# Expedition Style – A Himalayan Perspective (1976–1986)

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There were 339 climbing expeditions to the Greater Himalaya during 1986. Two out of every three were large expeditions. In China, over one-half of the expeditions went to four mountains. In Pakistan 56%, 29 parties comprising 240 climbers, visited six mountains all of which are approached via the Upper Baltoro glacier, with 10 to Broad Peak, nine to K2 and six each to Gasherbrum 1 and 2. There were 52 foreign parties climbing in India, 19 of whom visited four mountains in Garhwal and two mountains in Kashmir. Nepal continues to draw the largest numbers, with the 8000m peaks providing a magnetic attraction; five of them were visited by 25 expeditions out of a total of 96 during the spring, autumn and winter. Overall there were about 45 deaths. Falls were the leading cause, accounting for over 36%, followed by avalanches (31%) and high-altitude oedema (12.5%). On K2 alone there was a disastrous death toll of 13 climbers.

Just one decade earlier, in 1976, there were 11 expeditions each in the spring and the autumn to Nepal, with one each to Everest. There were 25 to Pakistan, with one to K2. The number of expeditions in India was under 35, with one each to Nanda Devi in the spring and autumn.

It has been a decade filled with remarkable records of every description. Apart from a four-fold increase in the number of expeditions, the rise in technical standards and the sheer scale of many achievements have been quite staggering. The changes that have been most striking have not come, however, from the growth in numbers, nor from the increasing tendency to repeat much-climbed routes on the 8000m mountains. These developments after all were not unexpected with the easing of entry restrictions in the countries concerned and with the opening up of China. What does cause concern is the rapid pace of change in values, which has brought about a steady erosion of traditional mountaineering precepts and practices, accompanied by a tendency to make doubtful or unresearched claims. This appears to be symptomatic of a new type of activity in which innovation and enterprise are subservient to competitive achievement, with personal ambition providing the main driving force. We are familiar enough with the nature of these motives in our everyday lives, and it would be almost too easy to lay the blame on the all-pervading media for their introduction into the world of Himalayan climbing. Perhaps the excellence of modern equipment and the gradual dismantling of earlier physiological and psychological barriers have pushed the base-lines so far forward as to encourage too many presumptions and to allow too much to be taken for granted.

Ethical standards as related to mountain climbing, whether Himalayan

or otherwise, have almost always been a matter for contention. The basic principles have generally been only broadly defined, because of the diversity of the attracting forces. Whether readily acknowledged or not, there are three main ones: spiritual, still present though less easily identifiable today; physical, the awareness of the power and skill to achieve technical excellence; moral, the discovery of unexpected personal frontiers under exposure to extreme strain. No two mountain climbers value these three forces in anything like equal proportions. Besides, the gap between the amateur and the professional continues to widen relentlessly. The latter's scale of values and commitment are based upon the need for increasingly brinkline performances and maximum media publicity. This is acceptable within the profession, where the pressure to seek ever greater challenges is essential to the preservation of a public image.

A prominent cause of many of the misadventures that seem to have become a part of the Himalayan scene has been the headlong rush into extreme ventures without the necessary physical and mental preparation.

One of the least defensible practices in high-altitude climbing, adopted originally by Japanese climbers and now increasingly widespread, is the virtual rejection of the climbing rope. It is a form of individualism, or self-interest, that illustrates how far we have departed from mountaineering tradition. In 1934, the Sherpa Gaylay, though physically able to descend alone through the storm on Nanga Parbat, died in a high bivouac rather than abandon his exhausted leader Willy Merkl. In 1937, Frank Smythe, nearing the top of Mana peak, found his companion Peter Oliver unable to continue, and was ready to forgo the summit until he was assured of Oliver's safety. In 1939 the loss of the exhausted climber Dudley Wolfe and of his three rescuing Sherpas at a high camp on K2 cast a shadow of disgrace over the expedition. On Annapurna in 1950 it is unlikely that Herzog and Lachenal would have survived without the succour of their companions. In 1953 seven climbers abandoned their high camp and their attempt on K2 in order to save the life of the seriously ill Art Gilkey. In 1975 Peter Boardman and Pertemba waited for an hour and a half on the S summit of Everest for Mick Burke, and only began their descent when a storm placed a hazard on their own lives. Routes such as the SE ridge of Dunagiri in 1975 and the W wall of Changabang in 1976 would hardly have been feasible by an unroped pair.

