the Club with international membership. With other friends like Vijay Kothari and Dr. Pravin Shah, I formed our own club 'The Mountaineers, Bombay' in 1973. With the independence that it gave us in the Indian mountaineering set up, it continues to support all our plans. When the window was closed, doors were flung wide open!

The injury on Devtoli in 1974 (*see Article 7*) almost crippled me. Walking for two years on crutches was an experience which had a human face. Suddenly, I was noticing all the persons walking with crutches on the road. The human face of a hectic city like Bombay was seen during these trying times. Friends and well-wishers supported me through it all. What I have learnt in these two years of human kindness is a rare treasure. I often wonder how on earth I continued with the Himalayan climbing after this. Losing a friend in rock climbing accident in 1968, falling in an avalanche in 1969, facing the tragedy of the deaths of four friends in 1970 and a serious personal injury in 1974. The Himalaya were testing me.

In 1977 we tasted the first failure. An earthquake, poor teamwork and difficult terrain summarily defeated us on the Kalabaland glacier. But returning there in 1979 (*see Article 10*) was another success story.

Till now all my trips had been to Kumaon, Garhwal, Nepal and Sikkim, I had not seen the trans-Himalayan barrenness. This prompted me on a trek to Ladakh and Zaskar (*see Article 23*). With just one other companion, Bhupesh, we crossed many valleys and covered 520

kms in a long push. It was a wonderful experience and later on I was to visit these areas many times. I had tasted my first *momoes* and Tibetan tea.

During the late 1970s, I ventured to write a guide book *Trek the Sahyadris*. This was the first and only book giving routes in the local hills, forts and pinnacles. Based on my personal experiences, it was an authentic record of the area where none was available, particularly as all the maps were (and still are) restricted. It became an instant success and by now the fourth edition is in print. Thrity Birdy had worked hard on this book. While I was injured and was on crutches for two years she encouraged me with the writing and supported me. She was a reputable mountaineer herself. It is only due to her untimely sudden demise in 1979 that we did not climb together more in the Himalaya.

The first writing and publishing experience led to much more. Soli Mehta, Hon. Editor of the *Himalayan Journal (H.J.)* was proceeding abroad for a few years. The Journal needed a mountaineer editor. I was approached, with R.E. Hawkins as the assistant editor. Hawk had a life long publishing and printing experience but he insisted on playing the assistant in the mountaineering journal. I took over the editorship after persuasion from Jagdish, and now *H.J.* has become a part of my life. With Hawk and Soli (later on his return) I forged a good bond and learnt a lot and enjoyed a lot. Both passed away in 1989 within three weeks of each other. *H.J.* has been hard work since their deaths.

But, again, fate played its hand. A French student named Jean Rene Odier came to Bombay for studies. I met him accidently and we trekked together in the Sahyadris. This association led to the first international expedition for me. We joined the French to climb Sudarshan Parbat (6507 m) and other peaks (*see Article 5*). Though Jean himself could not join us, his brother, Bernard Odier, was my co-leader and we continue our association to date.

Like the French, many others visited Bombay over the years. The earliest visitor was Ian Clough on his way to Annapurna South face in 1970. During the week-long stay, he imparted training and exposed us to the international scene. Unfortunately, he died on the expedition or else the first Indo-British expedition for me would have been much earlier. There was a chance to interact with famous names. Noel Odell spent a day at home in 1974 and saw my slides of Nanda Devi, the first views of the peak for him after his first ascent in 1936. When

asked why he did not write an autobiography, his reply was: 'Let's say I am not a public entertainer. My experiences are too personal for me'. There were many others, Heinrich Harrer, T.H. Braham, Doug Scott and Aamir Ali, just to name a very few. And of course most of the members of the joint international expeditions I participated in, stayed with us. My balcony has housed almost ten Everest-summiters, to cool them in hot Bombay! These visitors shaped ideas and we shared a lot of camaraderie.

Somehow I have been more fascinated by the unknown valleys and areas than with climbing peaks. Many peaks were climbed only to obtain a better perspective of the unknown terrain. In this age of satellite photography, there are areas in the Indian Himalaya which are not seen by human eyes at close quarters. One such valley was Lingti in eastern Spiti. We explored it partly in 1983 and finished the explorations in 1987 (see *Articles 19 and 20*). These explorations were some of the most satisfying trips I have undertaken.

