



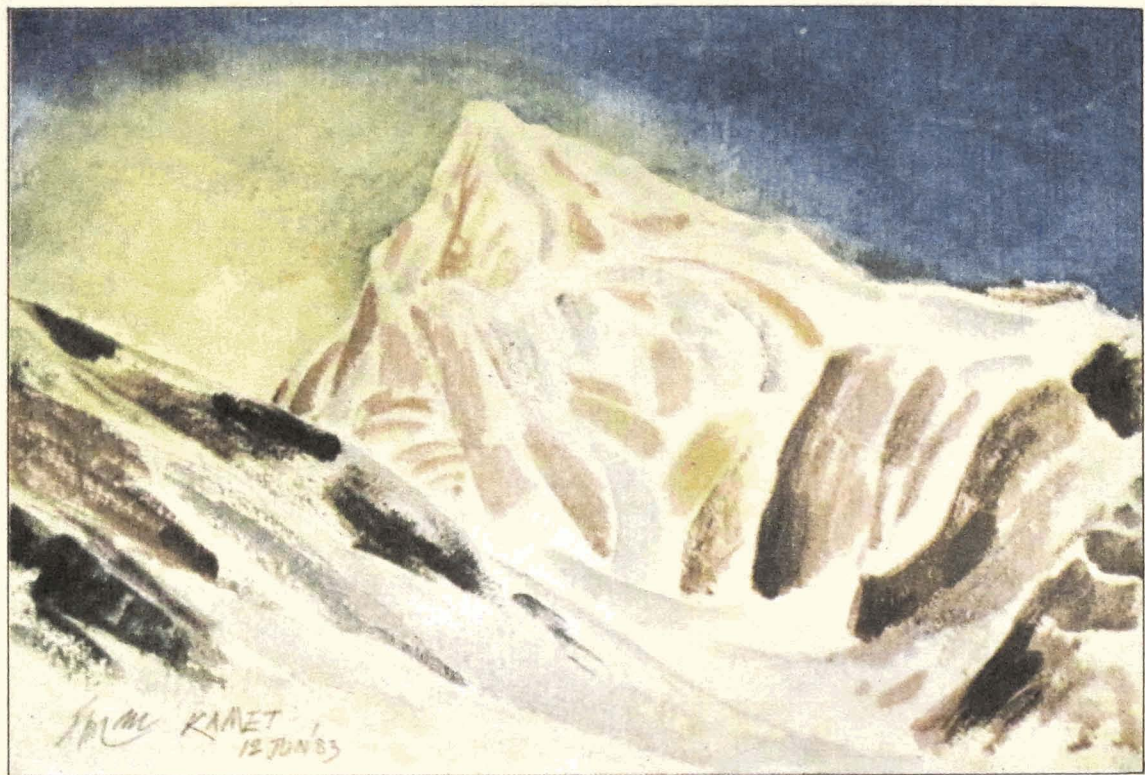
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KAMET

THE KUMAONI EXPEDITION

KAMET EAST KAMET WEST

Col Narinder Kumar

PVSM, KC, AVSM (RETD)

Kapil Malhetra

Illustrations and Paintings by
Ram Nath Pasricha



Vision Books

(incorporating Orient Paperbacks)

*To
all my fellow-soldiers
of Kumaon Regiment*

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FOREWORD

'Half of our Army is deployed at high altitude. Why can't we organise some big mountaineering expedition?' Gen Raina had queried in 1976 and Bull Kumar had taken up the challenge choosing the toughest challenge available—the so-called 'Impossible North East Spur' route to the elusive Kanchenjunga. Two German teams had earlier failed and Lord John Hunt had concluded that this posed greater problems than the Everest. The expedition returned successful — yet another laurel for Col Kumar whose remarkable mountaineering career had announced his farewell to arms, it was a natural reactions for me to call upon him to lead a regimental expedition. He accepted with his usual elan, chose a peak in the Kumaon Himalayas setting the expedition a dual task of climbing from both the Western and Eastern approaches. Expensive though it was, I was glad to agree to his proposal as it would give my boys an excellent opportunity to be exposed to the higher reaches as also learning the intricacies of planning an expedition — often timed far more complicated than logistical planning of military operations.

Mountaineering is an excellent medium to inculcate a spirit of adventure in our officers and men. It also brings to the fore qualities of leadership and courage to face severe adversity of the unforgiving mountain climbs. This would also act as a catalyst to many others to spend their pastime in trekking and climbing with the ideal opportunities that are offered alongside for studying our rich flora and fauna.

The expedition has been a great success in many ways and in qualifying my remarks I would like to add that the attempt along the Western approach has particularly warmed my heart. This will act as a starter in a more exciting area of climbing and will no doubt lead many more of our young men and women to emulate the great climbers of world who excel in the technical aspects of 'face climbs' — Donath, Messner, Bonnington and others. It will also provide climbers a fresh look at the otherwise 'climbed peaks.'

This is an intensively readable book and should prove to be an excellent initiator to the mountains.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Initially I was hesitant to take on the responsibility of the Kumaoni expedition to Kamet. I was close to retiring from the army and had to consider many a factor relating to my future. In retrospect, however, I am glad that the call of my regiment and that of the Himalayas dictated otherwise. Many men of Kumaon Regiment acquired experience of climbing a high mountain which has given some of them opportunities to be selected for other major expeditions. Also, our attempt on Kamet has brought to light the magnificent challenge that the North-West Face of Kamet poses, a challenge which I have no doubt shall be taken up by others in search of a truly noteworthy first ascent.

A word about the book itself, the writing of which is a joint effort between myself and my publisher-friend, Kapil Malhotra. We first met in 1977 and quickly became friends sharing among other things a love for the mountains. I was fortunate he could spend nearly three weeks with our expedition on its western axis. As a return offering, he is the one who actually wrote this book, based on my dictaphone notes, the diaries of my two deputy leaders and other members. I am delighted that he is not only the publisher of this book, but also its co-author. The narrative, however, is in first person singular due to my co-author's insistence that the book would read more smoothly and logically if written in first person singular on my behalf. Originally, it was our plan to publish this book immediately upon our return from Kamet. Unfortunately, this has not been possible due to a chain of unexpected events. Fortunately, however, the book retains its value not only as an account of a major expedition to India's third highest mountain but also because the formidable challenge of Kamet's North-West Face still beckons undimmed and those who wish to answer its call may find the account of our attempt useful.

The book owes a great deal of its beauty to the paintings and sketches of Ram Nath Pasricha, an eminent painter of our country whose deep love of the mountains is clearly reflected in his paintings, an overwhelming number of which depict the Himalayan landscape in wondrous water colours. He accompanied our expedition and volunteered to donate his paintings and sketches to the Kumaon Regimental Centre at Ranikhet where, no doubt, they will greatly add to the attraction of the regimental museum. Though nearing sixty, he gallantly went till Camp 3 on the eastern axis, where he painted Kamet and some of its adjoining peaks. It may well be some kind of a world record of painting at high altitudes.

As in any major enterprise, so many contributed so much to our expedition that it is well-nigh impossible to acknowledge each individual contribution. I trust my friends will not take this as ingratitude. It would, however, be very amiss if I did not put on record our gratitude to Gen. K.N. Krishna Rao, the then Chief of Army Staff, who was the patron of the Expedition. Lt Gen HC Datta, PVSM, who was then GOC-in-C Central Command enthusiastically offered us logistical back-up and Lt Gen. K.K. Hazari, the then Director of Military Operations got our venture sponsored as an army expedition which meant we could draw upon the vast establishment of the Indian Army as our secure base. Brig S.K. Issar, VSM, the then Commandant of Kumaon Regimental Centre (KRC) at Ranikhet was a tower of strength and also galvanised the resources of the Centre for our training and preparation. All other officers and men of KRC also willingly put their shoulder to the

wheel, none more than Lt Col Sinha and Capt Ashok Mall who were out indefatigable and utterly reliable in getting our expedition to the mountain, and getting it off Kamet safely and in comfort. The Indian Air Force was an over-willing ally — its helicopter pilots not only took us on recce flights but also showed great courage and daring in evacuating casualties by making difficult landings on glaciers and moraines. The Defence Food Laboratories and Mohan Meakins Ltd gave us donations of excellent precooked food, and State Bank of India, Ranikhet, came forward with a generous cash donation to supplement our budget.

A special debt goes to all fellow-Kumaonis, with whom I have shared a precious regimental bond which is a gift to each soldier. As always, they rose in support and help, nobly and fully. As a token of my gratitude, this book about their own endeavour, I dedicate to all my fellow-soldiers of Kumaon Regiment. I am also happy to earmark all royalty earnings from this book to the Kumaon Regimental Centre. I also take this opportunity to particularly remember Lt Ramnik Singh Bakshi, a budding young officer who achieved the unique feat of climbing both Kamet and Abi Gamin during our expedition — an effort unmatched by anyone else in the annals of mountaineering. After this remarkable feat he was an automatic choice for the ill-fated Indian Army Everest Expedition of 1985. Bakshi was among those fine young men who never returned from Everest and the mountains, in accordance with their own inscrutable laws, had once again taken away from us one upon whom they had showered so much success at such an early age.

Narinder Kumar

I

THE CALL

Late in 1982, I received a letter from the Colonel of the Kumaon Regiment, Lt Gen P.N. Kathpalia, AVSM, which said:
'I am writing to you in connection with the Kumaon Regimental team attempting to scale Kamet next year. I do appreciate your personal achievements for the Army and the country but it is very surprising that being a Kumaoni you have never led a pure Kumaoni Team in the field of mountaineering where you are internationally known. I am writing to you in the hope that as a good Kumaoni you will not refuse this request of the Regiment to lead their team to Kamet this year....I am not prepared to accept no as an answer.'

I am a Kumaoni, and proud to be one. Ask a soldier, almost any soldier, and you will find him utterly, even fiercely and aggressively loyal to his regiment. To a soldier, his regiment is his second home. It is what nurtures and shapes him, gives him a sense of identity with a group of fellow-soldiers, gives him proud traditions to carry on, and a heroic and glorious past as legacy. Not just that, it also gives him a sense of distinctiveness in the large Indian Army by giving him this special turban or that special cap as headgear, by determining how he may carry his baton, or whether he can have a green pom-pom on his beret. A soldier owes his regiment much, and cherishes its honour as sacred. In short, regimental ties and feelings are among the strongest bonds one can have in the Army. Within reason, regimental obligation, or responding to the call of one's regiment, is as much a duty of a soldier, as the direct order of a superior officer.

Our regiment, bearing the name of a famous mountain region of India, had no mountaineering expedition or venture to its credit. Gen Kathpalia was determined to set this right and had decided that Kumaonis would attempt Kamet in the summer of 1983. Kamet is a high mountain of about 7756 metres. An ascent of Kamet would, therefore, be dramatic enough for what he had in mind; it would certainly make the regiment as 'mountainous' as its name was. That it is in the neighbouring Garhwal, almost in Kumaon itself, was an additional attraction.

The senior most soldier of my regiment, who in the Army is called 'Colonel of the Regiment' — though he is invariably a General — was now making a strong request and I knew I could hardly refuse.

My health and age weighed heavily against the pull of my regimental ties. Also, Kamet had hardly ever come to my mind as a worthy challenge, and I found little inner drive for it. In contrast, when I had wagered very heavily by suggesting to the then Chief, the late Gen T N Raina, that the Indian Army should climb Kanchenjunga from the 'impossible' North East Spur route, I had been a man possessed by a vision; that route on Kanchenjunga was the highest virgin route on any Indian mountain, and one to test the steel of the best climbers of the world. Yet I knew that my regimental call could hardly be left unanswered, and, reluctantly almost, I began assembling the key facts in my mind.

Kamet is the third highest mountain in India. I had already successfully led expeditions to the highest two; Kanchenjunga and Nanda Devi. So it could be a satisfying hat-trick. With a little more enthusiasm I then turned to the earlier accounts of Kamet. And I began thinking of my regiment's requirements. It was first climbed by Frank Smythe's team in 1931, the highest mountain ever climbed till then. Thereafter, it had always been climbed by the original Smythe route; up the East Kamet Glacier to Meade's Col, and then to the summit. Surely there were other aspects to a mountain as high as Kamet. I looked for photographs, studied them, and gradually a vision began to form in my mind.

There *were* other aspects to Kamet, routes untried, faces not grappled with, challenges not yet met. All these churned through my mind and, almost against my will, I found myself in a state of some excitement. I had found some challenges in Kamet; and now I could answer my regiment's call with the enthusiasm it deserved.



2

THE HIDDEN MOUNTAIN

The third highest mountain in the Indian territory gets barely a second glance as one looks out with wonder at the galaxy of white-mantled mountains of Garhwal and Kumaon on a clear morning from Ranikhet. Of course, the utterly beautiful Nanda Devi and sister-mountains attract a very great deal of attention. And from Ranikhet, where the Kumaon Regimental Centre is located, even the innocuous Trisul seems to rise with an upward grandeur that unfailingly draws one's attention. Sweeping leftwards, the eyes are drawn to the icy Nilakantha, and then the Badrinath and Kedarnath peaks. And, sure enough, we have missed out Kamet, seemingly a mere bump, there between Trisul and Nilakantha, hardly worthy of close scrutiny.

And that's how Kamet lies, farther north than these other mountains of Uttarakhand, north of the Great Himalayan Range, the tallest and mightiest of a group of four high mountains — Abi Gamin, Mukut Parbat, Mana Peak and Kamet itself — that mark the eastern extremity of the Zaskar Range. Its greater distance from Ranikhet — about 150 miles — is what conceals Kamet's true proportions. One has to penetrate deep into its either flank before one is able to appreciate just how high a mountain it is. That it should remain relatively so undisturbed is quite strange when one considers how it lies between the high Niti and Mana passes, two of the best known, most trodden land routes between India and Tibet. The Niti and Mana passes have been immortalised by a generation of British explorers in the earlier part of this century. And my generation of Indian climbers could scarcely be unaware of the familiar romantic ring of these passages to Tibet. Then, too, for the newer, younger mountaineers eagerly seeking fresh challenges which may make their reputations, Kamet should logically have been more attractive than it has been. I was quite astonished, especially when I discovered that no one had attempted to climb the mountain from its Western flank since the intrepid Captain Slingsby's last unsuccessful efforts of 1913. I just could not believe this. Here lay the highest unclimbed route on any Indian mountain, and none had thought of it for over seventy years. I decided to go up and take a look at this baffling mystery. Was the route such a piece of cake as to be of so little interest?

I asked the pilot to take our Chetak helicopter round once more, my favourite 35 mm Nikormat glued to my eyes. I snapped picture after picture of the imposing rocky face that sheered upwards outside the window. The chopper seemed to hang motionless, a speck or a fly pasted on that huge mountain wall. I was face to face with the Western route of Kamet, and far from being a piece of cake it was one of the most imposing routes we could have asked for. Most mountains are pyramidal in shape, and their flat surfaces — three mostly — are called Faces, while the edges that bound these Faces are known as Ridges in mountaineering language. Our helicopter was flying along the lower edge of the South-West Face of Kamet, a wall of huge rock and boulders climbing straight up over 2000 feet from the West Kamet Glacier below to the West Ridge of the mountain. I was quite shaken to see this battlement of a Face, almost completely bare of snow — too windswept, or just too sheer

— for any snow to stay on it. Either way it meant a tough climbing challenge. Was there a snow or avalanche chute over to the left, a white streak on the rocky visage? Perhaps that could allow us to slip up, praying of course all the while that no avalanche should at that time choose to come down. I could really see no other way to get on to the ridge above. Well, perhaps we could gingerly climb that at night, when the snows are normally frozen tight on to the slopes and there is usually little danger of avalanches. But there is the cold. At night there is the severe cold, and the raging winds.

With an effort I wrenched my thoughts off the problem of climbing the gully, and took a closer look at the ridge itself. From where the gully would lead one to the ridge, it crested up in a rocky, jagged line for about two kilometres, climbing about 750 metres as it swept upward to the summit of Kamet. Looking at that ridge as it rose against the skyline, I was reminded of another ridge on another mountain; a ridge that had beckoned to me for years, a ridge considered quite impossible until our army team had overcome its challenge in 1977. The North-East Spur of Kanchenjunga had flung at us monster ice towers, treacherous gendarmes, knife edge ice aretes over its four-kilometre length. Often on that ridge our daily progress was measured in mere hundreds of horizontal feet. Even now when I see a picture of that ridge — the North-East Spur of Kanchenjunga — I experience a slight tremor. Did we ever really do it, I wonder. Did we really secure a passage up that knife-edge incline on which lay ice and snow masses frozen in every conceivable leap and roar of power. What did the Kamet West Ridge hold? Was it broken too, and jagged, in keeping with its rocky character? Would there be towers over and down which we would have to clamber repeatedly? And what of the surface itself? There was rock; would it also be glazed with *verglas*, that deadly layer of ice, hard, slippery, and too thin to drive any lifesaving pitons into it? And sheer rock at that height also meant winds. I tried hard to think how the wind would blow here. Wouldn't it be westerly; and, if so, wouldn't it blow across the bodies of the climbers clinging on to the ridge? I knew that there were challenges enough on this route. As the machine dipped and took an about turn under the shadow of the rock face. Flying past Mana Peak, and then the peaks above the Arwa and Badrinath area, I could finally relax and enjoy the beauty of the rugged mountains below and around me. Suddenly my eye was arrested by a magnificent pyramid of rock rising sheer to a height of perhaps 22,000 feet, not a very great altitude as Himalayan mountain tops go but every vertical rock foot of it was packed with challenges and difficulties enough for the most skilful of climbers. And it wasn't even marked on the maps. A mountain a day's march above Mana, and as imposing as Changabang, and surely unclimbed too, for it did not even exist on the map. Such is the scale of the Himalayas.

As the chopper swung left for the flight back to Joshimath, I turned for another look at Kamet. Higher as it stood than any rival in that company, its perfect pyramid was still bathed by the late afternoon sun even as the other giants were already in complete shade. Slanting lances of light of the sun turned the mountain a glowing red as though a huge, cheerful fire was burning in the glacier below and its red heat and light travelled upon the walls of Kamet. Once again I was struck by the sensibilities of these mountain people, and the precision and poetry with which they christen these awe-inspiring high mountains they live amidst, for Kamet comes from the Tibetan Kang-med meaning, 'glacier fire'. And mornings and evenings as Kamet shines red in the early and late light of the sun, what better explanation can there be but that its glacier is on fire throwing up its crackling flames, licking upward along the mountains faces, washing them red.

I turned my mind back to the present. We would be soon at Ranikhet and our plans had to be finalised. Gen Kathpalia and Brig Satish Issar, Commandant of the Kumaon Regimental Centre, would be eagerly looking forward to a final proposal from me. I closed



A view of the high mountains of Garhwal from Ranikhet

my eyes and tried to marshal all that I knew, and had seen; so far. I had may be, thirty minutes to finally make up my mind.

In a way the facts were very simple. Having been one of the three highest mountains completely within the British Empire — the other two being Kanchenjunga and Nanda Devi — Kamet had attracted sustained attention of British explorers and mountaineers. The names of those who set out to reconnoitre and climb its slopes read like a roll-call of honour. Dr T.G. Longstaff and Brig Gen C C Bruce (1902), C F Meade (1910, 1912 and 1913), Capt A.M. Slingsby (1911 and 1913), Dr. A.M. Kellas (1911 and 1914), and again, Dr Kellas with Col H T Morshead (1920).

Except for Capt A M Slingsby's attempts in 1911 and 1913, and Meade's in 1912, all the other major attempts had been from the Eastern side of Kamet via the East Kamet Glacier. In fact, it was Meade's unsuccessful attempt from the Western flank in 1912 which convinced him, and all others who attempted the mountain thereafter, of the impracticability of finding a route from that side. And it was, in fact, Meade who also provided the key to climbing Kamet when in 1913 he proceeded up the East Kamet Glacier, and then tackling a snow gully and a small rock face higher up, reached the saddle between Kamet and its northern neighbour, Abi Gamin. This hollow, or col, has since been immortalized as Meade's Col. Cruelly, Meade was beaten back from his col by bad weather and his party's poor acclimatization but he had hit upon the route which so many successful expeditions were to take. The first of the many ascents of Kamet was achieved by the team led by that very well-known British climber, F S Smythe, who in 1931 succeeded in having six members of his team reach the summit in the autumn of that year. The floodgates had been opened. A continuous series of expeditions thereafter set out for Kamet. With India's independence, Indian climbers too found in Kamet a friendly and attractive mountain, and were successful in climbing it first in 1955 and then again, more than once, during the 1970s and again in 1980 and 1982.

So the basic facts were: one, that Kamet had been very often climbed from its eastern side, among others by girls and young cadets of the Indian Military Academy, who all followed the same route as used by Smythe in the first ever ascent of the mountain, i.e. over the East Kamet Glacier and Meade's Col, and two, no attempt at all had been made, since Capt Slingsby's effort of 1913, to climb the glacier-fire mountain from its Western flank. So here was a much-climbed mountain, much climbed from only one side, and not at all from the other. Almost a paradox, and a strange oversight on the part of keen mountaineers looking for fresh challenges.

The banking of the helicopter as it descended to land made me open my eyes. We were about to land at Ranikhet and now I had a plan. Simple and clear. Kumaonis would launch not one but two expeditions. We would attempt Kamet not from any one, but from both its flanks simultaneously; we would follow the route everyone did, and also attempt a route no one successfully had.

3

READY, GET SET, GO

New Delhi: February 1983

Lt Gen Kathpalia pushed aside the maps and papers, leaned back in the chair and turned to Brig Issar, 'So Satish, what do you say?' The Commandant of the Kumaon Regimental Centre didn't hesitate at all. 'I understand very little about the problems but it sounds grand,' replied Brig Issar. 'Well, you will have to do a great deal, you know, Bull is based in Delhi, so the overall supervision of the preparations will be under your charge,' reminded Gen Kathpalia.

'We'll take care of it in Ranikhet,' assured Satish.

Gen Kathpalia glanced around at me enquiringly. I had nothing to add. Among the three of us ran a strong current of confidence. Satish Issar had come down to Delhi for the weekend in order to finalize with the Colonel of the Regiment what I had earlier suggested after my aerial recce of Kamet. We had carefully gone over the various issues involved during a long sitting at Gen Kathpalia's home, ever so often recharged by chilled beer. Now he raised his frosted glass and said, 'Right then. Here is the Command Decision: the Kumaon Regiment goes to Kamet in June 1983.'

Thus the gears were engaged, and the expedition machinery changed from idling to motion. It needed to gather speed rapidly, for the launching date was barely three months away and we had set for ourselves rather ambitious goals.

The primary goal was, of course, to initiate the regiment into serious mountaineering. Kamet at about 25,447 feet (7756 m) would certainly be a good blooding. A successful ascent would generate confidence and get Kumaoni climbing activities off to a good start. Then, considering that substantial commitment of effort and money would be involved in the venture we decided to make the most of it. We thus determined to make a full-scale reconnaissance of the Western flank of Kamet, an approach never before seriously tackled; Slingsby's effort was courageous but had not quite come to grips with the challenge. My aerial recce had revealed that climbing Kamet from the West was a truly formidable proposition. I reckoned that the odds were against us succeeding in getting to the summit; few high mountains have yielded at the first try from a new, difficult, and unknown route. Thus the Western side of Kamet remained a virgin route — too tempting a prospect not to try.

If indeed we were successful in climbing Kamet from the West — admittedly it was not very likely — we decided we would cap it with the first ever Indian cross-over of any high mountain; the Western summit team would descend by the traditional Eastern route, thus involving them in crossing from one side of this mountain to the other, over the summit. Besides this ambitious plan we also decided that at least one of the two neighbouring peaks of Abi Gamin and Mana could be attempted from the two Base Camps which would be set up. These two are the second and third highest peaks of the Zaskar Range, the highest being Kamet. We determined, too, that it would really enthrill the regiment if a recruit — a soldier

trainee—were also to reach the summit of Kamet, and given the fact that we had among the Kumaonis about half a dozen expert skiers, we added to our list of goals a ski-descent of Kamet. In 1931, Holdsworth had skied part of the way down the mountain and I reckoned we had a good chance of now doing better. Of course, a complete ski-descent of Kamet is not possible owing to a 1000-foot rock face below Meade's Col, and another very steep ice gully lower down but the rest of the mountain offered an exhilarating skiing prospect. Indians had earlier set a world record by skiing down Trisul in 1976. Having discovered the tremendous thrill of such long ski-runs I had become very enthusiastic about trying these on some other mountains as well. This multiplicity of goals stemmed from our desire that, once launched, the Kumaon Regiment should have as full a mountain adventure as possible. I was also, therefore, rather keen that weather and other conditions permitting, one of the fitter members should attempt a solo climb of Kamet. Few solo climbs of high mountains have been attempted — Reinhold Messner being a shining exception — for the simple reason that climbing solo multiplies the risks involved a hundredfold. A relatively minor mishap or accident — a sprained ankle, for instance — can prove fatal. Getting caught alone on a difficult pitch — where a fellow climber's belay could have got one across — could easily result in tragedy unless one is not only a very competent climber but also possesses very steady nerves. Then, too, there is the psychological barrier to overcome, to climb high on a high mountain with the awareness that one has no one else to talk to, draw sustenance from another's strength or will when one's own is flagging. All in all, it sounded a very interesting prospect.

We dispersed that day with our broad goals set. Ranikhet would become the nerve centre of our preparations. I took over the responsibility of arranging for the equipment and it was decided that a small team would be established in Delhi to assist me with that and various other paperwork and legwork an expedition entails. Finally, a sum of Rs. 1,50,000 was earmarked from the regimental funds as our budget. I was deeply gratified by the hundred percent support and backing of both Gen Kathpalia and Brig Issar; more than that, their total involvement and enthusiastic encouragement. We were on.

Ranikhet: March—April 1983

As the volunteers from the various battalions of the Regiment began trickling into Ranikhet, Capt Suraj Dalal, one of the two deputy leaders, took them under his charge and inducted them into the gruelling training programme he had worked out to ensure that our final team would consist of tough, trained climbers.

During the first week, he daily put them through two hours of route march, hill climbing and load carrying followed by familiarisation with the use of equipment and rope. Many of the volunteers had already attended courses in mountaineering and for them it was a useful refresher spell.

As the muscles hardened, Suraj began to train them on rocks near the Somnath Ground which was designated as the Advance Training Area. Rock-climbing was interspersed with long marches of 20-25 kilometres and with loads of 20-25 kgs on their backs. The final team was selected by Satish Issar, Suraj and myself.

The team was essentially a youthful one with a few mountain-scarred veterans who lent it the right blend of experience. We selected twelve members — including a Deputy Leader — for each Axis.

Captain Suraj Bhan Dalal, 38, had served as an Instructor at High Altitude Warfare School (HAWS) and had been a member of HAWS Expedition to Sickle Moon, the highest

mountain in Kishtwar Himalayas. He was appointed Deputy Leader in-charge of the Western Axis team.

To lead our team on the Eastern Axis, we picked Captain DB Thapa, who had been one of the summiteers of the Indian Military Academy (IMA) Expedition to Kamet in 1982. Cool, competent and remarkably mature at 29.

The other members of the Western Team were:

Capt R S Sambial who had successfully attended basic and advance mountaineering courses at HAWS, and also a skiing course.

Capt Sanjay Agarwal, 24, who had climbed Gori Chen in Arunachal Pradesh.

Lt Balwan Singh, 24, for whom the expedition would be the first taste of high mountains. But what he lacked in experience and training, he more than made up in toughness and enthusiasm.

Subedar (Sub) Kura Ram, SM, was, in contrast, an old, experienced hand. At 42, he had years of mountaineering experience under his belt. He had climbed extensively in Bhutan and Kashmir, and had been a very valuable member of the Indian Army Expedition to Kanchenjunga in 1977.

Naib Subedar (Nb Sub) Suli Maon had successfully completed basic and advance mountaineering courses at HAWS. He is also a fine skier and had been a runners-up in the National Ski Competition. He had been a member of the Army Karakoram Expedition, 1981, where he had climbed Sia Kangri. At 30, he seemed to have the right experience and the right age to play a key role.

Havaldar (Hav) Laxman Singh, another 30-year old had been with me to Teram Kangri in the Eastern Karakorams. He too had undertaken basic and advance mountaineering courses at HAWS.

Naik (Nk) Dan Singh and Nk Abhai Singh had also undergone basic mountaineering courses at HAWS. Nk Dan Singh, at 28, presented a picture of toughness and eagerness and Abhai Singh, 31, looked as sturdy and steady as he turned out to be.

Hav Jeet Bahadur Ram, Nk Rajendra Singh Dev and Nk Khushal Singh had also attended mountaineering courses at HAWS and had emerged well from Dalal's training regimen at Ranikhet.

Major G Ravinder Nath of Army Medical Corps had volunteered as one of the two doctors of the expedition. He had been one of the first to arrive for the training, and though new to high mountains, he had trekked in the Central Himalayas. In the expedition he played a role far exceeding that of the doctor and became an integral member of the team.

Nk S C Patil of the Army Medical Corps was the nursing assistant attached to Maj Ravinder Nath and he too responded fully to even the non-medical demands placed upon him.

Under Capt Thapa on the Eastern Axis were:

Capt Daljit Singh, new to the mountains but a university-level boxer. Tough and sturdy.

Lt R S Bakshi, who had climbed Kamet as an IMA Gentleman-Cadet in 1982, when Thapa too had reached the summit.

Lt R K Singh, had also been a Gentleman-Cadet member of the IMA Kamet Expedition, 1982.

Sub Soban Singh, VSM, had served as an Instructor at HAWS and had been a member of the 1976 pre-Kanchenjunga expedition to Siniolchu.

Hav Raj Pal was another trained mountaineer who had served as Instructor at HAWS. In addition, he had won an all-India ski competition.

MEMBERS OF THE KUMAONI KAMET EXPEDITION



S B Dalal



G Ravinder Nath



Balvan Singh



Suli Maon



Abhai Singh



D B Thapa



Lakpa Tsering



Col N Kumar



Khushal Singh



A N Chingappa



Laxman Singh



Mhathung Loth



Kabiraj Singh



Kura Ram



Soban Singh



Dan Singh



R S Bakshi



Daljit Singh



Roop Singh



Bir Singh



B S Pokharia



S C Patil



Jeet Bahadur Ram



L M Mathpal



R K Singh



Raj Pal



Rajendra Singh Dev



Khim Singh



Sanjay Agarwal



S S Khanka

Hav Lalit Mohan Mathpal, 32, another trained climber and Instructor at HAWS, Lance Naik (LNk) Bharat Singh Pakharia, 27, Sepoys (Sep) Kabiraj Singh, 20, and Subhash Singh Khanka, 25, and recruits (Rec) Khim Singh and Mhathung Loth completed the Eastern Team.

A list of the complete team, and their support groups is given in Appendix 1.

For the selected members, the pattern of training was continued till the take-off day. The latter part of the training was at Mana which was still snowbound and this gave the team a feel of snow and cold. Mana Training Camp also afforded the opportunity of filling in some vital gaps in the skills of some of the members because as Suraj put it, 'Many of the team didn't know any cooking and I detailed them to the kitchen tent for a couple of days each!'

Delhi: April 1983

The budget sanctioned was indeed very generous so far as Kumaon Regiment's capacity went. On the other hand it was minuscule for what we had in mind. Boots, for instance. Good climbing boots must fulfil several essential conditions; they must be waterproof but must also 'breathe', be warm yet light, be flexible but must have hard enough soles to take on crampons which are essential for climbing ice surface. I had suffered in 1961, and know of several other Indian expeditions that had casualties on account of inferior footwear. I wasn't going to compromise on this. The kind of boots we needed aren't manufactured in India. I thought of buying second-hand ones from Nepal, discards of foreign expeditions. I enquired and received a quotation of Rs 30,000-Rs 40,000. That was clearly too expensive for us. I was in extreme quandary. Then I thought of the boots we had imported for the Kanchenjunga Expedition. They were five to six years old by now but I still had more confidence in these than in any Indian ones. I made a weekend trip to Gulmarg where they were stored and was greatly relieved to find them in satisfactory condition. Only after I got actual possession of these, and had put them in a truck for Ranikhet, did I finally feel that our expedition was on.

If anything, the high altitude climbing clothes we needed proved an even more severe budgetary problem. The ideal insulation from a climbing point of view is provided by eiderdown — the down of a North Sea duck called eider. It is extremely good insulation material, and extremely light. Ever since the early explorations of the poles, eiderdown had remained the first choice for arctic or mountain clothing notwithstanding the remarkable technological advancement in the field of synthetic materials. To equip twenty-five members with complete down outfits — down gloves, down jackets, down sleeping bags, down what-have-you — would have ruined us financially. Each set cost about Rs 10,000; add another Rs 10,000 for import duty — alas, such clothing is also not yet made in India — and we were faced with a figure of half a million rupees. That would put our accounts very much in the red. Confronted with such insolubles I have often despaired for Indian climbers. As in the past, we set about making compromises, and I decided we could afford only six complete sets, three for each Axis. These would be used by the highest climbing members, and handed over to others as the lead changed. Then a visit to the office of the Controller of Imports and Exports, and we obtained a waiver of import duty on these. Total outlay: Rs 50,000.

Then, three cheers for India. The army's Ski Trooper Sleeping Bag is lovely, light and warm. The jackets used by the army at high altitudes are very warm too. These would have to do despite their bulk and weight — 4 to 5 kg. In fact, because of the bulk, the members found these served as excellent pillows when bunched up. But for mattresses we again had to look to foreign supplies. We were able to obtain some kapok ones from within the

country but we bought second-hand Karrimats in Nepal; extremely light closed-cell foam mattresses which provide excellent insulation from the ice and snow surface on which tents are pitched in the mountains. Also, these can be rolled up and carried with ridiculous ease. This is a far cry from the days of our earlier expeditions when air mattresses were in vogue, and along with them cold backsides as these were prone to punctures. Windproof cloth of decent quality is now made in India, and this is a big help for Indian climbing expeditions. Wind blows away the thin layer of warmth that the human body generates around itself. Then, having laid bare the body, it multiplies the effect of cold. For instance, a temperature of -3 degree Centigrade at 45 kilometres-an-hour-wind, is exacerbated to an effective -9 degree Centigrade; wind-chill factor, which is why wind-protection is vital. We discovered, and were able to hire, windproof parkas with hoods from a new source, the Kumaon Mandal Vikas Nigam who have built up stores for the Indian pilgrims who go to Kailash and Mansarovar. The hire charges were steep, but still it was cheaper than having to buy the large number we required.

Meanwhile, the regimental ladies at Ranikhet had also been put to work. Satish had charged the atmosphere to a high pitch and the women organized themselves and knit furiously. Well within the schedule, they had ready for us heaps of balaclavas and woollen gloves. Though we had eider mittens for the high teams, we would even then need woollen gloves underneath for mittens are too clumsy for technical climbing where handholds have often to be felt for. Such work can be done in woollen gloves; feeling around ice and ice rock-surfaces at high altitudes with bare hands is, of course, asking for certain trouble.

