

MOUNTAINEERING: THE NEEDS OF NEPAL

by

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Introduction:

If the number of expeditions that come to Nepal is any guide, mountaineering in Nepal has surely come of age. This autumn, 43 mountaineering expeditions from 16 countries will be attempting 29 different peaks, 13 of which are over 8000 m. These attempts will directly involve nearly 420 expedition members, perhaps over 1200 Sherpas and porters and 43 liaison officers giving a total of nearly 1700 people. For the Government of Nepal this will mean earning a royalty of over Rs.500,000 (nearly \$ 37,000), direct employment of nearly 1300 people with a remuneration of over 2.3 million rupees (approximately \$ 1,70,000) in a period of a little over 6 weeks. It will also mean a consumption of at least 4000 kg. of firewood per day for the number of expedition days involved in getting to and from the base camps. In the exhilaration of a successful ascent or the disappointment of a failure the impressive amount of garbage that the expeditions will have contributed to, from and beyond the base camp will perhaps be forgotten. A few mountaineers will have given their life to the eternal lure of the Himalays; rescue problems will remain acute. The inadequacy of administration, communication and technical facilities will at times be frustratingly felt even though the famous Nepali smile and the glittering Himalayan peaks in the first rays of the morning sun will remain reassuring. In short, many needs will be felt all over again. For as mountaineering in Nepal has come of age, so have problems. The needs have become more pronounced with each passing year and it is time that these needs be discussed and put in proper perspective if mountaineering is to remain a priority area in the tourism industry in Nepal.

Policy Issues:

For host countries, particularly developing countries like Nepal, mountaineering involves some fundamental policy issues. Most of these issues arise, as a result of the very nature of mountaineering activity. Mountaineering is a risky sport that needs to be made safe, in so far as safety is possible. Mountaineering is an adventure with nature. Thus it has to be managed in a way that retains both the spirit of adventure and the natural ecological balance. Mountaineering involves elements of physical, and psychological risks - all of which need to be placed within limits. Mountaineering has become an important part of tourist industry. Mountaineering policies therefore have to be placed in the overall context of the present and projected growth and needs of tourism.

Like all environment related activities, the marginal cost to the environment has to be minimised while the marginal benefit both to the nation and to the mountaineers has to be increased. Mountaineering activity, everywhere is an activity that is related to an extremely fragile environment both because of slope and height. Mountaineering policies have therefore an added responsibility of guaranteeing the stability of the environment as well as the resource base. One has, therefore, to make sure that " the goose that lays the golden egg does not foul its own nest ". Mountaineering as a tourist activity again can never be the catchy " home away from home " idea. But then it is " nature away from home ". The mountaineers do not simply climb a mountain, they have to transcend the very physical and cultural heart of the country.

Each mountaineer that comes to scale a peak in Nepal does not simply scale a peak and leave his/her footprints in the forlorn heights, he/she, we would like to hope, goes back to the more wiser in the realization that while scaling the unknown, he/she has inadvertently made it known with all its overpowering implications. If we would like a tourist to go back with pleasant memories, we would also like the mountaineer to go back with a deeper humility, understanding and sympathy of the Nepali landscape and the people who make the landscape meaningful. Mountaineering, therefore, has to be oriented by these needs and policy prescription have to be framed under these needs.

It might not therefore be out of context to put the two ideological stands in mountaineering - the idea of institutionalised and free mountaineering - in the Nepali perspective. Free mountaineering as practised in Western Europe is clearly not feasible in the Nepal Himalayas, for several reasons : First, the Himalayas, to Nepal, are by themselves a resource base in more than one sense of the word. Himalayas are a source of much needed foreign exchange. Second, Himalayas, unlike the mountains in Western Europe, involve a high level of risk. For safety alone, it is imperative that there be certain controls on mountaineering. Third, Himalayas, at least for most of the central and eastern parts in Nepal, form a sensitive political boundary between Nepal and the Tibetan region of the People's Republic of China. Fourth, because of the fragile environment, the ecological burden resulting from mountaineering can simply overpower the environmental capability and steps have to be taken to avert such a situation. Perhaps, a need might be felt to preserve the natural environment in certain regions in its pristine state.