On these later trips my main companion was Muslim Contractor. We had trekked together in Darma valley and had enjoyed crossing the difficult passes. Now in these trans-Himalayan areas he came into his own. For such difficult, long explorations, there is no better company than Muslim. When in his element (with his pipe), he can turn a depressing barren trans-Himalayan terrain into green pastures. In fact he enjoyed barrenness so much that later in Kumaon he was heard complaining about the greenery of the *bugiyals*. After the death of Hawk and Soli, Muslim joined me as the Assistant Editor of the *Himalayan Journal* and the *Newsletter*. We have enjoyed almost a decade of mountaineering and editing together now.

I have been following the Scottish Himalayan expedition (1950) routes to the different areas of Kumaon and Garhwal. Working with the *H.J.* one liked to follow its pages and the trips recorded in it. In 1988 it was Girthi ganga (see *Article 2*) exactly on the Scottish route, with some variation in the valleys thrown in. When we were rained-out on Danu Dhura, we were following the route suggested in *H.J.* Vol. XIII, going backwards to the route suggested by Hugh Ruttledge in *H.J.* Vol I! Though we failed, the pass was reached in 1992 by another team from Bombay. It has been a pleasure to suggest such plans to other teams and give support by way of information and photos. Many new areas that we opened have been visited again and based on the knowledge brought in, many teams have flourished. My second book *Exploring the Hidden Himalaya* was written by Soli Mehta and

me in 1988, to celebrate the Diamond Jubilee of the Himalayan Club. It contains most of the unknown areas and peaks explored by me. This passing on of knowledge and experience is a satisfying, continuing tradition.

During the 1970s and 1980s, Indian mountaineering continued to grow, but not always in the desired directions. The pre-occupation with huge expeditions, Everest and 'nationally selected' teams continued. Some expeditions landed up with bureaucratic problems and some with quarrels. They had nothing to do with the previous history or future vision. But there were a few which broke new ground. More than giant teams, my respect will always be for those small teams which climbed in a new area. With climbers of many nationalities approaching the Himalaya, many challenging climbs were undertaken. But Indians took a minor part in these changes. Being independent of the official scene I was lucky to interact with many of them.

Some of the smaller peaks and areas of Himachal Pradesh are easily accessible. Here I could combine business with pleasure. Col. Jimmy Roberts used to finish his Friday evening army parade at Dalhousie cantonment and reach the foothills of the Dhauladhar by car for the night. I tried my 'cloth merchant version' from Bombay. I could arrange a business visit to Amritsar on a Wednesday. Next day a car would drop me at Dharamsala, 4 hours away. Friday and Saturday I could trek and climb up to the different passes of Dhauladhar. Coming down on Sunday, a taxi would ensure catching the night train to Delhi. A Monday morning flight would see me at my shop by noon, turning me into a cloth merchant again. Expanding the idea into a week long trip, a lot was done quite economically (*see Articles 14 to 18*). It could be a 'hurry hurry' trip to Kulti, a winter excursion to Kailash or Yada or a sojourn to Kinnaur. All pleasures were possible, who says that the days of the Raj are over!

Eastern Karakoram has been opened to mountaineers since 1984. But it had always been difficult to organise expeditions there. I had experienced the area in 1980. Going there with the British in 1985 (*see Article 24*) we had a lot to prepare. But it was worth it, as the final results were brilliant, and because of the friendships we made with Stephen Venables, Victor Saunders and Dave Wilkinson. On the Siachen glacier trip one of the chief achievements of the Indian team, apart from climbing, was to teach these Britons how to eat mangoes properly, in Indian style. If I had ever eaten mangoes like them in my childhood and spoiled my shirt, like Dave, I would have received a

serious scolding. Dave continued to wear his white shirt with mangoes spread over it for the duration of the expedition. This inspired Victor to write about the different techniques to eat mangoes in his prize-winning book. A new happy chapter of my life, with the British, was beginning. Stephen visited Bombay few times later and became a familiar name to Bombay mountaineers.

In 1989, we were faced with many problems (*see Article 25*), but with the experience gained by then, we made a successful trip to Chong Kumdan (*Article 26*) with Dave Wilkinson. These historic areas gave me a taste of army life too. For a man from Bombay this was something very unusual, but it enriched a different aspect of life.