Camping equipment and fuel; again we had to make do with what we could hire for or obtain as Army issue. The alternative was to go broke even before putting a foot on Kamet for we needed thirty two-men tents, and each of these cost around Rs 4,000. We decided to make do with the army's own Arctic Tent. We also took along ten experimental pup-tents. This made our tentage much heavier and I hoped we would be lucky and get plenty of porters, some of whom could be persuaded to carry to the higher camps on the mountain. Also, there still seemed no alternative to the smelly, bulky kerosene oil in the matter of fuel. Countless must be the number of Indian expeditions which have suffered — often their chances of success cruelly eliminated — on account of faulty primus stoves at higher assault camps. My own experience leads me to distrust Indian stoves and matches above 21,000 feet. Gas lighters must always be carried, and we can only hope that one day we will have butane gas stoves as easily available as they are in the west. These are light, reliable, throw-away and non-contaminating. We chided Indian Oil Corporation about this and they came up with a few small gas cylinders, heavy considering their useful life but may prove to be a start towards a solution to the fuel problem.

On the food front, army stores provided the basics and staples. For the specialities, we knocked on kindly doors. Shri Arunachalam, Finance Advisor to the Ministry of Defence, got us great quantities of excellent special dehydrated food, like cooked chappatis, halwa etc. from Defence Food Laboratories in Mysore. Mohan Meakins camp up with Rs 15,000 to Rs 20,000 worth of juices with the company's compliments. Dehydration is a constant source of anxiety in the mountains because in cold climate the palate does not register the fluid loss that the body suffers. Water is often unappealing but juices are not. Apart from replacing the water lost by the body, the high sugar content of fruit juice is also an excellent source of quick-energy glucose. Chocolate is another excellent quick-energy food, and goes down very well with most climbers. After some initial reluctance, Cadbury's responded with a very generous gift of eclairs and various kinds of chocolates, and we had saved another Rs 8,000 or so. For high altitude camps — above 20,000-foot level — we also bought biscuits, soups and some raisins. Mohan Meakins also gifted us a batch of 'space food'

special, ready-to-eat canned Indian food like pulao, biryani, and some vegetable dishes. We found these excellent. We only had to warm these a little before eating, even cold they were quite palatable. I don't see our astronauts losing weight in space!

As it was all collected, the equipment, food and climbing gear was sent off to Ranikhet in a convoy of trucks.

Ranikhet: April 1983

The days became clearer. Open blue skies and already one could feel the warmth of spring in the coursing breeze. The view became unobstructed and the chain of Garhwal mountains — the famed view of Trisul, Nanda Devi etc — was visible till well into the day. And the team's training went on. Already they were fitter and were running, jumping and rappelling with growing ease, and even some elan.

Training session over, Suraj and his team members would then supervise the arrival and packing of the stores. Everything had to be meticulously listed and then packed in porterloads of 20-25 kg. classified as to which one were meant for the approach march, the lower camps, and the higher ones. Day after day this went on, and yet there seemed no end to it. If anything, more and more seemed to be needed.



Delhi: May 1983

'I'm going to get married. It's all arranged, the dates and all. I would like to, but I just can't come along on the expedition, sir, Captain Sambial unexpectedly turned up at my home one weekend when I had believed the entire team was training in Ranikhet. He looked anxious, caught on the horns of a dilemma. I persuaded him to go to Ahmednagar and talk his fiancée into agreeing to a postponement of their wedding. 'You can't let the regiment down. can you?' I played upon the same sentiments as had earlier proved so successful with me.

'Go on to Ahmednagar and don't worry about leave. I'll take care of that with your C.O.' I assured him.

I didn't want any changes in our team at the last moment. Capt Sambial wouldn't be able to join the rest of the boys for training but there seemed no way around that.

Kathmandu: 22-23 May 1983

I spent two days with Maj A C Chopra buying the climbing gear and Karrimats. Also, ropes for climbing and fixed-ropes, about 10,000 feet of these. The Western Team had in store a very great deal of technical climbing, so we also bought rock and ice pitons of various sizes; pitons strong enough to arrest falls of up to 50 feet when hammered securely into the mountain face. Expansion bolts, rock drill, karabiners, jumars, hammers... it was a fairly long list but we managed to get all that we needed in two days of non-stop activity. For good measure, we also bought a dozen headlamps; small torches that can be strapped onto the forehead with a wide, elastic headband. Maybe, we'd have to work on some sections at night to avoid falling stones...

Leaving Maj Chopra to load and shepherd all the stuff by a truck to Ranikhet, I barely managed to catch my return flight to Delhi.

Delhi: 24 May 1983

I reached home at 10.30 p.m. keeping my fingers crossed about our film. It was there. Plenty of it. Maj Inder Jit had managed to obtain all our requirement and had delivered it earlier that afternoon.

I finished my personal packing well after midnight. In between, I called Kapil on the phone, waking him from sleep to remind him to request Films Division to teach him the working of the 16 mm movie camera, I had appointed him to be the cameraman for the Western Axis since Capt Sambial, the earlier choice, was away from the scene trying to smooth out domestic trouble even before he was married.

Lucknow: 25 May 1983

The central command, especially Lt Gen H C Dutta, PVSM, had helped us a lot in putting together the expedition in a short duration of just two months. So before leaving for Kamet I decided to pay a visit to Lucknow to thank the staff in general, and the General in particular.

A simple but solemn ceremony was organised when I was given the Central Command Flag by Gen Dutta to be put on the top of Kamet. Gen Kathpalia who had especially flown for this function to Lucknow, took this opportunity to present the Kumaon Regimental Flag.

To the media of Lucknow, I gave the objectives of our expedition as follows:

- 1) To make a serious attempt on Kamet from the Eastern side,
- 2) To reconnoitre the Western route, and
- 3) To ski down if the slopes permitted.

The same evening I left for Ranikhet, from where I was picked up by a helicopter and deposited in Joshimath.



4

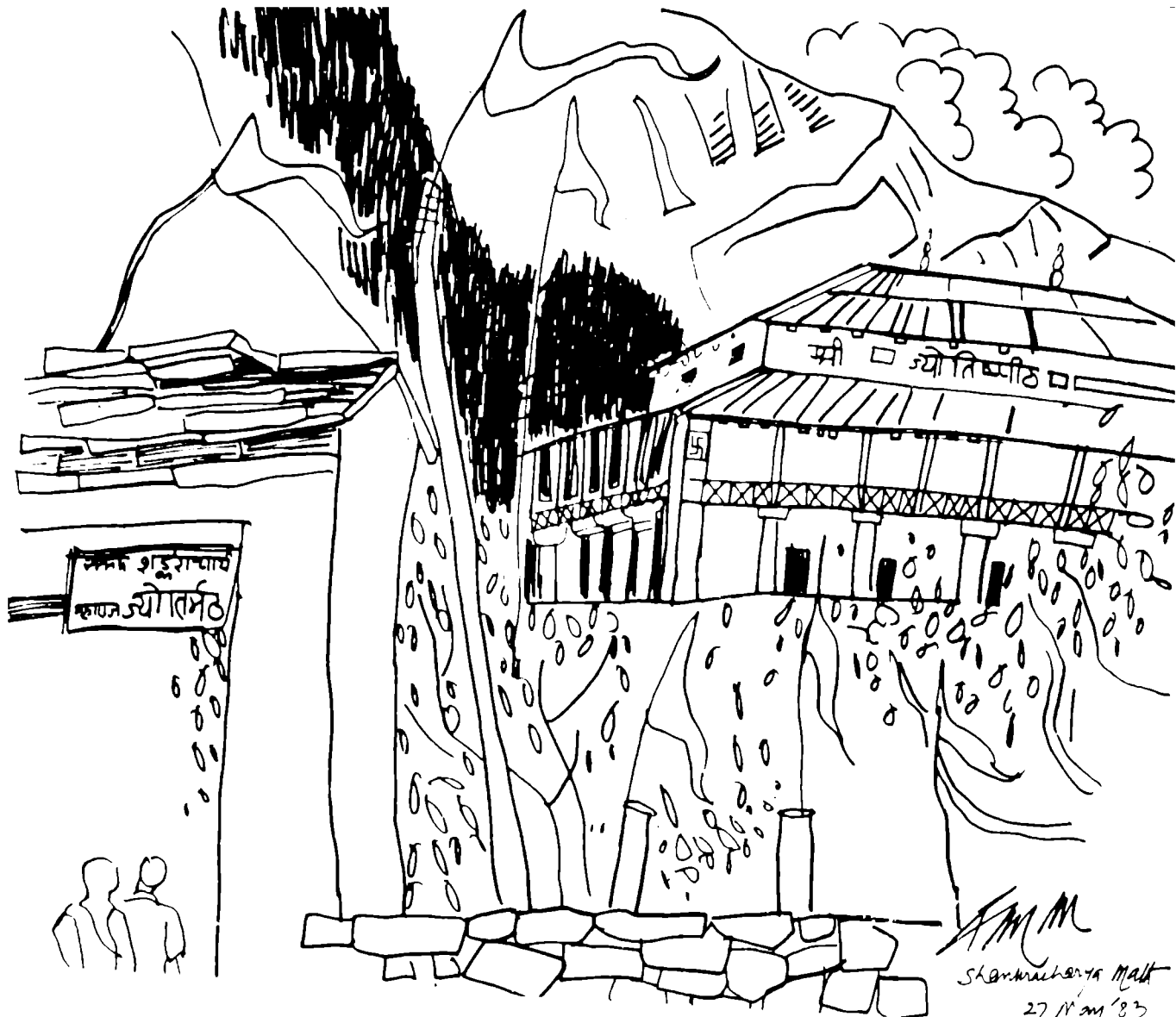
FORMING UP

For me Joshimath was an exquisite interlude between the frenetic dashing around of the previous week, and the hard effort we had to put in during the week ahead. Our mountain was just behind and around the wooded hills, no more than twenty miles as the crow flies, but I didn't think about it very much in the mild, sunlit weather. The hillside was coming alive after the winter; there weren't any flowers yet but the leaves of the plants and trees glowed in green and the heather shone in rust. The air was clear and I breathed in deeply of its nourishment. A little below where we were in an army mess, the road dipped rather steeply to seek out the Alaknanda again which it had left when it rose up the mountain and on its left bank in quick switch backs just a few kilometres before Joshimath. Near Joshimath, the gorge Alaknanda cuts is a narrow, rocky one, and Alaknanda itself is becoming more a mountain torrent than a mountain river. And so to be at a less asphyxiating position, the town of Joshimath rises higher on the right side of the mountain which flanks Alaknanda; high enough until it commands quite a vista and expanse.

Joshimath is an almost inevitable halting place for anyone who comes along this mountain road of Garhwal. For the pilgrims who throng to Badrinath with their truly astonishing devotion and ardour, it is a back-breaking twelve-hour bus ride from Rishikesh at the foot of the Shivalik hills. In their small and cramped buses they have followed the Ganga from their start, early at dawn. It is a curious fact that it is this road to Joshimath — and Badrinath — that follows the holy river of the Hindus up from Rishikesh. The road to Gangotri, on the other hand, takes a sharp, right-angle turn to the left as it climbs steeply from Rishikesh towards Narendranagar, the summer capital of the erstwhile rulers of Tehri, one of the three districts of Garhwal, and follows the dry, rocky bed of a rain-fed watercourse. And on this road to Gangotri one does not meet the Ganga, or Bhagirathi as she is then called, until over eighty kilometres away.

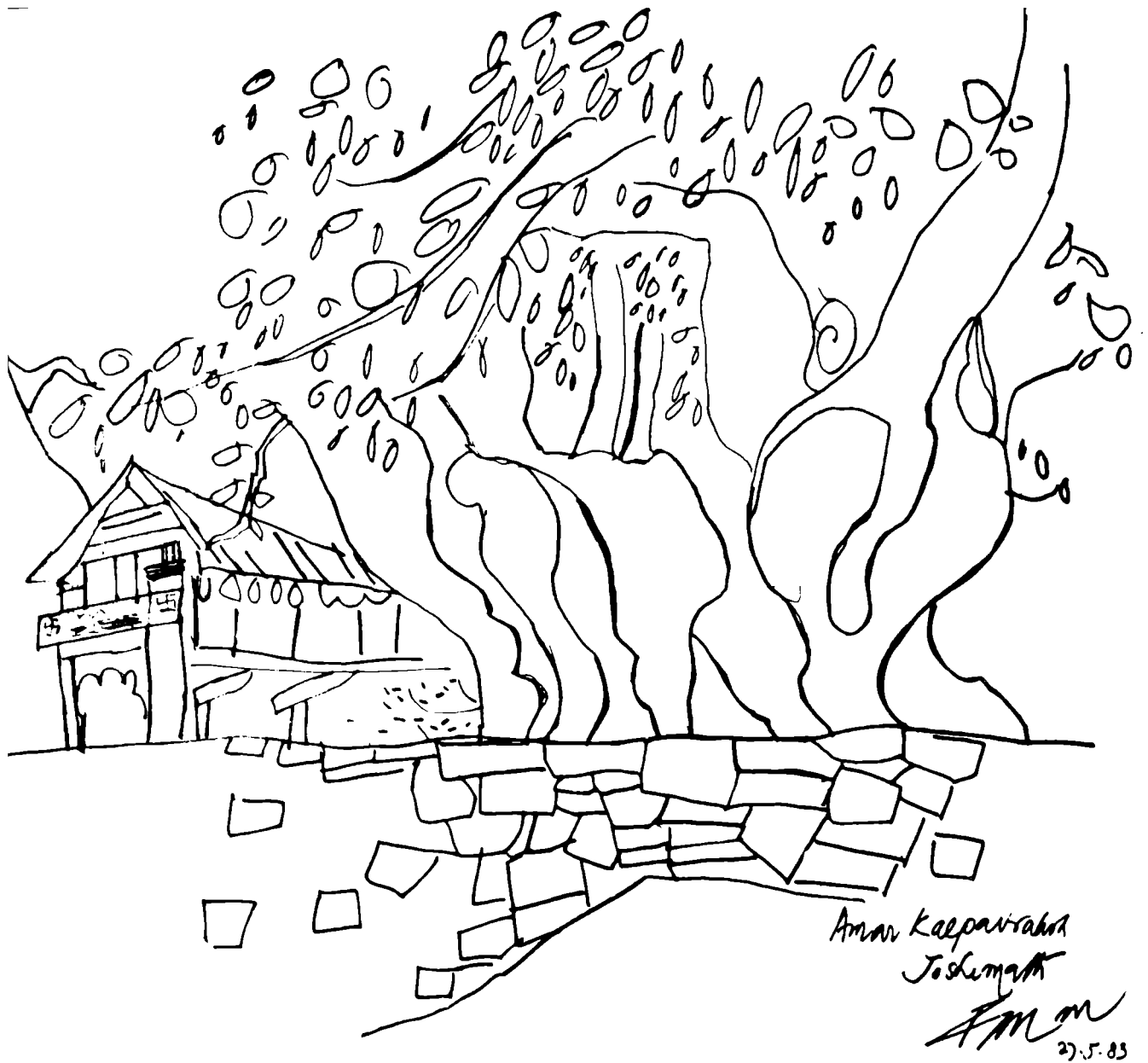
The road to Joshimath follows the Ganga into the mountains, and at Dev Prayag, some 60 kilometres above, two equally powerful currents become one, the Ganga. The westerly of the two is Bhagirathi, the one considered to be the main, holy Ganga bursting forth from the snout of the Gangotri Glacier at Gaumukh and worshipped by millions of Indians. But at Dev Prayag who can say which is the Ganga. At Dev Prayag anyone can be forgiven for mistaking the Alaknanda as the Ganga, for here they are both equally powerful and one is in no way less than the other.

On the road between Rishikesh — at the base of the Shivaliks — and Badrinath, there are in all five such confluences — prayags, as they are known. Seventy kilometres beyond Dev Prayag is Rudra Prayag, where the Mandakini joins forces with Alaknanda. Mandakini has its origin in the Kedarnath mountains, and the motor road to Kedarnath also bifurcates here from the one that goes on to Joshimath and Badrinath. Kedarnath Shrine is one of the twelve most sacred temples of Shiva and Rudra is one of the many names by which this formidable god is known. Beyond, at Karna Prayag, the Pindar frolicking down from the



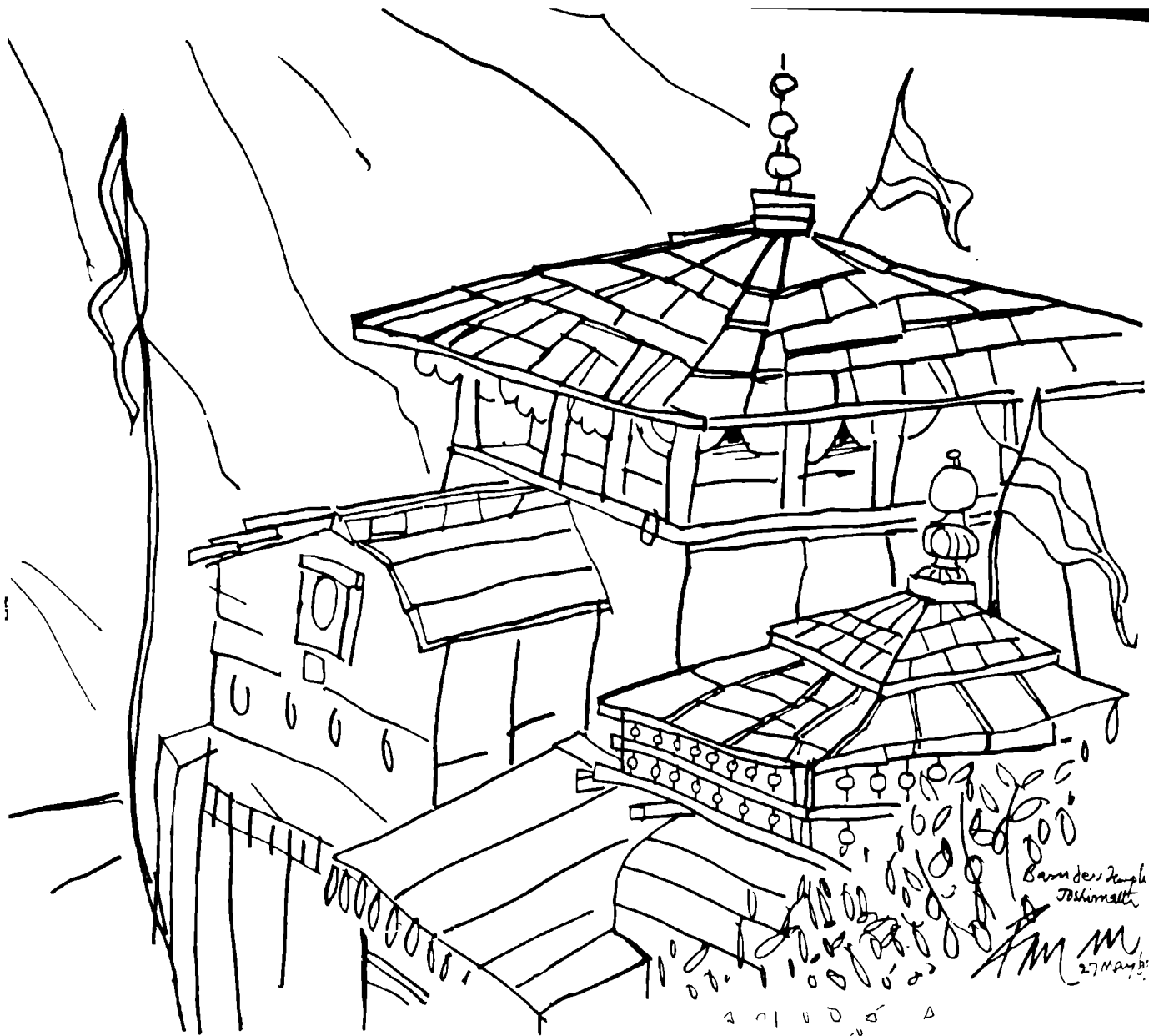
famous Pindari Glacier joins Alaknanda, and then at Nand Prayag it is Mandakini which merges with Alaknanda. Vishnu Prayag, the fifth prayag, lies between Joshimath and Badrinath and here it is the turn of Dhauli Ganga to lose itself in the mightier Alaknanda, or Vishnu Ganga as it is now called. Each of these prayags is holy in its own way; each has temples to various gods and deities, and so too each has many an intriguing legend associated with it. Indeed, the whole of Garhwal is known in ancient lore as Kedarkhand and it is said that in this region temples actually outnumber rocks!

Garhwal, along with Kumaon, lies in the Central Himalayas which span only 350 kilometres of the mighty 2500 kilometre-long Himalayas. It is an incredibly beautiful mountain country. There are high, snow-mantled mountains, glaciers that give rise to the mighty rivers Ganga and Yamuna, clear lakes, pastures, trees, birds and the Valley of Flowers. European, and particularly British, travellers delighted in Garhwal, comparing it very favourably with the best that the Alps can offer. But even before them, the Aryans

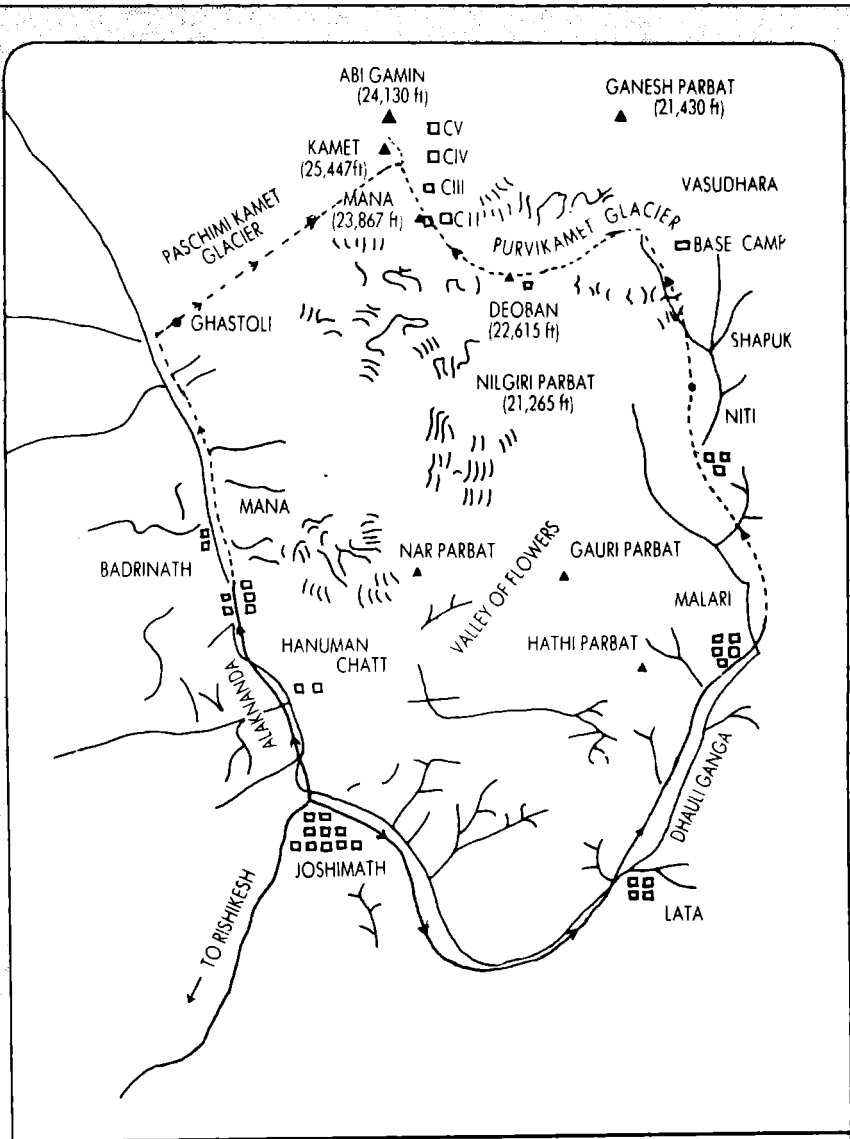


celebrated Uttarakhand in a quite different way. They anointed it their temple-land, for where else could gods be enshrined but in the majesty and grandeur of Garhwal. Then even as a succession of Rohillas and Gurkhas fought for suzerainty, the Hindu gods reigned resplendently in these environs. In the eighth century, Shankaracharya trekked here from the southern tip of the sub-continent seeking light and, so it is said, found it in Joshimath, then called Jyotirmath, the monastery of light.

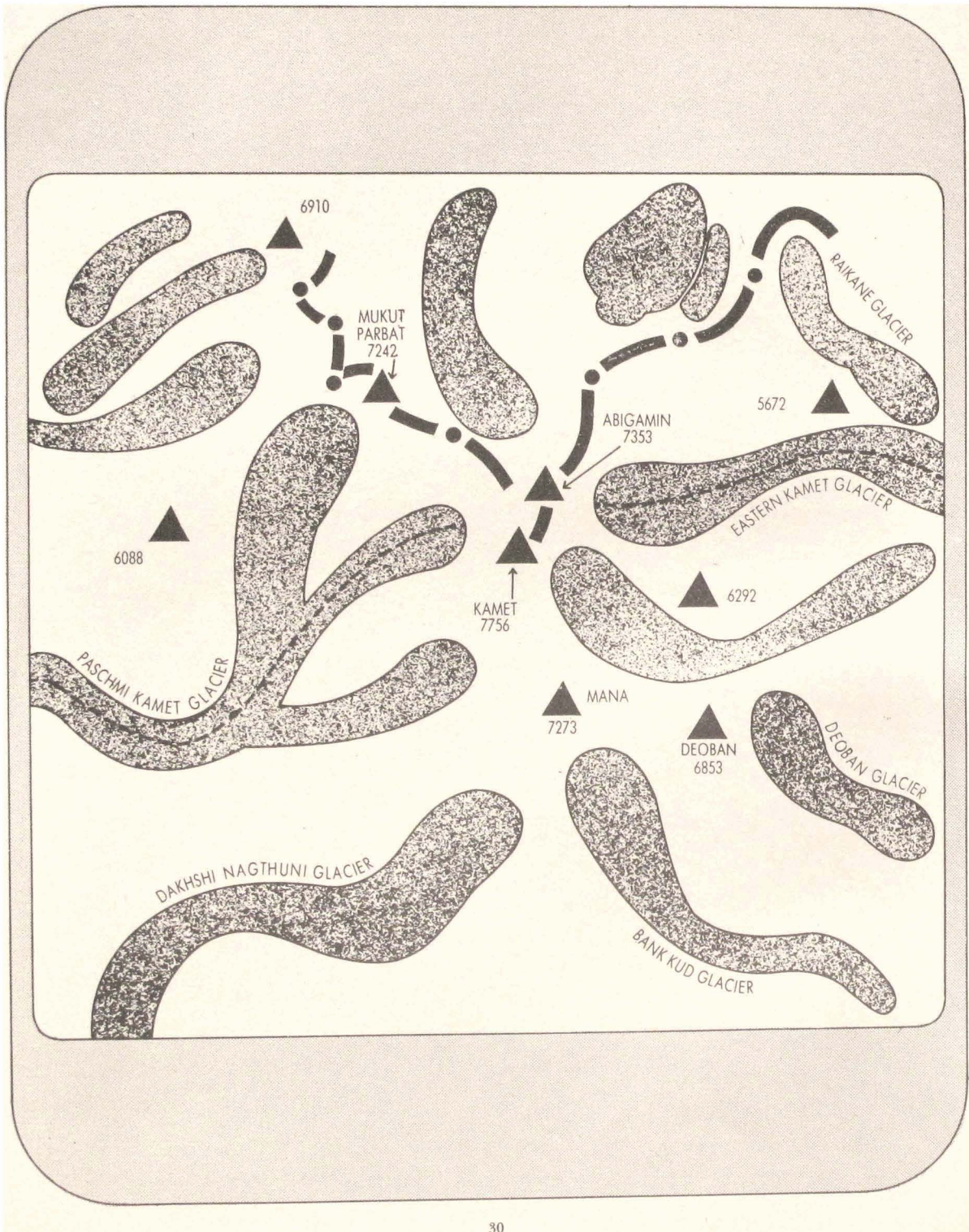
Then, wise and shining, he led a country-wide Hindu renaissance. First he went to Badrinath and re-established in the temple the deity that had been flung into the river, and where it had lain, smoothed and scrubbed by the rushing waters. And Badrinath became holier than ever before, a beacon to all Hindus, the pilgrimage of pilgrimages.



Now the pilgrims normally halt at Joshimath for the night on their journey to Badrinath. It is a long enough drive from Rishikesh in the bus — over twelve hours — and at 6000 feet it is a more hospitable night-halt than the infinitely colder Badrinath, which is over 10,000 feet. At that height, the holy temple-town could also pose an altitude problem or two to some of the devotees, many of whom are elderly and have never before even to lower hills, leave alone to the base of mighty snow-capped Himalayan mountains. And so the buses draw up for the night along the sides of the road and the stiff, weary travellers dismount, wrap themselves in their woollen shawls and melt away very, very quickly into the roadside *dhabas* for a hot meal and then, equally rapidly, into the *serais* and *dharamshalas* for the night. It is a truly fascinating sight; how the somnolent bazar comes alive as the convoy of buses starts arriving in the late afternoon light, disgorges their



SKETCH SHOWING ROUTE TO KAMET AND ABI GAMIN



passengers, and the *dhudbas* and sweet shops are carefully readied with their offering of hot food – or tempting sweets laid out; stoves hiss, oil is heard and the shopkeepers and their assistants shout out their offerings, each trying to attract the travelers' attention. Their beds-roll and other bundles whisked-down from the bus-tops quickly; the pilgrims tuck into the hot, warming food and then, within an hour, the quiet silence of the hill might descend upon the bazar. Often, the erratic electric supply fails, and this adds to the quiet. The outlines of buses and shops dim and fade as the light of the day withdraws and only a few, flickering lamps and candles can be seen, the only sounds the bark of an occasional stray dog. The sense of being in nature is complete. We are in the mountains, where bird and beast bed with the sun.

The rest of the team had come up to Joshimath on 4 May from Kanikhet and were busy keeping fit, packing, re-packing and sorting out the stores, gear and equipment. 25 May 1983 dawned bright and clear. My mind went back to 25 May 1960. On that day I had missed becoming the first Indian after Tenzing Norgay to climb Everest as our summit team was beaten back from 28,300 feet by rapidly deteriorating weather and faulty oxygen equipment. We had sat slumped on the high Everest ridge, huddled against the howling winds, growing colder by the second and yet in a way quite forgetful of its intensity by the enormity of the moment. The top of the world lay barely seven hundred feet above us with few difficulties to bar the way but the implacable weather gods. And so we sat there, each huddled into himself in an effort to come to terms with the now inevitable retreat. What an enormous effort it had been to finally turn to Gombu and Gyaso and say, 'We must go down.'

But now we flew off from Joshimath in clear weather for another aerial recon of our Western route. Flying at 16,000 feet we were quickly over Badrinath, and almost face to face with Nilakantha. It rose, icy blue and awesome as ever, and even though we went past it so very swiftly, memories of our 1961 duel with it crossed my mind. We had succeeded in making its first-ever ascent but we were very nearly routed. The cold took a terrible toll and I lost more than half of my toes and had to almost re-learn walking. But even as I was momentarily lost in memories, Suraj tensed up in his seat, craning his neck and peering out of the plexiglass side as we rushed up the Saraswati Gorge and then banked right in a right-angled turn at the moraine of the Western Kamet Glacier. I swiftly re-checked my cameras and stole a quick glance at Suraj who sat quite still and composed as the trio of rock faces of Mana, Mukut Parbat and Kamet floated into view, the latter easily topping the other two, a massive mountain rising thousands of feet from the glacier bed, thousands of feet of brown rock sprinkled with snow and pasted with ice, and a line of feathery cloud floating near its top.

We were now flying at about 17,000 feet — near enough to appreciate easily the two-fold problem we would face, but too far to be able to arrive confidently at any sound solution. The first challenge would be to climb about 2000 feet straight up the South-West Face to gain the West Ridge. I tried to examine what during my earlier reconce flight had seemed to be a possible route up, a snow-avalanche chute over to the left, but I was no nearer, this time and so less confused whether it would offer a possible route up. I did, however, see another obstacle; the approach to the Face itself was guarded by a rock-step with frozen water-falls glistening on it, which would have to be tackled before we could gain access to the shelf on the lower part of the Face. As for the ridge itself, a quick scan bore out my suspicions. It was armed with numerous gendarmes, each of which would be a successively more difficult climbing task. I also cast a measuring look at the South-East Ridge which was shorter, but much steeper. Also, one would have to climb a very tricky face to get to the ridge, a face menaced by many a

hanging glacier and totally exposed to the likely path of any avalanches that might break off these.

Could there be a third possible alternative by following the glacier around the West Ridge to Kamet's North-West Face, and then strike up for Meade's Col from its western slopes? Once at the Col, our route would then link up with the normal route to Kamet and follow the North Ridge to the summit. If this were possible, the two teams would follow the same route from Meade's Col, at 23,500 feet, to the summit. But there was no way of knowing whether this was a possibility as we were now near the unbroken range of mountains which forms the border with Tibet. The valley had narrowed down and climbing, the chopper was closing in on its safety limits, both of altitude and manoeuvrability, and so we returned for Joshimath, not all that much wiser about the route.

'We will have to decide about the route when we actually get there, sir,' Suraj remarked when we landed. 'The infantry can't expect to solve its problem from the air.'

I was impressed by Capt Dalal's tough, pragmatic approach. He was not deterred even when the porter contractor brought the news that he had so far managed only a third of the porters we needed for the Western Axis.

'Let me start tomorrow with an advance party to open the route,' urged Suraj. 'That way we shall start making some progress.'

The advance parties having taken off from Joshimath, the rush of events of the past few days markedly slowed down. Suddenly for the first time in weeks time seemed to move by liesurely. Of course there was much going on, what with the daily transportation of loads to the road-heads on either side, setting up of communication lines between Ranikhet and Joshimath on the one hand, and Joshimath and the two axes on the other, rounding up of porters, solving of numerous last-minute snags but having experienced these almost inevitable labour pains of Himalayan expeditions many times earlier, I could be somewhat detached and savour the joys of being back in the mountains. The vanguards of the expedition were now the charge of younger, fitter, tougher, Kumaonis, and I gratefully let Lt Col A K Sinha and Capt Ashok Mall wrestle with the administrative tail and allowed myself to roam around a little, and my memories wander.

Looking out towards Badrinath from Joshimath, there is a wooded and cheerful hill, rounded and friendly, that looks uncannily like an elephant, and aptly called Hathi Parbat. But that is where all greenery and roundness ends, far beyond rises a mountain chain of a completely different character—broken, bare rocky spires thrusting upward in jagged edges, piercing the evening cloud masses. This range clearly hints at the barren, high-mountain country beyond; there already is an echo of menace, of adventure. Our Western Route lies that way. As does Badrinath.

There are five temples associated with Badrinath, called Panch Badri —Raj Badri, Yog Badri, Dhyan Badri, Narasinha Badri and Bhavishya Badri. Narasinha Badri deserves our special attention. One arm of the idol Narasinha at Joshimath which is one of the Panch Badri, is growing thinner day by day. The day it falls off or disappears, the road to Badrinath will be closed by a landslide which will dam up the river Vishnu Ganga and the temple at Badrinath will get submerged in water. The place of the landslide will be two miles before Gobind Ghat and has been named Patmial. Nar and Narayana will also join. The new temple at Bhavishya Badri near Tapovan will become the main shrine.

