Ski Himalaya: Making the Impossible, Possible

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Abstract

In 1995, commanders at several levels claimed that it was not only difficult but also extremely dangerous to cross the high passes of the Himalaya in deep winter. The sceptics were proved wrong when an eight-member Ski Himalaya Expedition, with two officers, the author and the then Lieutenant Colonel (later Brigadier) Krishan Kumar traversed in the deep winter from the Karakoram Pass in Ladakh to Lipu Lekh, where Uttarakhand meets Nepal. This is a short narration of that epic expedition. For ease of narration it is in the First Person. At the end some recommendations are given.

Prologue

Since ancient times, the Kashmir valley and Lakakh, had been of great geo-strategic significance and an economic hub, connecting Indian sub-continent with Central Asia and the rest of the world. Three major 'corridors' or trade routes contributed to this aspect; the Tibetan route, from Leh to Lhasa, which went over the Karakoram Pass into Central Asia; the Changchenmo route from Leh to Xinjiang, which crossed via the Kailas range; and the extreme eastern route, via Chang Tang and Pangong Lake, from Leh to Khotan. "The latter, however, was rarely extensively used, because of fear of marauding Tartar tribesmen".[1]

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In Himachal Pradesh Buddhist sages crossed over the Kaurik route into Spiti valley and further east, in today's Uttarakhand, the region's Bhotiyas, known as the trans-Himalayan traders used at least six high Himalayan passes including the Mana Pass and Lipu Lekh. The importance of these mountain passes for local economy and cultural exchange is well documented in history. However, they lost its relevance in 1947, with India's partition and closing of the traditional trade routes across the Indo-Tibet border.

Many of these passes now remain closed for trade but the concept of connectivity has revived in the form of China-led Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which is opening up new corridors, including the Trans-Himalayan Economic Corridor in our neighbourhood. Although "the two ancient civilisations intersected long before the Han dynasty in China and the era of Emperor Ashoka the Great, in India" [2], history indicates that China has remained an unreliable neighbour. Hence, it is prudent to ensure greater vigilance over our border, both in summer and in winter, once considered impossible.

Virtual Top of The World

The adventure wasn't without its mishaps and the fight against the vagaries of weather was extreme. So deep was the snow on the first day of the start of the expedition on 17 February 1995, that it took us almost twelve gruelling hours to reach the Karakoram Pass from its nearest post Daulat Beg Oldi, that in summer would take just four hours. As the descent began, the light breeze turned into a storm and then into a blizzard, plummeting the temperature to minus 58 degrees Celsius.[3] Later that night, when we reached the base, two of the members were frostbitten, one of them later losing seven of his fingers. But for the expedition, it was only the beginning of their adventure, which became one of the momentous journeys in mountaineering history.

Undaunted, we climbed up the Depsang Plateau, the 'veritable top of the world'. "All around appeared mountain ranges, none of which were less than 6,100m high, while to the west rose two lofty peaks; yet in the distance they seemed below us, for the land around sloped away down on all sides. In whichever direction we looked the sky appeared below us."[4] A blinding squall of snow exposed the skeletons of ponies as we descended into the Kazi Langar, 'the red hole', and followed the bleak route named "via

dolorosa"[5] because of the many lives it has claimed, both human and animal.

The trail beyond Chongtash passes through a sheer-sided valley with the sky just a slit directly overhead, covered by a grey canopy that further darkens the valley. We came out of the cleft near Sultan Chusku and crossed Kataklik Pass, a round bump on which we climbed at leisure. Ladakh is a 'land of passes', where the valleys are not deep and passes not particularly high, although they can be about 5,500–6,000 metres. Prayer flags fluttered in the breeze on the top, from where we had the most wondrous view. To the north, the slopes of a mountain range glowed in shades of rust brown, green and black, fissured by innumerable clefts filled with glaciers. Deep in the valley below, shining like a sheet of white linen spread out before us, was the Shyok River, which we followed.