In between these East Karakoram expeditions, I ventured to an area last visited by Dr. J.B. Auden, 51 years ago. The Mana gad and Trimukhi Parbat (*see Article 1*) was a wonderful trip. Everything that I loved in the Himalaya was there. The final execution of the trip was a delight.

And as 1992 approached, another Indian-British trip was planned, to the Panch Chuli peaks. I had seen these peaks in 1982 from the Darma valley (*see Article 9*), read about them and now undertook the happiest expedition there. Chris Bonington, the legendary mountaineer, was my co-leader and some great names in the world of mountaineering were part of the team. Going with Chris and the others was the *piece de resistance* of many years of climbing. From the Indian side, I had old trusted companions of many years. What better combination can one ask for. The words written by Chris Bonington in the report, after thirty years of climbing, should make every Indian proud: '. . . it was one of the best and most enjoyable expeditions that the team members have ever taken part in.'

With such a hectic 60-day trip, I thought I had had enough for the year. But there I was, off to Kedarnath valley for a trek, just like a good *paan* (condiments wrapped in a betal leaf) eaten to digest a heavy meal!

So it goes on. A lot to do and write about in the future.

I was married after the Bethartoli Himal expedition. Geeta and I had met while trekking in the local hills. She continued to trek in the later years. Far from stopping me, she encouraged me to go to the Himalaya. She supported me through the injuries and welcomed all the friends. She knew what happiness all this meant. My father, Bhagwandas, had never stopped me from going to the hills, looking after the business while I was away. Our two sons, Sonam and

Nawang, are named after my Sherpa friends and they love to be with nature. The family has welcomed mountaineers from the world over, and the home is always a hub of activity related to the mountains. In fact, everything surrounding me has been directed to the Himalaya and the Sahyadris. Most friends love to talk about it, share a trail or at least agree to suffer the repeated slide-shows. Of course I have non-mountaineer friends and business associates who consider me insane. During the day at work, selling cloth, one does not utter a word about the sport. It is the other hobbies like cricket, art-movies, plays, and classical music that lend a balance when in Bombay. This tight-rope walk between the chosen sport, family, business and other activities is quite a serious acrobatic feat in Indian society. I am lucky to have survived. In India, activities like mountaineering are not accepted easily, let alone understood. Many start young but give up after completing their education and later because of the constraints of work. More give up on marriage, some on suffering an injury. The survivors continue. I have been lucky to be a 'survivor'. Running a family business since 1969, being married in 1971, suffering injuries in 1974 and 1989, now I have no other barricades to stop me, except myself!

I have always wondered about one thing. Many friends who started with me over the years, loving the mountains with vigour, gave up suddenly. Not only did they give up going to the mountains but also reading about them, seeing slides or even talking about them. I have always wondered why? Mountaineering is a passion and, like all passions, either you have it totally or not at all. It is too painful to have anything to do with it, if it cannot be pursued in totality. Like a deep love affair.

I hope to continue with this passionate affair.

Garhwal Treks

There is always a certain element of risk in being alive, but—The more alive you are, the more the risk.

—Ibsen

There will be many who for the first time looked at the Himalaya from the *bugiyals* of Garhwal. I certainly am one of them. For almost the first decade of my Himalayan years, it was Garhwal and Kumaon that I returned to the most.

The trip to Jadh ganga valley had all the ingredients of excitement—an unknown valley, new passes and peaks, and of course the tracks of snow leopards. Preparing for a trip to such a remote area is an exercise I love. Corresponding with Dr Auden, managing the permits and the piecemeal gathering of information, is all a challenge. It all ultimately fits in, as a jig-saw puzzle does into a beautiful picture. My only other companion, Monesh, was young, enthusiastic and we matched well, as we should where only 'Two is Company'. Such a meeting of minds, strengths and interests is essential for happy two-men trips, which I have undertaken on at least three occasions.

Earlier, it was my other trusted companion, Muslim, who made the trip to Girthi ganga fun. It was a classic trip, like many I have undertaken. One treks in a main valley route, bifurcating to the side valleys, reaching passes, climbing peaks and covering great distances. And if you fail in the limited time in each valley, there is something else to look forward to.

