

# ON TOP OF THE WORLD

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**The Indian Everest Saga**

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1854-2006



**M.S. KOHLI**

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# THE INDIAN EVEREST SAGA

(1854-2006)

*Contributions by Everest Leaders*



M.S. KOHLI

*Foreword by*

Prime Minister, Dr. Manmohan Singh



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DR. MANMOHAN SINGH  
Prime Minister of India

## FOREWORD

Mount Everest is closely associated with the advent, development and growth of Indian mountaineering. In 1953, the maiden ascent of Everest by Tenzing Norgay, alongwith Edmund Hillary, electrified the entire nation. It is to the credit of our visionaries—Jawaharlal Nehru and Dr. B.C. Roy—who, realizing the potential of this historic achievement by an Indian, took the momentous decision to set up the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute in Darjeeling in 1954 with Tenzing as the Director of Field Training. These welcome developments played a significant role in the life of our nation.

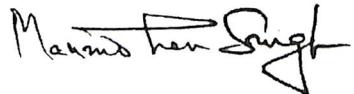
In 1965, India became the fourth nation in the world to climb Everest when the record-breaking Indian expedition, superbly led by Captain M.S. Kohli, set up the world record by putting nine climbers on the summit. This catapulted India as a major mountaineering nation in the world. In Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's words, "The record of Commander Kohli's expedition will find special mention in history. It was a masterpiece of planning, organisation, teamwork, individual effort and leadership".

By the end of the climbing season of 2006, one hundred and

seven Indians, including 12 women, have reached the highest point on the earth. It is a matter of pride for us that one of the first two persons to reach the summit is an Indian; the first man to climb Everest twice is an Indian; the first woman to climb Everest twice is also an Indian and the three climbers, who hold a world record of spending three nights just at about 28,000 feet, are also Indians.

These gallant climbs by Indians prove that there is nothing beyond the reach of our people. Today the climb of Everest has become symbolic of reaching the highest peaks of achievement in different spheres of life and the best way to promote the spirit of adventure. I am happy that Captain Kohli has now embarked on a historic mission to set up 500 'Adventure and Leadership Parks' in India. These character-building endeavours for the youth will also go a long way in improving the quality of life in the nation.

I hope this book will inspire and motivate our youth to march forward and take India to its zenith.



MANMOHAN SINGH  
Prime Minister of India



## PREFACE

I have vivid memories of the post-war phase of the epic of Everest which began in Nepal in 1950 when the Himalayan kingdom opened doors to foreign mountaineers for the first time, as also the pioneering Indian attempts to reach the highest peak in the world. On March 23, 1952, when I came to know that the Swiss Everest team was in Delhi on way to Base Camp, I had rushed to the Swiss Hotel in Civil Lines to meet them. As Students' Union President, I wanted them to visit our college. On reaching the hotel, I observed that no one spoke English. I could not converse with them at all. I returned to the college without making any headway. Tenzing was away in Kathmandu. It was this historic expedition in which Tenzing and Raymond Lambert blazed the trail to the South-East Ridge of Everest, missing the summit by 650 feet. This meeting had one positive outcome—it generated in me a desire to climb Everest one day.

The following year we were all thrilled to know that Tenzing and Hillary had reached the top of Everest. On their return to Delhi, there was a civic reception in honour of the team. Many of us had gate-crashed to get a glimpse of the heroes.

In 1960, India took up the challenge of Everest. The expedition led by Brigadier Gyan Singh, missed the summit by 730 feet. I was in the second summit party and was caught in the heavy snowfall on arrival of monsoon. On return to Delhi, we received a very heartening message from the Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, "The spirit and lure of the Himalayas is spreading now all over India among our young people, and that is a sign and

symbol of the new life and the new spirit that is coursing through India's veins."

In 1962, India attempted Everest for the second time. Major John Dias was the leader and I was selected his deputy. Sonam Gyatso, Hari Dang and I made a bid for the summit but missed it by 350 feet due to strong blizzard. We spent three nights at our last camp at 28,000 feet, two nights without oxygen. I remember, Indian newspapers had announced that we were probably dead.