Here, we decided to make sledges that we called 'skoddies'. Each skoddy consisted of three skis and three ski-sticks, held together with clamps and pulled by a long sling. We made two sledges, one for each team, the Huskies and the Mastiffs, the latter named after the breed to which my dog Druk (of the Trans-Himalaya Expedition) belonged. Skiing over the frozen Shyok, we camped beside the Galwan Nullah, named after Gulam Rasool Galwan, the caravan leader from Leh, who had served many caravans on the route, including that of Sir Francis Younghusband.

Ahead of the Changchenmo trade route, that once led to Xinjiang, a narrow gorge at Darbuk, 'gateway to hell', linked Shyok valley with the desolate, trans-Himalayan plateau called Chang Tang. The altitude here, rarely falls below 4,250m and temperatures plunge below 40 degrees Celsius, making it the cruellest environment on earth. Here, near an abandoned village of Muglib, we noticed with a mixture of awe and fear, a snow leopard. That fear, forced us to sledge away from the ridge line and into the centre of the frozen Pyangong Lake, that extended for about 30 kilometres or more. It was like a lunar landscape, only more shrivelled.

The Middle Country

Separating Ladakh from Spiti valley is the 5,580-metre high Parang La route. Along the way, we occasionally saw herds of gorals or

ibex, making us aware that we were being constantly watched by a snow leopard, but from where was hard to identify. Sledging over the frozen Tsomo Riri lake, we reached Norbu Sumdo, where a dilapidated hut stands as a sad reminder to the past glory of the 'free highway', that once connected Kulu and Lahaul with the distant lands of Central Asia.

Here we followed the Parang Chu flowing down from the south-west of the Parang Pass, which we crossed on 20 March. Making a steep descent across, we camped in a gorge no more than 15-25 metres wide and after a near escape from an avalanche and more sightings of the snow leopard, reached Kibbar in Spiti valley.

Spiti, sometimes known as the 'middle country', because of its location between Tibet and the Indian plains, is one of the few valleys in the Himalaya that runs east–west. The mean elevation is about 4,570 metres and the peaks exceed 6,000 metres. For centuries, it has remained isolated from the rest of the world, and even today, during winter, the passes that give access to the valley are blocked by snow. This isolation provided a perfect location for the meditating Buddhists monks who established gompas or monasteries, including Tabo, the most sacred monastery after Tholing in Tibet and the oldest in Spiti.

After a visit to Tabo monastery, which houses some of the greatest Buddhist art treasures in the world, we skied down to Sumdo where Spiti joins the Sutlej. From here we followed the Tirung River, to reach Chitkul Pass, the top of which offered a grand view, encompassing a long valley with a snow-laden pine forest.

House of The Gods

In Sangla valley, we were joined for a short while, by new members from the USA, Australia and the UK, who were appalled to learn that they had to ski with packs loaded with supplies to last 10 days. Moving ahead, the perfect sunny day, turned bad quickly and thick snow fell. It was April, when tonnes of warm snow could come rolling down without the slightest warning. Waiting, I considered, would be at the cost of running short on rations, so we moved on.

Crossing the Lamkhaga Pass (5,282m), the wind was unbearably cold, but skiing down with heavy rucksacks – even on a precarious glacier where crevasses were commonplace – was great fun, although we all took spills with comic regularity. The mountain passes in Western Himalaya in general, offered an easy climb from the north, but offered steep descent. However, after some distance, it also offered some of the best ski slopes running for many kilometres and hours of fun.

Entering the Bhagirathi valley at Harsil, 'stone of the lord', we reached the snout of an enormous glacier, called Gaumukh, 'the cow's mouth'. Overlooking the glacier was the Mahadeo-ka-linga, now known simply as Mt Shivling. Moving across on the 20-kilometre long Chaturangi glacier, a subsidiary of the main Gangotri glacier, snow bridges dropped under our weight, creating a booming sound, which echoed across the valley and our hearts pumping like a run-away train.