On such varied trips no one could be a better companion than Muslim Contractor. His intellectual

Nepal-Sikkim

*I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and—
I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

—Robert Frost

The northern valleys of Sikkim can offer a lifetime of fun. We were lucky to have been there before the restrictions were clamped in. Towards the end of the trip, Zerkis Boga and myself sat near a slope full with blooming rhododendrons in different colours. 'We want to be buried here', was the thought. But of course we trekked on and still 'live' with the beauty of Sikkim.

Kondup lama, our guide, was the famous companion of Tensing Norgay. Still, after so many years, I cannot forget his dancing, drinking chang, driving hard bargains, route finding over impossible terrains and his laughter. He was the one to keep for the memories too.

Nepal, the trekkers' paradise, had an attraction for us too. Sir Edmund Hillary called Tashi Lapcha pass the most difficult one he has crossed. My wife Geeta still proudly holds that as her height record. The charms of Solu Khumbu and Arun valley belong to an another world. And what's good is that both the treks, from east Nepal and north Sikkim end at Darjeeling, where momoes are in plenty, *tomba* flows freely and my Sherpa friends are warmest. It is all in the game.

12

On the Sherpa Trail

1978

SOLU KHUMBU, in the northeast Nepal, is the homeland of Sherpas. Most of the famous climbing Sherpas hail from the upper district Khumbu, while the Sherpas of lower Solu district are traders. These Sherpas had close relations with Tibet in the north and were engaged in regular trade with them, while not much contact was established with people in the plains. Earlier in this century, Sherpas at first migrated to Darjeeling which was developing as a major climbing centre due to the opening of Tibet. Many Sherpa families settled down there for better employment and trading and Darjeeling became another homeland for them. As a consequence, regular contact developed between these two hilly regions. They used to follow three major high-level routes to and from Darjeeling. The northernmost was to cross the difficult Amphu Lapcha pass to Barun valley, Lumbasamba Himal and to Walungchung Gola. Then on to Ghunsa, Tseram to Sikkim via Kang la and on to Darjeeling. The second route went a little south from Luckla over Pagong Dara, Salpa Dara to Arun valley. Then passing through the prosperous towns of Chainpur and Taplejung it crossed over to Sikkim via Chhiya Bhanjang or Phalut. The lower route followed from Solu region via Okhaldhunga, Terrathum to Illam and Darjeeling. All the routes were 14-18 days in duration and passed over rugged terrain in most remote areas.

Solu Khumbu Sherpas had regular contact with Kathmandu also in the west. Here two major routes were popular. The higher going over Tashi Lapcha pass (5820 m) to Rolwaling valley and to Kathmandu via Dolkha in 10 days. The lower route, which is now the famous Everest Trail, followed from Luglha to Jumbesi, Lamosangu to Kathmandu. Now with an airport at Lughla, many Sherpas fly to

Kathmandu and proceed by bus to Darjeeling and the above routes are not used by them for long journeys.

We followed the old 'Sherpa Trail' from Kathmandu over Tashi Lapcha pass to Solu Khumbu and then to Darjeeling via Salpa Dara, Taplejung, Chhiya Bhanjang, covering 375 km in 40 days of trekking. We crossed 7 passes ranging from 2200 m to 5800 m crossing watersheds of major river valleys including Bhote Kosi, Dudh Kosi, Arun, Tamur and Kabeli. On an average these river beds were at an elevation of 600 m with their watersheds at 3000 m thus making us climb and descend about 4880 m to cross one river valley. As one journalist put it, this whole area has missed the great invention of mankind, in the last century, the wheel. There were prayer-wheels, but no hand carts, bullock carts and no mechanized transport except two small airports. Everything is carried on human shoulders as even animal transport is limited to yaks. But the region is rich in beauty and friendly people and inviting for mountaineers.