On 30 May I drove up from Joshimath to our Mana Camp at the roadhead, a little way above Badrinath. Even before Badrinath, my eyes were inevitably drawn to the majestic Nilakantha, the mountain of such triumph and tragedy for my small team in 1962. And here it was, unchanged, unchanging, grand. I have hundreds of pictures of its magnificence

and still took hundreds more. Then over the next two or three days I wandered about in this holy region. Not just the Badrinath temple, but all the boulders and caves and waterfalls are holy here. This, it is said, is the locale of the last act in the lives of the five Pandavas, the mighty and noble warrior kings who won a victory for righteousness in the war of Mahabharata.

A huge concave boulder is *Vyas Gupha*, the cave where Rishi Vyasa is said to have composed the epic which he dictated to that fabulous god Ganesha, who wrote it all down sitting in another cave nearby called *Ganesh Gupha*. A little above the Mana village is the tumultuous gorge of Saraswati, which we shall follow on our approach march to our Western Base Camp, and which merges into Vishnu Ganga near the village. I took a walk up along the Vishnu Ganga and after a few kilometres the vista of Bhagirathi and Satopanth Glaciers opened up; the icy highway we had followed when we climbed Nilakantha. I looked that way a long moment, into memories of unremitting cold and sweet success. Nearby, the Vasudhara Falls descended in a shining sheet of steel, now a solid mass and then drawn into finer strands. The waters hurtle down for over 400 feet and a large area underneath is centuries-wet but legend has it that the Pandavas had a bath in its waters so not even a drop of it will fall upon an impure one even if such a one stood directly underneath. We clambered up a slope still clad in its winter snow to take pictures, and were reassured by the cold spray that hit us.

We turned back in the late afternoon. Near Mana a mule grazed peacefully by a stone wall. The little bell round its neck tinkled gently and the mellow light of the sun cast it in tones of eternity. Our footfalls seemed to fall softer and even the unreligious among us were strangely moved into quiet. The first lamp lights of Badrinath shone clearly in the dusk, and the sentinels of the shrine — Nar Parbat and Narayan Parbat, the mountain of Shiva and the mountain of Vishnu — were dissolving into the mysteries of darkness as we reached Mana Camp.

The camp had been set up a little short of Mana village, by the side of a road just below the temple dedicated to the village lass who could not keep to herself the secret of the unimaginable treasure she had stumbled upon. A spirited young thing, she had once followed her nimble-footed and wandering sheep up to the glacier region of Nar Parbat. She must have walked fast and climbed strongly half way around the mountain, for that is where the hanging glacier called Kuber juts out in icy blueness from the mountainside. But then distance and altitude are the concerns of scientists and mountaineers, hardly those of youthful legendary heroines.

So this young Mana shepherdess found herself in the domain of Kuber — the divine treasure-keeper of the gods — and there came upon precious stones, rubies and diamonds, pearls and sapphires that no woman could ever even have dreamt of in her dreams. Dazed, then delighted, she bent over to gather all she could. The divine treasure-keeper finally realized the human trespass. His command from the heavens froze the girl into stillness. 'You shall not tell anyone of what you have chanced upon,' the disembodied but all-powerful voice ordered. 'Nothing at all, or you shall come to grief. Now take a souvenir or two and go away. And never try to come back here.'

The poor girl was frightened out of her wits but with the extraordinary resilience of the young she hurriedly gathered a precious stone or two, and collecting her flock together quickly drove them down the slopes. Not until the stone roofs of the houses of Mana came into sight could she begin to relax. The power of the mighty voice from the heavens had truly terrified her. But, there, now she could see the narrow, winding lanes of her village, and her friends and others going about their daily chores. The scene of everyday normalcy gave her courage and she sat down on a rock to get a hold on herself, and to gaze in utter, disbelieving joy at the dazzling treasure she had gathered; a large, glowing stone in each



Badrinath

hand. Her fear evaporated almost as suddenly as it had descended upon her, to be replaced by exuberance. She had had an adventure no other could ever have had; imagine, she had rich evidence of having seen the treasure of the gods! And, that voice from the sky! How it had stopped her dead in her tracks, rooted her to the spot with a fear that had permeated her very being. Surely others would have heard that voice too, the voice which seemed loud enough to girdle the earth. All the village would ask her about it; where was she when it had spoken. But she had to keep the secret completely inviolate, she scolded herself, reminded of the stern warning. She mustn't even whisper a word of it to anybody, not even

to the best of her friends from whom she otherwise had no secrets. Today's adventures she must press tightly within herself; if one disobeyed the gods, the punishment would be unbearably severe. . .

The punishment was severe, and meted out swiftly. Her village people were stopped in their rush up the mountain by complete darkness in the middle of what had been a clear, sunny day; a total darkness followed by avalanches that came roaring down the mountain's higher slopes with a noise and thunder not known since the epic clash of the Mahabharata. The simple Bhotia folk, born and raised among high mountains, had never seen nor heard of such furies. It was the face of *pralaya*, the cataclysm itself, they told each other. And in utter panic and rout they fled, rolled and tumbled down the gradient, then rushed into their huts and crouched under overhangs, but surely it was pitifully inadequate protection against the mountain that followed them. They crouched and waited for hours but nothing at all happened. Gradually they stirred out into the lanes and pathways in ones and twos at first, and then more and more of them, slowly filling up in the centre of village, peering up apprehensively at Nar Parbat. The evening glow gave it a look of utter quiet. It stood as it always had, firm, strong and unmoving. Not a stone seemed out of place. But then whatever became of the avalanche that looked capable of ending the world. The growing murmurs died down as each one came to the same realization and instantly a new knowledge grew in them all, not a superstition, not a myth or a legend, but knowledge itself, knowledge based on what they had all lived through that day. That girl was right; she had indeed chanced upon the treasure of the gods. She had been where no human should have been, or would ever reach again. Her youthful excitement had bubbled over and she had whispered the secret to her best friend, under all sorts of oaths of secrecy of course. And her friend, half in disbelief, half in excitement had similarly breathed it to another, and another . . . All of the villagers, save the young girl, had gone up for the treasure that day. All of them, save the girl, were saved. The girl, the free-spirited keeper of the sheep, was found dead that strange evening. No one could understand the cause of her death, for she was quite unmarked. Actually, no one really tried to. Instead, the next day they began raising a small memorial to her at the foot of Nar Parbat. And, as is only to be expected in this valley of gods, over the years the memorial turned into a temple.



5

WESTERN AXIS

'ALPHA BRAVO CHARLIE TO CHARLIE Two'

'No, there is no way this way,' Suraj Dalal called out cheerfully to Balwan, Maon and Lakpa. 'We'll have to go down and climb up over the glacier.' The others groaned naturedly at the prospect of losing some hard gained altitude by their gamble in climbing the slopes to the left of the West Kamet Glacier in an attempt to find a shorter, direct route to Camp I which was obviously lost; they stood high above the glacier with no easy way down. Below, looking down the way they had climbed they could see the Base Camp on the flat snow-covered plain of Ghastoli. In front, the slope tumbled down to the left bank of the glacier. But there was plenty of soft snow on that steep slope, clearly unsafe for the heavily laden porters. They sat down for a rest, laughing and chatting despite the prospect of having to retrace their steps. They felt fit and excited to be out in the lead on this new route to Kamet.

From the Base Camp at Ghastoli the boulder strewn terminal moraine of the Western Kamet Glacier is about a kilometre's walk along the left bank of Saraswati. The glacier itself is almost exactly at right angles to the Saraswati, a ninety degree turn to the right as one walks up from Ghastoli. The Saraswati and the Western Kamet Glacier thus form two sides of a right angled triangle and Dalal and his pathfinders had been after the hypotenuse of this triangle in an effort to find the shortest route to Camp I. Only, the hypotenuse ran about a thousand feet above the rest of the triangle and now they were, literally, left to cool their heels on the snow-perch.

'Balwan, didn't anybody ever teach you never to be tempted by short-cuts in the mountains? It is a very basic rule,' cracked Dalal in mock-anger and mock-admonishment.

'You forget, sir, that I am not a trained mountaineer like you,' returned Lt Balwan grinning cheertully, with not even a trace of tiredness on his tough face.

'Well in that case remind us to make sure never to bring up a novice again.' Dalal is quite invincible at repartee. 'See how much effort this novice has cost us,' he continued, turning to Maon and Lakpa who had been listening to this exchange in growing amusement and mirth. Then rising to his feet, Capt S B Dalal led the way back down the way he had led them all up in the first place with his light, sure-footed, measured tread; led them nearly all the way down to where the terminal moraine of the glacier spent itself just short of the Saraswati. They now had no option but to tackle the terminal moraine, an inexorably steepening confusion of snow-mounds which were actually boulders of varying sizes covered with the winter snows. Suraj continued in his measured tread, to all the world completely oblivious that the ascent now made the calves ache and the breathing hard. With feet sinking into the increasingly sun-softened snow, steadily he led his compact, close-strung party towards the silent, unexplored regions.

My heart seemed to pound in deafening strokes; at least that's how it seemed to me even as I laboured over the first steep slope of the moraine. We were a large party, a ferry of porters, Kura Ram's rope of three going up to support the first rope who were scheduled to start work on the mountain as soon as we decided about the route to take beyond Camp II; Kapil, and my own helpers carrying my cameras and other equipment. Now, about a kilometre out of the Base Camp, the rest of the heavily laden party was fast disappearing out of sight over the vertically rising moraine. That first kilometre had looked a gentle walk up the snow covered valley floor but then those are the guiles of the mountain; the subtle trick of foreshortening that the combination of expanse and light plays. True, that first stretch offered no prominent or challenging steepness, yet it had risen enough to quickly drive out any thoughts the younger ones of the party might have had about taking off with a flourish. Already at 14,000 feet the mountains demanded that one walk the only way that mountains like; in smooth co-ordination of breath and step, one exactly pacing the other. I was content to bring up the rear. One's passing years are brought home sharply in the mountains. But then the edge of one's competitive streak wears off too, and one can afford to get left behind and not mind. Earlier I revelled in competing, now it is pleasure enough to march at one's pace. I could guess it would be a long march, so why not enjoy it!

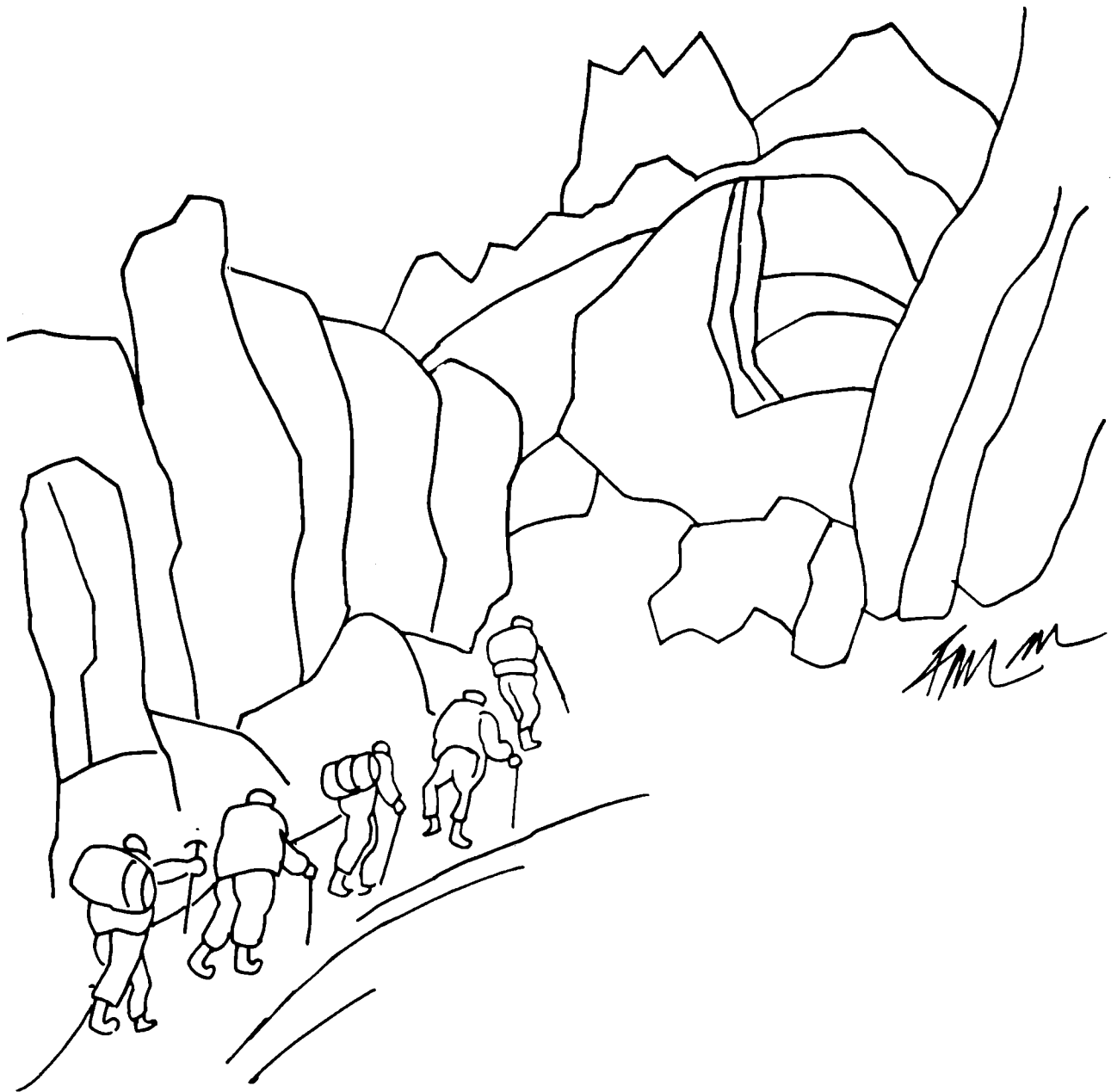
Coming to think of it, the walk from Mana Camp to the Base Camp at Ghastoli had been long and tiring enough; a sixteen kilometre walk, most of it over the snow covered right bank of the Saraswati. It lifted us from 10,400 feet to 13,700 feet and took me over seven hours, a nice testing walk for starters. Upon reaching Mana two days earlier, the relaxed feeling of Joshimath had quickly disappeared and I was sucked back into the vortex of administrative headaches. The problem of porters seems to be an insoluble one for climbing expeditions in India. We needed all we could get. We had hardly any. The people of Mana are surprisingly well-off considering how remote the village is and how barren most of the land around appears to be. Whatever their source of livelihood, it certainly isn't portage. Col Sinha and Capt Mall were desperately trying to round up porters with the help of the two porter-contractors of Joshimath. Finally, they were able to gather fifty on 28 May. We put them in an army truck and carted them off to Mana Camp. Capt Agarwal and Sambial who were trying to keep the disorder of Mana Camp from becoming a chaos, gleefully welcomed them and promptly sent them off with loads towards Ghastoli. They finally seemed to be making some dent in the mound of loads, they congratulated themselves. At fifty loads a day, well, it wouldn't be too long before they too could extricate themselves from the tail-end of the expedition and get in some real climbing. After a satisfying cup of hot tea they put together another fifty loads for the next day.

The next day only twenty porters were to be seen. The other thirty had melted away during the night. They had been driven off by the late spring snows that covered most of the route. It was tough, wet going, too long for a day's ferry under such conditions, too cold and tough on the feet. Also, many of them had no goggles and their eyes had hurt. We tried our best to get them woollen socks, snow shoes and dark glasses. We borrowed some, bought others in Joshimath but discouraging words had gone round and no more Garhwalis were forthcoming. Our porter-contractors scoured the hill villagers around. Up-valley of Joshimath and down-valley, up-slope of Joshimath and down-slope went messengers but to no avail. The big push needed to clear the stuff quickly through to Ghastoli had fizzled out. An unplanned dump-camp came up midway between Mana and Ghastoli, at Musapani. Khushal, who was a climbing member, manfully took charge of the dump, both the men and loads sheltered under tarpaulins. Members and porters quickly seized upon the opportunity this presented and the Musapani dump became a favourite place for rest and refreshment for those ferrying loads to Ghastoli.

With the porter situation still causing concern, I started from Mana on 1 June. The sun was burning hot and we had spent some time photographing Badrinath and Nilakantha so it was around 10.30 a.m. that we laboured up the steep rocky stretch past the slate tiled houses of Mana village to the very dramatic little bridge that took us across to the right bank of the Saraswati. Here at the bridge the gorge of the Saraswati narrows down to about fifty feet and the river plunges down deeply and powerfully, as if furiously announcing its arrival to the people of Mana, a grand flourish before merging into the Vishnu Ganga coming from the Satopanth glacier system. Bursting with energy through its narrow rock gorge at this point, the river roars and thunders. There is spray and foam, and the surface breaking in white. A rainbow decorated the gauze of spray that marked the point where most of the river is supposed to disappear into its subterranean passage to Allahabad. I took a few still pictures, regretting that the porters had taken the movie camera ahead. The path ahead climbed in a steep zigzag and disappeared around a high shoulder where the gorge opened out wider about a kilometre ahead. The route then ambled over a grassy and pleasant hillside. Around the next buttress we hit snow. By now there was a well-trodden track; still it was exciting to adjust once again to walking on that surface in slower, more measured and careful rhythm. It took me almost two and a half hours to get to Musapani. By then there were some clouds about, and combined with the snow underfoot, the entire aspect of the march had changed. Khushal greeted us with piping hot tea and a hissing primus ready to warm our packed lunch. The river flowed about 300 feet below us, a wide blue band through the white ice. At places it was bridged across by snow and ice, reappearing through jagged openings. A little ahead we could see huge ice-blocks brought down by an avalanche, and the channel it had gouged almost down to the river. Packed lunch, tired legs, ice and snow, and a cold edge to the wind — I was in the mountains.

After lunch and a nap on a kapok mattress — the Musapani dump was handy — the track petered out and we went boulder-hopping over rather large stones. After negotiating the boulder zone we traversed a series of snow-fields until a final steep ascent hoisted us onto the shoulder of the mountain which ringed Ghastoli from the south. The broad flat plateau lay almost completely covered with snow except where the river ran peacefully through its centre with not even a hint of the furious aspect it acquired near Mana. The clouds were broken up now and the plain below bathed in lovely peaceful sunlight. We sat back enjoying the vista that lay below us, gratefully sipping some hot tea a porter had brought us from the Base Camp — privileges a leader enjoys. Then the fairly steep descent to the river which we crossed over a snow-bridge to get back to its left bank. The Base Camp was about a kilometre ahead under a rock cliff on the only tiny green patch in the whole area right next to a very pretty fresh-water spring. Two Arctic Mediums and a few two-man Arctic tents were up, the loads lay covered with tarpaulin, members and porters wandering around in brightly coloured wind-jackets, a bucket next to the spring and a pair of shoes, and two or three chicken clacking busily around. Kura Ram, my climbing companion from Kanchenjunga, came forward to greet me. He too had lost some more hair. 'We are both old climbers now Kura.' His handshake was firm and warm with the glow of shared experience and comradeship. By nightfall the sky had emptied of clouds and then as the darkness grew, it filled up with the largest number of stars one can imagine, hard-pointed and glinting steadily; the air was already thin enough to take away the twinkle they have in the plains. High above us on the glacier, Suraj and his scouts had that day established Camp II at 18,200 feet but I was rather content and too deliciously tired to think of that. After dinner we chatted drowsily, warmly tucked up in our sleeping bags until deep sleep claimed us.

I spent the next day pottering about the Base Camp checking loads, reassuring myself that all the vital equipment which we would need on the upper slopes of the mountain had arrived safely. We were at 13,700 feet and it was good for acclimatization to spend a couple



of days here before pushing up higher. That day we could not establish any radio communication with the higher camps. There were porters ferrying loads and returning but no clear picture could emerge about the progress above. Kura Ram also led a ferry party to Camp I but he too could not bring back any news about what has happening beyond, except a scribbled note in Suraj's hand which said that Camp II had been set up at 18,200 feet. This meant that the party had reached near the foot of the West Ridge. This was a critical juncture for now the final summit route had to be selected. A wrong choice could straightaway finish our chances of success, or at least greatly increase the odds against us by

using up the team's enthusiasm, energy and freshness. I was terribly anxious to speak to Suraj. We fiddled around with our wireless set repeatedly during the day without getting any signs of life. The shortage of porters was causing a build-up of stores at Camp I even as there were shortages of various items at Camp II. The carry from Base Camp to Camp I took four to five hours, and it was tough going all of ten kilometres. Camp II was another seven kilometres over the glacier. But we had to quickly start stocking up the latter which would, in effect, be our Advance Base Camp. Then I hit upon the idea of assigning a team of the tougher porters to go bare-backed to Camp I, take up loads from there to Camp II and descend straight back to Base. Kura agreed it could be done and the offer of double wages and alternate rest days did the trick.

The first double-leg ferry was done on 3 June, the same day I was moving up to Camp I en route to joining Suraj's party for the final selection of our route. The extra-tough porters had left early in the morning after a hurried cup of tea; they would breakfast only at Camp I. The other group had taken things rather easily and left Base only at 9.00 a.m. It was a cloudless, blue-sky day and the sun punished us very severely for our laziness. First the terminal moraine broke up our walking rhythm with its chaotic tumble of earth boulders, often covered with snow. We climbed the terminal moraine cutting ever so gently across from the left bank towards the centre of the glacier. It took us an hour and a half of very steep climbing before the valley opened up somewhat and we came to the end of the confusion. A steep snow slope blocked the view we were eagerly looking forward to. On our right, at the left edge of the glacier a blue water torrent raced down, now emerging from the jagged glacier crevasses, then disappearing again below the icy surface. It was a grand halting place. I was a bit tired too, and the enervating glacier lassitude seemed to have set to work. Kalyan produced a flask of coffee from his rucksack. I rested my back, which had begun to ache quite a bit already, against a rock and looking back down the way we had struggled up I again saw the unvanquished peak which I had first noticed during my second chopper recce. What a testing technical climb for an intrepid group, with at least a night on the face in a harness or hammock. It had been hidden from the Base Camp but now we had a grand frontal view.

Reluctantly, I started off again. The snow underfoot had by now been softened into slush by hot sun and our tired feet sank into it at every step. After two successive snow slopes, the climb eased a little bit but stayed at a deceptively testing angle nevertheless. Our route now lay almost in the centre of the glacier which flowed in humps and bumps, about three fourths of a kilometre wide. The south sides of the little glacier hills were bare of snow and ice and showed black earth and rock. After 1.00 p.m. we were stopping to rest every ten minutes or so. Our drinks had run out. The sun blazed down from almost directly overhead and the glacier acted as a giant heat and light reflector making us sweat and our skin burn even when we stopped, heads bowed, to ease our panting breath. A little later we met the fastest of our porters returning after their carry to Camp I. 'Just a little further, sahib,' they would call cheerfully as they loped downhill to a well-deserved lunch back to Base Camp. Eagerly we would rush towards the next hump, craning our necks to catch sight of Camp I... but there was another rise ahead, and yet another. We hit the camp at 2.30 p.m. after a final half-hour haul over the bouldered crest of the right lateral moraine, exhausted and dehydrated.

Camp I was a series of four or five Arctic tents in a straight line on the rocky moraine, sited under a huge rock face safely out of range of any stonefall. The glacier took a sharp left turn just ahead of the camp, so Kamet was still hidden though the south face of Mana was just visible. We leaned on some mattresses which had been dragged out on the rocks and the hot



*The
South-West Face
of Kamet*

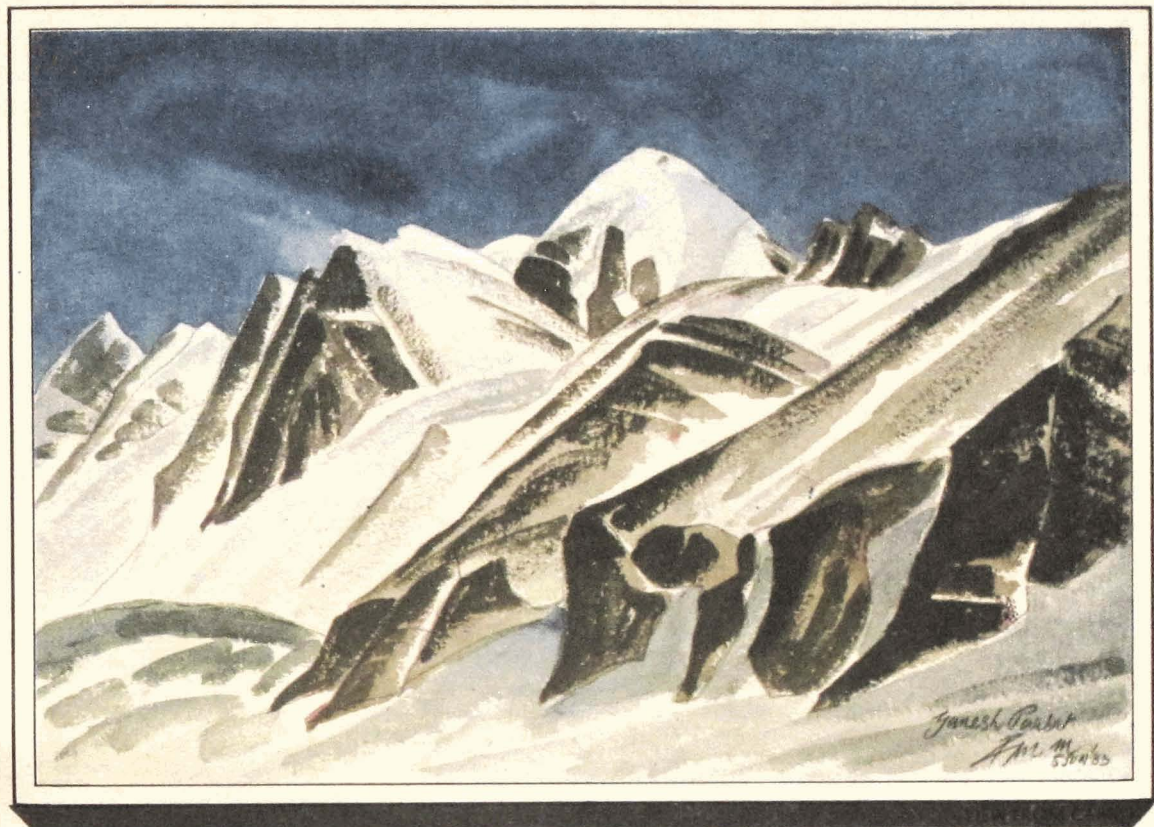
lunch revived us somewhat. Afternoon clouds were building up and I hustled Kapil and Akshay to start back for Base Camp. I was really pleased with their performance. Kapil had insisted on ferrying up a load of sweet *laddus* to Camp I. I suspect he wanted both to test himself and to feel he was contributing a little more to the expedition than only gathering material for this book. And Akshay, hardly fourteen, had kept up manfully with us on the gruelling march. But now I was a bit anxious about their descent, tired as they were. They left at 3.30 p.m. cheerfully planning to glissade down the steep snow slopes above the terminal moraine, looking to all the world like two youngsters planning an afternoon lark.

That night at 16,500 feet I felt a little of the effect of altitude in the small tent. But the view outside was incredible; overnight, the number of stars in the sky had multiplied and had my arms been a couple of feet longer, I could well have touched them.

A mug of hot tea arrived through the tent flap at 5.30 next morning. I seemed to be feeling better, more at ease with the heights, so I quickly packed my stuff and set off for Camp II at 6.30 a.m. The porters doing the ferry from Camp I to Camp II had already left as a part of the route was exposed to falling stones and they wanted to be across it before the stones were loosened off the slopes above by the hot sun melting away their snow or ice grips. The route lay over the right lateral moraine and I walked over the snow track much more easily than the day before. The early start certainly made things easier; also no doubt my growing fitness. Turning sharply left with the glacier opened up the view somewhat. Mana was closer. Then after about two kilometres Kamet came into view; the West Ridge

and the SW Face leading up to its crest — the same aspect which I had earlier recedded from the air, the unclimbed route we had come to climb. We could not yet see the complete ridge line leading to the summit but we could see enough to realize that it was going to be very, very difficult. Kura Ram was with me and we tried to work out the vulnerabilities in the mountain's defences, tracing one line up the face and then another, but each one appeared to be threatened by avalanches. We couldn't really see a reasonably secure route up.

Abruptly we broke off our discouraging route-finding exercise and started off again. We will have a better view from Camp II and it will be easier to find the route from there, we reassured each other. The valley opened up after about three kilometres and the route began veering diagonally across towards the centre of the glacier. A little ahead we came to a small glacial lake which we crossed over a natural snow-bridge. Some porters met us; returning after dumping their loads at Camp II. A short, steep snow slope and then the route swung hard right and for a while our view was restricted as we climbed in and out of a series of dips in the glacier. About a kilometre short of Camp II, the SW Face suddenly seemed to loom just ahead of us, slowly focussing itself into its true, grand scale. The ridge line was still cut off short of the summit by Mana which bulged upward to our right. We quickened our pace over the last long snow field towards Camp II. A quarter of a kilometre short of the camp we were received by Suraj, Balwan and Maon. They all looked tough and fit. Suraj cut a very distinctive figure in the only yellow wind-suit on the mountain, his polaroid glasses startlingly white, and with the beginnings of a salt and pepper beard. We were meeting after ten days, and Suraj started off on his account of thier recce of Kamet from its unclimbed sides. He had spent the last three days considering the various possible climbing routes, gauging the risks and dangers, mentally pitting his climbers against the mountain, dividing up the routes into pitches, keying in on to the obstacles, searching for possible camp sites, calculating the logistic build-up needed to propel a team onto the proud high-point of Kamet that rose over 7000 feet above Camp II.



GANESH PARBAT

6

EASTERN AXIS

JOSHIMATH TO CAMP III

Captain Dhan Bahadur Thapa, Deputy Leader of our Eastern Team, almost didn't make it even to Joshimath. Detailed for a Junior Command course, there seemed no way the army machinery could be cajoled into relieving him for our expedition. All other climbers were already helping the final preparations at Joshimath but there was no news of our key member of the Eastern Axis. However, I was absolutely determined to have him. On his part, Thapa too was in a limbo. His heart and mind were in the mountains even as he desultorily went about his course. Heaven and earth had to be moved — almost — before he could join the team at Joshimath.

He had had no time to even familiarise himself with his team, leave alone work out a detailed strategy and plan for the climb. Under the circumstances anyone would have been easily forgiven being a bit dazed for a while. But not Thapa; he took on his responsibility effortlessly. From the moment he arrived, the Eastern Team began functioning like a well-oiled machine. He amply bore out my faith and confidence and led his team with a very steady and impressive hand on the rudder. Born to the mountains — he hails from the Pokhara district of Nepal — mature and tough-made, he had the situation well in control when his party rolled off from Joshimath on 28 May.

At Kurkuti, where their trucks unloaded them, they straight away, ran into porter problem. Of the fifty porters they needed, there were only thirty-nine, and no mules at all, though they required thirty. Adjusting quickly to the situation, Thapa pushed ahead an advance party led by Lt R K Singh to open the route to Base Camp and detailed Lt Bakshi to round up what mules he could from the neighbouring villages of Bampa and Ghamsali. Bakshi herded together twenty-two which enabled the main body of the team to proceed only a day behind the advance guard. Then the porters struck work. Dumping thier loads they demanded higher wages. Thapa remained firm and cool and let them all go. He then managed to recruit a fresh batch from another village, and reassured that things were finally under control, he too pushed on to Base Camp via Niri and Shapuk. RK's team had dumped the first loads at this site on 31 May and had moved in and occupied the camp on 1 June. Thapa, with most of the other members, joined them there on 2 June. He had left Capt Daljit behind to ensure that the tail did not drag behind for too long.

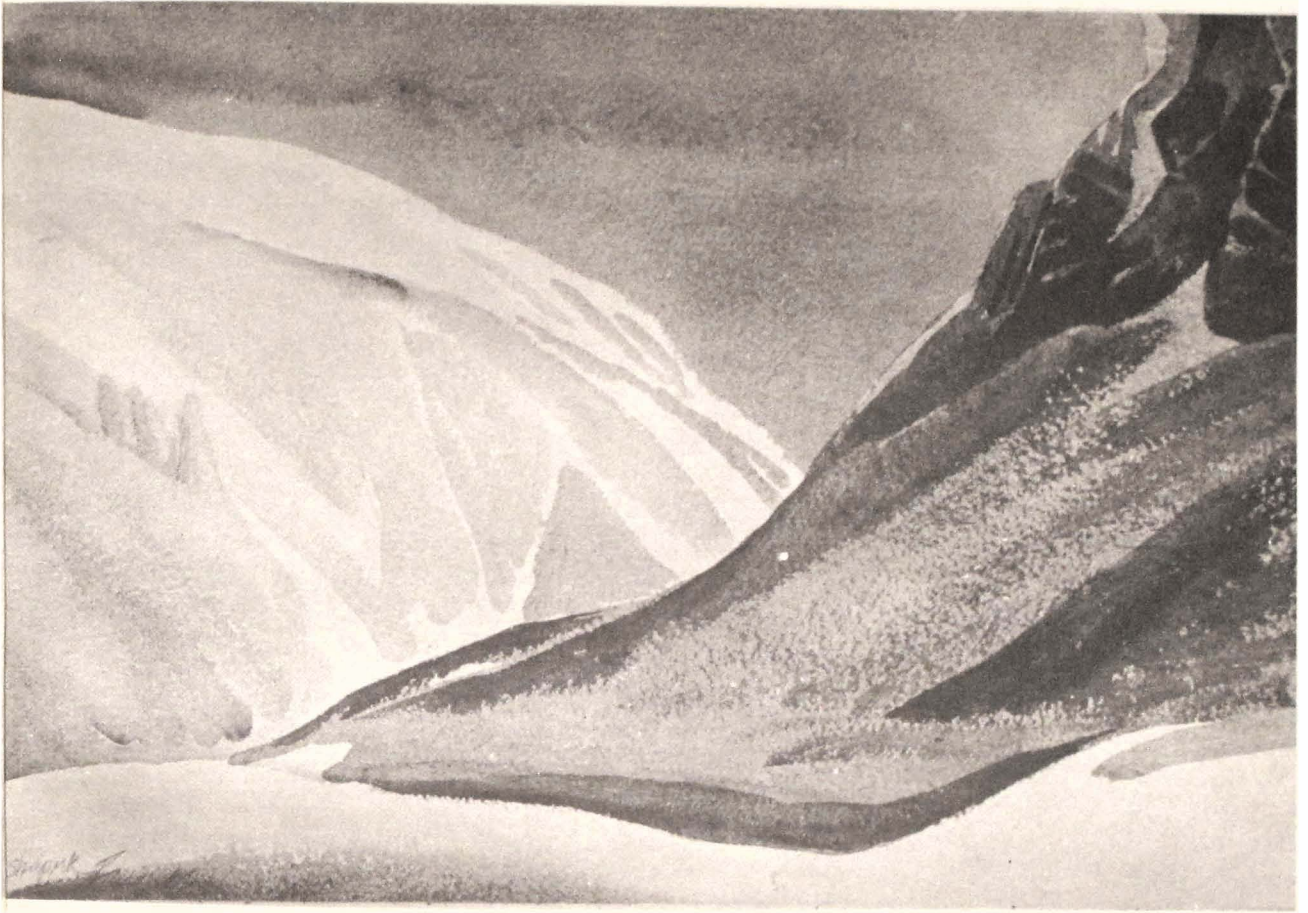
Pasricha, our painter-member, accompanied Thapa's team and even as the climbers wrestled with porters, mules and logistics, he savoured every bit of this first-leg to Kamet. Quiet, but with a ready laugh, self-reliant yet friendly, his eyes found freshness and beauty everywhere:

'Ranikhet was lush green with vegetation. The frill of tall pines led the eyes to the eternal snows where Trisul dominated. The Himalayan panorama was captivating, to which different times of the day lent different moods. To me the



streets and lanes provided nostalgia. Twenty-eight years ago it was a small town. Now it had expanded and seemed prosperous. My four days' stay at the Kumaon Regiment Centre was pleasant. It was rounded-off with a grand dinner and a send-off to the Kamet expedition by the Commandant, with the Regimental Band playing patriotic tunes.