Every few days, the weather became a complete 'white-out' as it was on Kalandani Khal (6,000 metres), where it was more by luck than judgement that we managed to avoid a disastrous fall into a deep crevasse. That night, the wind hooted like jackals baying at the moon. The tent swayed in gusts that exceeded Force-8 but it stood fast. Although it was a horrible night, the view that greeted us in the morning was correspondingly magnificent. We were at 5,600 metres and all around us lay such glorious mountains as Kamet, Abi Gamin and Mana. Now that we had got used to the weight of our rucksacks, it was great fun skiing for miles down the valley, past Arwa Tal, and along a narrow gorge to Mana, where we enjoyed a refreshing bath in the thermal springs of Badrinath.

We were now in a mountaineer's domain, with high mountains passes, which also provided one of the highest and longest ski slopes in the world. Passing through the valley of flowers, we climbed towards the Bhyunder Pass. After a strenuous climb through 'white-out' conditions, we erroneously managed to camp on a shoulder above the pass. So, it was the first time that we actually skied down to the pass and continued on a long ski run, which lasted until late afternoon. I have since skied in many interesting places around the world and ski-sailed across Finnmarkvidda, north of Norway, but this remains to be the best ski-run of my life.

Further east of Malari, is Lapthal, the summer village of the Bhotias that was once occupied by the Tethys Sea, which dried up after the supercontinent Gondwanaland crashed into the Asian continent about 40 million years ago. Even today, you can find stunning physical evidence in the form of marine fossils. A herd of mountain goats scampered up the mountains as we skied towards Khingru Dhura (5,274 m) and Unta Dhura passes (5,394 m), which were steep and prone to sudden avalanches, offering some scary moments.

A Serendipitous Journey

Empty houses greeted us in Milam. Once a buzzing village with about 600 families that flourished as the trading centre with Tibet, it now lies in ruins. We were now north of Mt Nanda Devi sanctuary, India's second highest mountain and as far one could be from civilisation. The prospect of discovery excited us.

Crossing a narrow stream at Samgaon, we travelled north towards the Kwalgang glacier, an alien landscape, at the far end of which was an ice fall. It took us two days to find our way to the top. The pass was 50 metres wide and filled with rock debris from the 6,000-metre peaks that stood over it. There was no cairn on the pass, such as passing travellers customarily build, nor did we see any traces of human activity along the route. All indications suggested that we were the first to discover and stand on this ridge, so we made a large cairn on the top and named it 'Ski-Himalaya'.

The next day was exceptionally clear, offering a panoramic view of the Garhwal Himalaya dominated by Mt Nanda Devi. We could see both its main and secondary peaks with an incredible saddle in between. It was a view never before seen from this direction. Ahead was a wide-open glacier, named Chhiring Tashi, bounded by steep ridges, beyond which was a conical peak that seemed about 5,500 metres. After a careful recce, we found a narrow gully that led us to a ledge and, by late afternoon, we reached a col, about 200 metres long, on which we camped and named it 'Rajiv Gandhi'. It was in tribute to Gandhi for allowing me, as a young officer, to sit in his cockpit to gain a new perspective of the Himalaya, while flying from Delhi to Srinagar.

In the south was the Zaskar range, with its innumerable peaks glowing in the setting sun. The most prominent – Suli, Chhiring We and Bamba Dhura, all above 6,000 metres – dominated the skyline. Negotiating a narrow gully, which was a perpetual rock chute, we fixed a rope along its steepest stretch. Across the gully was an ice-field, at the edge of which was a col but the approach was blocked by a rock-band and a hanging glacier. The pass itself was razor-thin and the gradient so steep that there was not enough space even for two people to stand together. A nasty wind blew, but we retained our humour and called it the 'Dennis Pass', to mark the little menace in all of us.