We were five, Zafar Vasi, Rajendra and Rupal Desai, Geeta and Harish Kapadia. From Kathmandu, we reached Barabhuise on the Kodari highway on 26 April 1978, with the Sherpa Sirdar Jangbu and about 9 porters. The track climbed up to Rolla Bhanjang, 2290 m in two days and we descended to Charikot-Dolkha, the district headquarters, on the banks of Bhote Kosi also known as Tambe Kosi. Proceeding along the river bank we camped at Pikoti and Ghungar to turn east, entering the Rolwaling valley. The climb to Simi, 2440 m and Beding, 3200 m was through very rich forest to begin with but the last portions were totally eroded. Beding is an enchanting place with waterfalls, open valleys and a close view of the east face of Gaurishankar, (7134 m). Nagaon (4050 m) was the last village in the valley. Rolwaling has the largest Sherpa settlement outside Solu Khumbu and has close contact with the neighbouring district. 4 May was spent leisurely at Nagaon repacking and acclimatizing. The route ahead climbed gradually to Chobuk lake, 4570 m, over boulder-filled moraine. We had to rest here an extra day as Zafar was not acclimatizing well. He had to be sent down in the evening with a Sherpa and after receiving an 'all well' note from him we proceeded ahead. As we learned later, his condition surprisingly deteriorated even after a further descent and he had to summon a helicopter to be rescued in a hurry. A costly affair.

For the next two days, we proceeded gradually along the lateral moraines to camp at the base of the icefall. Jangbu missed the tradi-

tional route and was caught in two bad avalanches along with Geeta and a porter. Luckily they escaped but we lost all our ropes and were left to cross the 5790 m pass without any ropes. The route through the icefall was steep and rather dangerous, passing underneath many a hanging ice tower. We camped on the upper snowfield at Tolbeding, (5670 m). Starting early on 10 May, and going over a few crevasses and a huge bergschrund, we reached the pass by 9 a.m. Sir Edmund Hillary, who pioneered the crossing of this pass for mountaineers in 1951, has described it as the most difficult and spectacular. We missed all the views due to bad weather in the east. Our descent was quick on the other side and, covering 28 km in a day, we rushed down to Thami by evening. Next day we reached Khumjung and Namche Bazar in the heart of Solu Khumbu. Fresh purchases in the traditional and colourful bazar at Namche on a Saturday was a very costly job. The rates were exorbitant, quality poor and quantity difficult to procure. It would have been cheaper to fly all our provisions here from Kathmandu. After rest and enjoying the excellent scenery of Sagarmatha Himal (Everest) we walked down to Luglha. We spent time talking to trekkers and mountaineers from various parts of the world and heard the original recordings of the climb of Everest without oxygen by Messner and Habeler from a journalist. Along with steep prices and commercialism there are few advantages of the great trekkers' influx into Sherpaland. However the area looked clean and with many facilities. Geeta flew home from Luglha, as scheduled, while we proceeded on the second half of our trek on 16 May.

The route now was at altitudes ranging from 600 m to 3350 m with luxuriant forests in remotely situated valleys. We crossed Pagong Dara (2590 m) and Surke Dara (2290 m) crossing Inkhu khola and Hongu khola respectively. Sherpa villages were now far and few and only on the higher ridges, with hot valleys being occupied by Tamangs. We were caught off guard in a flash flood and lost some of our kitchen items as we passed through, observing the changing customs and way of life. On 21 May, we climbed to Sanam, the last Sherpa village on our way, to be welcomed by an old lady literally studded with gold ornaments. At Salpa Dara (2900 m), we crossed out of Sherpaland to Arun valley in Khandbari district and Kumbhakarna Himal. It was a land of Kshetri villages and our Sherpa porters were clearly feeling out of place. We had to cross small rivers umpteen times over varieties of bamboo bridges, and the whole region was rather tropical. After two days, we reached the gorge of the river

Arun, the largest river in the East Nepal. It was hot and windless as we crossed Arun dangerously in a small and leaking canoe carved out of a tree-trunk. Walking along the river to Tumlingtar was a torrid experience. On 24 May we climbed to Chainpur. This was by far the most beautiful and rich town in the valley with an excellent view of Makalu. We admired those large houses with the nearest roadheads at least 12 days away. Chainpur to Nundhaki and Milke Danda (3080 m), was again the same story of ups and downs. At Milke Danda in the evening, we were treated to some good scenery of Makalu, Jannu, Kangchenjunga and all the surrounding ranges. It was a magnificent display of beauty in changing colours of sunset and it made our whole trip to East Nepal worthwhile. The forest north of Milke Danda was like a walk in paradise. It had varieties of orchids, rhododendrons, lilies, colourful birds and butterflies, all against the backdrop of the above mountainscape.