The Army bus took us past small villages, temples and terraced fields where hill people worked in the sun. It was a beautiful sunny day and everything was crisp. At Karna Prayag, where Pindar river meets Alaknanda, and the road joins the highway to Badrinath, we had a lunch of sandwiches which Mrs Kumar had brought aplenty. We reached Joshimath in the evening where the team had already assembled. Each of us was provided with high altitude clothing and climbing gear, and there was a day to roam about. I visited the busy bazar, the old town and the temples, which are very ancient.

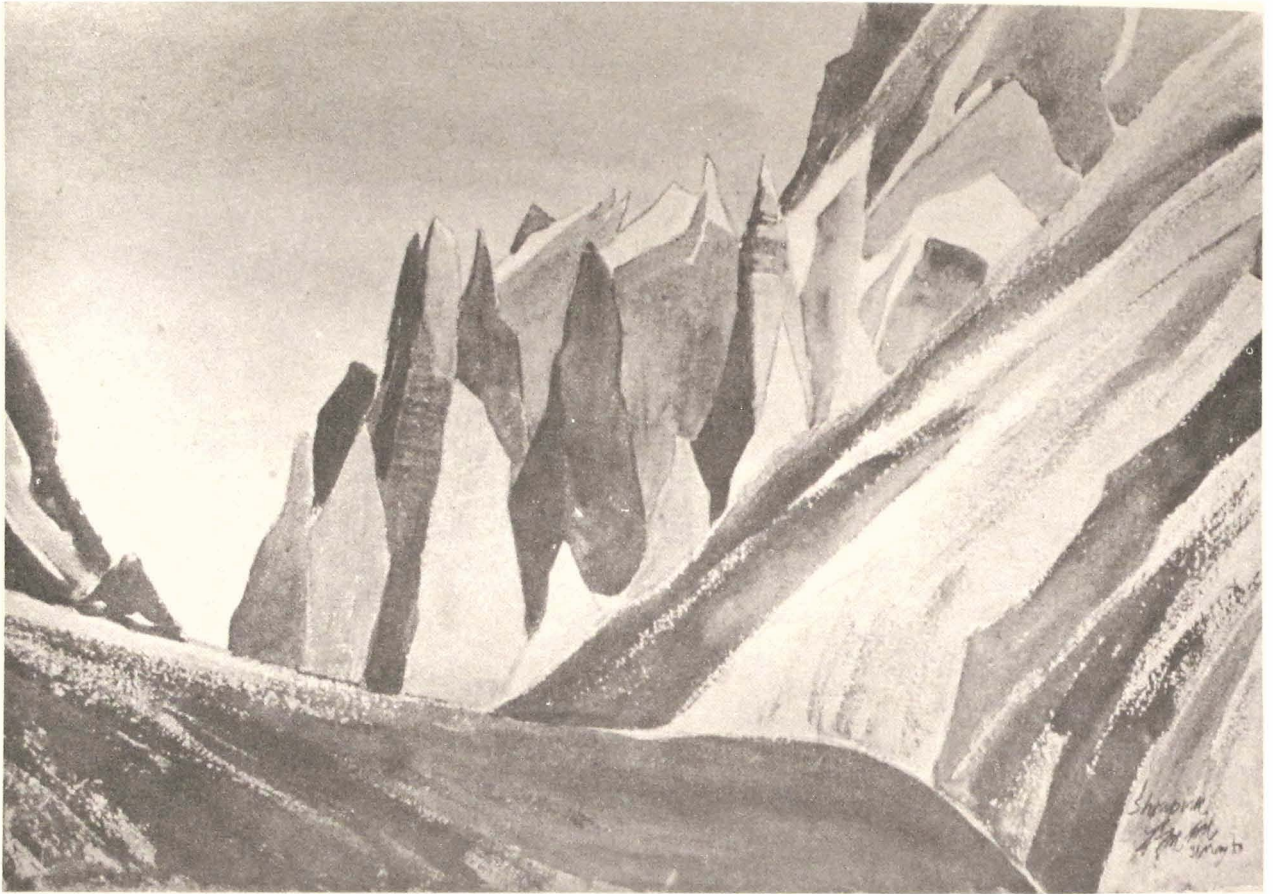


Shapuk

The day of our departure arrived and we were given a warm send-off by the Station Commander, Brig Pathania, a *pundit* applying *tilak* on everyone's forehead and wishing success and safe return. The loaded trucks rolled off towards Malari. At Jumma we halted for a few minutes and I looked in at the rest house where I had taken shelter from icy winds and rain seven years ago, and whose rickety furniture with protruding nails, had made many a hole in my clothes. We reached Malari in pouring rain and found shelter with the Indo-Tibetan Border Police.

The path from Malari onwards is almost level for many kilometres through unspoiled wood of conifers and the Dhauli flowing along Black rock cliffs tower above the tree line. With the advent of summer, the residents of Bampa, Ghamsali and Niti, who move to lower altitudes in winter, were returning to their homes. They were a colourful lot of old and young, men, women, and children. They had their valuable possessions and babies on their backs. A train of mules laden with heavy luggage followed. The bells tied to their necks tinkled. It was a melodious company that made our travel enjoyable.

About two kilometres before Bampa, schoolboys insisted that they carry my rucksack as far as the village where they offered me tea as well. They persuaded an old lady to pose for me. A big round stone placed on a stone pedestal is the village god.



Shapuk

Flags fly from poles. God Chauria looks after the welfare of the village. Past Ghamsali the valley becomes extremely narrow, amidst tall cliffs. These cliffs prevent the sun's rays from penetrating to the river. Thus masses of snow which accumulate during winter continue to stay hard and provide natural bridging between the two banks, which villagers and their herds of sheep and goat use fearlessly when the river has to be crossed. The valley opened again and the village of Niti came in sight. Through pouring rain and cold winds we reached the village and pitched tents in the newly constructed *Panchayat* premises. By sunset the rain stopped. I went to the village and met people, and persuaded some to pose for sketches, and drew three before it was dark.

'The next day was a fine morning with plenty of sun. As I roamed about the lanes with my camera, I had no dearth of models. There was demand for medicines, and the expedition doctor had to take care of the sick. Except for such occasions, most villagers have learnt to live with their ailments. They believe that nature is the best cure and they carry on well.

'It is a narrow but clean stony track along the river, most of the time climbing higher but occasionally descending. As such it was pleasant. There were waterfalls every now and then and hills opposite were laden with pine and *bhoj* trees. Then we



Lumpuk

reached an open area called Goting, where the landscape all of a sudden became Spitian. It is treeless and stony and for the greater part the Dhauli passed below mud cliffs. Where snow had melted pastures had appeared, and juniper bushes.

'We went under tall mud cliffs, and as we crossed Raikana Nala over a snow bridge, we landed on a huge mass of winter snow. The place is 12,690 feet above the sea level and is called Shapuk. It is the terminal moraine of Raikana glacier. It is a strange world with an unearthly look. Team members and porters pushed off to establish Base Camp. I stayed back for a day to paint the landscapes.

'It was the second of June. As we progressed through the day towards the Base Camp set up at 15,500 feet, we walked over snow for fourteen kilometres. At this site Raikana and East Kamet glaciers meet along Vasudhara Tal, a small lake of exquisite charm which was yet snowbound. From a nearby ridge one had a glimpse of Ganesh Parbat and Kamet. Towards the south one views a panorama of peaks of the Nanda Devi Sanctuary, including Nanda Devi, Changabang, Kalanka, and Dronagiri. It was a very windy place and the temperature plunged below freezing point after sunset. There were occasional snowfalls. Capt Thapa set up a temple of stones and installed an image of Kali amidst fluttering flags where he offered prayers for the success of the expedition and safety of everyone. It was a frozen landscape and



the silence was deep and penetrating. It was a strange phenomenon that the nights become cloudless. The big bright stars appeared in the sky. Their glow was sufficient to convert the ice-clad peaks into a fantasy.'

Once at Base Camp, Thapa divided his climbers into three groups, one each under R K Bakshi and himself. On 2 June RK's party opened the route to Camp I. But after that it was not until 6 June that Bakshi's party, which had replaced RK's team in the lead at Camp I, could open the route to Camp II, which was established at 18,000 feet on a broad snowfield below the first obstacle on this route; a narrow, steep gully which rises a thousand feet. The drive from Camp I to Camp II had been brought up short by further porter trouble. On 3 June, seventeen porters who had earlier agreed to carry loads beyond Base Camp changed their mind. 'Its too cold, too high,' they muttered and left the expedition, leaving Thapa with only ten. A fresh recruitment drive was undertaken and finally we were able to send up a dozen, eight of these were to ferry loads from Base Camp to Camp I, and the other four to help in the stocking of Camp II by carrying loads from Camp I to Camp II.

On 7 June there was a big ferry from Camp I to stock up Camp II. Thapa's team, Bakshi's team and all available porters carried loads along the route opened the previous day. R K's team, which had successively recce and set up Base Camp and Camp I was enjoying some well-earned rest. On 8 June, Thapa took his team and occupied Camp II; it was now their turn in the lead, taking over from Bakshi.



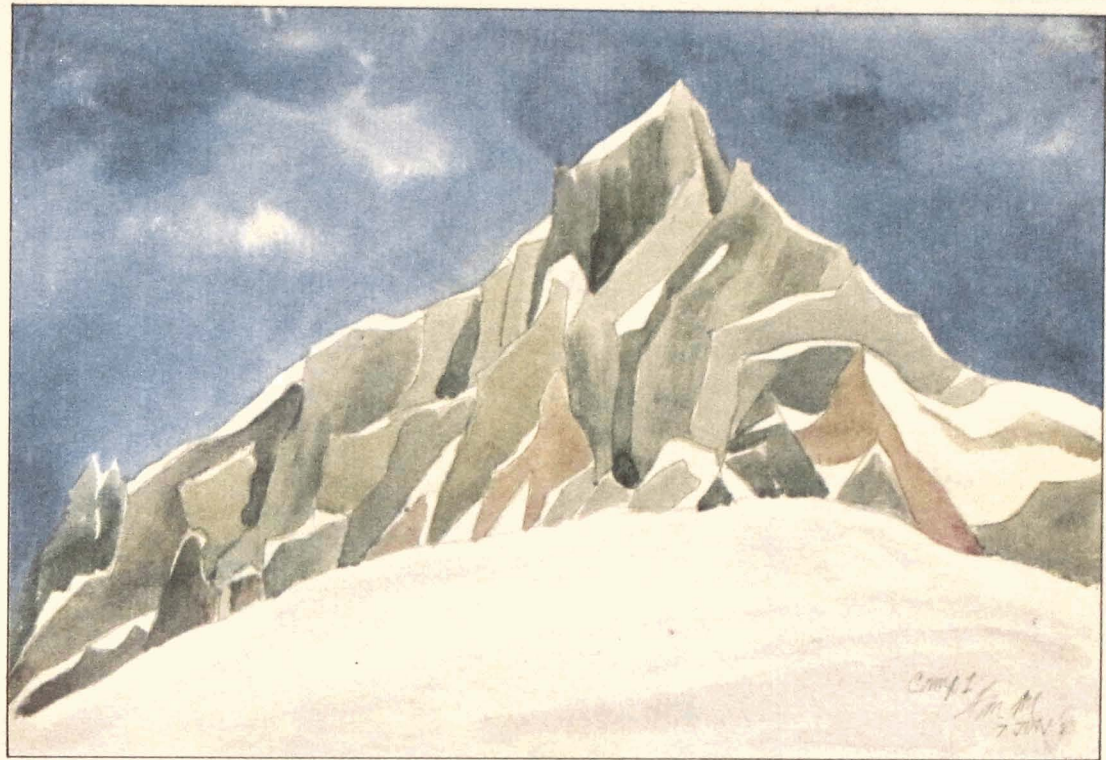
Their lead started on the first day of really bad weather we encountered. 9 June was overcast from morning and the team made a late start at 8.30 a.m. From Base Camp to Camp I, the route was over the East Kamet Glacier. Beyond Camp II, the glacier opens out and stretches to the foot of the East Face of Kamet. Above this it turns smartly left and rises in a series of icefalls to the col between Mana and Kamet. Camp II was sited on the left bank of the glacier, and Camp III had to be set up on top of the rock cliffs that rose above Camp II flattening out into a big snow field that stretches westward in series of mounds.

While at camp II, it snowed heavily and continuously. Pasricha gives a vivid description:

'At Camp II, the tip of Abi Gamin, Deoban and Mana Peaks with their awe-inspiring ruggedness and plastered heavily with snow continued to be in sight; and for the first time Kamet came in full view rising about 7000 feet above the glacier. The valley had narrowed down considerably and one had the feel of being caught up in a trap. Hours of



sunshine were reduced by the overcast skies and the snow made the tents sag. Visibility was poor with temperature much below freezing point. There were occasional thundering noises as avalanches rolled down the mountain cliffs. Painting was impossible as whatever water I got by melting ice froze back into solid ice in no time. On the third day it suddenly cleared in the evening and a bright, warm sun appeared. I hurried out of my tent with my paints and brushes to paint Kamet which was bathed in the pink of the setting sun. But the sun dipped very quickly behind another peak and it was suddenly very cold once again. The water with which I was dissolving colours got encrusted in no time. The brush, which seconds before was charged with colour and working smoothly, suddenly began depositing icy powder on the paper. The painting had to be abandoned.



VIEW FROM CAMP 1



First Camp 8 Jun '83
Am m

Fifteen minutes out of Camp II. Thapa's team reached the base of the gully. The gray, sunless weather now became their ally as the snow remained hardpacked and the crampons could grip it well. The first pitch yielded to hefty stepcutting. Rock cliffs rose on both sides and the gully was prone to falling rock. But Thapa knew the route well for he, along with RK and Bakshi, had been on the IMA Kamet Expedition in 1982. Unerringly he picked a safe line by negotiating the rocks on their right. 'At places we found traces of the rope we had fixed last year, and this was helpful,' recorded Thapa. On a day of a well-sustained effort they overcame the gully and emerged on the snow plateau above. The site for Camp III lay just ahead but they had fixed over 600 feet of rope in the gully and were feeling tired.

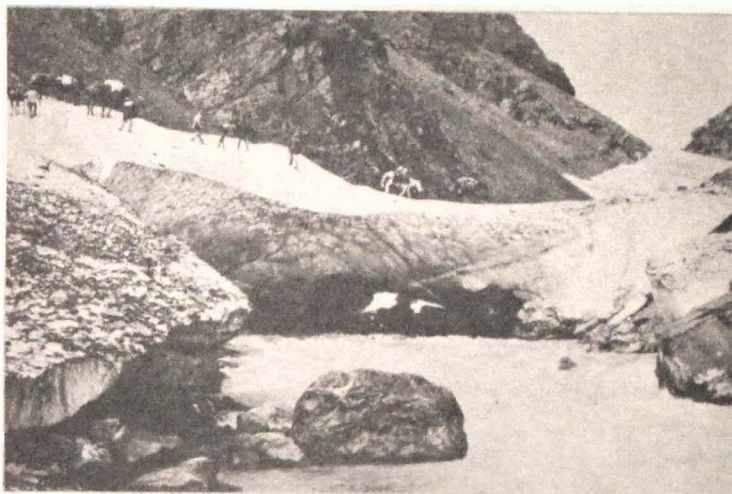


On way to base camp

Bharat Singh and Maon had begun to lag behind considerably, obviously suffering from the altitude, for they were now above 20,000 feet. The weather too was taking a turn for the worse. Looking down, the gully they had climbed up now wore a dark, menacing look. Tired after the day's work, Thapa carefully led his men back to Camp II.

For Thapa, RK and Bakshi it was familiar ground. For me, completely new, and I was greatly struck by the very impressive surroundings of the Eastern Base Camp, where I was deposited by Sqn Ldr Sharma in his chopper. It was a blustery day, showering rain and sleet and we had a bit of problem sighting the camp. But there was no mistaking the clear sweep of the East Kamet Glacier — at least three times wider than the West Kamet Glacier — and we followed it upwards till we spotted Camp I tucked in at its left bank. Of course there was no landing spot there but we were now able to pick up the foot-tracks which led up to it from the Base Camp. Turning around, and following the track, we finally picked out the tents of the Base Camp. At that altitude, the rain and sleet of Joshimath had turned into snow and the helipad could hardly be termed flat. It was a difficult landing and the pilot had the engines running all the while as I clambered out. In fact, he did not take the risk of putting the machine down fully and hovered just above the ground. It was expert flying.

*On way to
base camp*



The date was 15 June and we were halfway through the expedition. I wanted to discuss the final plans with Thapa, apprise him of the progress on Western Axis where I had been all this while and ensure proper coordination for our projected cross-over. At Base, Capt Daljit was in poor shape. Every half hour or so he would disentangle himself from his sleeping bag and rush out from the tent and stand outside, retching. Unaccountably he had been unable to acclimatize at all, and he looked miserable.

The Base Camp was on the moraine, the area very similar to that of Camp I on the Western Axis. But there the similarity ended. For one thing, this glacier was at least two kilometres wide, as wide as any I had seen in the Eastern Karakoram, an area famous for its highway glaciers. Close by was Vasu Tal, the biggest glacial lake I have ever seen. Partly frozen over, partly emerald blue waters with floating ice-floes. Then there were the views. Absolutely magnificent, soaring views. En route to the higher camps, I savoured them in their stilled magnificence. Two days later on my way to Camp I, I recorded: 'Right in front of me is a fantastic panorama. Never before have I seen such a grand vista. There is the Nanda Devi group and from here it is so clear that their eastern aspects are less formidable, which is why most of these mountains have been climbed from their eastern sides. I think I can identify Dronagiri may be Kalanka, and Mana. Kamet is still hidden. I am told one can only see it from beyond Camp I.'

The view remained grand as I trudged up to Camp II the next day, a marvellously cloudless one. So it was hot, hot enough to walk up in a thin shirt eschewing sweaters and parka. The walk was also made memorable by an almost unbroken series of powder avalanches cascading down on all sides. It had snowed considerably for last three or four days and this freshly deposited snow was now being loosened off the mountainsides and poured down onto the glacier in billowing elegance. Camp II was superbly located, affording a complete view of the South-East Face of Kamet, and Abi Gamin. The hidden mountain lay fully revealed but was veiled again as the weather closed up in the afternoon

and at 5.00 p.m. we again had sleet. Such rapidly changing weather conditions is something that I still marvel at even after so many years of climbing. It is not only the extremes of temperature which it produces — the exhausting heat of the forenoon had turned into chilling cold — it also transforms the entire aspect of the mountains. In the clear light of sun the mountains are open and friendly. Covered with clouds, the unknown lurk everywhere and one's soaring mood is touched with some indefinable disquiet, menace almost, and one feels an unwelcome trespasser threatened by mysterious powers. Being alone on high mountains in such conditions must surely be among the more lonely and vulnerable states one can be in.

But at Camp II that evening I was not alone. And even as the gray took over, I had the opportunity of learning first hand about the most recent setback we had suffered on this Axis.

7

WESTERN AXIS

THE NORTH-WEST FACE OF KAMET

It is not at all unusual to toss about sleeplessly in the mountains. The body acclimatizes itself slowly, and if you go to higher regions somewhat faster than your rate of acclimatization, you may get a headache, suffer from nausea and lack of appetite, and you may find it difficult to sleep. But at Camp II on the night of 4 June under the bulk of Kamet's South Face, it was the tension in my mind which prevented me from falling asleep. Earlier that afternoon we had come to the conclusion that there was no feasible route to the West Ridge of Kamet from the SW Face. Our recon that afternoon had confirmed the conclusion Suraj had earlier reached. Over and over again in my mind I pictured what we had seen that afternoon.

Suraj had pointed out the difficulties over lunch which Kami had cooked in the ice kitchen at Camp II. From the camp there was an unobstructed view to the summit of Kamet — first the SW Face rising about 2000 feet to the West Ridge, and then the ridge running to the summit. Just behind us rose the bulk of Mana. The South-East Ridge fell at a much steeper angle to a col from where the North Ridge of Mana rose. The col lay at the head of a cirque, its approach guarded by a small icefall and higher up by some hanging glaciers. The foot of the steep slopes leading to the col had a jumble of ice blocks and other debris and it would be a complicated task to mark out a safe route to the col. All this we saw as we enjoyed our hot lunch.

After lunch, Suraj, Balwan, Kura and I walked to the base of the rock face — the first obstacle to gaining the West Ridge. Face to face, our proposed route looked quite different from the view we had had of it from the chopper. The rock step wore a sheen of *verglas* which had given it a bright visage from the air — now it looked a very confident foe armed with treacherous weapons of uncertain footholds. Worse, the gully above it which we had hoped could offer a line to the crest of the ridge was much deeper than we had reckoned and just a few minutes of observation confirmed that it was a natural funnel for falling stones and ice boulders which came loose from the hanging glaciers above. Looking at all the activity that went on in the gully, Kura remarked 'It would be easier to climb the Face directly rather than tackle the gully.'

But only just. The SW Face too was completely exposed to falling rocks and ice and there seemed to be no possible site for camping. It was perhaps feasible to climb the Face between the gully and the summit but that would mean hitting the ridge at between 21,000 and 22,000 feet — a carry of 3500 to 4000 feet from Camp II, a very difficult proposition for stocking up the higher camps.

We then turned our attention to the South-East Ridge. To reach the col, we would first have to pick a way gingerly through a highly crevassed glacier — a long detour traversing the lower slopes of Mana — well beneath its ice-fluted higher reaches, and then a final steep ice wall to the col. This latter section would again be exposed. From the col, the South-East



The western aspect of Kamet. The foreshortened West Ridge in the foreground, with the South-West Face on the right and the North-West Face on its left. Abi Gamin in the left background.

Ridge rose steeply at an angle of over 45° — a sharp challenge at that altitude. About a thousand feet below the summit it turned into an overhang for about 100 feet. From what we could see we would certainly have to fix a rope over this pitch, and possibly some others. Fixing a rope at above 24,000 feet is always a tough proposition, and this would be in the stretch between the summit and the last camp. Besides, we weren't at all happy with the route to the col — it looked highly unstable and somehow loaded with menace. We headed back to the camp after about two hours. 'Tomorrow we'll go and see the North-West' offered Suraj. 'I think that's a better bet.' It was a superb, clear evening. At sunset a bonnet of pink-edged clouds was strung motionless above Kamet even as our camp fell under the first inky layer of night. Looking south, serrated and sharp rock spires rose above the left bank of the glacier like a battlement of imposing ruins of past grandeur. After an early dinner we crawled into our sleeping bags, but I couldn't get to sleep

The next day was again wonderfully clear. My mind, however, was beset by a cloud of uncertainty and worry. Today we would have to take the bit between our teeth and decide on the route. Perhaps that's why we dawdled and started off on our recce only around 9.00 a.m. From our camp at the left edge of the glacier we set out towards its middle, dropping down for about a kilometre. We then turned right and headed up the glacier towards an icy dome-shaped peak that dominated the ridge at the head of the glacier. We walked on the glacier for another kilometre, keeping well clear of the huge blocks of ice that lay on our

right — tell-tale signs of the avalanches which had peeled off Kamet's West Ridge. As the glacier began developing into a small icefall, we turned right. Here the glacier was a bit broken as it cascaded down a steeper slope but the weather had been clear the past few days and the few fractured crevasses lay unconcealed. We peered down their blue, gaping walls even as we went past. Suraj and Balwan had been up here before and so better acclimatized but I was rather breathless as we entered deeper into the valley above the broken ground. So I suggested a halt and we took in the vista.

We had entered a small, closed valley about two kilometres long which ended in a high ridge that seemed to link up Kamet on the right and Mukut Parbat on our left. Beyond this ridge must lie Meade's Col and the North-East Ridge of Kamet but there was no way to tell from where we were the likelihood of a link-up with that traditional route to the summit of Kamet. Going into the closed valley, Kamet lay to our right, its NW Face rearing upwards for over 6000 feet from where we were, about half a kilometre from the base of that vast face. About the same distance to our left, the rather more squat bulk of Mukut Parbat offered us its rocky South Face with a network of broken ribs in its upper bastions.

The valley stretched as an almost flat snow-field till it began bumping into huge ice blocks and avalanche debris that extended for about 100 to 200 yards from the base of Kamet. Then, necks craned as far back as possible, our eyes focussed onto the greatly foreshortened view of Kamet's NW Face, searching out a gully or a rib which might offer a lead up its lower slopes. Nothing. There were no such obvious climbing routes. The lower half of the Face first rose almost vertically upward in avalanche ice-cones and then turned into a dark rock wall, here and there relieved by whiteness which on closer observation appeared to be thin ice. A few sections of *verglas* shone like mirrors, lending startling depth to the otherwise solid, closed-off Face. If one didn't allow oneself to get caught in trying to force a mental route up this lower part of the Face, the eyes swept uninterrupted till about 23,000 feet where the entire Face was girdled with flaring hanging glaciers. Three of them stretched right across the huge expanse and it didn't require any imagination to conclude that their blue undersides—seemingly unsupported—would intermittently sag and break-off. Then anyone or anything caught in their path of descent would probably be finished even before hitting the valley floor. There were three of these, each looking as nasty as the other. Above these hanging glaciers, if we could claw atop these, the going seemed easier. The Face seemed to lay back from its near-vertical rise, and in the middle seemed to continue in a rising traverse to a snow col on the West Ridge, about 1500 feet below the summit. From where we were there did not appear any major obstacles after the glaciers—no icefalls, no gendarmes or towers on the ridge and no big cuts in its crest either. All my observations, finally, would come back to the lower portion of the Face and to those nasty undersides of the hanging glacier.

During his own earlier *recce* Suraj had zeroed in on the only possible route, and now he pointed it out to us. Between the last two glaciers there was one narrow gap which seemed safe unless an abnormally large portion broke from the left-hand side of the central glacier. All avalanches should normally follow their usual route, a clearly ravaged gully. However, should a very large avalanche occur, its overflowing debris could threaten about 500 to 700 feet of the climbers' route. Work early at dawn? Climb at night with head lamps? We mulled over these possibilities as we continued to scan the line we were forcing up the Face.

A traverse to the left over a dazzling and steep *verglas* slope of about fifty feet would almost certainly be an extreme test of skill and courage before one could gain the top of the central hanging glacier from where the going would ease a little. 'So, what do you think, sir?' asked Suraj. We had not been able to see any safe way on our original West Ridge route. Kura

Ram was quite unequivocal about the objective hazards of trying to gain the West Ridge from the SW Face of Kamet. 'It is completely exposed,' he had said definitively.

Finally, we all agreed that this route was it. I quickly rechecked all the vital gear and equipment which would be needed for the climb. Some more rope should be sent up soon, I made a mental note. The possibility of a lack of sufficient cracks for pitons worried me and now I again made a note of quickly sending up the rock drill and expansion bolts — vital equipment for clawing up crackless granite.

'Well, that's it then,' I summed up. 'We take the NW Face. It will test us to our limits, and beyond, but if we can pull it off it would be the first 6000-foot face climb by any Indian team.'

Having taken a final decision about our route, we all felt lighter and happier, no doubt relieved that we could now get on with the climb. Suraj, who had already decided that this was the only feasible route had had some loads dumped in the closed valley with the idea of setting up Camp III. Now he crisply issued the necessary instructions and a group of our men and porters quickly put up an Arctic Medium tent and the stylish orange Meade which Suraj would use. Camp III had been established. Date: 5 June 1983. Height: 19,200 feet.

A few mattresses were dragged out into the open, and leaning against our rucksacks and one or two large stones that were lying around we dug into our packed lunch which we washed down with piping hot tea from the kitchen which Kami had quickly activated. Even as we ate, our eyes were constantly on the Face, examining it in greater detail, mentally working out the various pitches and looking for camp sites. We were all somewhat bothered about this last point, for there appeared not even a ledge before the hanging glaciers, which we reckoned started at about 23,000 feet. Could we do without a camp for 4000 feet of completely technical climb on this Face? The average angle of steepness before the glaciers appeared to be at least 70° the ground unremittingly difficult. Without a doubt the entire route would have to be fix-roped. Even after that, could climbers make it to Camp IV during daylight hours? And how would we ferry loads over 4000 feet of fixed rope, and return to Camp III the same day? We could hardly ask, or expect, the local porters to carry loads above Camp III so this would have to be done by the members themselves. Forcing a way to the glacier would itself be a remarkable feat of technical climbing, and stocking the higher camps would certainly be a problem. On the other hand, we needed only three to four days of stores to be taken up to Camp IV as Camp V at the snow col where the glacier hit the West Ridge appeared a moderate day's climb ahead. Two climbers, or three at most, would spend a night there, having taken a tent from Camp IV and then go for the summit the next day, leaving Camp V standing. Once on the summit, we hoped a party from the Eastern Axis would be there to guide them down to Camp V or possibly Camp IV on that axis. As we were planning for the summit party to make a cross-over to the eastern side, and not return by the same route, the stocking up required was somewhat less.

We lay around on our mattresses after lunch, soaking in the sun and also wanting to learn what effect the growing heat would have on the Face. The level of activity of the rocks was certainly rising; stones fell from various parts into the debris at the foot of the Face. Then, sure enough, a part of the first—and the largest—of the three hanging glaciers broke off from the main mass and came roaring down. 'Sahib, my camera,' I yelled to Kura, eager to capture at least the curtain of powdery snow that billowed in the wake of falling ice. The main avalanche buried itself where it fell in the previous debris; so steep was the angle of the Face that the blocks of ice had fallen almost perpendicular and had no horizontal impetus to roll on towards the camp. A little later there was a somewhat smaller avalanche from the slopes of Mukut Parbat which too failed to make much headway towards the camp site; it



MANA



An avalanche cloud

spent its final surge a safe 200-300 yards away. This was another source of worry removed. I had wondered if the width of the closed valley was big enough to accommodate both avalanche debris and our Camp III. It seemed to be, but only just.

And then, the third glacier—the one on the extreme left, also let loose a voluminous amount of ice and snow. Tensely we waited for most of the powdery snow to settle. When it did, it was clear that the line we proposed to take was clear of the path of the avalanche: our route looked safe enough from such danger.

I had seen all I wanted, done all I could. Leaving Suraj, Balwan and two others at Camp III, I walked back to Camp II with Kura Ram. Camp II was being managed very ably by our

doctor, Major Gautam Ravinder Nath. I was very pleased with his performance so far. Though a complete newcomer to high mountains, he had volunteered for our expedition. I was glad he had. Tall, rangy and always cheerful, he had quickly struck a fine relationship with Suraj and had come up to Camp II, and with no other officer around at that time, easily slid into handling all the administration work there, apart from keeping a watchful eye on the acclimatisation of all the members and porters who came up. He himself seemed to have taken to the heights quite effortlessly and alongwith his nursing assistant and all the medical supplies and equipment, he appeared equipped to look after any casualties.

In fact, there had been a casualty just two days ago. Lance Naik Man Singh, one of the toughest of the support party on this axis had stubbornly kept on with his ferrying despite poor adjustment to the altitude. Perhaps worried about losing his fast-spreading reputation as a very strong climber, he successfully concealed his growing discomfort and complete lack of appetite. Finally, after three days of going without virtually any food it was clear to all that Man Singh was done in. He lay exhausted, and quite speechless. Gautam was quick to notice some tell-tale signs of trouble, the foaming at the mouth for one, and promptly despatched him downwards with his nursing assistant carrying a bottle of oxygen and the prescribed medicine for pulmonary oedema—that killer of killers at high altitude. Lasix injections began draining some of the fluid from Man Singh's lungs. Unless this fluid formation can be quickly arrested, the patient can die by drowning. Even as the casualty party headed towards Base Camp, Gautam radioed for a helicopter which landed there and lifted Man Singh to the safety of a hospital in the plains below on 5 June, the very day we had finalized our NW Face route and set up Camp III.

Gautam seemed completely cool and in full command over everything at Camp II despite this emergency. He had also done an excellent job in chasing up supplies from the lower camps with the result that much of the climbing kit and equipment we needed to start technical work on the Face had already arrived at Camp II. There was also enough food and fuel for at least a week, and some supplies of special high altitude rations. There were even some chickens frisking about on the glacier, so there wasn't much chance of any lack of variety of food quite yet. Things seemed to be falling in place and I went to sleep that night very contented.

I was up very early the next morning, as if in moral support of Maon's rope which was to start work on the Face that day—the first day of grappling with Kamet's NW Face. Earlier, down at Base Camp and out of touch with Suraj's vanguard, I had fretted a bit about the stocking up of higher camps. I had worried that Suraj seemed to be scouting ahead without enough logistic planning which might lead to bottlenecks as the climb began in full earnest. But now I was convinced that my apprehensions had been unnecessary. Not only did Suraj quickly find the route to Camp I and Camp II with a great deal of aplomb and then unerringly picked the best line for the ascent beyond Camp III, he had also supervised his logistic back-up well. He was leading from the front but had a good grip on his administrative rear.

Then I headed down to Base Camp happily. The route was still trying even in descent, but there was no need to stop for regaining one's breath. I reached Base camp in the still warm afternoon sun of 4.30 pm, Ghastoli looked a greener and happier place. I was tired, hungry but satisfied. We were now locked with Kamet up its NW Face, the route agreed upon, logistics synchromeshed, my climbers lit and enthusiastic. I had done all I could higher on the mountain, so I was satisfied to be down at Base. And, there it was another world. Akshay, delighted to see me back, with a chicken clutched in his arm reverted to a child-like lisp to show his joy. And how proud he made me that day when he had manfully kept pace with me on that leg-softening, hard-breathing, long climb to Camp I. Clutching a hen and

lisping, and, yet trying to master the intricacies of our wireless sets, tapping keys, moving dials and calling out; 'Alpha Bravo Charlie to Charlie 2, do you hear, over.' He was trying to raise Camp II.

There was Kapil, too, at the Base, lugging the heavy cinematograph around, his face all laughs as he greeted me, 'Have we climbed the mountain, sir?' If only such confidence as Akshay and Kapil have in us could do it, well, we had as good as climbed the mountain! I sat back against a rock in utter contentment, warmed by the sloping sun shining from above Chandra Parbat and the hot mug of tea and sent the following signals:

OP recce Kamet(.) sitrep as at 061800, firstly(.) alpha(.) Western party(.) Leader and dy leader carried out extensive recce of various approaches of Kamet on 4-5 June(.) it had been decided to climb Kamet from NW Face(.) camps as follows(.) one(.) Base camp area Ghastoli at Ht 13800 feet(.) two(.) Camp One on West Kamet glacier Ht 16500 feet(.) three(.) camp Two near south-west spur of Kamet Ht 18000 feet(.) four(.) Camp Three trying to find out way up led by Nb Sub Maon second Party in support led by Kura Ram(.) future progress will be extremely slow as every inch of height gained has to be bought with piton and rope under adverse condition.