The Americans had booked Everest for 1963 and 1964. So our booking was now for 1965. In 1963, six climbers reached the top. We were delighted that one of them was an Indian—Nawang Gombu. On their return to Delhi, Prime Minister Nehru, who was not really feeling too well, invited the team to Teen Murti. The American ambassador, John Galbraith, was also there. Sunil Dutt and Nargis also joined us. They were returning from Ladakh after entertaining the troops.

In 1965, I was selected to lead the third Indian Everest expedition. Another eminent climber, Major N. Kumar, was my deputy. This time we were better equipped, more determined, and of course, more experienced. The team was wonderful and nine of us were able to reach the top.

In 1984, we decided to send a mixed (men and women) expedition to Mount Everest. The expedition was led by Col. D.K. Khullar. Those days the President of Indian Mountaineering Foundation, Harish Sarin, was away in Kathmandu as India's ambassador. In his absence, as Vice President of the IMF, I looked after the administration of this important expedition. Five climbers, including Bachendri Pal, reached the summit.

Directly or indirectly, I was associated with most of the subsequent Indian expeditions to Everest. All these expeditions to Everest were responsible for spreading the spirit of adventure to every nook and corner of India and deserve to be chronicled.

The book in Part One covers the discovery of Everest and the important role played by the Indians in foreign expeditions. Part Two covers the first Indian success and Part Three covers

**PART I**

**DISCOVERY AND  
FOREIGN EXPEDITIONS**



# DISCOVERY OF EVEREST

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1852

*H.P.S. Ahluwalia*

Few people are aware of how the world's highest and most famous mountain got its name. It was during 1849 to 1855 that the Himalayan peaks in Nepal were first surveyed by the British Surveyor General of India. No one imagined that one of the peaks surveyed was the tallest in the world. Mount Everest was not prominently visible as it was hidden by a lower peak which lay in front of it. At that time Kangchenjunga was considered the highest mountain in the world. Since most of the peaks observed by the surveyors did not have any local names, Roman numerals were allotted to them. Mount Everest and Gauri Shankar were given the numerals XV and XX respectively.

The methods of computing the heights of mountain peaks were not sufficiently advanced in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. As a matter of fact, altitudes were not calculated with any degree of accuracy till much later. The question of atmospheric refraction was being investigated by scientists and that played an important part in the calculation of altitudes. When the results of the calculation were finally announced at the end of 1855, it became known that Peak XV was 29,002 feet above sea level.

The peak is situated on the Nepal-Tibet border at latitude  $27^{\circ}59'16''$  and longitude  $86^{\circ}55'40''$ . The mountain range at this highest point is formed of sedimentary calcareous and metamorphosed sandstone. The final pyramid composed of dark schist is very compact and dips northwards at 30 degree. The group is estimated to belong to the Triassic or Jurassic period (200 to 240 million years ago). It has a conspicuous, broad, light-brown band of rock known as the Yellow Band, which extends along the base of the pyramid. Stone pieces brought back from the summit of Mount Everest were analysed and the results have proved beyond doubt that it was once under the ocean. Studies of the Himalayas also reveal that they are still rising due to continuing pressure exerted by the hard crust of the earth from the north and the south. It is for this reason that the Himalayas have grown approximately 2000 m during the last 20,000 years. It is observed, as per latest figures, that the average growth is 1 mm a year.

After having found the highest mountain in the world, a search began for an appropriate name, and the matter was debated for nearly ten years. During this period, the Surveyor General considered all the local names which could possibly be used. Many names were suggested but they were all rejected. Col. Andrew Waugh, the then British Surveyor General of India (in consultation with his deputy Col. Henry Thuillier and Radhanath Sikdhar, Chief Computer), decided to name the peak after his predecessor, Sir George Everest, who had contributed a lot to the Geodetic Survey of India. He was the dominant figure of the Great Trigonometrical Survey and believed in great accuracy. The name was accepted by the Royal Geographical Society of Britain. Col. Andrew Waugh wrote to Col. Henry Thuillier, Dy. Surveyor General in March 1856, as follows:

"I was taught by my respected chief and predecessor, Sir (Col.) George Everest, to assign to every geographical object its true local or national appellation... But here is a mountain, most probably the highest in the world, without any local name that we can discover, whose native appellation, if it has any, will not very likely be ascertained before we are allowed to penetrate into Nepal, and to approach close to this stupendous snowy mass."