Again we descended to 600 m level to Dobhan at the confluence of Mewa khola with Tamur. We were in the soldiers' land as all the villages are famous for their fighting qualities in the Gurkha regiments of the Indian and British armies. We met many retired soldiers and heard battle stories. Taplejung, the district headquarters, situated in Lumbasamba Himal, is an administrative town of historic importance. Following the route, we descended to cross the hot banks of Kabeli, the last river gorge of our trek, to enter Kangchenjunga Himal and Panchthar district. All the villages were poor and the area far from inviting. Chyangthapu was the last village on the Nepal side with a border check-post. Customs 'officials' went through all our items thoroughly, mainly out of curiosity as no other party had passed for a long time. The climb to Chhiya Bhanjang (3903 m), was gradual and at last we were on the Singalila ridge and entered Sikkim, India. We climbed down to Uttare and Dentam for a taxi to Darjeeling, thus completing our 'Sherpa Trail'.

13

North Sikkim

1976

IT ALL began on a Sunday morning. Zerksis Boga and I were asking each other. Where to this year? Suddenly Sikkim was thrown open to Indian mountaineers. By a coincidence, I was reading a book on Sikkim and that helped us to make up our minds on a long trek to North Sikkim. We trekked to Green Lake (4940 m) and crossed four high passes—Tangchung la (5150 m), Thieu la (5212 m), Lungnak la (5035 m) and Sebu la (5852 m), in all covering 240 km.

We reached Gangtok, still uncertain about the inner-line permits, as there were no precedents on procedures available. Four days of hectic activity of telegrams and telephones to Delhi followed. At last, Mr. H.C. Sarin, the President of The Indian Mountaineering Foundation, came to our rescue and we were allowed to proceed. We were the first mountaineers in the region after a closure of 15 years.

Gangtok, the capital of Sikkim, to Chungthang (1561 m), a 96 km journey, was covered in 12 hours in a crowded bus. Next day, amidst pouring rain, we reached Lachen (2728 m). We arranged for 9 Tibetan porters, with Kondup Lama as a guide-cum-Sirdar. He was middle-aged, but very thorough and knew the area like the back of his hand. These Bhotia porters were a great asset. They were sturdy in build and noisy in manner.

At Lachen dak bungalow, going through the Visitors Book was like a glance through mountaineering history. There was mention of all the expeditions to Kangchenjunga and of the pre-war expeditions to Everest. These Everest expeditions passed through from Lachen in March and returned by late August. Sadly, in the return entry, some names were missing of those who had died on the mountains.

Zemu Glacier and Green Lake (4934 m)

Six km ahead of Lachen, at Zema, the route to Zemu glacier turns to the west. On a small bridge, we crossed the Zemu Chhu, which was to be our constant companion from now onwards. Soon, we ran into a difficult route over landslides, for 13 km making our progress slow. We were to encounter this kind of terrain almost throughout, as Zemu Chhu had swept its banks during the floods of 1968. By late afternoon, we reached Tallem where the Lhonak Chhu from the north meets Zemu Chhu. We camped on a little clearing as it poured down all night. Next day, we had the first view of Kangchenjunga (8598 m). Even at a distance, it appeared majestic in form and bold in outline. We crossed a small bridge to Jedang and climbed up to Shobuk. This route is a walk in paradise. We passed at least twenty different kinds of rhododendrons, varying in colour from white to the deepest red, and in height from trees of 6 m to shrubs of not more than a foot. We were particularly lucky in that so many varieties were flowering at the same time. After leisurely climbing, we descended to Jakthang at the bank of the river, exactly opposite the valley leading to Kishong la.

Next day, we crossed a small bridge over Thomphyak Chhu, where we met a Lepcha shikari, who had possibly crossed over from Kishong la (5208 m). He looked bewildered and seemed like a figure wandered out of an earlier world, where man was closely allied to nature. He disappeared after giving us a long stare. After the bridge, the original route has been washed out by floods and it is boulder-hopping all the way to Yabuk (3978 m).

On the 13th, we made a late start with cloudy weather, wind blowing ceaselessly and the terrain getting more rugged. We passed three long moraine fields, looking like deserts, past the Rest Camp (4570 m), to camp at about 4730 m.