On the other hand, the idea of institutionalised mountaineering appears much more appealing to countries like Nepal. But here again, there are limits. Institutionalised mountaineering in its extreme form involves governmental regulation and management of expeditions that are permitted entry into the country. This simply is neither feasible nor desirable or practical in the Nepalese Himalayas. Nepal, therefore, can neither afford the extreme of free mountaineering nor the extreme of institutionalised mountaineering. Private sector, evidently

efficient in its performance, has played a significant role in the management and growth of mountaineering in Nepal and it is only fair that this role be responsibly consolidated both by the private sector and the government. In the meantime, it is for the government of Nepal to see to it that policies in the national, environmental, cultural and economic interest are formulated, appropriate regulations are drawn and that such regulations and provisions are responsibly and honestly followed by the private sector who manage the mountaineering expeditions. There is surely some trade-off involved, for example, the trade-off between environmental damage and financial earnings to the government or the private sector. It is up to the government to decide the points of these trade-offs. In so deciding, one hopes that the permanence of the Himalayan landscape, the variety and vitality of the human cultural heritage, the developmental aspirations of the people and the extremely slim resource base of these regions be given a very high priority.

It is in the above context that an attempt will be made to indicate some of the major problems in mountaineering in Nepal and identify some of the needs arising out of these problems. This is not an exhaustive treatment of the "needs" in the area of mountaineering in Nepal. The ramifications of the "needs" and the needs themselves are so many that such an exercise would be pretentious in a short space. What follows is essentially a native observer's perspectives on the needs in the area of mountaineering and mountain-tourism in Nepal.

NEEDS

The needs will be dealt under four broad themes :

- 1) Needs of a technical nature,
- 2) Needs in the field of management and training,
- 3) Administrative needs and
- 4) Auxillary needs.

It need not to be emphasised that the problems that will be highlighted and the needs that will be suggested are by nature inter-related.

1) Needs of a technical nature

a) Maps : The lack of detailed, large-scale authentic maps is a problem of a very long standing. With an exception of the Khumbu region, reliable topographical maps are simply not available. The Mountaineering Expedition Regulation of HMG 1979 specifies the potential expeditions to "submit a map which clearly depicts the caravan route and the expedition route". So it is mandatory to abide by this provision. The Ministry of Tourism itself does not have large-scale authentic maps on the basis of which the routes etc.. can be verified. Currently, much of the routing in the Ministry of Tourism is based on the Japanese publication "Mountaineering Maps of the World" (Scale : 1:3,000,000). If mountaineering is to be a priority area for HMG in the field of tourism, it is the obligation of HMG to provide expeditions with suitable maps of the area, notwithstanding the fact that construction of good maps is a time consuming and costly enterprise. Survey of India maps can be updated, the resources of HMG Department of Survey and Remote Sensing Department can pull their resources together and make considerable headway in the right direction. This area certainly needs priority.

Thus far 122 peaks of over 6500 m. have been opened by the Ministry of Tourism, while over 270 peaks are known. Apparently many peaks have not been opened due to the lack of knowledge made evident by the lack of maps. In fact, HMG has been ironically dependant on foreign sources or past expeditions in this area for information on route conditions, snow and weather conditions etc. Technical needs of mountaineering have to be professionally met. A start can be made, perhaps, by starting with the collection and compilation of caravan and expedition route maps, photographs etc. of selected, most frequented destinations. A map library and a photographic library appear to be extremely essential to the Ministry of Tourism. In fact, these can be financially advantageous to HMG also.

b) Verification : There have been instances where expeditions have come back by ascending the wrong peak. Verification of an ascent is important and the concerned ministry of HMG should have the ability to verify the peaks or establish a successful ascent with certainty. HMG has already made a start by collecting photographs of different peaks. This should be continued and added to the photographic library of the Ministry of Tourism.

c) Expert Studies : Mountaineering, at least its attraction to the risk-taker, lies perhaps in the risk itself. Therefore technical studies on routes for climbing may not be desirable but peaks can be graded on the basis of problems and requirements and background information on each can be provided. There is definitely a need to provide as exhaustive information as possible to expeditions.

d) Guided Climbs : Scaling peaks of over 6,500 m. require professional competence and the government should of necessity insist on "good" climbing. But for amateur mountain trekkers who would like to feel on top, guided climbs under the guide of technically and professionally competent "guides" can be organised. Guided climbs seem to have considerable prospects in Nepal. The need in this area is of creating a pool of competent Nepali mountaineering graduates duly certified by HMG. These operations can, if possible, be run by a quasi-government organization and by private organizations. Many of the lesser peaks in not-too-crowded destinations can be opened up for such guided climbs. Safety consideration make it imperative that detailed information on such peaks be prepared and provided to concerned parties.

2) Training, Management and related needs

The needs in training, management and related fields are as diverse and varied as they are critical. These needs include needs of technical management of mountaineering to management needs in such areas as communication, mountain rescue and the environment.

a) Training: The need for a mountaineering Institute had long been felt in Nepal for the training of Nepali mountaineers as also for upgrading the technical and safety skills of Sherpas. It was with this objective that the Manang Mountaineering Institute (MMI) was established at Manang. The Institute founded in 1974 and managed by Nepal Mountaineering Association (NMA) with the assistance of the Government of Yugoslavia is offering the 4th annual course this year. Since the courses run for only a few weeks each year the facilities that are present have not been fully utilized. The courses, thus far, have been offered between June and September. Because of the fact that a large proportion of Manang Institute participants derive from within the mountaineering establishments the operation of courses around the peak mountaineering season has apparently been a major problem.