Clearly, I had no illusions about what lay ahead in store for the Kumaonis on the North-West Face of Karnet.

8

EASTERN AXIS

TRAGEDY AND PROGRESS

It was the 9th June, we were having breakfast when one of the johnnies came and told me very casually that L. NK Bharat Singh was not feeling very well. About ten minutes later I went to see him. The casual manner of the report had not prepared me for the sight I saw.' Capt Chengappa of the Army Medical Corps thus begins his account of the tragedy that struck the expedition out of the blue.

'Bharat Singh was lying in a daze, not in his senses and looking very weak, and barely able to whisper. When I asked him whether he had eaten anything, he said that as he had not felt like it he had eaten hardly anything in the last three days. I examined him carefully. There were no symptoms of pulmonary oedema so I attributed his weakness to his not having had any food. Immediately I prescribed some easily digestible drinks like Bournvita, Horlicks and fruit juices etc. hoping these would quickly replenish his energy level. But none of these worked and by evening he looked very drowsy. He couldn't speak any more, nor was he able to recognize anyone. Moreover, he was breathless and was also coughing. I examined him again, and this time found definite signs of pulmonary oedema.

'Immediately I started the prescribed treatment; Lasix, Morphia, oxygen etc. With all this his breathing improved somewhat, his coughing also seemed to have reduced but he did not become any more alert. In fact, he gradually slipped into a coma. He did not respond to any stimulus except to wince at painful ones.

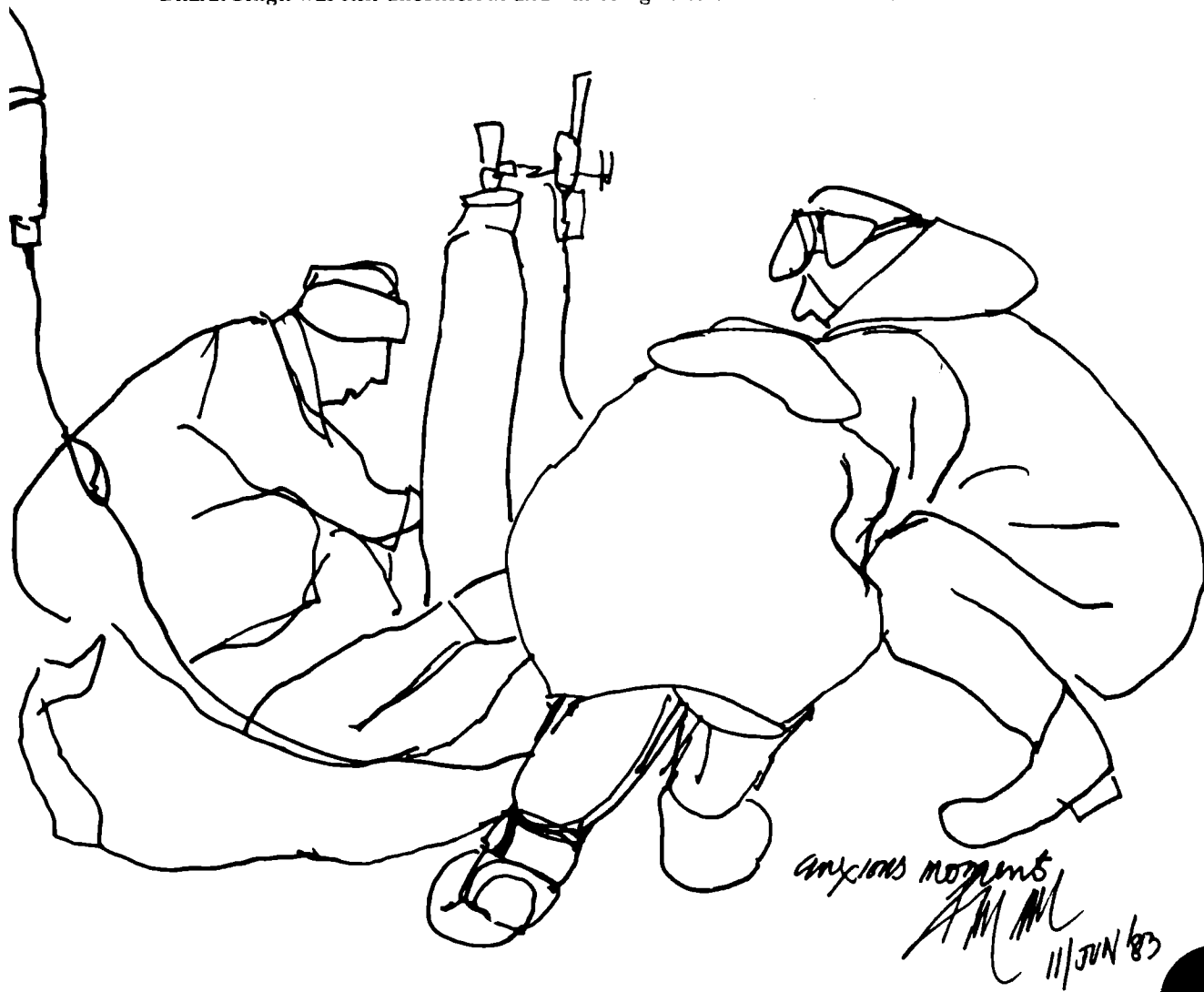
'By this time darkness had fallen but there was no dearth of volunteers to keep me company on my night-long vigil for it was vital that Bharat be given the necessary medicine and injections at regular intervals. Meanwhile, we had been able to contact Camp II on the Western Axis and had requested them to pass on to Joshimath our urgent request for a helicopter to evacuate Bharat Singh to a hospital in the plains. But we knew that the chopper could land only at Base Camp and that we would have to first take Bharat down there from Camp II. Next day my nursing assistant arrived at Camp II and brought up some intravenous glucose bottles. This was a big relief since there was no other way to provide Bharat Singh with any nourishment. We gave him two bottles of glucose and also injected some Bournvita directly into his stomach.

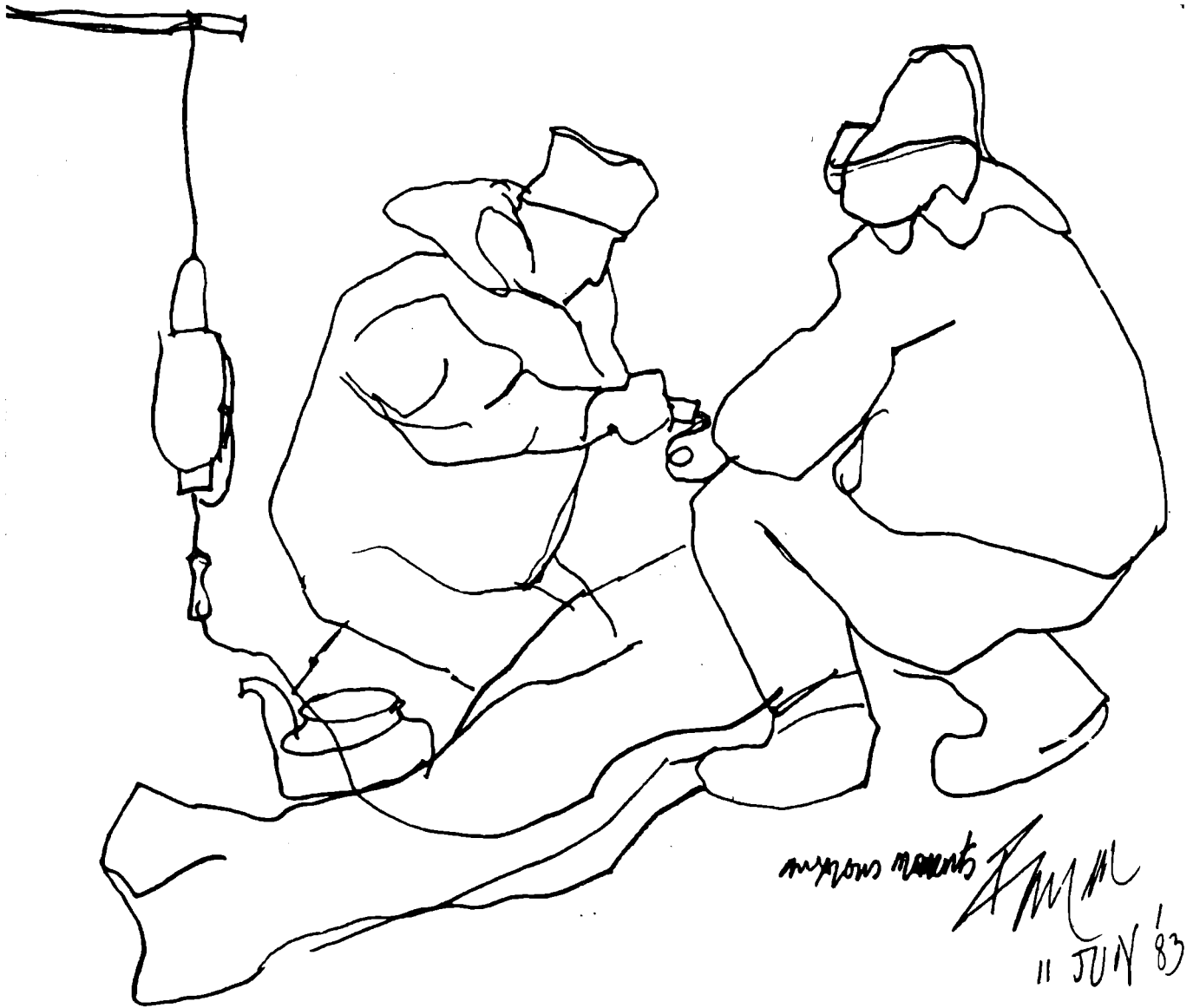
'We started Bharat's evacuation around 3.00 p.m. on 10 June. It was one of the toughest jobs I have ever been involved in. Bharat Singh was strapped on to the stretcher and there were ten of us who took turns carrying the stretcher. It was back-breaking work, and we had to keep stopping to rest and to give Bharat oxygen, injections and medicine. To make matters worse, it was snowing heavily all the while. To me it seemed a scene out of frozen hell. Three hours later we stumbled into Camp I. Here we rested a little and four fresh members took over from some of the more tired ones who had accompanied our sad, silent caravan from Camp II.

'We set out for Base Camp in blizzard conditions. It was cold, miserable and the visibility was very poor. A message had been radioed to Base Camp and we hoped that a few more porters would meet us halfway to help us. In uninviting dark, a group of them did march a considerable way up the glacier. But our progress had been slower than expected and after waiting for an hour they returned to Base thinking that they must have missed us on our way down.

'We slipped, slithered and stumbled along the glacier; our tiredness and the awkward stretcher load made it a nightmarish experience. It was not until 2.30 a.m. on 11th June that we reached Base Camp, utterly exhausted but relieved that Bharat could now be evacuated by helicopter. Even after we had made Bharat comfortable inside a tent, I tried my best to stay awake in order to be able to keep a constant check on him. I succeeded for a while but passed out around 5.00 a.m.

'I was shaken awake around 10.00 a.m. It was a while before my sluggish mind could make out the cause of all the excitement — there was the sound of the chopper overhead. Bharat Singh was still unconscious and was being lifted on to the stretcher and we carried





him out of the tent and hurried towards the landing zone some distance off. It was still snowing heavily. The pilot lowered the chopper, then lifted-off and circled about a bit, no doubt wondering if it was safe to land. For a while it seemed to us that he had decided against risking a landing in those conditions. Disappointed, we began carrying poor Bharat back to the camp when we saw the chopper returning. This time there was no doubt that the pilot was going to land.

'As we watched the machine disappear, our intense fatigue was offset by the fact that Bharat was now headed for the plains and the best possible treatment. Our night-long effort had not gone in vain, and our tiredness seemed worth it.'

The helicopter landed for refuelling at Joshimath, and two doctors worked on Bharat Singh for forty five minutes with oxygen masks and injections to fortify him for the ninety minute flight to Bareilly. I met these doctors on 14 June when I spent a day at Joshimath during my

transit from the Western to the Eastern axis, and one of them told me, 'The casualty was very serious when he arrived here. Had his evacuation got delayed by even another hour he would have been dead upon arrival.'

So perhaps we had managed to save Bharat after all, I thought to myself. I had been extremely worried ever since I had learnt of his condition. I was then at the Base Camp on the Western Axis. But the same day, 14 June, the pilot who had flown Bharat to Bareilly came to Joshimath on another sortie, and told me that though Bharat was breathing normally, he continued to be in coma. 'It's very surprising,' I recorded in the dictaphone. 'It seems to be a very rare case of altitude sickness. Usually a patient suffering from pulmonary oedema recovers rapidly when taken down to the plains at sea level. Maybe he had taken some sleeping tablets too, but why should he have done that.' Serious misgivings had already begun nagging me.

Pasricha despite his age had been well acclimatised and feeling fit at camp II and decided to go as far as camp III. Availing the rope Thapa's team had fixed earlier, he went up the gully and reached camp III on 17 June. While at camp III he painted Kamet and Mana peaks and sketched my portrait. Pasricha had never been so high before and possibly he is the only artist to have ever painted the Himalayan landscape at the height.

On 18 June, L Nk Bharat Singh died in the hospital, without once having recovered consciousness. The post-mortem revealed that he had indeed taken sleeping pills; of course there was evidence of pulmonary oedema but the doctors felt that he might well have recovered from that but for the sleeping pills he took. The news of his death reached the team on the 27 June, even as we were poised for our push towards the summit. Bharat Singh had been one of the toughest of the climbers on the Eastern Axis. Now the altitude had claimed him. Others, not as strong, some older, others less determined, were even then perched much higher than Bharat had been able to go. What inscrutable laws are these? How, finally, is one's destiny decided upon? There are no answers, perhaps, so there is a sense of loss, and grief, and helplessness, and incomprehension. I looked at the familiar sight of snow and summits, and wondered despairingly at the price they extract. 'Is it ever worth it?' I whispered to myself. 'Is it ever worth the loss of a life?'

Bharat Singh's evacuation to Base Camp threw into disarray the carefully calibrated movement plans of Thapa. His team was hopelessly strung out on the mountain, and regrouping took two days. Therefore it was only on 13 June that Thapa's rope could finally occupy Camp III at 20,500 feet, though they had practically forced the entire route to it four days earlier.

The next day they took on the 1200 feet rock face that guards the access to Meade's Col. This rock face is the only technically difficult obstacle on Kamet from this side, a face at places layered with ice, at others covered with small stones and lined with avalanche chutes. To enable stocking up of the higher camps, almost the entire route on this rock face had to be fix-roped for load-carrying porters. On 14 June Thapa and his party fixed some 500 feet of rope. Another push, and they ought to be able to clamber over the 50-foot ice wall that marked the upper end of the rock face, thought Thapa satisfied with their day's work. Back at Camp III he was happy to see Bakshi there with his party. 'You complete the work on the rock face tomorrow,' he told Bakshi that night before turning in.

But on 15 June the weather was again bad, too bad for the tricky work of completing the route and fixing rope on the rock face. There was no movement beyond Camp III but all the other climbing members came up from Camp II; Camp III was now becoming the Advance Base Camp.

16 June was clear and Thapa decided to gamble on it remaining that way and make a big push towards Camp IV. One after the other a variety of reasons had been interrupting his team's progress, and he felt that now they had to make full use of every possible day. He sent off Bakshi's team two hours before the others so that they could finish making the route on the face by the time the main body caught up with them. It worked. A big ferry was undertaken by all those who were at Camp III. It caught up with Bakshi's pathfinders just below the final ice wall. Rajpal cut a route up that and a sizable dump was established at the proposed site of Camp IV.

Another successful ferry was conducted the next day. That depleted the stores at Camp III so on 18 June Thapa sent up only two men to carry the tentage needed to set up Camp IV; all others went down to Camp II and brought up loads to Camp III. Not much height had been gained during these days but Thapa's determined spree of load humping had once again put the logistics more or less back in shape. More stuff was brought up on 19 and 20 June, and things looked well under control as Thapa and I sat down to finalize the summit plans.

Thus far Thapa had been working towards attempting the various ideas we had originally set for ourselves on the Eastern Axis, including a solo attempt of Kamet from Camp III, the ascent of both Kamet and Abi Gamin in one day, a climber spending a night on the summit, etc. A necessary precondition for success in any of these ambitious ideas was



*Towards the gully between
Camp II and Camp III*

View of Mana from Camp I



Deoban towering above Col Kumar at Camp I.





Above: Entering the gully between Camps II and III

Below: View of Deoban from Camp II





Above: *On way to Camp IV*

Below: *Near Meade's Col*





On the summit of Kamet



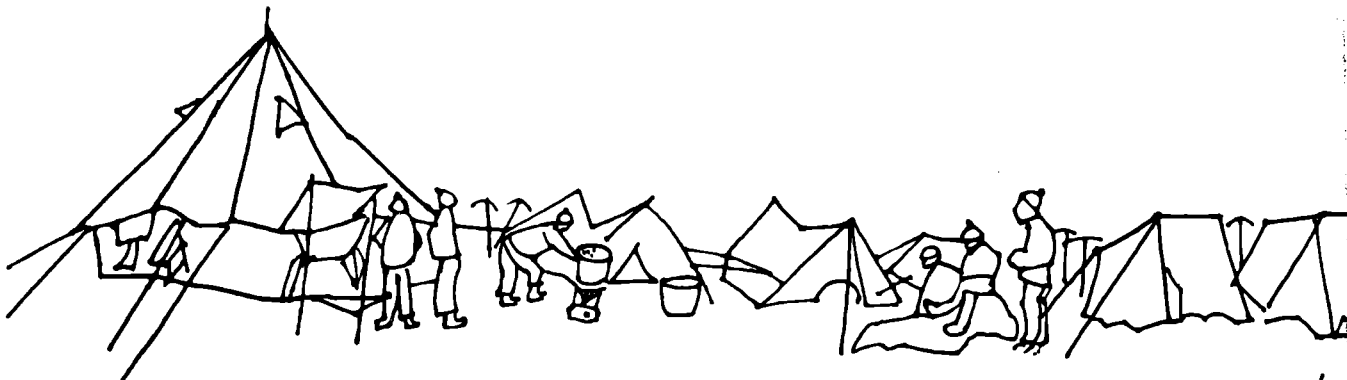


*At the foot of gully
to Camp III*

good weather. Instead, we had unfortunately run into a very bad spell and the forecast was for more of the same. So we put these plans aside for the present as it was absolutely essential to set up the higher camps and climb Kamet in order to be prepared for receiving the Western summit team should it succeed in climbing Kamet from that side. There was no provision for them to descend back on their side so if they got to the top they would have to come down on the Eastern Axis, and this meant that we had to be ready to receive them and guide them down, for the eastern route was a completely unfamiliar one for them. This then became the guiding factor of our planning. For the same reason — the safety of the cross-over team — I immediately accepted Thapa's idea of establishing an extra camp on our side. Traditionally, Kamet has been climbed from Camp V at Meade's Col which is at a height of 23,500 feet. There aren't any great difficulties between there and the summit of Kamet which is about 25,447 feet, almost exactly two thousand feet higher. But as yet we had no idea how demanding the summit push would be for the Western Team, or how long it would take them to climb from their final camp to the summit. An additional camp — Camp VI — somewhere between Meade's Col and the summit, therefore could well come in very useful should the Western climbers be in a bad way after their ascent.

Having decided upon this key factor, the rest was easier. We decided that the first summit party would consist of Lt R K Singh, Sub Soban Singh, NK Balwant Singh and Recruit Khim Singh, besides Thapa himself. Their summit bid was to be supported by the party consisting of Lt Bakshi, Rajpal, Lalit Mohan and Subhash whose task would be to make the route to Camp V and VI, and ferry loads required for these camps: in short, to take on all the more arduous tasks in order to leave the summit team relatively fresh for the final ascent to the top.

We then worked out the time-table. The summit attempt was scheduled for 24 June. For this, the summit team had to be established in Camp IV on 21 June, in Camp V on 22 June, and in Camp VI on 23 June. The ski-team of Lalit Mohan and Rajpal would then make their attempt on 27 June. This would ensure that the higher camps would be



12 JUN '83

AMM

CAMP 2

operational during the period in which the Western Team planned their cross-over for they had radioed that they would make their push on 24 June or 26 June. As an additional precaution, it was decided that Camps IV, V and VI would be stocked with additional food, sleeping bags and mattresses so that even in the eventuality of this team not being in a position to receive the Western boys after their cross-over, the latter would find comfort and sanctuary in these fully stocked camps. Another summit bid — to be made by all other fit members in position — was also kept in mind as a possibility.

The summit team began its push from Camp III on 21 June, and I watched them across the kilometre-long snowfield stretching to the base of the rock face. They were accompanied by Kabiraj, Vijay Singh, Karan Singh, Maon and Dan Singh, an exceptionally tough and spirited porter of Bampa village, who would carry loads from Camp IV to camps V and VI. It was an extraordinarily bright day, and the sun shone down from a speckless blue sky. The mountain — clothed in freshly fallen snow of the previous few days, was dazzlingly white when the large group set off after a hearty meal at around 11.00 a.m. Two feet of new snow covered the earlier track and a fresh one had to be made. This slowed them down considerably but didn't dampen their high spirits: for it the weather held for three to four days the summit seemed within reach! They ploughed on and reached Camp IV around 5.00 p.m. where an unpleasant surprise awaited them. The support party led by Bakshi was still at Camp IV though they had been scheduled to set up Camp V that day.

'I'm really sorry,' Bakshi apologized. 'My members are feeling the altitude very badly and may not be able to go higher. I thought it best to wait for you here,' he added.

'The route to Camp V which I thought would have been opened on that day had not been. But I did not dare show my dismay for that would have made the others lose heart,' recounted Thapa. 'Camp IV was overcrowded so I immediately sent down Subhash, Vijay, and the unwell Lalit Mohan to Camp III.' Thapa was also very anxious that the time-table of the ascent should not be changed. This meant an unbroken push to Camp V, Camp VI and the summit on successive days. 'I did not want to waste even a day at any of the camps. So I decided that we would move up together with the support party the next day, instead of the original plan which had called for the latter to be a day ahead of us, making trail, establishing camps to facilitate our progress.'

The next day — 22 June — they set off after a full meal around 9.00 a.m., and reached the site of Camp V after a gruelling eight-hour climb. 'Bakshi, RK, Rajpal and Balwant took turns breaking the trail through freshly piled-up snow. I found the terrain had changed



since the previous year, so much so that we had to find an entirely new route.' Thapa told me later. The hanging glacier had come together forming a jagged edge and opening up new crevasses. They decided to stay well clear of the crevasse zone and chose to climb on to hard ice along a higher line. They roped up and fixed crampons on to their boots and Thapa, Rajpal and Balwant buckled down to cutting steps and fixing rope over a 50-foot ice face above which they reckoned there wouldn't be much danger of crevasses. It took them half an hour to cut a route to the top of the ice block. Then, panting with exertion, they sat down for a rest. Here the ferrying party also caught up with them and everyone had some hot soup. Three hours later they shrugged off their loads and set up Camp V. Time: 5.00 p m. Place: Meade's Col.

The sun had set by the time the last of load-carrying members straggled in. They had done an excellent job in carrying all the stores required for the last two camps on the mountain. They reached Camp V utterly exhausted. 'Maon and Karan Singh came in last. We did not have enough tents and I had to send them back to Camp IV that evening,' Thapa noted regretfully.

Then as they set about preparing dinner inside a tent, a gas cartridge sprung a leak and the gas began burning in a dancing flame inside the small space. In the rush to get out of the tent—in clumsy clothing from a small-mouthed tent—the tent itself began sliding down the slope as it had not yet been securely anchored. Then Thapa did the only thing he really could; ignoring the flames, he grabbed hold of the cartridge and managed to hurl it out of

the tent. The fire put out, the others then stopped the sliding tent. 'Everyone was fine but we had lost a complete cartridge of gas,' noted Thapa laconically.

They set off for camp VI the next day at about 11.00 a.m. The summit team was supported by Bakshi, Kabiraj and the Bampa porter, Dan Singh. Bakshi and Kabiraj carried some food for Camp VI and had the job of breaking trail to the highest camp. Dan Singh carried the tent. This would leave the summit party relatively fresh for their ascent the next day. It was planned that the support party would return to Camp V the same day, i.e. 23 June, and Bakshi and Kabiraj would attempt Abi Gamin the next day. 'While climbing Abi Gamin, Bakshi, the cine cameraman in our team, would also be able to photograph our proposed ascent of Kamet on the 24th. The weather was clear throughout the day and I was hoping it would remain that way for a few days,' recorded Thapa.

On way to Camp VI the indefatigable Dan Singh walked into a narrow, deep crevasse. He was carrying the tent for Camp VI and now the bulge of his load pinned him at the mouth of the narrow crevasse. 'His head was visible but the rest of his body dangled in the crevasse. I tried to hold him but in the process one of my legs also went into the crevasse. Immediately I planted my ice-axe on the other side of the crevasse and managed to prevent myself from falling in any further,' Thapa recounted of his attempt to rescue Dan Singh.

Bakshi, who had been following Thapa, was quite stunned to see the two of them struggling in the crevasse. But he then reacted quickly. 'Someone threw a rope from behind. Everyone was shouting and there was confusion. I caught the rope and rushed to where Dan Singh was slowly slipping further down, his outstretched arms losing their grip. I put the rope below his armpits, and with one jerk pulled him out of the crevasse. Either due to the effort or due to the tense situation which had developed, I collapsed on to the snow and lay there for about three minutes, completely spent,' the young lieutenant recalled.

They settled for a site lower than what they had hoped, and began setting up Camp VI on the North-East ridge of Kamet at 4.00 p.m. on 23 June. At 5.30 p.m., Bakshi, Kabiraj and Dan Singh began retracing their steps to Camp V, leaving Thapa, R K and Balwant nestled in the highest camp ever set up on Kamet. The summit rose 1500 feet above them, but the weather had closed in again and the wind was rising.

9

WESTERN AXIS

With PITONS AND ROPE UNDER ADVERSE CONDITIONS

From Kapil Malhotra's Diary

Where was Dan Singh? Suraj, Gautam and I stopped at almost every step and tried our best to pick out the lead climber of the rope on the Face. We could see Abhai Singh standing motionless a little below and to the right of the rock wall that barred the way about 1200 feet above Camp III towards which we were headed. Then, closely following the rope that stretched to the left, traversing the entire width of the base of that rock feature, we picked out a bulkier, bigger figure. 'That's Kura,' exclaimed Suraj. 'They are trying to climb the rock wall from the left. Oh good, they are at it!

'All the while that we had been walking up from Camp II that morning, Dalal had worried about whether Kura Ram's rope would be able to work that day. It had snowed, not heavily but very steadily, the previous evening for about two to three hours. I had moved up to Camp II that day, reaching it about 1.00 p.m. with dark clouds rapidly gathering overhead and a cold wind perking up into squally gusts. Already, a few flakes of snow floated downwards. Gautam had met us, very cheerful and friendly, about a couple of hundred yards below the camp site, sporting a gorkha hat set at a jaunty angle which he would occasionally sweep off his head with a flourish. "Come and have some tea and hot lunch," he welcomed us cheerily. "I am shifting the camp to the middle of the glacier. It will then be on the direct route between Camp I and Camp III, so things are a bit unsettled. But the kitchen is operational," he added hastily, no doubt noticing our disappointment at not being quickly able to crawl into tents and sleeping bags. The kitchen was an ice hole protected by a large boulder. The stove hissed, heating some water for our tea, and no doubt melting a bit more of the floor of the kitchen, thus gradually deepening the hole. Already the cook could hardly be seen when he bent over the stove.

'We did get hot tea but had to wait considerably longer for lunch which was served after the camp had been re-established at its new site. Finally, late in the afternoon we settled down into our sleeping bags, delighting in their warmth even as the sky outside turned completely grey. It was about an hour later that the guy ropes of our tent were lustily shaken and the gravelly voice of Suraj yelled from outside, "Hey, what are you fellows doing lying about in sleeping bags in the middle of the day!"

'I was quite drowsy but Gautam quickly shot up into a sitting position, rolled his sleeping bag off his body to unangle his long limbs, thrust his head out of the mouth of tent, and cried, "Hey, Deputy Leader, where have you come from? Deserting your post or what!" all the while struggling to pull on his snow boots. The tent walls flapped vigorously as he

crawled out excitedly. I followed. Outside, Dalal in his yellow windsuit and mirror-like polaroid glasses cut a startlingly vivid figure in the grey, misty and wet afternoon. "You didn't expect a surprise inspection, did you?" he grinned whitely and widely.

Then turning to Doc, he added, "Well, you deserve your rest. I see you have shifted the site of the camp which is what I came down to suggest. Good show." he then barked, still playing the part of supreme commander.

That evening we spent in animated chatting, all four of us — Suraj, Doc, Sambial and I — squeezed into one Arctic Tent, each bringing the other up to date on news and gossip of our respective parts of the mountain. It was an evening of warm friendship; an occasion and a mood quite uniquely gifted to those engaged in a common, testing enterprise. As if sensing our sunny mood, the next morning greeted us with clear blue skies. Only a distant cloud or two hinted at bad weather later in the day. We stood about in the morning light and the growing warmth, leisurely packing our rucksacks and supervising the strapping-up of the loads to be ferried to Camp III by the porters.

Though Suraj still joked around, it was clear that he was tense that morning. The evening before he had been totally relaxed but now one could sense he was somehow preoccupied. He led the way over freshly fallen snow with complete nonchalance, hands in pocket, superbly co-ordinated and extremely gracious in dropping his pace to match that of the laggard — me. To keep us fresh and keen, he would stop and point out an interesting fissure here and some peak there. As we turned into the closed valley, however, he was distracted by his impatience to find out if the climbers had ventured up the fixed rope that morning. Dalal had apprehended that they might have found the rope iced-up as a result of the previous evenings snowfall, too iced-up to give any purchase to their jumars. Now upon seeing his men gamely carrying on, he visibly relaxed. Expansively he looked around at us, then said, "Let's relax for a while and watch them climb. What's the hurry, anyway?" "And we deserve a rest," he added, characteristically sparing me of any guilt, for I was unmistakably the one most in need of a respite. Gratefully I shrugged off my rucksack, took off my down jacket and spread it on the snow and sat down to watch the tiny figures poised above us and well tried to pick out Dan Singh on the North Face.'

And that day they were witness to some of the best climbing of the entire expedition. Once at Camp III, with the aid of binoculars they finally picked out Dan Singh in the shadow between an overhang and the rockwall. After traversing left over a very steep ice slope, Dan Singh had found himself at the bottom of that narrow funnel. It stretched up vertically; the surface of smooth rock with a thin crust of ice, too thin to hold an ice piton. He cleared off some ice with his ice axe and hands and inspected the rock below. No crack, no protuberances, no hold at all, nothing. He peered up. Again nothing that he could use to climb. He was stuck. Wisely, he decided to call Kura Ram, his experienced rope leader, to his stance. It took the latter fifteen minutes to make that fifty foot traverse though a fixed rope now gave him a handrail. Once together, they again examined the obstacle. "Bend down a little Sahib" he told me, 'Kura Ram recalled later. 'I was struck dumb. Dan Singh was preparing to hoist himself on to my shoulders.'

Either he was too astonished to protest, or Dan Singh was very swift, or perhaps Kura Ram too realized that desperate innovation was called for to make further headway, for he steadied Dan Singh on his shoulders by firmly grasping his ankles. Swiftly Dan Singh yanked off his gloves and then explored the vertical slope for holds. Finding a shallow depression, he stuck his fingers in and calling out, 'Hold me if I fall' to Kura Ram, he hugged the surface with his entire body to achieve friction and jimmied himself up till his fingers dug into a small crack where he exultantly hammered in a piton. 'I swear to you,

sir,' Kura recounted later, ' that day he went mad.'

Having got over that hold-less pitch, there was no stopping Dan Singh. In another hour of superb climbing over a treacherous mixture of rock and snow, he hauled himself on to the narrow ledge that was the top of the 100-foot rockwall. There he vigorously hammered in some pitons, attached karabiners and looped a rope which now stretched down for Kura Ram to come up. But Kura had first to leech Abhai to his stance. Abhai must have stood at his position for about an hour - and - a - half, able to look across and see Kura but little of the climbing drama in which Dan Singh was involved. ' He was also in shadow and must have grown quite cold,' Suraj told me at Base Camp three days later.

Once Abhai reached him, Kura climbed up to Dan Singh's stance. ' I had the fixed rope, but still it took me twenty minutes and I was completely breathless,' Kura recorded. ' My arm muscles ached as I followed Dan Singh's line of tiny footholds. It was frightening.' And this from the most experienced climber we had on the mountain.

By the time Abhai reached the other two it was already 1.00 p.m. and there were clouds gathering in the west, slowly advancing upon the Face. The three of them had a drink of hot tea but Dan Singh was not through for the day yet. He had had a good deal of rest while waiting for his companions to reach him. Now warmed by the hot drink he rose for a final round. Above them was a beauty, a glittering ice slope of about 200 metres, and at an angle of only 60°. After what he had done earlier on, this was a piece of cake. His ice axe held high like a proud standard, he almost went leaping up that slope in an energetic burst. At Camp III they all came out to watch him. His mastering of the rockwall had not been visible from below but now he was poised dramatically against that beautiful ice pitch. Not bothering to drive in pitons or fix rope — that could be done the next day — Dan Singh was now climbing for the sheer joy of it; and who could grudge him his celebration after that incredible climb earlier on.

' He went up us if the summit was in sight,' said Doc. ' Swift, sure - footed and smooth. Not a false step anywhere, not a pause. He was a man inspired.'

Fifty metres above his companions, the rope became tight around his waist. It now stretched taut to the grinning Kura Ram below who had quite correctly assessed that they had done enough for the day. Reluctantly Dan Singh turned back, but not before making a huge gash on the ice to mark his high-point. Then he swiftly cramponed down to the others.

' Once again together on the tiny ledge on top of the rockwall, they began their descent,' recorded Suraj. ' I was very happy that this major obstacle had been overcome and reckoned that Dan Singh had reached nearly 21,000 feet that day — or certainly 20,000 feet at the very least.'

The descent down the side of the rockwall took about three quarters of an hour, and then the traverse another fifteen minutes. Occasionally Kura Ram would stop and tend to a piton or straighten out the fixed rope. After descending to the top of the avalanche cone they unroped and came abseiling down the last few hundred feet one after the other. The strain and tiredness was now taking its toll. Occasionally one or the other would go out of control while rappelling and tumble down for a while before stopping, but the fixed rope was there as a securing line and these rolls weren't particularly dangerous though they did provide a dramatic picture to those watching their rapid descent. By the time the team reached the bottom of the cone, the weather had packed up completely.