It cleared for a while in the morning. In the front was Siniolchu (6887 m), tilting against the sky, lifting its silver spear. There is no other mountain that can equal Siniolchu in beauty and boldness. Douglas Freshfield, who had seen many mountains on earth, spoke of it as the most beautiful peak in the world and the most superb triumph of mountain architecture. The impression it made on us was indelible. We made a delayed start for Green Lake, which was rather close and which we reached in 8 hours. The Green Lake proper has disappeared after the floods. We camped at (4935 m) on open ground.

15 May started with a thick fog and wind. We decided to hold the fort for the day and we literally had to hold on to our tent poles as it turned into a strong blizzard by late afternoon. The mist lifted only next day, revealing to us, for the first time, walls of the great amphitheatre at the head of Zemu glacier. We were face to face with Kangchenjunga, the highest peak in India and the third highest in the world. 12 km away, it rose to a height of 8000 m above us in a broad line of cliffs of terrific steepness.

After drying our equipment and having a quick lunch, we decided to move up 600 m above us for better views. This we did in the next 4 hours, trudging in snow and on rock. We were rewarded with a grand panorama of the Kangchenjunga divide and distant Chomolhari in Bhutan.

We were down the next day for lunch and divided ourselves in two parties. Boga, with a porter, started off towards the Nepal Gap glacier. He could observe the Nepal Gap, the Zemu Gap and the glacier system to the north. I, with another porter, descended to the bed of Zemu glacier and proceeded towards its junction with the Twins glacier. The Zemu glacier has receded almost to the base of the Kangchenjunga wall and it was an all-moraine walk with many small green lakes. It is said to pose a big threat to Sikkim, as when it melts or pours heavily it can cause unprecedented havoc through floods.

That evening, we lit a huge camp fire and sat around watching the colours of the sunset. We noticed, more than once, a peculiarity referred to by Sir J. Hooker, the false sunset in the east, where a glow, as strong as that of the sunset appears as a separate source of illumination. We saw a magnificent full moon, with Kangchenjunga radiating the glow. The romantic beauty of the landscape was almost beyond belief.

Tangchung la (5150 m)

On the 18th, we moved down to a little below Rest Camp. We were now to follow the high level trade route of old days, now out of use. It follows via Kishong la, Tangchung la, Theu la and Naku la into Tibet. We started climbing steeply towards Tangchung la. The Bhotia porter has, through practice of generations, become so indifferent to the angle of his track, that he prefers a ladder path to any reasonable zigzag, even when heavily laden. Many a time, we lost the path and had to resort to maps, as our guide was also repeating the route after a number of years.

All along the route, we came across what appeared to be cairns marking the route. On closer approach, they proved to be plants, stalks of the giant rhubarb *Rheum nobile*. The plant measures 45 inches in diameter at the base of the cone and is about the same height. We crossed Yakjuknamteng ground and reached the pass over rocky terrain and strong winds.

The Tangchung la is a broad, but not deep gap, guarded on both sides by rocky eminences. One of the neighbouring crags has a curious resemblance to a large bird. The summit, east of the pass, Tangchung Khang (5303 m) could be easily climbed when free of snow and would afford a grand panorama. In the north, was Thieu la (5212 m) separated from us by a gulf of 900 m.

On the other side, was a steep descent in deep snow. We passed three lakes and then the last slopes of thick scrub of juniper and rhododendrons. We camped at Theulacha, after crossing the river Thomphyak Chhu.

Thieu la (5212 m)

20 May dawned cloudy and it was snowing till noon. As it cleared a little by late afternoon, we decided to climb up to the pass and camp there. We followed a steep ridge, flanking a nala and then crossed three long boulder-filled fields to camp 33 m below the actual pass. We were up and about early next day and climbed up to the pass. A magnificent panorama opened in front of us. On the northeast was Lungnak la (5035 m), Khangchengyao (6889 m) to the north, Naku la (5270 m) leading to Tibet and the proper continuation of the trade route we had been following. To the northwest, was Chorten Nyima (6927 m). To the south, the tips of the peak of Zemu shot up over the white shoulders of the intervening ridge of the Tangchung la.

