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First crossing of Chaukhamba (Meade's) Col (6,093m)

India, Western Garhwal, Gangotri

Chaukhamba Col lies northeast of Chaukhamba I (7,138m), on the ridge connecting it with Januhut (6,805m). A crossing of this col, from the Bhagat Kharat to Gangotri glaciers, forming the most direct route between the two famous pilgrimage sites of Badrinath and Gangotri, was first tried by English mountaineer C.F. Meade in 1912. Meade reached the col from the east and looked down onto the Gangotri Glacier. Shipton and Tilman failed to make the crossing (or even to reach the col from the east) in 1934, as did Harish Kapadia in 1997. In 1995 a three-member British team reached the col from the west in an attempt on Chaukhamba I.

Indian climbers Biplob Baidya, Biman Biswas, Paratha Sarathi Moulik, Debabrata Mukherjee, and Ritobrata Saha, with experienced high-altitude porters Devram, Kirtan, Rajhubeer, and Kamal Singh, left Mana village beyond Badrinath on May 18. By the 21st they had reached Camp 2 (4,730m) at the head of the Bhagat Kharat, below the dangerous icefall leading to Chaukhamba Col. They avoided the icefall by climbing a steep 80m rock wall leading to snow couloirs. This was fixed and the team put a camp at 5,131m. On May 23 they made a two-and-a-half-hour climb on easing ground to 5,429m, where they camped with a spectacular view of the hanging glaciers and continuous avalanches of the north face of Chaukhamba.

Next day they dropped to the glacier valley separating Chaukhamba and Januhut, threatened by avalanches from both. A two-kilometer crossing of crevassed terrain led to the icy headwall below the col. They camped at 5,623m. On the 26th the party gained the ridge to the right of, and 70m above, the heavily corniced col. During that day Paratha Sarathi Moulik slipped, hurt a leg, and needed help with his heavy load. As Kamal Singh took the load and tried to reach the fixed ropes, he too slipped and tumbled 150m. Fortunately, he was uninjured, but the rucksack fell another 150m and had to be retrieved by two other team members.

It was windy on the col, so in early afternoon the group began to descend the Gangotri side. It was difficult terrain and they only reached a suitable campsite, at 5,563m, at 11 p.m. Next day they continued down, Paratha now having trouble with his injured leg, until they arrived level with a large menacing serac barrier. On the right a steep rock wall fell to the glacier; on the left an ice couloir dropped from below the seracs. They had little option but to take the latter.

Fixing around 220m of rope, all went down. It was slow and dangerous work, but at last they reached the glacier and set up camp at 5,245m. A big avalanche fell from above, the debris stopping 100m from the tents. On the 28th they started descending the entire 25+km of the Gangotri Glacier (becoming one of very few parties to do so), with the injured Paratha moving slowly. The group reached Tapovan on the 30th, and Gangotri the next day.

In February 2014 the Himalayan Club presented this achievement with the annual Jagdish Nanavati Award for Excellence in Mountaineering.

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with information from Debabrata Mukherjee and Ritobrata Saha

Images

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