"In the meantime, the privilege, as well as the duty, devolves on me to assign to this lofty pinnacle... a name whereby it may be known among geographers, and become a household word. In testimony of my affectionate respect for a revered chief, in conformity with what I believe to be the wish of all the members of the scientific department over which I had the honour to preside, and to perpetuate the memory of that illustrious master of accurate geographical research... I have determined to name this noble peak... Mount Everest."

The appellation Mount was chosen by Waugh for a single definite peak and not a massif. Everest was changed to Mount Everest a year later. However, the naming of the highest mountain did not go unchallenged. Brian Hodgson, formerly a political officer in Nepal and an able linguist and scientist, claimed that "newly found" peak was none other than Devadhunga or Bhairathan, names well known in the ancient literature of Nepal. Waugh spent considerable time investigating these claims and wrote to the Asiatic Society that "the names appear to pertain to some peaks near Kuti Ghat, but as the position of that Ghat is uncertain... there is no point of departure for our investigations. The evidence only shows that there is a peak called Bairoa or Deodhanga considered to be to east of Kathmandu, but there are many peaks. We have nothing to which to have a verification."

Another controversy arose over the name of Gauri Shankar. The German brothers, Adolf Herman and Robert Schlagintweit, conducted scientific investigation in Tibet, Sikkim and Central Asia, where Adolf was later murdered in Kashgar. During their stay between 1855 and 1857, they made observations from Sikkim and announced that Everest was called Gauri Shankar in Nepal, and Chingopanari in Tibet. This caused a great sensation. The Royal Geographical Society in London supported them and disagreed with the Survey of India. Thus the name Gauri Shankar came to be adopted in maps as the highest mountain in the world till as late as 1900. Later, their sketches and observations were closely scrutinized by the Survey of India and it was discovered that the observation stations of the German brothers hid Mount Everest from their view. From Phalut they had seen Makalu and

from Kaulia they had seen Gauri Shankar. Mount Everest appeared very small from their observation post as compared to these two mountains and remained unnoticed.

The legend of Gauri Shankar and the name persisted for about half a century. It was only in 1903 that Capt. Wood entered Nepal and made observations from two stations and established that Mount Everest and Gauri Shankar were two different peaks, 36 miles apart. The explorations carried out between 1906 and 1908 in Tibet by Sir Sven Hedin and the subsequent publication of his work brought out many interesting facts. He wrote:

"I do not wish to rob the English surveyors of their discovery in 1852, but I feel compelled to bring to light the true facts of the forgotten part. In 1921 Mount Everest expedition under Col. Howard-Bury found that the Tibetans have the name Tchomo Lungma for Mount Everest, and the official instructions from Lhasa to the local district Tibetans informed the latter that the English expedition wished to visit their mountain Tchomo Lungma. Now, this correct Tibetan name, Tchomo Lungma, appears as Tchoumou Lancma on maps which were prepared from native information by French Jesuits in Peking in 1717, and these maps were printed by D'Anville in Paris in 1733. If the resemblance between the new name Tchomo Lungma and the old Tchoumou Lancma is held to be merely an accidental similarity in sound, I must then draw attention to the agreement in the geographical position of the name between the latest English maps and the old French maps. On modern maps the latitude of Mount Everest is  $27^{\circ} 20'$ , the modern longitude east of Ferro,  $104^{\circ} 55'$  and D'Anville's longitude was  $103^{\circ} 50'$ . This is surprisingly accurate when one remembers that the Peking calculations were made at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century."

Commenting on his observations, Sir Sidney Burrard of the British Surveyor General of India wrote:

"The evidence produced by Sven Hedin to prove the identity of D'Anville's range of mountains Tchoumou Lancma with the Mount Everest of modern geography is certainly very interesting; his investigation has earned our gratitude. But as in some ways,

his outlook is different from my own, I am venturing with all respect to analyse his conclusions. The two main conclusions which Sven Hedin reached in his book are:

1. The highest peak in the world, which the English claim to have discovered in 1852, was shown on French maps 119 years previously.
2. The real Tibetan name of Mount Everest, namely Tchomo Lungma, which the English did not succeed in finding until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was known to the Jesuits in Peking 190 years before."

