

MOUNTAINS AND RIVERS OF THE HIMALAYA: THEN AND NOW

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Then we trod soft along padandies;
Now telas ply on black topped saraks.
The hills that then were green with trees
Are barer now and scarred by land slips.
The wood carved, stone roofed mountain hamlets
Are changed to cement and corrugated iron.
Pilgrims by tourists now outnumbered
Pray with their feet no longer, but
Ride packed in buses belching fumes.
The river's blue is turned to grey
By blasted rock and bulldozed debris.
I miss the peace of yesteryear.
And yet, and yet, beggar's diminished,
The bear-scalped farmer, goitered shepherd,
Children dying of disease,
Women in difficulty with child birth
Have schools and hospitals within their reach.
Wheels can replace the back for loads,
The river's water will be stored,
And roads defensive and for trade
Have changed the ways of life that was.

MY FIRST EXPEDITION in the Himalaya, fifty years ago, was with John Martyn in 1937 when we were the first to climb on to the summit ridge of Bandarpunch, and then to cross by the Kalindi pass from Gangotri to Badrinath. This range had already been crossed by Shipton and Tilman, but by another route unsuitable for laden porters. We had with us throughout, from Mussoorie to Naini Tal, the Sherpas Tensing and Rinsing who looked after us and carried loads at high altitudes, and we engaged other load carriers first in Mussoorie, and then to take their places when these returned, in Harsil. We paid the porters Rs 1½ a day to carry up to 50 lbs and cover up to 16 miles. There were, we were told, those who would carry up to 80 lbs 20 miles a day for 12 annas! As far as I remember we paid the Sherpas Rs 2½ a day, and the two months expedition cost us each Rs 700. In 1955 the first ascent of Kalanag, known to us then as the Black Peak, with Sherpas Pasang and Chetan and varying numbers of porters, — the Kalanag expedition lasting about 40 days, cost us about Rs 950 for each member. The expenses of climbing were increasing, but were still far less than they are today.

Other great differences between then and now were in clothing and footwear. Warm and light thermal underwear had not been invented and boys mostly climbed in grey flannel trousers. We all walked in gym shoes. Boots for climbing were heavy and nailed with clinkers and, if you could get them, tricounies. It was not till much later that I was able to import a pair of Henke's Vibrams where moulded rubber took the place of nails. I still have these as I cannot find anyone with large enough feet (size 11) to want them. Any takers? We had crampons, but not those with spikes forward at the toes, and we had no pitons. Climbing rope in those days was bulky and heavy and we never had enough for fixed ropes. Ice axes of course we carried for hard snow and ice.

My last expedition was in 1973, but as this, like all but three of my sixteen adventures into the Himalaya, was with school boys, and these three others were between 1937 and 1940, I have no qualifications to write of mountaineering 'now'. My only experience has been watching training in rock climbing under Colonel Balwant Singh Sandhu at the Nehru Institute of Mountaineering at Uttarkashi. There I was astonished at the ironmongery tied to or hanging about the climbers — apparatus that enabled them to climb vertical slabs or overhangs that would have been impossible in my early days; but you have only to read reports in climbing journals to realise that with modern equipment difficulties can be tackled that would have been insuperable in the past.

Another great difference between then and now is speed of approach. Then we had to get to our mountain on our feet. This would take a week or more and involved carrying food for both arrival and return, and this meant employing more porters. Today you can go far into the mountains by bus or jeep. This has the disadvantage that you may not arrive as fit and acclimatized as we used to do.

The great thing today is that so many more are moved by the spirit of adventure to trek or climb in the hills; and not only to trek, but come down the rivers in canoes or inflatable rafts. When I did this with cadets and the Adjutant of the Joint Services Wing of the National Defence Academy in October 1950 from Devaprayag, and then with other cadets in April 1951 down the Jamuna, I never expected that White Water Running would become as popular as it is now. I wanted to come down the Ganges from Devaprayag to Hardwar. I knew the boat (an inflatable raft) could not be sunk but I was afraid it might be capsized. I reckoned we could keep clear of rocks, but did not know about waterfalls. I looked carefully at the map of the river but could find none marked. To make sure I wrote to the Survey of India, the Forest Department and the authorities of the Ganges Canal and asked them if they knew anything of falls below Devaprayag. None of them

did, but none of them could guarantee there were none. I decided to find out and waited for a suitable occasion. This came at the Dushera holiday and we set out from Dehra Dun where the N.D.A. then was. We had to go round the Siwaliks by Roorkee and Hardwar as the bridge across the Song at Doiwala had not yet been reconstructed after the rains. We got there in time to enquire about buses up the Ganges valley for the next day and were told to be ready to start by 7 a.m. Accordingly we lined up early the next morning, only to have to wait exasperating hours till the bus was full and we started. We reached Devaprayag at about 2.30 in the afternoon and enlisted the help of a gang of men to carry the boat down to the water, to the Prayag where the Bhagirathi and Alaknanda meet and where pilgrims take their dip hanging on to chains to prevent their being washed away by the swirling current. Here we inflated the rubber floats, launched the boat and set off. The locals could not believe their eyes. At first they thought we were going to return by bus and let the boat float down to see how far it got, and when they realised we planned to go in it they made it plain that they thought we would not long survive. The first 100 yards were something of an adventure as we were soon in a rough patch with water breaking over the sides; however we weathered that and began to feel more confident. We were all wearing life jackets, though had we been upset the danger would have been less from drowning we supposed than from being badly bashed about. All the same they were psychologically comforting. We swished down the gorge through magnificent scenery, here and there between precipitous black cliffs, and at other places between high banks of shelving white sand. The movement of the water was most interesting. At places it welled up in great black humps, in others it swirled round in whirlpools in which we occasionally got stuck, finding it difficult to get the boat back into the main current. Here and there it rushed over some great submerged boulder and you found yourself dropping as much as three feet on the other side; or going round a cliff-enclosed corner you were thrown against the rocks and had all you could do to fend the boat off. Twice we crashed into these cliffs but came to no harm, and each time our confidence in the boat increased. We had covered about 21 miles by the time it began to grow dark — an average speed of about 7 m.p.h. in spite of delays in whirlpools and eddies. In places we reckoned we were going a good 15 m.p.h. We were fortunate in being able to land on a gentle shelving sand bank leading to a little village. Unprepared for the delays on the road we had hoped to reach Rishikesh before night and had brought no beddings with us, and if we had they would have been, like us, wet through. We borrowed two quilts, in the village, spread one on the sand and the other over us and