It is now considered unexceptional to treat an expedition as 'successful' irrespective of the climbers who never come back. It is generally accepted that the high-altitude climber no longer expects to give or receive any support from other members of his group. He is the sole judge of whether he should be there, and the responsibility for his survival is his own.

On the 'popular' 8000m peaks, it does not seem to matter if the route climbed is different from that permitted, nor if it happens to encroach upon others who are climbing their permitted route. One such case of interference in 1986 almost ended in blows, and another resulted in a three-year climbing ban.

It seems fashionable for heterogeneous groups of climbers, treading upon each other's toes, as it were, to follow trodden paths up the same

mountain; achieving 'record' times; or claiming a 'solo' ascent, as on Kangchenjunga in 1984, when without help from another party on the same route, a safe descent would probably not have been achieved.

With the proliferation of 'commercial' expeditions to the 8000m mountains quality is no longer the dominating factor in the conduct of the climbs. On the biggest mountains it is exceedingly rare to achieve an alpine-style ascent in the strictest sense. Large mountains are simply not alpine in scale, nor in the physiological demands that they impose, nor in the severity of their weather. This is not to say that alpine-style climbs are not possible, such as two outstanding ascents achieved in 1985: the W face of Gasherbrum 4 and the winter ascent of the E face of Dhaulagiri. And in 1986 the N face of Everest, which was climbed in 40 hours, mostly at night, and was described technically as 'easy'. Easy, that is, for two leading professionals at peak acclimatization. Current practice tends to overlook the need for acclimatization, in the belief that technical skill and modern equipment are factors more likely to affect the outcome. The death from high-altitude oedema of Marcel Rüedi in 1986 demonstrates that nine previous 8000m climbs are no guarantee of impunity against trying to rush a tenth.

For today's supremely experienced climbers, and for those physically and mentally acclimatized to Himalayan conditions, there are unlimited new frontiers to tread: a traverse of the NE and SW ridges of Everest and K2, the Lhotse-Nuptse traverse, a traverse of the Kangchenjunga-Yalungkang-Kangbachen ridge, the unknown E side of Nanga Parbat and the Diamir-Rakhiot traverse. There are areas in Nepal immediately around the main massifs of Dhaulagiri, Annapurna, Ganesh and Gaurisankar rich in untapped opportunities. In Garhwal the NW side of Chaukhamba has not been approached for 40 years: and there is a host of unclimbed mountains surrounding the Raktvarn, Nilambar and Mana glaciers. Further west, several unclimbed 7000m mountains are to be found in the Saser, Teram, Siachen and Apsarasas regions. There are many fine climbs waiting to be done in the NW Karakoram, on the mountains rising above the Skamri and Sarpo Laggo glaciers, and on Pumari Chish, Kanjut Sar W, Kampir Dior from the east, the Pasu group, the N side of the Batura. Since certain areas will always be more popular than others, a series of positive steps will eventually have to be taken to reduce the effects of overcrowding, starting with the construction of huts in the style of the European Alpine Clubs in areas such as the Upper Baltoro glacier, using solar energy for cooking and incinerators for waste disposal.

In their enthusiasm to encourage the flow of revenue generated by tourism, there appears to be a reluctance by some of those in authority to deal adequately with the harmful effects of the tourist boom. The failure to perceive the longer-term effects of overcrowding, especially in certain areas and on certain mountains, is a breach of fundamental principles. It does not help when an avalanche of applications continues to be received for the same routes on the same mountains during the short seasons available. Herein lies the root of the problem. The compulsive urge to climb a mountain of 8000m, and then another – and yet another . . . This is the competitive approach. It also underlines the prevalence of a blinkered view of the vastness of the Himalaya. The view that it

is more desirable to join the queues up much-climbed mountains of 8000m than to seek new routes, and search out unclimbed mountains and unexplored corners.

Will the meteoric rise in today's technical achievements become the commonplace standards of tomorrow? Succeeding generations will almost certainly produce a new breed of Himalayan climber with values different from those now accepted. It might seem idealistic to expect that the competitive urge and the pursuit of records will begin to diminish. It is the human factor in the end that will dictate the choice between the persistence of today's relatively narrow perspectives and the recognition of the need for a realignment of objectives, so that the Himalayan regions might retain the essence of some of those unique qualities that originally drew us there.