These conclusions should be impartially considered; the highest peak of the earth is beyond the reach of nationalism. In his review of Sir Sven Hedin's book, Sir Sydney Burrard wrote:

"The interest that now attaches to Mount Everest is due only to its great height. The Lamas and Jesuit Fathers discovered that the whole of this region was mountainous, and that it abounded in ranges and peaks, but their maps show that they were unaware that any mountain of exceptional height was standing here. In fact they knew no more about Mount Everest than the Tibetans themselves knew. Nothing was known about Mount Everest, until it was observed by a theodolite from the plains of India in 1849. Until that observation was made, the world was ignorant that their highest mountain was standing here."

The question then arises: who discovered Mount Everest? A popular story which, unfortunately, has gained ground and appears in many books on Everest is that the Chief Computer, Radhanath Sikdhar, rushed into the room of the Surveyor General's office breathlessly exclaiming, "Sir, I have discovered the highest mountain in the world." Burrard in his book has effectively contradicted this version and proved that the above words could not have been uttered then.

While working on this book, I visited the Survey of India office in Dehradun and for several days went through all the available files and records of Everest, through the kind courtesy of the then Deputy Surveyor General. I am fully convinced from the facts available that the Chief Computer, Radhanath Sikdhar, was at that



time in the Calcutta office of the Survey of India. He was posted in 1819 and continued there and had no hand in the computation of the height of Everest. Radhanath Sikdhar, a very able computer, worked under Sir George Everest and was highly praised by him. He joined the Survey of India on a salary of Rs. 30 a month and rose to be the Chief Computer, which was a great achievement.

In 1950, immediately after the Independence of India, a great controversy started and at one stage, pressure was brought on the then Prime Minister by Bengal that Mount Everest should be renamed Mount Sikdhar as it was stated then that Sikdhar's contribution to the discovery of the highest mountain was much more than that of Sir George Everest. This question also came up for discussion in the Indian Parliament but did not yield any fruitful results. Firstly, Sikdhar had no hand in the computation of the readings of Everest, and moreover, a computer is not the real discoverer. According to the records available with the Survey of India: "Mr. Hennessey was engaged on all the computations for determining the positions and heights of the principal peaks of the Himalayan range including Mount Everest. He saw Mount Everest when he was engaged on the north-east longitudinal series. Mr. Armstrong is one of the gentlemen by whom Mount Everest was observed."

During my visits to the Survey of India, Dehradun, I did visit the various branches where the calculations were conducted and made my notes perhaps on the same table on which the computation readings were made over a hundred years ago.

Five Tibetan names for Mount Everest were familiar in the regions of Everest. They were found to be: Chomo Kankar (mentioned by Col. Waddell and Sarat Chandra Das, 1904), Chholungbu (mentioned by Surveyor Natha Singh, 1907), Chomo Lungmo (mentioned by Gen. Bruce, 1909), Chomo Uri (mentioned by Col. Howard-Bury, 1921), and Chomo Lungma (also mentioned by Col. Howard-Bury, 1921). Chomo is a Tibetan word corresponding to the Sanskrit word *Gauri* which means Goddess. Everest is known as Chomolungma by the Tibetans and Sagar-matha by the Nepalese today. The official name used by the Tibetan authorities in Lhasa for Mount Everest was Teha-mo-

Lungma. Sir George Bell, the British representative at Lhasa, who received the first passport in the form of permission for the first Mount Everest expedition wrote:

"When the Dalai Lama gave me the permission for Mount Everest expedition to take place, a week or two after I had reached Lhasa, he handed me a paper on which was written in Tibetan, 'To the west of the five treasuries of Great Snow (in the jurisdiction of 'White Glass Fort' near 'Rocky Valley inner monastery') is the Southern District where birds are kept (Lho-Cha-ma-lung) [Lho-south]'. Later on, in Lhasa, one of the Dalai Lama's secretaries who was in attendance on my party, a man of exceptional knowledge and intelligence, told me that Cha-ma-lung is short for Cha-Dzi-ma-lung-pa, which means 'the district where birds are kept'. He told me that in the time of the early Tibetan kings, 650 to 800 A.D., a large number of birds were fed in this district at the expense of the king. Now, *lung* in Cha-ma-lung means a district that has a valley or valleys in it, and it often means just a valley. It cannot be applied to a mountain summit, nor would a bird sanctuary be on the top of a mountain. In fact Cha-ma-lung, which is a common contraction from Cha-Dzi-ma-lung-pa cannot be the name of a mountain. Nor did the Dalai Lama or his Secretary use the name in that sense. I never heard Chomolung or Chomo-Lungma. People would be very likely to change Cha-mo, into Cho-mo, for the latter occurs in mountain names such as Cho-molha-ri or Chomo Kangkar. *Cho* means Lord amongst gods. The maps on the previous page of Mount Everest were prepared by Sir Sidney Burrard. One was copied from a Lama's survey and the other from a modern map. In comparison, the Lama's map has many errors; the position of the sacred peak of Kailash was in error by 85 miles in latitude. Sir Sydney Burrard observed that such an error can sufficiently displace Mount Everest from the crest of the Himalayas to the plains of India. He also observed that the Lama's map followed the rivers and laid down their courses; the modern map shows the same rivers. The maps do agree closely in shape which is determined by the sources of rivers. It can safely be assumed that it was the combined effort of the two and the credit should go to the Survey of India."

## Sir George Everest

Born on 4 July 1790 in Greenwich, England, he was the second son, and his father was a solicitor to both Greenwich and Chelsea Hospitals. George Everest had a brilliant academic career and it was in 1806 that he came to India in the service of East India Company. He later joined Bengal artillery. Few years later, he went to Java to make the survey of the island for the Governor, Sir Stamford Raffles. He returned to India in 1818 and began his work in the Survey of India. After working in India for a few years, he left for England for a brief period to supervise the design and purchase of new instruments. On returning to India he was employed in Calcutta, organizing workshops for field units. In 1830 he became the British Surveyor General of India and conducted the grand Trigonometrical Survey. In 1832, he came to Mussoorie bringing a Great Arc from the Central Himalayas and bought a house which became his summer headquarters for the succeeding ten years.

Although his main interest lay in the Great Arc, he was responsible for the surveys of Madras and Bombay. In 1834, he selected Dehradun and Agra as the base line to start his detailed work on the Great Arc. The same year he went to the hills of Kedar Kanta and Chour. He made observations of the snow peaks and made sketches of these profiles. He continued his work even during the winter and hot summers in India. Due to the strenuous work and the long journeys he had to undertake, his health started to deteriorate. Once, in the month of February he was confined to bed with inflammation in the hip joint which crippled him. He wrote: "To the astonishment of my medical attendants... after the application of some hundreds of leeches, fomentations administered night and day for several days in succession, a due abstraction of blood from cupping and a course of gruel did



Sir George Everest

I begin to recover the use of the limb, and by the end of February was again able to walk about”.

George Everest became a fellow of the Royal Society which paid rich tributes to him remembering the “journeys through vast and magnificent forest where, more to be dreaded than tiger or hyena, lurked the deadly typhus which prostrated him and his whole following... For months he was so weak that he had to be supported by two men while taking his observations at the great theodolite, and could not reach out his hand to the screw of the vertical circle without assistance... The chief was so indefatigable that his contemporaries spoke of him as Neverest.” Sir George Everest was promoted to the rank of Lt. Colonel in 1838 and his salary rose from Rs. 1700 to Rs. 2000.

Everest once refused to cross into Gwalior without due ceremony. He wrote angry letters to the Resident who refused to interfere. He then broke all rules and wrote directly to the Darbar for which he was severely reprimanded by the Supreme Government. In 1843, he handed over the charge of Surveyor General of India to Waugh who had joined him to work on the Great Arc in 1836. He returned to England in 1844 where he started the Second Great Arc work which was published in 1847.

Immediately after returning to England, he married Emma, daughter of Thomas Wing. They had six children but unfortunately none of the Everest descendants survived. Everest was offered knighthood on his retirement but he refused. He was again offered the knighthood in 1861 which he accepted perhaps on persuasion by his friends. Among his other publications were ‘On Instruments and Observations for Longitude for Travellers on Land,’ published in 1859. He died in 1866.