' We went across the valley to meet them. We were also keen to shoot some cine film of them coming off the Face. The wind had risen and there was a fine driving snow. All three of them were clearly very tired. As they came towards us, their feet played in tell-tale signs of exhaustion, they seemed happy nevertheless with their effort. I congratulated them on their work and then we hurried them into the large Arctic Medium tent where Kami's stove

had not only prepared hot tea for them but had also warmed up the interior to a very welcome temperature compared to the blizzard brewing up outside. Kura Ram, Dan Singh and Abhai quickly took off their crampons and boots, unstrapped the assortment of pegs and pitons from around their waists, unpacked the outer layer of down and windproof garments and burrowed into their sleeping bags. Then I left them for a well-deserved rest; their detailed account could wait till dinner time. This had been their second successive day on the Face and I really hoped they could manage another sortie the next day before descending to Base Camp for rest. Their achievement would then undoubtedly inspire the ropes to follow. I looked at them lying in their bags and silently wished them strength.' Suraj was anxious that this rope put in another day's work on the Face. He could see they all looked really done in, even Dan Singh despite his flashing smile, but he hoped that the tonic of having overcome the rockwall — one of the major obstacles on the lower portion of the Face — would inspire them to complete their target of three days climbing on the Face.

Suraj's anxiety was easily understandable. Back on 5 June, after we had finally decided upon our NW Face route, Suraj and I had worked out the plan of action. We first split up the dozen climbers into four ropes of three each. We tried to achieve as fine a balance as we could among the four ropes, with each rope having an experienced lead climber. We wanted a smoothly sustained momentum on the Face. We then decided that each rope would work on the Face for three days, and then come down to Base Camp about a week's rest before again taking up the lead position.

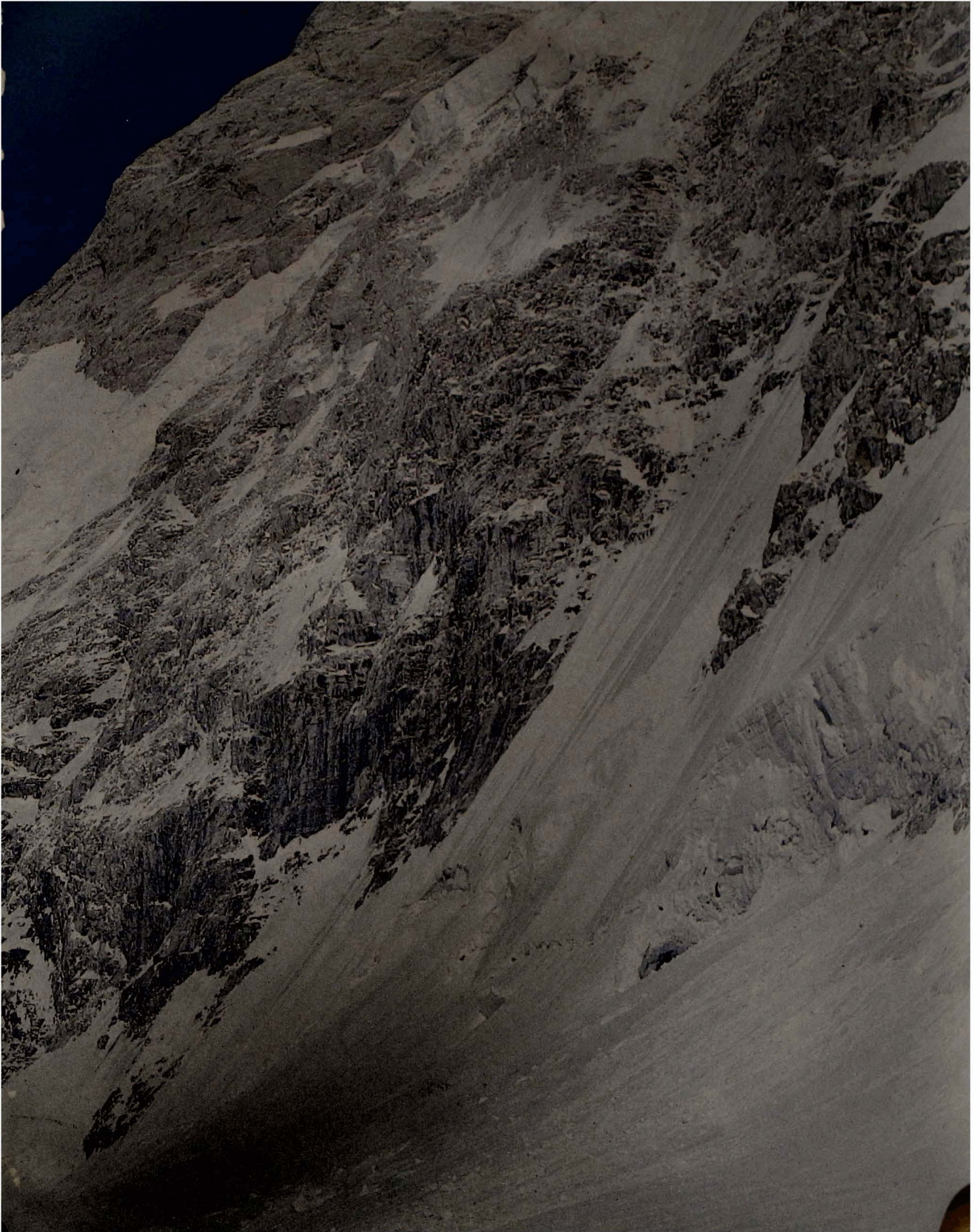
To the rope of Shule Maon, Balwan and Rajendra Singh went the excitement of starting our struggle with the Face. I was extremely keen that they should make an early start but on 6 June, the first day of our climb on the Face, a very strong wind started from 2.00 a.m. After 6.00 a.m. the climbers kept poking their heads out of the tent flaps every few minutes, only to duck back quickly into their warm cocoons. It was very windy, and cold. Even at 9.00 a.m. the wind blew strongly but at least the sun was shining on the NW Face and so they set out, hoping to be in its warmth after a while. They were all dressed in our high altitude gear; special down suits both windproof and warm, imported climbing boots and crampons strapped on underneath, boot covers, climbing harnesses with an assortment of pegs and pitons attached to them with karabiners, two pairs of gloves, a woollen one underneath and mittens on top — and helmets as protection against falling stones.

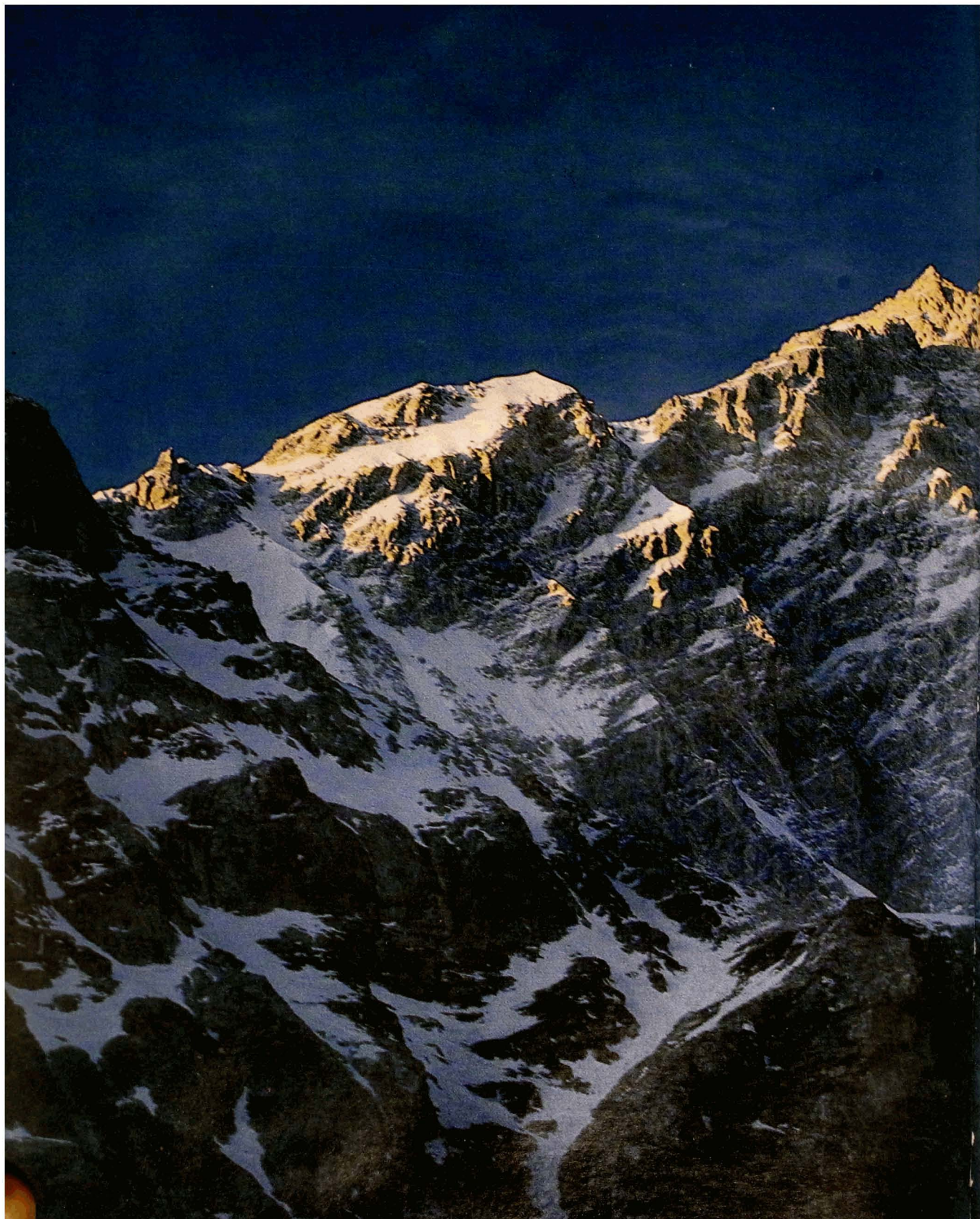
Maon was in the lead. Rajendra another trained mountaineer would belay Maon as the middle in the rope, and Balwan — as strong as his name suggests — brought up the rear carrying the heaviest load of the three; a rucksack containing rope, pitons, and a flask of hot tea — some 10 kg of load. Balwan had never before been on a climbing expedition, nor had he any mountaineering training but he had practically forced himself into the expedition by his immense enthusiasm and a reputation of great strength. And he had vindicated this reputation with his excellent performance during the team's training and on the expedition thus far. He had throughout been out in front with Suraj as Camps I, II and III were set up.

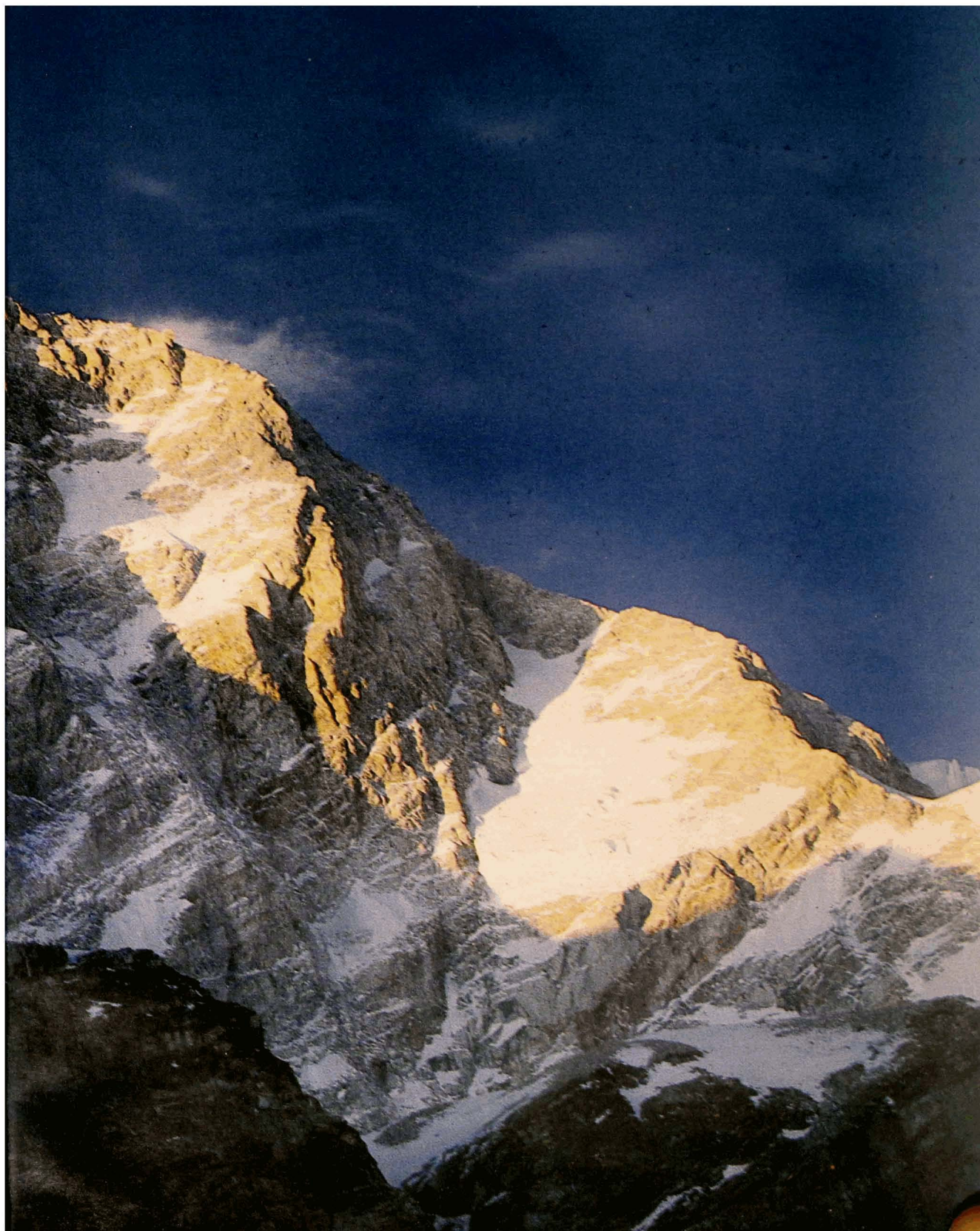
They were at the foot of the avalanche cone in twenty minutes. There they put on their crampons and Maon cut the first of the hundreds of steps he did that day. The cone rose upwards at an average steepness of 70° but underfoot there was crisp, hard-packed snow on the ice — a surface into which their crampons bit very reassuringly. Maon would cut bucket steps up the cone, and Rajendra coming next would brush them clean of all loose snow and carry out any other repairs he thought necessary for later use by heavily laden porters.

FACING: *North-West Face of Kamet*

OVERLEAF: *An aerial view of the unclimbed western side of Kamet. Abi Gamin in the background*







*The last bivouac on north-west face (22,000 ft)
where the Summit Party was benighted by a blizzard*



Capt. S.B. Dalal, deputy leader, at camp III

Around 10.30 a.m. the wind dropped to an occasional gust, and then died down completely. It grew hot now, with the sun shining from a cloudless sky and the hard work of endless step cutting soon had them perspiring freely. They changed the lead to relieve Maon and even Balwan took a turn at cutting steps. What a place to cut one's first step, and he still thrilled about it three days later when we met at Base Camp. That day they cut steps right to the top of the avalanche cone and in doing so gained about 700 feet of altitude. They returned to camp at 3.30 p.m. Maon's arm and shoulder muscles ached frightfully due to the endless swings of his ice axe; he had done most of the step cutting that day. Rajendra's dominant memory at the end of the day was that of falling stones. 'There are small stones falling all the time at tremendous speed and with a bulletlike whoosh. It is very frightening, sir, despite the protection of our steel helmets. I am sure that these falling stones would pierce our bodies if they struck us,' Rajendra recounted later. That sounded rather fanciful to me but the stones could nevertheless be very nasty and there was the risk of their breaking or weakening the fixed rope. This could spell disaster, especially for tired climbers descending, taking their security for granted.

Maon's party removed one great apprehension. Having climbed the avalanche cone, and seen the NW Face close up, they confirmed our judgement that the line we had selected was more or less safe from the danger of avalanches. They were pretty certain that barring an overflow of any exceptionally large avalanche, most debris off the hanging glaciers above would sweep down through the usual channels which were clear of our route. This was indeed a big relief. We seemed to have picked a good line on this count.

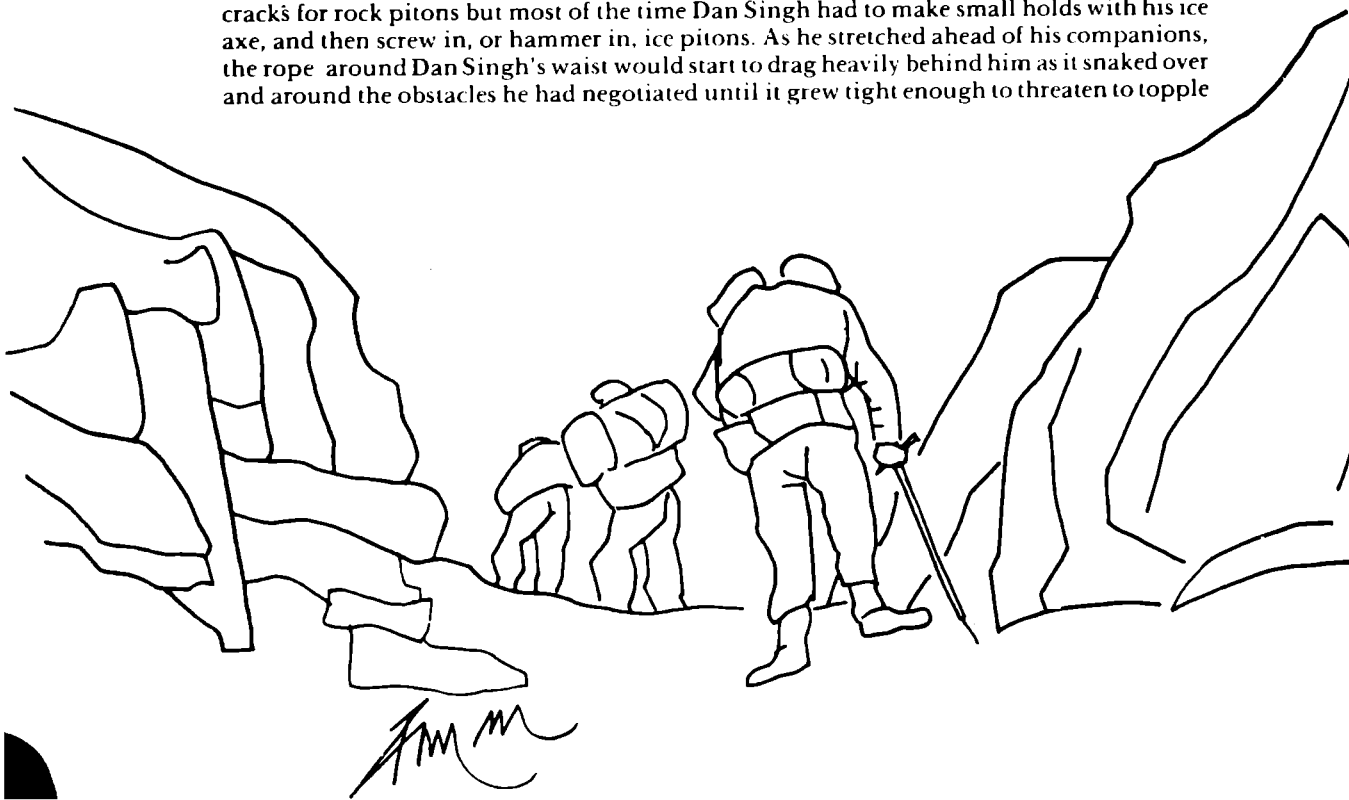
The next day — 7 June — a slightly different team set off at 8.30 a.m. Balwan was not feeling too bright — obviously not yet fully acclimatized to these higher altitudes — and Lakpa, a sherpa from Darjeeling, took his place. Swiftly they climbed the avalanche cone, aided by the prodigious step cutting effort of the previous day, and reached the high-point of 6 June at about 9.30. a.m. Here they were greeted by the first warmth of sun. The cone ended in a bergschrund and they made for some broken rock on the right. With a firm anchor there, they traversed to the right where the rocks were covered with thick ice. They fixed a climbing rope at the traverse and then cut more steps straight up the ice slope. Maon Lakpa and Rajendra fixed two climbing ropes and one rappelling rope — about 400 feet in all — that day and reached to within striking distance of the rockwall which Kura Ram's rope finally overcame two days later. They could appreciate the challenge it posed. The wall was very steep — nearly perpendicular — its face polished to smoothness by falling rocks. Maon's rope was too tried to probe its defences that day and they turned back for Camp III which they reached at 1.30 p.m. They had been on the Face for only five hours and yet were completely exhausted upon their return to camp. The steepness of the Face, and the unflagging concentration it demanded, was obvious from this. The holds available on the rocks were so small and precarious that Maon and Rajendra had preferred their jungle shoes to climbing boots for their second day's attack on the Face. I wasn't at all happy when I learnt of this. To my mind wearing jungle shoes was inviting frostbite should the weather turn bad; it was a reckless trade-off for obtaining surer footholds. Luckily they had had perfect weather that day and I forbade this practice for future.

They were lucky with the weather but the NW Face of Kamet showed its difficulty in another way. Contrary to our plan of each rope putting in three days' work, the Face had reduced Maon's team to exhaustion in only two. Their arm muscles aching and their legs wobbly, Maon's team was clearly in no shape to muster the thrust required to come to grips with the rockwall that barred the way ahead. Wisely, Suraj decided to send them down to Base Camp the next day, and press Kura Ram's rope into the breach. Simultaneously, he radioed Camp I and asked Sambial to bring his team up a day ahead of schedule. The

weather had held well so far and Suraj was anxious not to lose any clear days. Despite the unforeseen situation of Maon's team having to withdraw a day sooner than planned, Suraj felt satisfied with the progress they had achieved — about 1000 feet of height gained on the NW Face of Kamet, and the highpoint of the endeavour had crossed 20,000 feet.

The next day — 8 June — Kura's team moved up from Camp II to Camp III, reaching the latter at 11.00 a.m. Around noon dark clouds gathered overhead and a little later a full scale blizzard started. Strong, cold winds blew in through the mouth of the closed valley where Camp III was located. Roaring in past the flank of Mukut Parbat, they whipped out of the valley along the NW Face of Kamet. It was the first day of really bad weather we had so far encountered on the mountain and it brought home to us that the closed valley became a wind vortex under such conditions, and Camp III an uncomfortable place to be in. But we weren't much perturbed by the blizzard yet; the higher regions of the Himalayan giants often exhibit bad weather in the afternoons.

Happily, 9 June dawned clear and Kura's rope took on the Face. The nimble and sure-footed Dan Singh was in the lead, Kura in the middle — as mature and sensible a middle as anyone could wish for — and the hardy Abhai brought up the rear with a 10 kg backpack containing their gear and a hot drink. As they climbed the avalanche cone, this team fixed ropes. Maon's team had not experienced much difficulty in cramponing up this well-packed slope but Kura immediately saw that heavily laden ferries would need the security and support that a handrail of rope gives. After the cone they followed the route made by the earlier team; a zigzag over rock, ice and *verglas*. It was a tricky pitch and they were happy to be able to jumal up the three rope-lengths fixed by Maon, Lakpa and Rajendra. An hour and a half later they crossed the 20,000-foot mark and hit the high point reached by the earlier rope. Immediately, their progress slowed down. Now they were moving one at a time, alternately over rock and ice. The Face offered very few secure footholds, and artificial ones had to be continuously created. Occasionally they found cracks for rock pitons but most of the time Dan Singh had to make small holds with his ice axe, and then screw in, or hammer in, ice pitons. As he stretched ahead of his companions, the rope around Dan Singh's waist would start to drag heavily behind him as it snaked over and around the obstacles he had negotiated until it grew tight enough to threaten to topple



him off his precarious balance and force him to halt in a secure stance. It would then be Dan Singh's turn to belay as Kura advanced to the former's position, threading a fixed rope as he came along, so that Abhai could then jumpr up to his companions. Then Dan Singh would be off again, feeling for holds or cutting them in the ice, unclipping a piton from the karabiner, hammering it in, testing it for its loadtaking strength, and satisfied, climb higher. That day Kura's team fixed 600 feet of rope, gaining a further 300 feet of height on the mountain. From their high point of that day they had only to look up to see the problem of the rockwall starting down at them.

Jamming their crampons against the ice and held on by the rope fixed to their harnesses, Kura Ram and Dan Singh leaned outwards from the Face, and took a long hard look at the rockwall above. They were below its right edge. Along that edge a narrow chimney snaked upwards but that was clearly out. Too exposed to falling stones. Almost perpendicular to the chimney, and forming its right hand wall, the Face shimmered upwards in transparent dizziness; a thin layer of clear frozen water plastered onto the granite underneath. *Verglas*. Above which, about 1500 feet above, the massive, blue underside of the central hanging glacier. They had to keep left now, they knew. Already they were at the very edge of the line we had reckoned to be safe from avalanche risk. A route from the right would be hazardous though the chimney looked climbable. Would they be able to climb the rockwall from its left? A large rock a little above them could offer a secure belay for the traverse across the 70° slope below the rockwall; but was there a feasible route after that? 'We'll see tomorrow,' Kura said finally and they slid back over the fixed ropes, descending carefully, testing out how the rope held their weight, driving in an extra piton or two at places until they were happy with their handiwork of the day.

By the middle of the afternoon Kura Ram's party was safely tucked into their sleeping bags. Outside, the weather had turned an implacable grey and snow fell from an unbroken dark sky. There was deceptively little wind but already at least three inches of snow had fallen in an hour and, soundless, it continued to do so. Sambial's rope had led a ferry up from Camp II and had hung around at Camp III after lunch talking to the trio which had just returned from the Face. 'You'd better be off now, bboys,' Suraj advised them around 3.00 p.m. 'I don't like the look of things outside.'

'Doc had planned to shift Camp II to the centre of the glacier, so we'll have to make a fresh route down today,' Sambial informed the Deputy Leader.

'Well, be careful,' Suraj called after them as Sambial's rope set off.

The earlier route between Camp II and Camp III had struck close to the West Ridge, keeping just clear of the ice blocks that marked the reach of avalanches coming off the mountain. Now Sambial, Laxman, Pratap and Patil took a line down the middle of the closed valley. In the enveloping gloom, they gradually drifted a little more to the right. The freshly fallen snow muffled their footfalls, and Pratap's cry. In the blurred and hazy shroud of that afternoon, it took the others just that extra instant longer to snap to alertness. Sambial whirled around, and his eyes locked into Laxman's surprised face. Pratap had disappeared from between them! And where he should have been, there was now the ragged opening of a crevasse. Sambial, Laxman and Patil cautiously advanced forward from either side of the fissure and then, kneeling on its edges, they peered down.

The crevasse was a blue ice cavern, first narrowing a little and then flaring into a larger hollow about seventy five feet deep. Pratap dangled about six feet below the crevasse lip caught in its narrow neck; the metal frame of his rucksack gouged into one wall and his chest pressed tight against the other. To Sambial, Pratap appeared still considerably

stunned, not able to think as he looked at his feet flailing in the air, and the frightening chasm below them.

Capt Sambial is a very level-headed, phlegmatic individual. Now his coolness proved tailor-made for the situation. The first thing to do was to calm Pratap down. 'Don't worry, we'll get you out,' he called down very levelly. 'You'll be fine. Just take it easy. And use your ice axe, that'll help.'

Sambial's soothing, sensible voice helped Pratap slowly gain control over his fear. Of course, the danger was still just a slip away but he felt he could get out of it. In his momentary panic Pratap had even forgotten to hammer his ice axe into the ice wall to prevent himself from falling into the depths below. Now he sunk the pick into the ice with a firm stroke and pushing against the wall he faced, he levered himself upwards. In less than ten minutes he had wriggled up to the top and was hauled clear of the edge of the crevasse. Safe, Pratap flopped flat on the snow, limp and exhausted by the close call. Suraj had by then arrived upon the scene and now decided to accompany Sambial's team to Camp II. It would save him anxiety and after this incident he felt he would personally like to select the new route to the re-sited Camp II. And less than an hour later he was yanking vigorously at the small tent where Gautam and Kapil lay cozily in their sleeping bags.

Down in Base Camp too it turned out to be an eventful day. I had just returned after my morning duty from 'across the field' — the 300-yard pebbly expanse upto the Arwa Nullah curving into the Ghasoli valley — and was brushing my teeth when my personal helper Kalyan Singh rushed upto me in great excitement shouting, 'Saheb, *Bagh, bagh.*'

The Base Camp wore a peaceful, sunny look — even tranquil — and it took me a moment to comprehend that Kalyan Singh may be referring to some signs of a snow leopard; that very rare, very elusive cat of the high mountains. It had snowed during the night and about half-an-inch of fresh snow still lay on the ground, but melting rapidly under the hot sun.

Leaving my ablutions half done, I grabbed my camera from the tent and, sure enough, there were clear impressions of a large animal by our hen coop, kitchen tent, and around the stores. We put some turmeric in the two-and-half to three-inch diameter pugmarks, and then with the indentations standing in bold yellow relief in the snow, I took a large number of pictures. We then filled up one of the clearer impressions with wet dough and let it dry under the hot sun. When we removed it hours later we had a perfect cast of the pugmarks. A line of smaller marks ran alongside and I think that possibly the snow leopard was accompanied by its cub. I was delighted that I had finally obtained a spoor of this cat after a quarter of a century of roaming around in the high mountains.

On 10 June, Kura Ram's team set out earlier despite the overcast sky. They left camp at 7.30 a.m. in very cold weather. The fixed ropes had to be cleared of snow all the way and it was 9.30 a.m. when they reached their previous high-point. They made a perfunctory recon of the chimney to the right of the rockwall but didn't like it any better than they had the day before. So Dan Singh led off the traverse to the left and Kura joined him at his stance below the left-hand edge of the rockwall. It was there, as Dan Singh set off for his magnificent lead over the rockwall, that Suraj espied them on his way back to Camp III.

Later that evening Suraj went across to the big Arctic Medium tent which served both as kitchen and sleeping quarters for the climbing rope. In the dim interior of the tent, the trio of Kura Ram, Dan Singh and Abhai Singh lay silently huddled in their sleeping bags, looking completely done in. Dan Singh's eyes still shone from the adrenalin of his superb effort but none of them had been able to eat anything much after their return. This worried Suraj. How would they recover their strength unless they ate. 'No appetite, sir,' Kura

murmured. 'It was a very tough day. For hours there was no place to even sit for a little rest. Our arm muscles are like jelly.'

They offered to go up again the next day but it was obvious that they were in no shape to make any significant headway if they did. 'No, you have done a wonderful job in overcoming the rockwall today. I think it is best that you went down to Base Camp tomorrow and rested there for a few days. We'll need you for another round then.'

Our plans were already coming unstuck. First Maon's rope, and now Kura's had been unable to sustain our advance on the NW Face for more than two consecutive days each, and not three as we had reckoned. Sambial's rope was scheduled to reach Camp III the next day, and take on the climb the day after. So 11 June was going to be wasted, but Suraj was not too worried about that at this stage. The rockwall had been overcome, so that evened things out a bit, he reckoned.

11 June dawned in blizzard conditions. The last few days the weather had been uncertain during the afternoons but it would normally clear up during the nights, and mornings were fine. But this pattern had now changed. Kura, Dan Singh and Abhai set out for Camp II in flying snow, leaving Suraj and Kami huddled in their tents at Camp III. As the storm raged, it brought a lull to our activities on the mountain. Sambial rightly decided to wait for the weather to clear before taking his rope up. Camp I also battened itself in, and at Base Camp we lounged around in our more comfortable quarters, reading and chatting. My friend, N.S. Thapa, had arrived at Base Camp the previous day.

It has never ceased to amaze me how the Himalayas extend their fascination to all manners of people, irrespective of sex, age or occupation, my friend NS Thapa is an archetypal example of this. A film-maker by profession, Thapa rose to the highest rung of Films Division of India. It is hardly a coincidence that Film Division's repertoire of films about mountains and mountaineering grew over the years as it did; it did so in step with Thapa's rise to the top of that organisation.

I first came in contact with Thapa when he came to Darjeeling to shoot some footage to flesh out the film on the Indian Everest Expedition of 1965. I was deputy leader of that expedition, and as Principal of Himalayan Mountaineering Institute, Darjeeling, it was my good fortune to be his host and guide. The Everest film went on to win first prize among sports documentaries and brought laurels to its director, N S Thapa. Our friendship grew as Thapa made films about some of my other expeditions — Kanchenjunga (1977), Trisul (1976), The 3rd Pole (1979 & 1981), etc. *Himalayan Endeavour*, *Himalayan Mountaineering Institute*, *Himalayan Environment*, *Guts and Dedication* are some of the other mountain-related films he has made. Over the years I came to appreciate his valuable contribution to Indian mountaineering, as well as to creating a consciousness of the Himalayas. His films showed our climbs to millions all over the country, and brought home to these viewers the magic and magnificence of these mountains and their meaning to Indian life.

And now here he was, sixty and retired from Films Division, yet enthusiastic as ever, shooting footage for a film about our expedition. Instead of sitting back on his laurels, or hankering for material comfort, he was cheerfully enduring the various discomforts there are at nearly 14,000 feet. It was heart-warming.

Late in the morning there was an urgent radio call from Camp II. The Eastern Axis had a serious casualty. Bharat Singh was diagnosed as having pulmonary oedema, and not being able to raise Joshimath themselves, they had finally got through to Camp II on this Axis. In turn, we now radioed their request for a helicopter evacuation. In the afternoon I wondered

if the chopper could have landed in the poor weather conditions. The skies remained unfriendly, and snow fell steadily. The news about Bharat Singh weighed me down. 'I'm told that he was the toughest man in the Eastern Team. On this side too (Western Axis), the toughest member had to be evacuated due to pulmonary oedema.

'I suppose young people, full of energy, putting in too much effort without getting sufficiently acclimatised, trying to do their best don't realize their limits . . .

'We have requested for a chopper fitted with skis so that it may be able to land at Camp I, where Bharat Singh would be brought down by 5.00 p.m. I am apprehensive. If the chopper doesn't get there soon . . . We are all praying he has been evacuated for one day's delay in such conditions can mean the difference between life and death.'

Later there was some excitement when Kura Ram's rope reached Ghastoli and we eagerly heard the story of their encounter with Kamet's NW Face. Kura reckoned they had reached a point between 20,500 and 21,00 feet. Also, they seemed quite confident of our chances.

By the morning of 12 June there was about a foot of fresh snow at Camp III, and no sign of the sun. Obviously the fixed rope would now be iced up, surmised Suraj. It would take a couple of days of sun before it would be usable for jumars. Also, some time would have to be given to the fresh snow to avalanche off the Face when the sun did appear. All in all, the situation at Camp III was cheerless. There seemed no point in staying there so Suraj and Kami quickly secured the tent flaps and headed downwards. Camp II was left in the charge of a skeleton crew, and Sambial's and Agarwal's ropes were brought down to Camp I to await clear weather. Suraj himself, along with Gautam and Kami, headed for the Base Camp. These three had been in the higher camps longer than all others and seized this opportunity for a rest in the more hospitable environs of Ghastoli. A clean, washed sun finally broke through the clouds at about 4.00 p.m. and I rushed up a party to the rock cliffs just behind our tents to fix-rope a 50-foot overhang so that Thapa could get some set-piece shots of rappelling. Balwan and Kura's ropes were modelling for Thapa and I was greatly struck by Lakpa's nimbleness and agility on the rock. Others seemed almost ponderous in comparison. Here was someone who we could certainly use on the NW Face, I thought to myself. Then we spotted Suraj's group on the home stretch to Base Camp and I hurried Thapa through the rest of our session, impatient for a talk with Suraj.