While skiing to Gunji, we saw a smaller version of Mt Kailash called Chhotta Kailash. There was a large lake nearby, the only one in the valley still filled with water, with a frozen shelf, occupying the position of Manasarowar. The climb ahead was gradual until we reached a conspicuous saddle on our right – the new Lipu Lekh Pass, which is connected by road with Taklakot on the Tibet side. We decided to cross over a spur on the left to reach the traditional pass, which is now neglected. Beyond Lipu Lekh we could see the lofty tableland of Tibet, which varies around 4,000 metres above sea-level, and standing clear in the centre were the ranges of Gurla Mandhata. To the left and beyond was another mountain, which in my imagination could have been Mt Kailash. There is no more sacred spot in the Himalaya, and a perfect place to end our great ski adventure.

Epilogue

Thus, on 24 May 1995, we completed the first ever ski traverse from the Karakoram Pass to the Lipu Lekh Pass, a 2,000-kilometer epic through the coldest winter in the previous two decades. The Ski Himalaya expedition crossed over twenty passes, including three that were hitherto unknown, thus proving that the thought 'impossible to cross the high-passes in the Himalaya', during winter is just a state of mind.

Valuable lessons were learnt during the expedition. Some of them which can be recounted without infringing security issues are given in the paragraphs which follow.

- **Military Commando Expeditions.** Every expedition should be valued against its benefits that would eventually help bridge

information-gaps of our border, support training for futuristic tasks or eventually strengthen the Army's strategic plan. For instance, past expeditions to Mt Kanchenjunga and Mt Everest and mountains above 26,000 ft (with some exceptions) have not benefited the Army in any way but for momentary glory. It is recommended that the Army, must encourage smaller expeditions (based on section strength) that are self-sufficient, work on their own power or with very little administrative support and whose expertise can be utilised, when required, for strategic and commando operations.

- **High-Altitude Recce Teams.** It is recommended that High-Altitude Recce Teams (HARTs) be formed, comprising of experienced High-Altitude Warfare School (HAWS) qualified individuals and participants of mountain expeditions. These HARTs along with individuals from Special Forces should be tasked to patrol the high-passes along the LAC in extreme weather conditions. These HARTs should be able to assemble at short notice in the eventuality of any large-scale Chinese incursions to mount a Fabian defence along the LAC, using harassing and attrition tactics to delay advance.

- **Mechanised Expeditions.** The difficult mountainous terrain offers great advantage to those who occupy the heights first. Once a defensive position at height is occupied, it may be very difficult to dislodge them. Our first line of defence in many of the forward areas is relatively static and could potentially be outflanked by small detachments. Also, all along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), we have seen narrow roads through deep valleys, used for the movement of our conventional forces which can be easily sabotaged. The only areas where the terrain flattens out are Ladakh, Northern Sikkim and to some extent Northern Tawang, where mechanized forces could be effectively used. Such routes must be reconnoitred by tracked or wheeled vehicles.

- **Eco Expeditions.** We are all aware of the environmental disaster the mountaineers have created on Mt Everest and special expeditions are now being organised to bring back the rubbish for safe disposal. Unknown to the world, the armies posted on the Himalaya have created a bigger environmental challenge for which we, as individuals must be responsible.

It is therefore recommended that Army should encourage Eco Expeditions to bring back the waste from the posts along the Sino-Indian border and establish a proper procedure for its disposal.

- **Tribal and Local Forces.** There are large clusters of no-man's land where human intelligence (HUMINT) could be critical in detecting Chinese grey zone operations. This in the past has been gained from nomadic herders, religious pilgrims and resident tribal populations. It is recommended that HUMINT along the LAC should be enhanced by training officers in the local languages of the tribes that live along the border. Also, the use of tribal forces, with an innate knowledge of the terrain and local conditions in strategic no-man's land areas could help reduce future incursions.

Endnotes

[1] International Journal of Culture and History, 2015. Vol. 2, No. 2

[2] A new beginning for China-India relations could transform Asia by Patrick Mendis, 2018

[3] The coldest recorded temperature in the Himalaya is minus 62 degree in Daras on 19 Feb 1995.

[4] H. W. Bellow: Kashmir and Kashgar: A narrative of the journey of the embassy to Kashgar in 1873-74, Trubner & Co., 1875.

[5] Sven Hedin: *Trans-Himalaya, Discoveries and Adventures in Tibet.* Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1909.