

BRITISH MERU EXPEDITION - September 1993 - Garhwal India

**Objective :** Meru Shark's Fin 6660m - east face .

**Group :** NOEL CRAINE  
PAUL PRITCHARD  
JOHNNY DAWES  
PHILLIP LLOYD  
DAVE KENDALL

REPORT

Arriving on the 20 th of August in Delhi we suffered the fate of countless expeditions before us - a ruthless battering at the hands of the Indian bureaucracy . A none too subtle combination of enervating Delhi heat , bureaucratic tedium and gastroinal warfare saw the team falling to a dismal low point . Dealings with the Indian Mountaineering Federation were no more enlightening save for meeting our Liaison Officer , Parag Pendharkar . Parag was a real light in this sea of madness - a genial and humble fellow, he became a close companion to us all and with luck we will be climbing together in the future .

Escaping Delhi's humid clutches we travelled the wild roads off the plains into the foothills of the Himalayas . We stopped in Uttarkashi to complete our provisioning and meet with Mount Support ; our liaison agency . The reality of the Himalayas was soon stunningly apparent- following the path of the pilgrims up the precipitous canyons of the Ganges we could only gasp and fumble for adjectives that failed to hit the mark . Acclimatisation for the group went on at vastly different rates - with only two of the five having any previous altitude experience the all too sobering headaches and vomiting soon had three members chained to buckets and no doubt questioning the wisdom of altitude mountaineering. The formation of the Llanberis Low Altitude mountaineering society was inaugurated in a Crimean like death ward halfway up the approach march.

In the interim Dave and Phillip completed the load hauling to advance base (5000m) - a task which had them certainly contemplating the relative joys of edema. First sight of Meru's east face was enough to make any self respecting alpinist reach into the bag of "a thousand excuses". The 1500m wall has resisted all attempts to climb it directly , claimed numerous lives and reigns inviolate alongside it's neighbour Shivling. A harsh combination of loaded avalanche couloirs , extreme mixed climbing and technical wall climbing has ensured that the by now annual pilgrimage of top alpinists return home vanquished . Although we were to reach way higher than any previous attempts ,our fate was to be no different from our predecessors. Meru's east face and more specifically the Sharks Fin remains one of the supreme alpine challenges demanding a high degree of ice and mixed climbing skill with the technical crux - a 500m vertical sword of granite situated at the top of the route .

We were not alone in our attempts to climb this face - an American team arrived to try a line right of ours . They were veterans of a previous expedition to Meru and of substantial alpine and altitude experience. The weather through the initial period was excellent - mild temperatures and minimal snow pack meant the approach to the wall was both easy and safe ; alas the moment we were finally ready to go onto the wall the fateful monsoon struck out -

two torrential storms dumped four feet of snow on the route consecutively . For two weeks we were confined to our tents in Patagonian like misery - hundreds of people were killed in landslides and floods in the valleys below . Hailed as the worst monsoon in 50 years such cries did little to ease our frustration . In the breaks in the weather we bouldered on Tapovan meadows awesome granite - in fact our team was probably more successful in this realm than up high . Whole days were passed in furious effort on what must be one of the world's top bouldering locations . Johnny boggled all with some fine 8a/b problems - certainly the Americans failed to see the attraction of two digit dynos and merely shook their heads in disbelief.

The weather finally cleared but now we were crippled by a dangerously loaded avalanche slope leading 1000m up to the fin . Whilst the American's gully had already avalanched ours remained perilously poised to go and we could only wait for the pack to settle . We had already cached one haul bag 500m up the 50 degree slope on a protected shoulder - our aim was always to go alpine style yet carry 500m of rope with which to fix ahead (capsule style) In this way we wouldn't have to move camp every morning nor would we be bound to using portaledge on the headwall. Dave had by this stage taken the weighty decision to stay off the slope so on the evening of the 23rd the remaining four of us staggered up to begin the route. The climb up to the shoulder (halfway up the gully 5500m) under headlamp wasn't technically demanding (45-50 degrees) but the combination of avalanche danger and heavy loads took a heavy toll. By morning it was snowing again and Noel was suffering from altitude . We dug a snow cave whilst Noel descended to recover ; later on it cleared sufficiently for the remaining three (Paul , Phillip and Johnny ) to fix the next 350m of the gully . What had appeared easy angle from below turned out to be 60-70 degree water ice - some excellent climbing ensued though notable for an absence of ice protection . The following day spent in the tight confines of the snow cave as it snowed and blew continuously - it was in a sense fortunate as it gave us a chance to recover - the workload of five was being divided between three and in the eight days around and above 6000m we were to feel the strain .

Leaving the relative comfort of the shoulder we staggered up the fixed lines with all our bivvy gear food and fuel for 14 days and an extensive aid rack - the horror scenario for any alpine wall. Phillip led the final 3 pitches to the head of the gully - more excellent water ice at angles over 70 degrees providing interesting lung and calf pains. The snow cave carved out of a 50 degree slope at the head of the gully was to be our home for the next four days as we fixed line up the rock ramp and mixed sections to the base of the fin proper . Poor communication with Noel saw a lot of wasted effort retrieving the fixed line from below - although we left the line down for two more days sadly Noel was unable to reach us and we were forced to continue without him. Some hard rock climbing pitches with complex route finding brought us up the ramp to the next mixed section . Johnny came into his own here leading two E5/6b pitches - no mean feat at 6000m .

On the sixth day Paul led a solid grade six mixed pitch up an eighty degree gully bringing us finally to the base of the fin . The cumulative stress of leading complicated and hard pitches at altitude for a week was beginning to show - our meagre diet and the altitude meant we weren't recovering at all. Disaster struck in the simplest yet most damning of mistakes on the seventh morning - Johnny dropped his plastic boot . With only one stove and all our fixed line exhausted we all had to move up to the next camp , we were left with one gloomy option . Paul and Phillip continued up on the seventh day to check out the line for future reference but

the route was essentially over and it remained only to get Johnny safely down the gully without boot or crampon.

This wasn't a fait accompli for the pack cracked loud and ominously as we placed three of the descending belays . Whilst descending unroped on the final section Johnny slipped and fell 600 feet to stop short of a large crevasse - a lucky end to our attempt. We had been on the wall for eight days ; with 400m of technical rock to the summit and 6 days food left it's a moot point whether we would have made it up . In truth the point doesn't bear discussion what is more important is our determination to return and climb this incredible wall. Certainly it poses challenges equal to any in the world - a fine combination of complex route finding , technical rock and ice and immense endurance. Meru's east face remains unclimbed for yet another season ; we have been served an excellent lesson in alpine humility and all in all little has changed in the Gangotri valley .