I told him about what I had seen of Lakpa's ability and we decided to put him in Agarwal's rope in place of Jeet Bahadur who was not acclimatizing well. He had been perhaps the most impatient of the Western Axis team to get to the front. When not included in the first rope, he had chafed and fretted. But Gautam had advised him to return to Base Camp — at least temporarily, as he couldn't eat anything at all above Camp I and had begun vomiting at Camp II. Lakpa was thrilled and rushed off next day to join Agarwal and Khushal at in Camp I.

The skies cleared the next day. We played bridge and chatted and filmed some more. I also had a discussion with Suraj and Kura about the climb ahead, about equipment and techniques, and about the time-table for the next few days. More bridge that evening and then a magnificent meal as Kami and the cook combined their culinary skills.

On 14 June, I left for the Eastern Axis. A chopper brought me to Joshimath and it was a different world. Civilization. Vehicles. Lots of people. Warm sun. Trees. Flowers. Hot bath. Hot lunch on a table. And then a soft foam mattress and clean sheets for an afternoon nap in a beautifully decorated room. All this in the middle of expedition!

But soft mattress, clean bed and all, I couldn't fall asleep. I was tense. Too tense to sleep. Upon my request, the pilot of the chopper had taken me for another look at Kamet's NW

Face before returning to Joshimath. It had left me unsettled, certainly far too unsettled for a carefree afternoon nap. I reached for my dictaphone, and recorded:

'My mind is on the mountain. On that Face; that grim Face of Kamet I've just seen. The blue ice of the hanging glaciers about to fall down. There's just a little snow on that entire Face to give it the cold and glassy look — the cold and forbidding look — which mountaineers shudder at. My mind goes to the people trying to climb the Face, like spiders foraying right and left, constantly bombarded by falling stones.

'The earlier feat of Dan Singh . . . first getting on to Kura's shoulder, then climbing by the friction of his own body . . . fantastic achievement at that height. Look at his guts; and stamina, risk-taking ability and what's more, he's got that touch, the touch of a natural rock and ice climber.

'The hanging glacier, once we reach that, seems to be so long and so steep . . . I think we're going to have a problem there too (even after we reach the shelf of the hanging glacier) . . . it isn't going to be as easy as everybody seems to think.

'We must find a camp site around 21,000 feet, after that Camp V on the West Ridge between, 23,000 and 24,000 feet. On the Ridge . . . I couldn't see any deep cut which could stop us, once there. But should anybody get sick, impossible to return to Camp III . . . one on the ridge, we have to get to the top and descend on the Eastern side.

'The more I think of the route ahead, the more I feel scared . . .'

10

EASTERN AXIS

Abi GAMIN

At Camp VI, Thapa's summit party endured a very windy night. The tent wall flapped and rattled continuously. 'I lay awake the whole night,' recorded Thapa. 'My plan had been to start very early, around 3.00 a.m., but a strong wind blew from the north raising clouds of powder snow and to start in such conditions was very risky.'

Thapa was not the only person lying awake that night. Down at Camp III, three times I ventured out from my tent in the darkness and everytime there was hail falling. I could imagine that conditions at the higher camps would be much worse. After lying awake most of the night, I was able to sleep a little and when I rose in the morning, the weather had improved a bit.

As the wind finally dropped off, Thapa, R K and Balwant set off for the summit of Kamet at 4.30 a.m. on 24 June. The skies were clearing but the the bad weather of the previous few days made the conditions very difficult. There was a great deal of fresh snow on the mountain, 'never less than knee deep'. The three of them took turns at breaking trail. With legs sinking deep in snow, the leading climber had to virtually lie down in the snow and clear the slope ahead with an arm action akin to breast stroke swimming. As Thapa put it, 'We were not walking, but literally swimming in the snow.'

Thus, though weather remained clear till noon, their progress was very slow. After eight hours of climbing they had reached around 25,000 feet; the summit was still 500 feet above. They were weary and now the weather again packed up on them. Judging by their earlier rate of progress, the ascent to the peak would have taken them at least another four to five hours. Did they have the time — and the energy — left to get to the top and then descend safely down to their camp in darkness and bad weather. Thapa wisely decided to call off their attempt. 'I decided to cache all the equipment we were carrying — ropes, pitons etc. — and to turn back.'

Coming down was equally difficult for the tired and disconsolate group. Also, they were thinking about what to do next. 'I couldn't decide whether to try for the summit the next day or fall back to Camp III to recoup,' admitted Thapa. 'After a lot of deliberation I decided to stay on at Camp VI and make another attempt the next day, or on the 26th.'

That night again the strong winds — and the height they were at — prevented them from getting much sleep. The wind and snow eased only around 7.00 a.m. on the morning of 25 June, much too late for them to think of making an attempt that day. Thapa had no option but to put it off, hoping that 26th would offer them a better chance. Meanwhile, the lower camps had to be informed of their change of plans. Accordingly, Thapa decided to send Soban Singh down to Camp III. The latter was also not feeling too well at Camp VI and it seemed a wise thing to do to send him lower. But there was no one else who could accompany him and it was a difficult decision to send Soban down alone. However, the weather was clear, and Camp V was only about an hour and a half away.

Most of the route to the lower camp was visible from Camp VI and Thapa took comfort in the fact that he could shout down and guide Soban Singh along the right track. It worked for a while and the latter safely reached Meade's Col. Then the weather abruptly changed. 'Suddenly we had white-out conditions. Black clouds drifted in from the south, and this chap completely vanished from my sight,' worried Thapa. The rising wind also made their voice communication less and less intelligible.

'When he vanished in the fog, I was quite worried,' explained Thapa. I could hear him shout "I can't see anything. I can't proceed further" but for him to have climbed back to Camp VI was out of the question. I shouted back to him to proceed to Camp V.'

The dismal weather lasted through the night, and till 9.00 a.m. on 26 June, wrecking all plans Thapa had entertained for a summit bid that day. The continuing bad weather had obviously taken a toll of their morale as they had been pinned to their uncomfortable camp. Now Thapa decided to wait out the bad weather spell at the more comfortable Camp III. Quickly they packed their personal gear, and after securely closing the two tents, set off for Camp V. Hardly had they started when the wind picked up again, driving fine powdery snow into their faces. Underfoot, the freshly fallen snow would also give way and they had to break fresh trail all the way to Camp V which they reached at 2.00 p.m. The conditions had slowed down the otherwise one and a half hour descent to a five-hour one. After brewing a hot drink they trudged on to Camp IV, reaching there quite exhausted and dehydrated. Fortunately Dan Singh was there at Camp IV and he melted them some snow to drink and also gave them some biscuits. The rest, water and food gave them fresh heart. The weather too cleared a little and so their descent to Camp III was somewhat easier.

Our first effort on Kamet had been turned back quite decisively. On 26 June, the summiters had been pushed back to 20,500 feet. The weather remained uncertain, and for all we knew the monsoon had set in and we would not be afforded another chance. Though we didn't know it yet, the daring bid by a five-men group of the Western Team was at that very moment pinned high on the fearsome NW Face, exposed to the furious weather without a tent.

However, the morale of Thapa's team was lifted when at Camp III they learnt that Bakshi and Kabiraj succeeded in climbing Abi Gamin on 24 June. It was a fine effort under quite adverse conditions and is best described in Bakshi's own words:

'Prior to our leaving for Joshimath, I was sent to Delhi and attached to the Films Division in order to learn how to operate a movie camera. Films Division had decided to make a documentary on our expedition and I was made the cameraman for the Eastern Axis. This was the primary reason why Col Kumar told me that he would like me to climb Abi Gamin while another team under Capt Thapa climbed Kamet. His idea was that I film Capt Thapa's team climbing Kamet from the slopes of Abi Gamin. At first I was rather reluctant to give up my chance of scaling Kamet, and I told him so. But he persisted and said that it was in the interests of the expedition, and of Kumaon Regiment, that I climb Abi Gamin and help make a good film. He added that if I were fit enough after the Abi Gamin climb, I could always try Kamet with the ski team which he planned to send after the ascent by Capt Thapa's team. It did occur to me then that climbing the mighty Kamet after scaling Abi Gamin was a tall order. I realised that no one had earlier climbed both Kamet and Abi Gamin in one expedition. Little did I know that this arrangement would ultimately turn out to be a blessing in disguise.

'We spent the evening of 23 June cooking food. At that altitude appetite lessens considerably and even though one is hungry one doesn't feel like eating much. The plan was that Kabiraj and I would leave camp the next morning at around 7.00 a.m., giving the

Kamet team a good start over us, as I wanted to reach the top of Abi Gamin almost at the same time as Capt Thapa's team reached the summit of Kamet. Dan Singh was glad that he would get a day's respite. I had decided that as he was well enough he would go down with us next day. He could help carry some load down to Camp III in case a member wasn't feeling too well. An extra hand at that height is always an asset. This was almost clairvoyant as on the 25th I did need him to help take up Kabiraj safely down to Camp III. That night before going to sleep I took out the photograph of Guru Nanak and prayed earnestly for success.'

'The morning of 24 June was a beautiful, clear one and both Kabiraj and I had slept well. By 6.45 a.m. we came out of the tent after filling our flasks with hot water and drinking some Bournvita. I told Kabiraj that we would carry just one rucksack which would contain a rope, two pitons, a hammer and my Paillard Bolex movie camera. By now I had become quite fond of it. We looked up and saw that Capt Thapa's team had climbed about 200 feet from Camp VI and were making slow but steady progress. I felt quite confident that both our teams would make it to our assigned goals. Thus, Kabiraj and I started off feeling quite confident. He was carrying the rucksack and I was leading the way, an arrangement he was happy with.

Col Kumar had told me before I left Camp III that instead of going straight for the slopes of Abi Gamin towards the south-east, I should follow a circuitous route, which meant I was to climb to Meade's Col almost till the centre of the Col and then turn east and climb Abi Gamin with our backs towards Kamet. The idea behind this was that if the weather did not play truant then Capt Thapa's team could follow our tracks, once they came down to Meade's Col after scaling Kamet. I had agreed to this as it would really help any member of Capt Thapa's team who wanted to climb Abi Gamin as well. This diversion added atleast three hours to the time required to climb Abi Gamin from where Camp V was located.

'We took almost an hour-and-a-half to reach the middle of Meade's Col. In between, I stopped twice to take shots of the peaks of Nanda Devi Sanctuary. Most prominent among



Kamet, Meade's Col and Abi Gamin

them were Nanda Devi in its symmetrical splendour, Kalanka, the imposing Changabang and some others which I couldn't recognize. I also tried to explain the working of the camera to Kabiraj but he was quite content to rest while I operated the camera. I think it was these short rests, and the resulting inactivity, which caused his fingers to go numb and turn blue atop Abi Gamin.

'As we neared the actual slopes of Abi Gamin, the snow of Meade's Col started giving way to ice. The slope was gentle at first, between 25 and 30 degrees, but it became steeper towards the top. Actually if we had zigzagged the going would have been much easier but I couldn't afford to do that as Kabiraj was showing signs of tiring. I had already taken the rucksack from him when we started climbing the slopes of Abi Gamin. He had carried it for almost three hours and the fatigue was showing. Around 10.00 a.m. we stopped for a rest and I took some shots of the Kamet team. I could now clearly see the Gurla Mandhata group of mountains towards the east as they rose majestically to almost 22,000 feet from an area which is generally flat all around.

'At 10.30 a.m. we started climbing again. I anchored the rope and left it there to reduce the load and decided to put on my crampons. The going now became difficult as we encountered ice and Kabiraj would often slip. We then innovated a novel way of climbing. Kabiraj would dig in his ice-axe two or three feet ahead of him and put his left foot against it. I would then thrust my ice axe in the slope just below his right foot and thus firmly anchored we would take another step up. Though the going was slow we didn't have too many problems as Kabiraj was determined to make it, and once you have the will and, provided God is with you, you are bound to succeed.

'Near the summit of Abi Gamin there are rocks for about twenty to thirty feet which have to be negotiated very carefully. After the rocks we rested a bit and then climbed the remaining thirty feet of ice to the summit. I was immensely happy. We had made it to the top at 1.30 p.m. after almost six hours and forty five minutes. Around 1.00 p.m., clouds had started coming over Abi Gamin from the Tibetan side and all around us the weather was now packing up. I took my last shots of the Kamet team from the rocks below the summit of Abi Gamin. They were then about 600 feet short on the summit ridge. I prayed and hoped they would make it. Kabiraj was besides himself with joy and happiness was writ large on his boyish face. But when I told him to hold the flags which we had taken up, I was shocked to see that his fingers had gone almost blue at the tips. He too then realised that holding his ice-axe was becoming increasingly difficult.

'I took a hurried shot as he held aloft the flags of India, Chief of the Army Staff, the Central Command, and the Kumaon Regiment. I then took a shot of the Raikana Glacier which is on the other side of Abi Gamin, as proof of our ascent. There was no point trying to photograph Tibet from there as the weather had become very bad. I hoped that the shot of the Raikana Glacier would come out all right. We started down immediately as Kabi's fingers were causing both of us a lot of worry. On the rocks I decided to take off my crampons to enable me to go down faster, a wrong move as I soon found to my cost. I had already given my feather gloves to Kabiraj as I had another dry pair. No sooner had I taken the first step after removing my crampons than I slipped and fell about 400 feet before coming to a halt very near the end of the slope. I was a bit dazed as I had hit my back on a rock. When I gathered myself I saw Kabiraj waving worriedly. I waved back to tell him I was alright. My rucksack with the camera was about a hundred feet above me. Of the ice axe there was no trace. I was in no position to go up and signalled Kabiraj to pick up the rucksack as he came down. Kabiraj understood but he had scarcely come descended about 50 feet when he too slipped and fell, coming to a stop of few feet away from me. The rucksack was still staring down at us. There was no alternative but to go up. I retraced my

steps, this time with crampons, and climbed slowly and painfully to where it lay. After picking up the rucksack, I slid down to Kabiraj. We took about an hour-and-a-half to get down to Camp V. We were overjoyed to see the sturdy Dan Singh, and the tea so thoughtfully made for us.

Dan Singh and I then got down to rubbing Kabi's hands as they looked pretty bad. After continuous rubbing for about three hours, we found some colour returning to his fingers. As I was quite exhausted it was left to Dan Singh to keep Kabi's fingers warm. Twice during the night Kabi complained of sharp pain in his fingers, both times Dan Singh and I, each rubbing one of his hands, managed to lessen the pain.

'We were in for another rude shock when Kabiraj got up in the morning and told us that he couldn't see very well. It was then that we noticed his eyes were watery, and occasionally tears would roll down his cheeks. I was quite sure it was a case of snow blindness. Though it isn't all that serious an ailment, it does cause problems in that the person affected can't see too well. Kabi had already lost the use of his fingers, temporarily at least, and now on top of that he had snow blindness. This had probably happened because the previous day he kept taking off his goggles whenever it became cloudy, not realizing that infra-red and ultra-violet rays are unaffected by clouds and keep getting reflected off the snow. That morning the weather was fine above Camp IV but in the valley we could see clouds. I waited till 10.00 a.m. for some kind of activity from Camp VI, but all I could see were three or four figures huddled around their tent, none of them moving up or down. We had a route marker with us and tried to attract their attention but to no avail. I was not sure whether they had reached the summit. At 10.30 a.m. we roped up, with Kabiraj in the middle, and started the descent to Camp III. At 11.00 a.m., before we had reached the ice fall, the weather became very bad as the clouds cover in the valley rose sharply. Soon, complete white-out conditions overtook us.

'I was very scared, not only because of the chances of losing our way and the danger of crevasses but mainly because bad weather would slow down our progress, which meant we had to stay out longer and this would needlessly expose poor Kabi's fingers to the unrelenting cold and which might cause frostbite to set in. We kept moving at a snail's pace, feeling every inch of the snow surface ahead of us almost like blind men learning to walk with a cane. Since both Kabiraj and I had lost our ice-axes while somersaulting down the slopes of Abi Gamin, we found the going very tough and hazardous, especially when we came to a steep ice slope where fresh snow had covered the steps which had been cut there. We just slid down trusting in God, hoping we would not continue down and take a shortcut to Camp II by free-falling more than 2000 feet to the East Kamet Glacier. As luck would have it we were alive and in one piece when we finally sighted Camp IV at 4.10 p.m. It took us almost six hours to cover a distance which would normally have taken only an hour.

Rajpal, Lalit Mohan and Subhash were there and gave us food and water. We had not had anything for nearly twenty-four hours. We started off for Camp III at 4.30 p.m. after being satisfied that Kabi's fingers were behaving. His eyesight too was a lot better and by 7.00 p.m. we were back to a tumultuous welcome in Camp III. The doctor and the Sherpa cook Tshering were there to comfort us. Kabi immediately received the doctor's attention. Water was boiled and his fingers treated till the normal colour was almost restored. The doctor decided to send him down the next day and to Bareilly, via Joshimath. I was glad that his fingers had been saved, and duly thanked God and the doctor. Dr Chengappa had always been very cheerful and remained a pillar of strength for all of us. His wit and humour went a long way in lessening tension. He was more a climbing member than a doctor. He would ferry loads as often as we did and was very fit till the end. It goes to his credit that he did carry upto Camp V.'

11

WESTERN AXIS

THE LONG, Cold Night

I had left Western Camp on 14 June, and flying out to Joshimath in a chopper had persuaded the pilot to take me for another look at the NW Face of Kamet. Familiarity did nothing to diminish its tremendous impact. 'The more I think of the route ahead the more I feel scared...' I had recorded later that day at Joshimath. It was true that Dan Singh, Kura Ram and Abhai had overcome the first rockwall but there were plenty of challenges ahead. Plenty.

The first of these lay in finding a site for Camp IV. Camp III, on the floor of the closed valley, was at a height of 19,200 feet. Dan Singh's high-point above the first rockwall was just short of 21,000 feet—at least a 5-hour climb from Camp III for lightly-laden climbers despite the fixed-rope now in place. Clearly, another camp was now needed. Thus far though, Kura Ram's rope had not been able to locate possible site. 'Not even a ledge' he had told me. 'The Face is too steep.'

Then I shifted to the Eastern Axis. Being away from the scene heightened my anxiety and the sporadic radio contact between the two axes aggravated the suspense about the progress of Suraj's boys. On 18 June came a cryptic message from them: '20 feet below plain ice'. I took this to mean to that they had very nearly hit the glacier. Buoyed, I recorded, 'Yesterday the chances were 30% but today I would say they are 40%.' The next day I was able to speak to Capt Sambial at Camp II on the Western Axis. And my lifting spirits were badly deflated. Sammy came on the line and gave me the dope. He said that the route had been made for quite a distance but Camp IV had not yet been established. Also, there were further casualties. Laxman Singh had contracted chillblain, Balwan again had problems with altitude at Camp III and had been sent down, and Maon lay snowblind at Camp III. Not at all a rosy picture.

While I was obviously dismayed at the depletion of the Western Team, what bothered me even more was that no site had been found for Camp IV. With every foot of progress, the team's chances were actually diminishing because of the increasing distance from Camp III. If and when a site was found, it would be a harrowing carry to sufficiently stock Camp IV for the summit push. Three days went by before the next communication came through, unhelpfully vague: 'Dalal's team has reached a height of 23,000 feet'. This was on 22 June, and I was back at the Eastern Base Camp after going up to Camp III. The Western effort had me greatly worried and I had come down to Base resolved to switch back to the Western Axis to see for myself how things were. I was most apprehensive lest any desperate effort lead to disaster. I reasoned with myself that Suraj was too mature and level-headed to allow that but, finally, it was my responsibility as Leader to ensure that correct decisions were made and the safety of the members placed above every other consideration.

I was fretting with anxiety to get back to the Western Axis but now the chopper let me down. For some reason we could not arrange a flight. The only other way was to walk down



The optimistic Western Team at base camp prior to the summit attempt.

to Malari, drive to Joshimath and then to Mana, and then walk again to the Western Base Camp at Ghastoli — a total of at least four days. And then another two or three days to Camp III, the action station on the Western Axis. This would imply that I might well be caught in between the two Base Camps even as the summit attempt got underway; out of touch, and hopelessly away from any effective action. I was stuck on the Eastern Axis, and left to follow the gruelling effort on the other side as best as I could through radio contact.

The strange ways of the weather god added to my apprehensions. Traditionally, Kamet is held to enjoy relatively good climbing weather. Its situations on the Zaskar Range is believed to shelter it from much of the precipitation that occurs and spends itself on the high peaks of the Great Himalayan Range which is more southerly. Well, it didn't seem true this year. As the effort on the Western Axis drew into its critical stretch, the weather conditions I logged daily made a worrying pattern.

17 June: Weather is bad again. It is 5.00 p.m. and we have afternoon showers of sleet at Camp II.

'25 June: It is 1.00 p.m. The weather was very bad last night with six inches of snowfall at the Base Camp. Yesterday was very bad too.

'26 June: 9.30 a.m. The early morning was clear. Then the weather changed. Absolutely black, threatening clouds are coming from the Great Himalayan Range.

'27 June: 6.30 a.m. Absolutely shocked to see that it is snowing heavily.'

We managed to raise Camp II on the Western Axis, and got a frightful shock. Five climbers led by Dalal had left Camp III for an all-out attempt for the summit on 26 June. They had been visible till well in the afternoon. Then, as the sun set, clouds and snow took over, enveloping the NW Face and the five climbers. There was nothing else to add. Had they survived the night? Had they found a camp-site? No one knew. With fear clutching at my belly, I looked at the very uncompromising skies which had descended upon our mountain... but then we have gone ahead of our story.

From Capt Suraj Dalal's diary of 15 June

'Self and Kura Ram's rope left Base Camp for Camp III early in the morning. Reached Camp I at about 0900 hours. Had breakfast and left for Camp II. Reached Camp II at 1200 hours. Had lunch and rested for an hour. Kura Ram's rope stayed back at Camp II but I reached Camp III at about 1600 hours. I travelled a distance of about 18 to 20 kilometres and had ascended from 13,700 feet to 19,200 feet in one day. Felt a little tired but it was quite satisfying to be back in Camp III, the place I belonged at.'

Thus after two days of restive rest at Base Camp, Suraj dashed back to the high camp in an astonishing surge of energy. And he was right in thinking that Camp III was where he must be, for the NW Face of Kamet had now begun to inexorably put on the pressure. 'As I turned into the (closed) valley I saw Capt Sambial's rope coming down. They could not reach the previous high-point (20,500 feet) till where the rope was already fixed. The "green-horns" as this team was nicknamed could not measure up to the tough requirement of the route. This came as a jolt to me. In Sambial I lost a useful member of the team, Pratap was retained as a support member at Camp III,' Suraj Dalal, loquacious as always.

Thus this rope had disintegrated in a day, and still there was no progress beyond Dan Singh's high-point of 10 June. 'Lakpa, Agarwal and Khushal left Camp III on the morning of 16 June at 0650 hours. At about 1000 hours, I noticed that their progress was held up. The team had not even reached the rockwall, and for the next three hours it made no movement, upward or downward. I got apprehensive about their well-being,' recorded Suraj.

Lakpa eventually shepherded the team down the avalanche cone and back to Camp III, and narrated that they had got stuck because Agarwal's crampons had come off his boots. Moreover, for all their enthusiasm, Agarwal and Khushal had been going poorly, their lack of experience of technical climbing further slowing down progress. Lakpa was, of course, very fit and raring to go the next day but the carefully assembled rope was finished as a team.

The next day — 17 June — Sambial, Agarwal and Khushal descended to Camp II to take over support roles there. And Lakpa and Laxman, the only two remaining climbers out of the six who had originally formed our third and fourth ropes, renewed our challenge.

They left Camp III at 6.00 a.m. and made it to the previous high-point around 11.00 a.m. After the rockwall there rose an ice slope of about 500 feet, climbing straight up at an angle of 75°. The crampons bit in well on that surface and the pair climbed it steadily. Above the ice slope they could see another rock-wall, and viewing it from Camp III we had hoped for a camp site at its base. Hopefully, Lakpa and Laxman gained the upper edge of the ice-field, and inched towards large boulders which hid the final approach to rockwall-2. Disappointment awaited them there. There was no easing of the slope between that boulder and the rockwall; the Face continued its unbroken rise without even a hint of relenting. There could be no hope at all of a camp there. After a full week's impasse we had made some progress and Lakpa and Laxman had that day undoubtedly breached the 21,000-foot mark. Yet the day was ending disappointingly. There was further misfortune in store. By the time two climbers returned to Camp III, Laxman had developed unmistakable signs of chill blain on the big toes of both his feet, and some of his fingers also appeared affected. There was no option but to rush him down the mountain the next day. Disconsolate, Suraj recorded in his diary that night: 'One more useful member of the team lost. Already, Jeet Bahadur was out. Sambial was out. Pratap was out. Balwan was out. Agarwal was out. Khushal was out. L Nk Man Singh, who I thought was a tough one, was out. L Nk Dalip and Ram Singh had reached their altitude ceiling and Camp III. In all, ten members were out of the picture. Very discouraging.'

On 18 June the two fit members of the first rope, Maon and Rajendra, were pushed into the breach. Five hours of jumaring brought them to the boulder reached the previous day by Lakpa and Laxman. From there they pushed up the route to the base of rockwall-2. It rose vertically — occasionally in an overhang — for 150 feet. Maon and Rajendra realised that they were not up to this major climbing challenge after six hours of ascent and turned back. It took them another three hours to descend to the camp, where they landed up with snow-blindness. They were confined to their tent . . . until such time they could go down to Base Camp. Another blow . . . in all twelve members are out of the reckoning so far.' Everything seemed to be going wrong for Suraj Dalal.

Then, on 19 June, Suraj hit upon a very powerful combination of climbers. He was by now quite desperate to make headway and came up with an inspired choice; Dan Singh and Lakpa. Dan Singh had already shown his mettle and skill in overcoming the first rockwall, and Lakpa too had been going well though the fizzling out of his original rope had robbed him of adequate opportunity of lead-climbing. But Suraj had seen him 'doing monkey tricks on the rocks near Base Camp for Mr Thapa's camera', and now by pairing him with Dan Singh — undoubtedly his champion climber at the moment — Dalal was offering him an opportunity to show his paces.

The pair moved out from Camp III at 5.30 a.m. and their swift, sure progress up the fixed ropes was a tonic after the frustration of the previous few days. 'Dan Singh and Lakpa went up to open the route. They did a marvellous job by ascending the "wall" (rockwall-2) through a treacherous gully of flowing snow over the near-vertical Face which did not offer any holds. My happiness was akin to that of a child who claps at the victory of his hero.' Undoubtedly, that day the two of them put in an exceptional day's climbing. It took them nearly five hours to jumar up the avalanche cone, rockwall-1, then the 500-foot ice slope and to the large boulder near the foot of rockwall-2, the previous highpoint of the team. Rockwall-2 rose over 150 feet in verticals and overhang; nowhere did it soften to an angle of less than 80° steepness. It was a heart-breaking obstacle to encounter after a five-hour ascent. But the pair had made an early start and the weather held. Also, Dan Singh and Lakpa were straining at the leash and were determined to put some life back into our attempt. Equally important, though paired out of necessity Dan Singh and Lakpa immediately turned out to be a superbly matched mountain team. They quickly developed confidence and respect in each other's ability and led and belayed by turns with great compatibility. For any formidable challenge, as the great North-West Face of Kamet unquestionably is, faith in one's partner is an indispensable ingredient in good climbing. It is only such faith that provides the safety anchor, both actual and psychological, without which the real enough dangers of such a climb would become far more lethal and terrifying. And it was such an affinity of attitudes and a matching of skills that enabled Dan Singh and Lakpa to climb and fix-rope rockwall-2 that day in a three-hour bout of exceptional technical climbing. When they turned back for the camp, their success kept them in high spirits and they descended with considerable aplomb despite the long day they had put in. They arrived back at Camp III at 5.00 p.m., nearly twelve hours after their dawn departure. It had been a wonderful day for his team but even so Suraj could put it in proper perspective. 'Place for pitching a tent (for Camp IV) was not found. Team returned exhausted. Every day's progress increases the time needed for the harrowing climb to the new high-point, and time available for the work of opening the route decreases. I thought of moving part of the stuff up the rope to be anchored enroute so that whenever the place for establishing a camp be found some of the stores would already be part way there.'

20 June was a quiet day. 'Rest day for the rope of Dan Singh and Lakpa. No support rope to take charge from them. Maon, who was sick and weak, had also to be sent down. Only Abhai and Kami went up to anchor some stores on the Face.'



*The north-west face
of Kamet; the summit
just clear of the clouds
on the left.*

His lead climbers refreshed after a day's rest. Dalal put on a two-team effort on 21 June. 'Lakpa and Dan Singh left early in the morning to push up the route. Kura Ram and Dalip went up later to replace some karabiners with "loops of rope" as we were falling short of karabiners and good quality pitons. Dalip gave up due to exhaustion and fatigue before rockwall-1 but Kura Ram went ahead and retrieved eight karabiners and some nylon rope, substituting some manila rope at relatively easier pitches.'

Meanwhile, Dan Singh and Lakpa reached the top of rockwall-2 after a six-hour ascent along the fixed ropes. From above rockwall-2, there were two possible routes. The blue hollow

of the central hanging glacier lay to the right, and a few hundred feet above. To reach it would involve a long, ascending traverse over a wide swathe of a frozen 'waterfall' — a thin layer of transparent ice which sheathed the rocks. It was a potentially hazardous stretch, offering dubious purchase for ice-axe, crampon and piton. And even after that tricky traverse, there would remain the problem of surmounting the broken wall of the hanging glacier and get on to the glacier itself. This blue underbelly of highly plastic ice thrust outward into space from the Face and would have to be turned by climbing along the ragged left edge of the glacier. All in all, Dan Singh and Lakpa felt it wouldn't work and turned their attention to the other alternative.

Suraj and others had been studying this route through the binoculars from Camp III. Left of rockwall-2, and separated by a 40-foot ice slope, was another rockwall of almost the same size and steepness as the former. They reckoned the top of this rockwall-3 to be over 22,000 feet. Above this third rockwall was an ice slope of 70° steepness, dotted with rocks and rising 200 to 300 feet. This slope appeared to end at a point above the hanging glacier, but much to its right, from where a tongue of hard snow seemed to lead to the hanging glacier. From the ice slope to the glacier would be a demanding 500-yard traverse but it was safe from avalanches and would get them on to the glacier. All along we had felt that the key to climb lay in getting on to the central hanging glacier. Once on it, the angle of the Face eased a great deal and it seemed that fairly rapid progress could be made on the glacier, or on the rocks above it, to a small snow Col on the West Ridge. It seemed eminently possible to pitch a camp on we got on to the glacier, and the snow-col—which we reckoned to be above 24,000 feet — could also be a camp-site. From the snow-col, it appeared to be a fairly normal ascent to the summit along the West Ridge. My aerial recon had assured me that the portion of the ridge above the snow-col hid no particularly difficult obstacle. The key, then, lay in reaching the glacier with enough strength and logistics for the final push.

On 21 June Dan Singh and Lakpa surmounted and fix-roped half of rockwall-3. It was another magnificent stint of technical climbing but so proficient had these two proved to be that nobody was particularly surprised by their effort. That night Suraj noted in his diary: 'The rope did a marvellous job... still no place or ledge found even for a single tent. Without a camp enroute, too difficult and exacting for these boys to open further route. We cannot continue indefinitely this way. Also worried about their health, as Lakpa and Dan Singh have been working at this altitude for over a week now.'

Had they found a place for Camp IV, many of these problems would have been removed. As it was, the ascent along the fixed-ropes to the previous high-point itself was so arduous and long that the climbers had very little strength, or time, left for making further route. Each day took more and more out of the lead climbers, with less and less reward. The hanging glacier was hardly much higher than where Dan Singh and Lakpa had reached, but without Camp IV it remained a frustratingly distant goal. We had one hammock among the gear at Camp III — a hammock designed for similar situations in the Alps. Desperately casting about for a solution to the problem of a resting place for the night between Camp III and the glacier, Suraj considered using it. 'We thought about using the hammock but we had only one. Also the steepness of the Face, the high-velocity winds, and very few places for driving in pitons for anchoring the hammock ruled this out.' A fairly oft-used method of the Alps was not going to be of much use to us on the NW Face of Kamet.

'22 June 1983: Lakpa and Dan Singh had a rest day. Rajendra, Kami and Patil (the Nursing Assistant) went up carrying some provisions and a tent for the proposed Camp IV. Patil could not go beyond rockwall-1. Rajendra and Kami went to a rock near rockwall-2, anchored the stuff there with ropes, pitons and karabiners. Met report for next day —

cloudy weather, 50 kilometres per hour winds at 20,000 feet, 70 kilometres per hour winds at 23,000 feet, showers likely.

'23 June 1983: The morning was clear. Therefore, in spite of the adverse weather prediction, I cleared the move of Dan Singh and Lakpa. They left at 0:130 hours and reached the point upto which the rope had been fixed by 1:00 hours. Miraculous ascent on their part. They started work on the selected route, inching upward, ice hammer in hand. Only the ice hammer and front prongs of the crampons were in touch with the smooth Face. They drove pitons into the minute cracks, fixed rope and made tremendous advance despite tremendous odds.'

It was a tremendous advance; overcoming rock-wall 3 and reaching to within hand shaking distance of the tongue of snow that led to the glacier. With this, Dan Singh had been involved in practically the entire lead-climbing on the NW Face of Kamet; rockwall 1 with Kura Ram and Abhai Singh, and after that in tandem with Lakpa he had surmounted practically all the technical difficulties of the 6000-foot Face, and catapulted our endeavour to a point from where Kamet looked climbable. It was extraordinary sustained performance of the highest calibre.

'Another rope of Kura, Abhai and Rajendra went up and pushed the stores above rockwall-2. Kura Ram ranged up and down the fixed rope in search of a place where we may be able to pitch just one tent, but it was not there. All five members returned to Camp III at about 1730 hours.

'24 June 1983: Weather cloudy. Rest day for the team.

'25 June 1983: Bad weather. We had to stick to our camp. We decided on the course for the next day.'

The course of action they decided upon was a daring one. Remarkably daring.

Suraj knew that the ski team on the Eastern Axis was targeted to make an attempt on 27 June and that its support party would be ensconced in the higher camps on that side. The Western Axis plan called for a descent on the other side, and we had always planned that there should be some members of the Eastern team available high up on the mountain to be able to and guide the Western team down. This factor nailed down the date. And as regards a resting place above Camp III, well they would carry Camp IV on their backs and pitch it wherever they found the first possible site! It was indeed a daring plan but there seemed no better one. Already his lead-climbing pair had reached their limit of effectiveness from Camp III; further forays would only lead to a deterioration of their condition without any significant gain. Also, any further sitting around in Camp III at the base of the Face day after day could endanger the morale of the team. The situation called for daring, and the Kumaonis responded in kind. 'We have thought we could spend a night out (in the open on the Face) in case it was needed. If we reach a place where we could pitch a tent, nothing like it,' recorded Suraj on the evening of 25 June.

