India: Winter Attempts and New Resources

India

Expeditions to the Indian Himalaya from other countries were nonexistent during 2020 and 2021 due to COVID-19 restrictions. However, from time to time, Indian nationals were allowed to travel within the country. Winter climbing on the higher peaks in the Indian Himalaya is still in its infancy, but during 2020 and ’21 there were several teams of Indian climbers attempting 6,000m summits during the winter season.

Rudra Chakraborty, Fursemba, and Rudra Prasad Halder used Nepali porters to reach base camp for the normal route on Deo Tibba (6,001m) in the Kullu region of Himachal Pradesh, taking five days instead of the usual three due to deep snow. They arrived on February 12, 2021.

The route normally climbs to the Duhangan Col (5,200m) on the ridge connecting Deo Tibba with Norbu (5,226m), but the slope below this col proved too avalanche-prone, so a steeper slope was taken, more toward Norbu. Camp 1 was placed on the ridge above, and a higher camp placed at around 5,200m. Here, the team discovered their gas cylinders, refilled with poor quality fuel in Kathmandu, were unusable. They buried their food under the snow, left the tent, and returned to base camp to collect a kerosene stove. When they returned, they found snow foxes had raided the camp and eaten most of the food. There was no option for them but to descend.

Ashish Chandra, Rivusoumya Das, Anindya Mukherjee, and Aniket Mitra made an attempt to climb Baljuri (5,922m, 30°15'16.61"N, 79°57'17.69"E) Eastern Garhwal in winter conditions. The choice of peak was determined by its ease of access and comparatively moderate technical climbing. The team approached via the Pindari Valley, planning to climb to the Baljuri Col and from there up the north ridge. On December 18, 2020, and after an arduous day in deep snow, the team camped at 4,600m, on the northeast face of Point 4,800m, about 800m southeast of the Baljuri Col. Next day they tried to continue but the avalanche risk was deemed too great.

In February 2021, Sunil Kumar Raju and White Magic Adventure Travel members Sanjeev Rai and Sunny succeeded on the first winter ascent of Kang Yatze II (6,175m) in Ladakh. Approaching via the frozen Markha River and the village of Hankar, the expedition fixed ropes and established three camps on the normal route from the northwest. The climbers reached the summit on February 25 to complete the first known winter ascent. [See also the report of a winter attempt on Kang Yatze IV here.]

Previously unreported, toward the end of September 2019, an expedition from the National Institute of Mountaineering and Allied Sports in the state of Arunachal Pradesh made the first ascent of Kangto VI (6,062m). This is one of the smaller peaks of the Kangto massif, which is dominated by Kangto I (7,042m), the highest mountain in the state and the only summit in the group known to have been climbed. It lies on the border with Tibet and the summit was reached in the 1980s from the Tibetan side, which gives a much easier approach. Difficult forested terrain and characteristically poor weather make an approach to the Kangto massif from the south demanding, but a joint Indian Mountaineering Foundation and Indo-Tibet Border Police expedition did reach its base at around 3,000m in 2016.

Finally, credit goes to Onkar Padwal, Bhupesh Patel, Yogash Umbre, and Rohit Vartak, part of a seven-person team, who reached the top of Shoshala (4,700m) in September 2021 after making the second ascent of Trishul Direct, a notable ascent for Indian big wall climbers. The 700m rock climb had been

put up by Yannick Boissenot, Elie Cheuvieux, and Giovanni Quirici over nearly three weeks (siege style) in 2011; the 19-pitch route went at 7b with a little A2 (AAJ 2012). The Indians also fixed the route and completed the ascent in around the same time, though losing many days to rain. They placed three extra bolts and climbed at 7a+ with some aid.

Information on ascents in the mountains of the Indian Himalaya is often fragmented and distributed across various mountaineering journals, unpublished expedition reports, and old books that are out of print, such as Harish Kapadia's Exploring the Hidden Himalaya. Sketchy information has led several expeditions to think they had made first ascents and to propose names for their peaks. Later, climbers have been disappointed to learn they were not the first and their peaks already had names.

Planning first ascents in the Indian Himalaya has now become easier with the publication of the second edition of the Japanese Alpine Club's (Tokai Section) excellent Indian Himalaya (ISBN 978-4-8331-5384-3). This 700-page comprehensive mountaineering guide covers approximately 2,400km of the Himalaya from East Karakoram to Sikkim. It describes all significant ascents, with many photographs. The main text is in Japanese, but 28 excellent sketch maps in English show popular areas, detailing base camps, glaciers, and key peaks (typically at a scale of 1:300,000). Moreover, an English version is expected in 2022. The Tokai Section has done exceptional work in preparing this guide, which is certain to become the standard reference for years to come.

Obtaining detailed maps for the Indian Himalaya remains a problem. Some of the Survey of India's (SOI) 1:50,000 scale maps have recently become available online. However, direct access is limited to people with an Indian mobile telephone number, not all maps are uploaded yet, and some maps have had their contours removed. In addition, the SOI maps of border areas are still restricted, and only military expeditions can access them. The lack of detailed maps means that identifying the correct names for glaciers, streams, and mountains (where named) is difficult. Trekkers face similar problems and, consequently, many trails and passes are now being digitally mapped by enthusiasts who, for example, have successfully added contours to SOI maps.

Currently, the best solution is to use a combination of sources. Google Earth Pro is still the best way to research mountain topography, but few streams and mountains are named. To get a similar overview, but as a map with contours, Mapcarta is useful but includes some mistakes in local names. Cold War maps can still be relevant: The Russian 1:100,000 military maps give contours in meters, but all local names are given in Russian. The U.S. Army's 1:250,000 maps are available online from the University of Texas; they are less detailed and have contours in feet and place names in English. Commercial maps available for certain areas, for example the Swiss Olizane 1:150,000 maps of Ladakh, have contours in meters and place names in English. By combining information from the above sources, more detailed maps can be generated.

Gaining official permission to climb in India remains challenging. As British climber Mick Fowler put it: "In theory the application procedure to climb in the Indian Himalaya is straightforward.... The uninitiated could easily be misled into thinking that the process might be simple and stress-free". What is stressful is that official approval (or rejection) is often not given until a few days before travel. This is particularly true in the border areas, due to the tense political situation. Fortunately, the Indian Mountaineering Foundation, which administers the application process, has allowed some recent expeditions to specify not only their preferred area (and peaks) but also a reserve area. This makes it possible for expeditions to mediate the risk that their application will be rejected by choosing a reserve area further from international borders.

India remains a mountaineers' paradise, with hundreds of unclimbed peaks and even forgotten valleys. It is estimated that there are approximately 300 unclimbed 6,000m peaks in Ladakh alone. But patience and determination are still needed.

— Information supplied by Keith Goffin, Germany, and Nandini Purandare/Himalayan Journal, India

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