The needs in the area of training are two-fold. The first concerns the maximum utilization of existing facilities by introducing a variety of courses in mountaineering and allied fields aimed at creating a pool of different types of personnel required for mountaineering and mountain tourism. In addition to mountaineering courses for amateurs, intermediate and advanced level courses can be offered in mountaineering skills and safety techniques. Refresher courses can be introduced for past graduates. Training of trekking guides can also take place under the aegis of the Institute. If the idea of "guided climbing" is to be taken seriously such Institutes will have to play the leading role. For consolidating all these activities other countries can perhaps follow the example of Yugoslavia and contribute their efforts. More Institutes like the Manang School will be needed in the future and here again external assistance can be fruitful.

The second need pertains to the operation of the Institutes. The idea that a Mountaineering Institute in Nepal can function and create an effective pool of trained mountaineers without functional linkage with other Institutes of higher learning appears far-fetched. The need then is to foster close working relationship between the instruction of physical education at Tribhuvan University and the Mountaineering School. Perhaps, it might be feasible to grant extra-credit for physical education students who undergo the MMI training. This is a matter that can be worked out between the Institute and the University. The courses offered at MMI and the training imparted has remained quite satisfactory and the MMI is trying its best under the circumstances.

If the aim of the mountaineering Institute is to bring about indigenous technical professionalization in mountaineering and mountain tourism it is of course imperative that such Institutes are managed and run under strictly professional lines.

b) Liaison Officers: The Mountaineering Expedition regulations, 1979 specify that each expedition will be accompanied by a liaison officer deputed for the job by the concerned Ministry department of HMG. Most of the liaison officers recruited at the present are either derived from the army or the police. In certain circumstances, non-governmental personnel are also entrusted with the job. The performance of most liaison officers has been commendable and satisfactory but there are problems in this area also. Most liaison officers have little or no exposure to high altitudes and are not properly oriented to their jobs. Therefore liaison officers need to be properly oriented regarding their jobs and responsibilities before they depart with the expeditions.

Before mountaineering season starts all the liaison officers that are to accompany different expeditions can be given a 2 to 3 day orientation-cum-training in what they are expected to do, what they will encounter and aspects of mountaineering logistics. Liaison officers need not be professional climbers but the Royal Nepal Army and the Police can in fact think of training a group of their personnel on a continuing basis who will then accompany expeditions and also, as is the case now, take part in joint expeditions. This way a professional group of liaison officers can be created.

c) Communication: It takes more than two weeks on foot from some of the base camps to the nearest centre of communication. Nepal does not have a well-developed system of communication and whatever network there is has been developed more from an administrative point of view and less from the point of view of mountaineering. Communication is therefore a major problem for mountaineering expeditions that come to Nepal, particularly when things unforeseen happen. Mountaineering Regulations permit the expeditions to bring two sets of wireless radios to communicate at a fixed frequency directly from the base camp to the Ministry of Tourism. But most of the teams cannot afford it because the equipments can be rather expensive. Most organisers of mountaineering expeditions tend to feel, and with reason, that a better solution would be for the Government to procure 8 to 10 sets of the communication equipment and hire them at a certain fee to expeditions that desire the use of these equipments. The Telecommunication Department of HMG has a ten year plan of establishing solar power transmitters in remote areas and 5 such areas are to be surveyed in the current year. This has to be speeded up with high priority given to areas which are most frequented by mountaineering expeditions. Because the problem of mountain rescue is very closely connected with the problem of communication, there is an urgent need for concerted action in this area.

d) Problem of Rescue: An increase in the number of expeditions to Himalayan destinations also means that rescue problems in the Himalayas will proportionately be higher. From 1979 to the Spring of 1982 a total of 58 mountaineers have lost their lives in the Himalayas. In the last few years an average of 17 casualties per year have been reported in the Nepal Himalayas alone. More than 70% of these tragedies have occurred in the case of foreigners. Rescue provisions at the present consist of services rendered on immediate payment by Royal Nepal Army, and the activities of Himalayan Rescue Association (HRA).

Himalayan Rescue Association which is basically dependant on HMG contribution and some aid is really not equipped financially, technically or equipment-wise in dealing with the needs in this field. With an exception of a hyperbaric chamber facility with Japanese assistance at Pheriche and the supply of some drugs, the HRA has not been active in other areas perhaps because of resource constraints. HRA would benefit greatly with external assistance from specialised organisation such as UIAA.