We descended to Lango to meet our first yaks. We lunched luxuriously on a hillock looking over a spread of wide valley, gravelly and flat. We were in Lhonak. There are no trees, no rhododendrons, no shrubs, except for a few stunted junipers, no turf, only sparse grass, good enough for yaks. The slopes below the snow were brown and yellow, the flats, pale and grey. We crossed the long wind-swept plateau to Teblhe and Muguthang (4520 m) after fording the ice-cold Langbo Chhu in knee-deep water. Muguthang is a place of nine winter months and its July snowstorms are proverbial. It is a land of moraine and a monument of diminished glaciers.

Lugnak la (5035 m)

From Muguthang, we turned to the east, off the trade route we were following. In two hours of gentle climbing, Charub Chho (lake) was reached. The angle steepened from here onwards, with soft snow. Two steep climbs led us to a sharp depression in the ridge, which was the pass. Lugnak la was first crossed by White, the political officer in 1895 and again by Dr Kellas in 1910, who pronounced it as too difficult and dangerous for laden porters. On the other side, the slopes were as a rule so steep that, though we often plunged above our knees, gravity helped us to get forward. A long descent led us to the valley floor to Chhoptra bridge ahead to Thangu (3920 m), where we had a day's rest.

Sebu la (5352 m)

From Thangu, we decided to move northeast to Sebu la, leading into the Lachung valley. The terrain ahead was a huge plain with mud and water, climbing up gently. We camped near the ruins of the Himalayan Club hut, in the company of a yak-herd.

We made an early start on the 25th. The route followed a steep scree slope till we reached the snowline, deep with fresh snow. For the first time, the sturdy porters started complaining. Boga led off on a small rock wall and fixed ropes to haul up the loads. Looking behind, we could see the whole Kangchenjunga divide. After an hour of trudging on snow, suddenly the worst of Sikkim weather came to our rescue, as clouds started rolling in with strong winds. This consolidated the fresh snow enough to restore some confidence in our porters. Soon we were scrambling up on all fours. At the top, it was difficult to locate the pass exactly and we were now waiting for a clearance in the weather. After an hour, we hit the correct pass and went down steeply on the other side to Sebu Chho. The upper lake, surrounded by the icefall of Chombu peak, caused havoc in 1950, through floods. By late evening, we were comfortably settled at Mome Samdong hot springs (4624 m).

In bright sunshine, we walked down to Yumthang, with excellent views of Donkya Ri (6190 m) and Pauhunri (7125 m). Yumthang dak bungalow is the biggest and the best in the region, with hot springs nearby. We walked through the most beautiful countryside to Lachung, where we 'surrendered' to the army hospitality and a lift back to Gangtok via Chungthang.

From the Reviews

"*High Himalaya Unknown Valleys* takes the reader on a journey that is both delightful and immensely informative; as enjoyable as the expedition, I was lucky enough to share with Harish."

—SIR CHRIS BONINGTON in Foreword to the book

"How does a 48-year old cloth merchant from Bombay fit this vast mountain glove? Quite comfortably, judging by Harish Kapadia's exuberant account of his high altitude quests from 1969 onwards. Whether with Bombay comrades or his beloved Brits, Kapadia is in his element on the altitude trail, always eager to peer round the corner."

—SUDHIR SAHI in *India Today*

"The range of his travels along the Himalaya must put Kapadia in the ranks of greater explorers . . . Throughout these treks the reader is given hard local information almost impossible to come by elsewhere and likely peaks are pointed out to stimulate other parties who may follow.

Kapadia's comprehensive coverage is valued by the international climbing community. These collected explorations can be considered one of the most significant Himalayan publications since Kenneth Mason's *Abode of Snow* . . . This book is a must for any serious student of Himalayan lore. Kapadia proceeds beyond where most trekkers turn back."

—BILL AITKEN in *The Hindustan Times*

"This book, like the expedition shared with Harish, is a symphony."

—PAUL NUNN in *The Himalayan Journal*

"This is a book for both the active climber and the armchair mountaineer."

—H. ADAMS CARTER, Editor, *The American Alpine Journal*

Other books by Harish Kapadia

- TREK THE SAHYADRI (5TH ED)
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INDUS PUBLISHING COMPANY

FS-5 Tagore Garden, New Delhi - 110027 (India)