'26 June 1983: Weather forecast on 25 June had not been in favour of clear weather, but in the morning we saw that weather was not too bad. Not absolutely clear but it was all right. We could take a chance.

'So we left Camp III at about 0400 hours, Dan Singh in the lead followed by Lakpa. I was at the end and ahead of me were Rajendra and Abhai. Kami, Sher Singh and Bharat Singh were following us. These three found the going difficult beyond the big rock below rockwall-2. I induced them in every way but the rock proved beyond them. They left the stores there and went down.

'Rajendra was not feeling too bright either; he appeared fatigued and exhausted. Half way through rockwall-2 he almost passed out. On reviving, he shouted in a feeble voice "Saheb main upar aon ya niche jaon." I paused to think and said 'Agar aa sakte ho to aa jao.'" He replied, "Thik hai to main ata hun." The respect for this man's determination rose sky-high in my heart. Here was a man who was coming up the rope with his jumar not with the strength of his arms but the supreme strength of will power.

'Dan Singh and Lakpa had by this time started fixing the rope above rockwall-3. The weather worsened. Abhai was moving ahead of me with a rucksack and a sleeping bag. I was carrying food and rope, Rajendra a sleeping bag. Kura Ram, who had started with us in the morning, felt some difficulty and I asked him to return to Camp III.

'At the end of ice slope above rockwall-3, Abhai reached a place which he thought would have to do for a bivouac and started making preparations for night halt. We could not have traversed across to the glacier as the tent had not fetched up. Dan Singh and Lakpa had traversed about 200 yards and were hidden behind a bulge. I shouted to them to return to our position before the weather turned its full fury of us. They were out in the open braving the howling wind and flying snow. They joined us at about 1800 hours. Rajendra had also come up by then with the sleeping bags.

'At the base of a rock we selected a small ledge, enough for us to sit upon for the night, if belayed properly. The rope which I had carried was used to belay us. Pitons were driven all around us. Ropes were passed through them, through our sling carabiners and fastened properly; double safety was ensured.

'We had three sleeping bags between the five of us. Lakpa and Dan Singh shared one, Abhai and Rajendra another, and I had one to myself.

'I cut a bit of snow to accommodate my not-too-wide and not-so-broad seat, took the line to a piton driven about head-high from the place where I balanced myself. Ice pitons were driven below to place my feet; pitons to keep my feet in position, pitons to keep my seat in position and even my head was resting on the rope passing from one piton to another piton.

'Sunset came, followed by clouds and snow. The intensity of snowfall kept increasing. By midnight the boys started going cold. Rajendra was the first target of the weather god's wrath. He started complaining about his feet going numb, followed by Abhai Singh.

'There was no way for us to warm our bodies and feet, except by remaining inside the sleeping bags, which had also become wet. I advised them to keep massaging each other's feet. This gave them some relief.

'But the weather would not relent. The fury of the wind appeared to shower the snows of all the mountains on Kamet only. Visibility became poor.

'The morning dawned bleakly, without any hope. We were not in touch with Camp III. We heard their faint shouts from below. It was no use shouting back. It would have been unintelligible. But I thought it proper to let them know that we had survived the night. Though cold and wet I gave a mighty yell, and my voice reassured them.

'Staying there was useless. Going up that day was not granted to us by the weather god. I was also now very worried about Rajendra Singh and Abhai; and we were drenchingly wet too.

'We took the decision to start back. Having come upto this place, going down was a bitter disappointment for all of us. But then it was destined that way. My biggest worry was to get all the members down safely. Cold injuries were not ruled out.

'At 0900 hours, Abhai took the lead, followed by Rajendra myself, Dan Singh and Lakpa. We had hardly descended 200 yards when my jumar stopped functioning; its teeth had iced up. Thereafter it was a nightmare to continue without a jumar. Then Dan Singh's balcalava was blown off to unknown places by the wind.

'A little later my right hand became cold. It took us some time to bring it back to life. Then between rockwall-3 and rockwall-2 an avalanche of powder snow roared down upon us. Abhai fell to the ground, got up, and fell down again. Rajendra lay buried in a heap of snow barely 100 feet below me. Then it was my turn, propelled by the snow which came lashing down. When Rajendra saw me so near him he could not comprehend the secret of my fast descent. I let out a weak smile and pointed toward the pouring snow. Dan Singh was struggling to keep his balance, so was Lakpa but he could not succeed in his attempt. He too was thrown down.

'The rope could have broken, the pitons could have come out. The slings could have deceived us. Many fatal things could have happened but we were spared.

When we reached rockwall-1 we were again subjected to a mighty powder snow avalanche. Rajendra and myself were thrown down with such force and speed that with all our strength we could not hold on to the rope with our hands.

'It was sheer luck or providence that we had been near the bottom of the wall when the avalanche swept down upon us. Dan Singh was thrown from the top of the rockwall to its bottom, so were the others.

'The avalanche passed. Visibility improved. Rajendra shouted, "*Sahab kahan ho, kaise ho.*" I was delighted to hear him; at least one was alive. Then I heard similar shouts from behind; Dan Singh, Lakpa and Abhai Singh! My happiness was complete.

'A miracle indeed! The Lord above had saved us, perhaps so that we could come back to Kamet on another day.

'We reached Camp III at about 1730 hours. Kura Ram wept at our sight. He could not leave me and sobbed uncontrollably for some time. Dr Gautam and Patil came forward, and without any ado thrust tablets into our mouths.

'We made it the Arctic Medium tent; it was the most comfortable accommodation in the world. A new life.'

I had been terribly worried about this party. At 1700 hours on 26 June I spoke to Gautam at Camp III on a long distance set. He had said 'They were last seen...' With some further probing I came to know that it was a planned bivouac and the team had carried sleeping bags and food with them. Still, I was worried on account of the extremely bad weather. Gautam had asked whether a search party should be sent. I felt there was no need as the team was climbing alpine style and would be able to look after itself. However, I did wish that the team should not come down in snowfall due to the danger of avalanches. The next day, i.e. 27 June, when the party came down I had a detailed discussion with Capt Dalal and upon hearing about the condition of the team and the severity of the climate, I decided to call off our western attempt.

Capt Dalal and his men had done an excellent job. They have charted a new trend for Indian climbing. Few Indian climbers or expeditions have attempted big mountain faces. Climbing big mountains from their faces — rather than from the comparatively easier ridges or spurs — represents a normal progression of mountaineering, reflecting the advancement of climbing techniques, gear and expertise.

I can't remember any major face climb attempted by Indians except for the effort of the great Nandu Jayal in 1955 when he went for the South Face of Saser Kangri. Though his team failed to get to the top, it was a great *reccé* achievement. The first-ever face climb from a new route by an Indian expedition was in 1978 when three members of the Army Eastern Karakoram Expedition of 1981 got to the top of Tarek Kangri from a direct line below. The Japanese had earlier climbed this peak but from a ridge which joins the summit at a much higher point on the Face. Our selection of the NW Face of Kamet was a deliberate attempt to open a new era of mountaineering in India. To me it seems that the NW Face of Kamet, which we failed to fully master, is a great challenge even for the best climbers of the world.

KUMAONIS ON KAMET

Waiting. Uncertainty. The Western attempt was over. And the Eastern one beaten back once. It was a difficult period. There was nothing I could do but wait and hope. Down at Base Camp, and at Camp II, I mulled over our experience and recorded: '29 June: I think it (Western Axis) was one of the greatest retreats in Indian mountaineering. I am not dissatisfied. This route has now been opened... As regards our future plans, they depend on how the weather behaves.

'30 June: Surprising how all my calculations have gone haywire this time. I had selected the period — 24 to 29 June — for our summit bids based on the reports of earlier expeditions. This period seemed to be the lull before the onset of monsoons. But this year these have been the worst days... How plans and conditions change on the mountains! Originally we had thought of a crossover from West to East after opening the unclimbed Western Route, we had planned a solo attempt, a member spending a night on the summit, etc. But as the events unfolded the more ambitious ideas were scratched by factors beyond our control. I had given ourselves only a 30% chance on the Western Axis and this was, finally, destroyed by bad weather. Sleeping on the summit has now been ruled out after three cases of chillblain and I have instructed Thapa to forget everything else and just climb the mountain. On Kanchenjunga, a member's death had made me angry. And more determined than ever to get to the top. But this time it has made me cautious. I don't want any more casualties.

'I have asked Dan Singh, Maon, Kami, Lakpa and Rajendra Singh (members of the Western team) to return to Joshimath and be prepared to come this side for an attempt should Thapa's team fail. 1 July: We kept on looking towards Kamet. Weather remained clear. No showers, wind only forty kilometres per hour. At 7 p.m. Camp III told us that they had seen a 7-man party reach the summit at about 4.00 p.m. What a great relief.... In the afternoon it rained at Base Camp; rained, not snowed. It's clear that the monsoons have arrived. We have been lucky. Lucky by a day.

So that night we went to sleep with lifting spirits. The next morning I was able to speak to Thapa over the wireless:

'Col Kumar: It was at a quarter to three, right?'

'Thapa: Yes sir.'

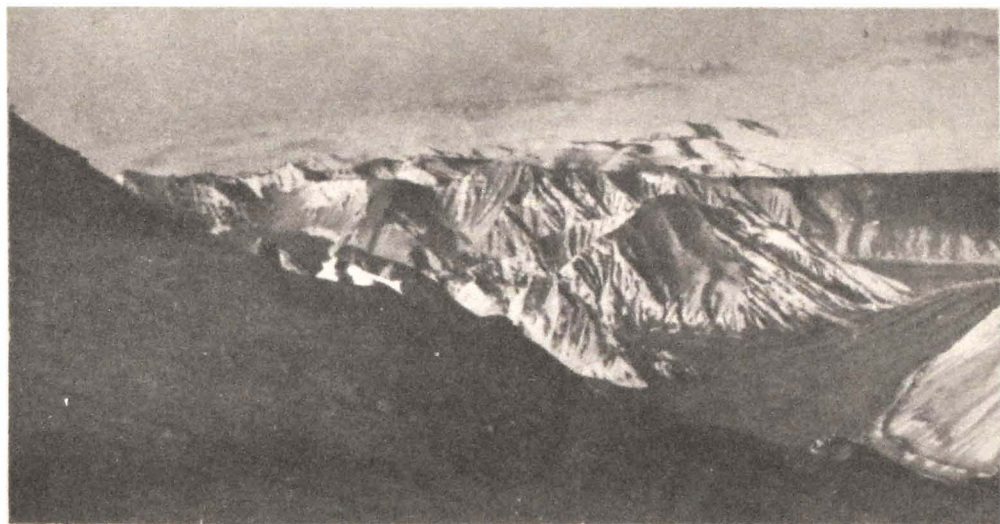
'Col Kumar: Is everybody well?'

'Thapa: All are well, sir, except that everyone is very weak. We have had no food, no water since yesterday.... When we returned from the summit the gas had leaked.'

'Col Kumar: That's very sad. What time did you leave in the morning?'

'Thapa: We couldn't stay at Camp VI because it had been swept away by avalanches. We had to start from Camp V and so we left at 0005 hours.'

'Col Kumar: You started at midnight?'



A view of the Tibetan plateau from the summit of Kamet.

'Thapa: Yes sir.'

'Col Kumar: And you kept on walking for sixteen hours?'

'Thapa: Fourteen hours and forty-five minutes to be exact.'

'Col Kumar: That's fantastic. And what time did you get home?'

'Thapa: Sir, our party started reaching Camp V at 5.30 p.m. Everyone was in by .00 p.m.'

'Col Kumar: And who all went up there? How many people in all?'

'Thapa: Seven of us started in the morning but only six of us could make it to the top. One, Nk Balwant Singh, stopped just 50 feet below the summit ... because of severe stomach ache. Regarding the Ski Team, they started their descent at 1730 hours from just 500 feet below the summit and reached Camp V for night-halt in darkness. They covered the distance in twenty-one minutes.'

'Col Kumar: That is 500 feet below the summit to Camp V?'

'Thapa: Sir. Today morning at 7.30 a.m. they started from Camp V. They should be at Camp III by now. And within an hour or so they should be at Base Camp.'

'Col Kumar: And they carried their skis with them?'

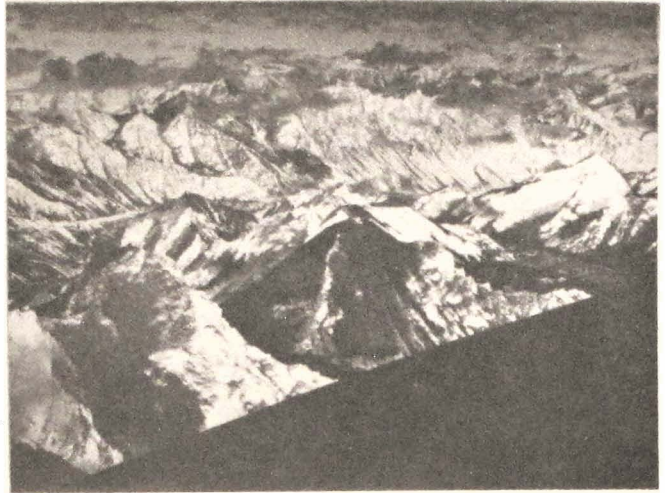
'Thapa: Yes sir. They carried their skis right from Camp V.'

'Col Kumar: That is fantastic.. I'll tell them to take timings at all camps and stop at Camp I; beyond that it is too broken up... Now tell me, is Khim Singh the youngest chap we have?'

'Thapa: Recruit Khim Singh is the youngest member of our team; about 20 years old. He may be the youngest Indian to have climbed such a high peak but we will have to check on this.'

'Col Kumar: What was the height of Camp V and what were the snow condition from there to the summit?'

'Thapa: Camp V is at 23,250 feet and Camp VI was at 23,800 feet. Throughout the route from Camp V to the summit there was never less than hip-deep snow.'



*The mountain ranges of
Central Himalayas from
the summit of Kamet.*

'Col Kumar: What did you eat at the top? Any offering to Kamet.'

'Thapa: I had taken a brass statue of Devi. Bakshi left a picture of Guru Nanak and some sweets. And we prayed.'

I then turned my back on Kamet for the last time and set off down the mountain with a light step and soaring spirit. While the other members came off the higher slopes, I could help smooth out the logistics at our administrative base, Joshimath, and Ranikhet.

I raced down the glacier and delighted in the green grass, flowing water and singing birds. After weeks in snow and icy fastness, these life-sounds registered on the senses with the keenness and wonder of a first savouring. From the Base Camp to the road-head at Kurkuti, the route too was new for me as I had had a heli-lift on the way up. So even as I sped down, I would often stop to gaze at a mountain setting, a stretch of rapid, or the play of light on earth. Of course I was happy to be returning home and yet, as always, a part of me bade me goodby and left me to go sit on a snow-ledge with the promise to return to me when I came back to the mountains.

Satish Issar, Lt Col Sinha and the others received me joyously at the Kumaon Regimental Centre at Ranikhet. We prepared a rousing welcome for the team as it lumbered in a few days later in a caravan of trucks and buses, and then Thapa gave us a full account of the final ascent of Kamet.

On 29 June the weather got slightly better and I received a message from Col Kumar, who was at that time at Camp II, that I must go ahead with my plan as soon as the weather cleared.

'On 30 June the weather was better — though there was a lot of wind early in the morning — and I decided to launch our attempt. Our Ski Team was also at Camp III since their attempt, originally set for 26 June, had also been thwarted by bad weather. Now I decided that we would all climb in one group. There were two advantages; more numbers for opening the route, and everyone could help the ski members in carrying their skis and their heavy boots.

'The summit party — Lt RK Singh, Lt Bakshi, CHM Rajpal, Hav Lalit Mohan, Naik Balwant, Recruit Khim Singh, and myself — set out from Camp II for our second attempt



Colonel of the Regiment PN Kathpalia PVSM, AVSM with Brig S.K. Issar — the sponsor and organiser of the expedition

on Kamet. We started around 11 a.m. as we planned to go only to Camp IV that day. From Camp IV we had decided to go direct to Camp VI and thus save one day.

‘Once again I had that mixed feeling of success and failure in my mind; there was no certainty if the weather would remain clear for the two or three days we needed. I prayed to God at every step to give us at least one clear day; the day when we would attempt the summit.’

‘The earlier route had been erased by the heavy snowfall of the past few days. I had to remake the route and had a very tough time going up from Camp III to Camp IV. To our despair we found that all the tents at Camp IV were almost buried under snow, so we had to put in a lot of effort digging them out and getting them into shape. Then to our horror we found that the gas cartridge we had left there was empty; neither could we find the stove which must have got buried in the snow and we had no strength to search for it. So we did not even have adequate water to drink and went to sleep on empty stomachs. In the morning we were all feeling quite hungry. I had a bottle of horlicks and ate some of the powder. I offered it to the other members also but they did not like its taste. We started early because the original route had been completely obliterated by fresh snow and we had another tough day of route making. Rajpal, Balwant and I bore the burden of this.’

‘Tired, hungry and dehydrated we reached Camp V where another shock awaited us. Earlier Camp VI could easily be spotted from Camp V. Now we couldn’t see a thing. The box-type tent at Camp VI was a very colourful one and so there was no question of our not being able to spot it. We concluded that a big avalanche must have swept away our Camp VI. I thought of sending someone a little distance ahead to confirm but none could summon enough energy to do so. Most of us were in favour of staying at Camp V that night and trying for the summit the next day from Camp V itself. I realised that this would be a very difficult task but with Camp VI finished there was no other alternative.’

‘There was only one tent at Camp V and all seven of us had to squeeze into that and also cook some food inside. Of course the question of sleeping did not arise as we had decided to start in the middle of the night.’

'Rajpal, Khim Singh and I had taken the lead while opening the route to Camp V, so on 1 July I decided to send RK, Bakshi, Balwant and Lalit Mohan ahead to open the route. They set out at 12.05 a.m. and the rest of us caught up with them at the base of the Kamet ridge above Meade's Col. They looked very tired, so Rajpal and I took over the lead. The day was rising in the East. The route was not very easy as there was very deep fresh snow and our progress was very slow. The clouds that had settled in the valley for the night covered every thing except the higher mountain peaks like Nanda Devi, Dunagiri, Kalanka, etc. Most of the smaller peaks of Central Himalayas were hidden and the clouds meant a real possibility of bad weather when they rose higher. I was thus very anxious to move fast. It was also clear that if we were not able to make the summit that day we would not be able to make another attempt. So I stuck to the task of route making for nearly four hours. A little distance from the summit we saw a thin ring of cloud around Kamet. This worried me greatly but fortune was now on our side and a clear sun soon broke through. Kamet was just ahead and I wanted to take some pictures but as I had no camera I sat down to wait for the rest of the party.

'I asked Rajpal to continue making the route. The slope was now almost a 90° incline and opening the route on that particular pitch was very difficult. On that vertical slope we came across an ice-wall which was almost 200-250 feet high. It was the only route leading to the summit, and there was no way out but to fix ropes, cut steps and climb it. Cutting steps was another herculean job at that height. Also, we were very tired as we had been climbing for nearly twelve hours in soft snow. Rajpal and I set about the task; I belayed and he led. After a while I offered to take over but he told me that I had done enough already. By the time we had fixed the 200-foot rope, the other members had had sufficient time to catch up with us. Balwant now complained of stomach pain. I did persuade him to go on and he climbed half way up the ice-wall but could not proceed any further. Sadly he had to give up just a little short of the summit. Another 50 feet above the ice-wall, and we were on the summit of Kamet.

'My joy was immense; I cannot express it in words. The memory of all the effort we had put in so far vanished from my mind. All around us we saw high mountain peaks. The clouds too had vanished completely and the day shone crystal clear.

'I sat down, took out my statue of Durga and started offering her sweets, biscuits, and other eatables I carried. The next task was to take photographs. We had carried with us many flags; the National Flag, Chief of the Army Staff Flag, Kumaon Regimental Central Flag, Area Flag, and the State Bank of India Flag. We had to photograph these to repay in some measure all those had helped the expedition. I also wanted to photograph the important mountains and areas around. We could see Mana and Nanda Devi but the Tibetan Plateau was partly clouded over. I photographed the other members against these back-drops and rapidly took one picture after the other.

'The final phase was to get to Camp V. This proved even tougher than climbing up had been because we were completely exhausted and the evening was quickly growing cold. We roped up and began to crampon down.

'I don't know how the others felt during the descent but I thought I had lost every bit of my energy. I was merely stumbling down and seemed to have lost all control over my legs. At times I felt like just glissading down but that would have been suicidal for on the southern side was a sheer rockface. I finally reached Camp V at 7.30 p.m. During the descent to Camp V, I had hoped that the members who had been ahead would have prepared hot tea or coffee for the others. But when I reached the camp I found that there was no gas in the cartridge, and that the stove was also not functional. Everyone just sat about with closed



Col Kumar, leader of the expedition presents the flag to Gen. K.V. Krishna Rao, Chief of the Army Staff.

eyes, sucking snow to quench their thirst. It was a terrible state of affairs and I knew we had to make some water and fight dehydration. The only solution that came to my mind was to light two candles and melt snow with their heat. It took nearly half an hour to melt just one mug of snow. We were seven members, and so it wasn't much but it gave us some energy. Then the seven of us settled down in that one tent to pass the night.

'The next morning we got out at about 7.00 a.m. and prepared to descend. We had now been without food for about thirty hours and seemed to have no energy at all left in us. But we had to go down. I got to Camp IV with great difficulty and while the others were on their way, I was able to communicate with Col. Kumar and gave him the news of our success. He was very, very happy and congratulated us. We now continued down to Camp III and enjoyed a *bara khana* because there were fresh vegetables around. We really enjoyed this sumptuous meal. The weather was worsening and we decided to spend the night at Camp III. The next day we pushed directly to Base Camp and reached there to a hearty welcome. On 6 July we marched to Niti. Where another *bara khana* awaited us, including fresh meat which had been sent from Joshimath by Capt Mall. It was time to make merry and everyone joined in.

'As promised to goddess Nanda Devi, the next day I offered sacrifice of a goat, after which we left for Malari. Bakshi, Chengappa and I went for a *darshan* of the holy Siva temple which is just North of Kumarsen. There I found serenity and sanctity. The next day,

8 July, our vehicles took us to Joshmath where we were received by the member of the Western Team. They led us in a procession to where they were billeted and where they had arranged for a *bara khana* for members of both the teams.

'Then, on 13 July, we drove to Ranikhet to a joyous welcome there by all the officers and men of the Kumaon Regimental Centre who lined the road and cheered our successful return.'

'And that's how the Kumaonis climbed Kamet. Thapa and his team put in a wonderful effort on that one clear day Kamet gave us after a terrible spell of bad weather. And even as they begun pulling off the upper slopes of the mountain the gloom set in again, and this time there would be no break for days, or even weeks, for the monsoon was arriving. And once the monsoon clouds burst, there is little chance of success on the Himalayan giants.

On 17 June, as I climbed from Camp I to Camp II on the Eastern Axis, I had had my first full view of Kamet from that side. My mind was then still full of the mountain's mighty NW Face where Dalal's team was grappling hard for every inch of progress. Delighted by the more open, accessible vista of our mountain from its eastern side, I had stopped to record into the dictaphone; Camp II is at a beautiful site facing the South-East Face of Kamet. The mountain looks so much easier from here as compared to the Western Route.'

No sooner had I said this, something made me hastily add: 'But no mountain of over 25,000 feet can be taken casually. A spell of bad weather, or sickness of members can swiftly turn anticipated success into failure.'

And, sure enough, unexpected bad weather had nearly aborted our plans. But the Kumaonis hung on and then seized on the very last chance. Low on food, drink and sleep they put in an amazing summit effort.

Appendix I

MEMBERS OF THE KUMAONI KAMET EXPEDITION

Col N Kumar, PVSM, KC, AVSM (Retd) — Leader

Western Axis

1. Capt S B Dalal — Dy Leader
2. Maj G Ravinder Nath
3. Capt R S Sambial
4. Capt Sanjay Agarwal
5. Lt Balwan Singh
6. Sub Kura Ram, SM
7. Nb Sub Suli Maon
8. Hav Jeet Bahadur Ram
9. Hav Laxman Singh
10. NK Dan Singh
11. NK Rajendra Singh Dev
12. NK Abhai Singh
13. NK Khushal Singh
14. Sep Bir Singh
15. NK/NA S C. Patil,
Nursing Assistant
16. Sherpa Lakpa Tsering

ADM Party

17. NK/NA B K Sagar
18. NK Narendra Singh
19. Sep Radhey Shyam
20. Sep Kharak Singh
21. Sep Puran Singh
22. Rect Hari Mohan Singh
23. Sep Umed Singh
24. Sep Kalu Chand
25. Sep Hari Chand
26. Sep Devendra Kumar
27. Rect Dev Singh

Eastern Axis

1. Capt D B Thapa — Dy leader
2. Capt Daljit Singh
3. Lt (AMC) A N Chingappa
4. Lt R S Bakshi
5. Lt R K Singh
6. Sub Soban Singh, VSM
7. Hav Raj Pal
8. Hav Lalit Mohan Mathpal
9. LNK Bharat Singh Pokharia
10. NK Roop Singh
11. Sep Kabiraj Singh
12. Sep Subhash Singh Khanka
13. Rect Khim Singh
14. Rect Mhathung Loth

ADM Party

15. NK/NA K K Mehta
16. LNK Kharak Singh
17. NK Hayat Singh
18. Rect Kundan Singh
19. Rect Balwant Singh
20. Rect Chander Singh
21. Rect Narayan Singh
22. Cook Ram Prasad

Appendix II

A FILM MAKER ON KAMET N.S. Thapa

Filming in the mountains always creates numerous problems. We cannot carry heavy studio camera beyond the heights of eight or nine thousand feet. Battery-run cameras often give trouble as batteries cannot be re-charged. Besides, cold freezes the normal camera oil. Each camera has to be cleaned and non-freeze oil used. The best camera for filming at high altitudes is the spring-driven Paillard Bolex.

When in April 1983, Col Narinder Kumar asked me whether I would like to join Kumaon Regiment's Kamet Expedition, I was delighted. Despite my other heavy commitments, I was able to join the expedition for a few days.

The members of the expedition left Ranikhet towards the end of May with two cameras given to them by Films Division. The only Paillard Bolex camera available was given to Lt R.S. Bakshi, and the second camera (Eclair), which was much heavier, was given to Kapil Malhotra, Director of Vision Books who was to publish the expedition's book. Since neither cameramen had any previous experience with movie cameras, they were hurriedly trained by the Delhi Unit of the Films Division.

I travelled to Mana Camp at a height of 11,000 ft by road. From there I trekked a distance of some 17 kilometres to the Base Camp at Ghasoli on the expedition's western side. Part of the way we had a mule track but many portions of the track were covered by snow and our progress was slow. The last portion of the climb was rather difficult; the snow being soft, every step had to be taken with a great deal of caution. I was welcomed at the camp by Col Kumar and Members of his party who were at the Base Camp at a height of 13,800 feet. Unfortunately, the weather deteriorated and for the next two days we were compelled to stay inside the tents.

The expedition was divided up into two teams; one following the traditional route through the Eastern Kamet Glacier and the second one wanting to challenge the unclimbed North Face of the mountain from its western side. Narinder had felt it would be better if I joined the Western team which was trying a new route. It was good to know that Kapil had travelled with his heavy camera upto Camp III at a height of 19,200 feet, and had taken some shots of this route. Lt Bakshi being a mountaineer himself, carried the camera almost upto the top of Kamet and took some film. The job done by them was not of professional standard's but considering the circumstances, they had taken some excellent shots which helped me make the film.

Filming on the defiant North Face of Kamet was far more tricky and difficult but all the same filming in high mountains is always as exciting as mountaineering itself. I also had the great experience of taking some shots of the North Face of Kamet from a helicopter, though it called for great strength to keep the camera steady in the vibrating chopper. On the whole, results of shooting by Lt Ranmeet Bakshi, Kapil Malhotra, Col Kumar and myself were very satisfactory and we were able to complete the film within a record time.

A PAINTER ON KAMET

R.N. Pasricha

Early in 1983, I met Col Kumar in his office. We had known each other for long and begun talking of his expeditions and my continued interest in the Himalayas. I casually suggested to him that he should include me in one of his future expeditions; I could then paint the snows to my heart's content. The idea appealed to him at once and a few days later I got an invitation to join the Kumaon Regiment's Expedition to Kamet of which he was the leader; I was captured by the beauty of the Himalayas in water colour paintings and expedition activities and events in drawings.

My journeys to the Himalayas had begun 33 years earlier. During one such journey I had already been to Malari. The bus journey from Joshimath along Dhauli was therefore full of nostalgia; and I kept watching the spots which had sought my attention during my earlier visit.

It was a beautiful day when I commenced my walk towards Niti, the last village on way to Kamet. I had the company of the people of Niti returning home after their stay at a lower altitude during winter. Himalayan people are always friendly company and over the years I have begun to admire them as I do the peaks and glaciers. Each line on their faces is chiselled by the weather and winds and they carry around them a dignity and character, of inner peace and tranquility which is imparted to them by magnanimous Himalayas.

Past Niti, it was exciting, as there was a new panorama every few minutes — the landscape later on becoming Spitian. But as the altitude increased it was not possible for me to keep pace with the youngsters; I was 57. But I enjoyed the slow walk. I could look around and admire the views as I stopped every now and then to recover my breath.

From Base Camp on I had all the Himalayan thrills — snow peaks, glaciers, a deep blue sky and the delicacies and warmth of the accompanying kitchen. The Base Camp was a very busy place with porter constantly arriving and departing. I could see the features of Bagini Valley along Nanda Devi. My work and acclimatisation go together; therefore my long stay at Camps 1 and 2 were extremely fruitful.

It showed continuously at Camp 2. But in the evening it cleared suddenly and a bright, warm sun appeared. I hurried with my paints and brushes to paint Kamet. The sun set fast behind the peak leaving a red glow but everything was suddenly very cold once again. The water got encrusted. The brush which minutes ago was charged with colour and working

smoothly, now dragged on the paper depositing ice powder. The painting had to be abandoned. It was a charming morning as well. I waited patiently till the sun was upon us. Then I painted Kamet, Mana and Deoban.

At Camp 2 we were almost under Mana peak, with masses of insecure snow poised for avalanches and avalanches were there every now and then. Will they roll down upon us? The fear had come, and one night an avalanche was almost upon us. It thundered, I could hear it roll down; and finally there was a splash of snow on the tent. Will it bury us? Shall I run for my life? But where? We were on the glacier and it was pitch dark around. I did not stir. Nothing happened. In the morning we saw a huge pile of debris a little away from the camp site.

Team members had established Camp 3 at an altitude of 20,500 feet and ferried stores there with the help of porters. I was fully acclimatised at Camp 2 and felt tempted to go higher. The distance was 7 or 8 kilometres and the rise was 2000 feet. At places it was vertical, and a rope had been fixed. There were areas of rock fall and the danger of stones rolling and knocking one down was constant. The climb was tiring but the views were rewarding. The small clearance where the camp was sited seemed nearer heavens. Kamet and Mana peaks were just opposite and the surrounding rock and cliffs imparted the place a weird look.

Next day the leader arrived from the Western theatre, and I made his portrait sketch. I also painted Mana and Kamet. It could be the highest point at which any artist might have painted the Himalayan landscape and the feeling gave me a sense of achievement. After staying at Camp 3 for two days, the team mates moved up while I got numb with cold. On the way down, I twice slipped at the fixed rope and had to be held by the members accompanying me. It was a great relief to be back in Camp II and a hot lunch. After lunch, I moved on to Camp I. But my speed was hampered by the pain in my feet. The afternoon heat had turned the snow soft and that too made walking difficult. The only tent at Camp I was shared by the support party and porters and I was provided a comfortable corner. Food was being cooked inside the tent on two big stoves which imparted its warmth. It was a pleasure to have a steaming hot dinner after having to eat cold and half-cooked food at higher altitudes.

We said goodbye to Camp I after lunch. It was an easy walk towards Base Camp, and very pleasant too. Many pools of green water had now appeared where earlier there were none. In them, icebergs floated. At sunset the sun's rays imparted a touch of warmth. The clouds and peaks turned red. It was captivating, but my feet pained and I was not able to fully enjoy the scenery.

Upon my reaching Delhi, the doctors diagnosed that my toes had been touched by frostbite. For a while, there was pain whenever my bare feet came in contact with the floor or cold air and water. Yet, the discomfort could hardly diminish the joy of where I had been and what I had painted there.

Appendix III

GLOSSARY OF MOUNTAINEERING TERMS

ACCLIMATISATION: Physical adjustment to the rarefied atmosphere of high altitudes and the physiological tolerance of these conditions.

ALP: A mountain pasture.

AMPHITHEATRE: A cirque of rock containing a number of routes, or possible routes.

ARETE: A ridge of rock or ice.

AVALANCHE: A sudden fall of rock, snow and ice either singly or collectively.

BELAY: An anchor point on a climb from which protection can be afforded. Also used as a verb indicating the fastening of oneself to such a point, and giving protection to companions.

CAMP: A pile of stones to indicate a summit, any other height or route marker.

CHIMNEY: A vertical fissure in rock or ice in which the body can be jammed for climbing purpose.

COL: A pass.

CORNICE: Overhanging snow projecting over the edge of a ridge, formed by wind.

COULOIR: A french word for gully, ravine or wide cleft.

CRAMPONS: A framework of metal spikes strapped to climbing boots to give purchase on ice and hard snow.

CREVASSE: A vertical fissure in a glacier that can be very wide and deep. Caused by the movement of glaciers over uneven ground or bends.

DESCENDER: A mechanical device used for abseiling or coming down a fixed rope.

FIRN/NEVE: Snow which is in the process of turning into ice and becoming part of the upper reaches of a glacier.

FIXED ROPES: Ropes used as anchors and hand rails to facilitate the transport of loads and for rapid movement.

GENDARME: A pinnacle of rock tower forming an obstacle on a mountain ridge.

GLACIER: A slowly moving river of ice.

HARNESS: An attachment of webbing worn round the chest or waist or both, for anchoring a climber to the rope.

ICE-AXE: An axe used for cutting steps in snow and ice and maintaining balance on steep slopes.

ICE FALL: When a glacier falls over a steep step it forms a confusion of ice cracked with crevasses and seracs. Such an area is called an Ice Fall.

JUMAR: A metal device to slide along a fixed rope while climbing.

KARABINER: A metal with a clip on one side which is closed by the action of a spring. It is attached to the eye ring of a piton and holds the rope which runs through it.

MORAINE: Accumulation of stones, and debris carried down by a glacier.

PITCH: A section of a climb between two stances or belay points.

PITON: A metal peg that is used as anchor in ice or rock with karabiners, ropes and tapes.

SADDLE: A depression in a ridge between two summits.

SCREE: A mass of broken stones, varying in size, on the side of a mountain or in a gully.

SNOW-BLINDNESS: Inflammation of the conjunctive, a painful condition due to excessive exposure to ultra violet rays reflected from snow and ice.

SNOWLINE: The point at which snow starts on a mountain.

TRAVERSE: Moving across a face or slope, or a horizontal climb.

WINDSLAB: A hard crust of snow plastered onto older snow by wind.

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