huddled as close together as we could. The top one did not quite stretch from one end to the other and there was a certain amount of tugging during the night. I remember because I was at one end. It was cold and dew fell heavily, but it was much less cold and uncomfortable than it would have been without the quilts.

We were off again early the next morning, expecting to reach Rishikesh by lunch. But instead of getting easier, the river became more difficult. In places we let the boat down on the end of a rope, one of us remaining in it to ease it over rocks while the rest, on the side, hung on to the rope. Just below Laxmanjhula we had our most exciting moment. We saw a big drop in the river ahead and decided to land. In spite of frantic efforts to row to the shore the current took charge and carried us into a fierce rapid. We estimated that the waves were three to five feet high and they filled the boat so that we were sitting in water up to our waists. Here I had better describe the construction of the boat, an inflatable naval landing craft that I had bought from war disposals. Its deck was of heavy slats or battens of wood wired together so that it would roll up. These were fastened to the two lower floats, one at each side, and rested on the floats when inflated. Above, forming the sides of the boat, were two more floats, and the deck was covered by a rubber sheet to keep water from beneath splashing up into the boat. This sheet prevented the water we had shipped from getting away. While I tried to tear it up I shouted 'Bale, bale her out'. The Adjutant, fresh from a parachuting exercise, thought I was using the expression 'bale out' in the Air Force sense. 'Don't, Don't' he shouted. 'Cling on. Cling on'. Fortunately we all clung on, and the sheet removed, the boat soon emptied itself of water, and we had learned something of the importance of inter-service understanding. The rest of the day was peaceful and beautiful, and as we slipped past the temples the people worshipping or bathing turned to look at us.

Though the voyage had turned out successfully, I hardly expected to repeat such an adventure. However the winter passed, misgivings were dimmed, the blood stirred in the warmth of spring and April provided another holiday for Holi. We decided to go down the Jamuna from where it is crossed by the Mussoorie-Chakrata road to the headworks of the Jamuna canal. At that time of year there was not a great deal of water in the river and there were many rocks above the surface. We had to get out at places to ease the boat over them. At one place we were going fast down what looked a harmless rapid when the boat got stuck on a rock and the force of the water turned it over and spilled us into the river. We had on life jackets and came to no harm, but I lost my gun and we all lost most of our clothes. It took us some time to repair the boat and collect what had

floated ashore, and we were overtaken by darkness before we got out of the gorge. Another upset in the dark persuaded us to abandon ship. We tied the boat up, climbed the cliff and found someone to guide us to the house, two miles away, where we were expected to dinner. I wrote in the Guest Book of our host:

Jagut Shamsher Jang Bahadur
Kept a good cellar and a good larder
Till Gibson, Uppal, Ombir, Sinha,
Sood and Ranu came to dinner
Out of the night, and drank and ate
Dry every bottle and clean every plate.

The next day we retrieved the boat and completed the voyage. 'I would not', I wrote, 'seriously advise anyone to repeat these voyages, but both took us through magnificent scenery and to anyone who does follow in our wake I can promise almost unlimited excitement. But don't tell your mothers I suggested you should go, and make your will before you do so.'

I end in an attempt to describe the pleasures I have had from expeditions. One, a vanity, has been in making first ascents. The opportunities for this are diminishing, but there are still many unclimbed peaks and numerous new ways of getting up those already climbed, and one must always remember that mountaineering is largely a matter of luck with the weather.

Valuable, I think, is the sense of satisfaction and achievement in reaching one's objective, and this is particularly so for the young beginners you take with you, be it a summit, a pass or just a trek.

I have had enormous fun skiing, a sport that has not yet been fully developed in India. In the summer, at heights above 14,000 ft you can often find, early in the day when the sun has softened the hard surface of the snow, conditions that are perfect. I suspect the time may come when mountain huts, like those in Switzerland, are widely built for skiers and climbers.

Above all I have enjoyed just walking in the mountains: the rhythmical movement, the changing scene, the birds and animals and flowers. If you cannot afford the time or equipment for difficult climbing, just go walking. There is no finer or better health-giving way of taking a holiday; and remember when you do so not to leave litter, and refrain from spoiling trees and shrubs to make a fire. Take a stove and fuel with you. 'Then' there were few expeditions to the Himalaya and little damage was done in burning the plentiful supplies of dry wood. 'Now' we must think of all those others.