The Royal Nepal Army helicopters undertake rescue services on demand. They do their best under the circumstances and if the helicopters are available but this service suffers as a result of the lack of equipment, oxygen, blood, first-aid and so on. The effort is focused in bringing the casualty to Katmandu for expert medical attention. Because of the costs involved (the charges are US \$ 825/hr including flight, landing, etc.) not all expeditions can afford to make immediate payments when the services are requested. Moreover the Army helicopters "do not" land above 15000 ft (4587m) which creates further problems of transportation. As a result of the poor communication, and sometimes no communication altogether, the services - as and what they are - cannot be requested in time.

The needs in the area of rescue are therefore manifold and not all of these needs perhaps can be managed by the Government of Nepal given her developmental priorities. Expedition desirous of rescue services - if and when such needs arise - must in all fairness receive such services. Perhaps some kind of a Helicopter Rescue Insurance Scheme can be devised so expeditions so desirous are guaranteed rescue services. The ideal thing would be to have some helicopters standing by for emergency services during the mountaineering season which could handle rescue services on a priority basis. Rescue equipment and technical expertise are also essential. In this regard, some attention must be paid towards the creation of a pool of middle-level trained rescue cadres which could be located at certain vantage points for speedy and efficient rescue operations. The coordination of NMA, HRA, Royal Nepal Army and RNAC, agencies that handle the flight operations, is essential. The extent to which HMG can be capable of organising this venture given the resource - constraints is of course open to question. The establishment of equipped health stations/hospitals in settlements near the base camps is another idea that needs to be accorded some priority.

e) Porters: For those engaged in managing the mountaineering expeditions, porters have become quite a problem in recent years. Many of the problems connected with porters have actually emanated as a result of the lack of a organised and registered pool of professional porters who could be drawn upon when required.

Porterage in Nepal is a socially less preferred activity and it is only economic considerations that has led people to fall upon porterage as a way of life. The problems in this area are mainly related to i) availability and ii) rates. Rates, very often, despite government specifications, depend on demand and urgency of the job and the demand/supply equation is at times naturally taken to its extreme. This causes hardships to expeditions. In this area while there is a need to ensure that mountaineering expeditions do not unduly suffer in the bargain, there is also the need to see to it that porters who often take this activity as a result of economic pressures are not unduly exploited. The Travel Agents Association of Nepal (TAAN) is planning to operate porter registration depots at various locations in the kingdom, and if successfully operated, this might ease the problem.

f) Fuel Depots: One of the adverse impacts of mountaineering and trekking in Nepal has been that the consumption of fire-wood in the already deforested hill-mountain regions has been on the increase. Estimates show that mountaineering and trekking in certain regions like the Khumbu has increased the consumption of fire-wood by about 10%, and is annually increasing. An average of 160 kg of fire-wood per day is consumed by a group of 15 trekkers with 10 Sherpas. This gives an average daily consumption of 6.4 kg per person. Porters on an average consume about 1.5 kg of fire-wood per day. Given these rates the environmental/ecological problems in the mountaineering and trekking regions can become, and in certain areas have already become, major determinants of ecological dislocation.

Alternative to fire wood in mountain areas is hard to come by. an appealing idea, and one which is being experimented in the Khumbu region, is the establishment of fuel depots in certain frequented mountaineering and trekking routes. Similar fuel depots for Langtang, Rara, Annapurna Sanctuary and Muktinath/Manang region are under consideration.

The kerosene depot at Jhorsaale at the entrance to the Sagarmatha National Park in the Khumbu region was initiated through the efforts of German Alpine Club and the German Agency for Technical Cooperation. They have also been active in reforestation efforts in the region. The depot at Khumbu has its own management and locational problems at the present but with proper management the depot would go a long way in meeting the needs of both trekkers and mountaineers.

The cooperation of the concerned authorities is of course central to the success of such ventures. In the mean time, the use of wood fuel in major trekking routes should be discouraged together with an encouragement in community forestry and simialar efforts. Mountaineering expeditions, perhaps, should be obliged to use altitude fuel in all areas, not only in national park as is currently the practice. Provision of alternative fuel needs to be taken up as a priority problem in the area of mountaineering.

g) Waste and Garbage Disposal: Trekking and mountain tourism has yielded little thought about and sometimes unexpected side-effects inspite of the fact that this has resulted in dramatic changes in the economic life of the people in concerned areas. New problems of environmental management have cropped up. While only 20 trekkers visited the Namche area in 1964, nearly 6000 trekkers and mountaineers visited Namche in 1978. In many areas the numbers of trekkers and mountaineers sometimes exceeds local population. The same camps are frequently used. In Thyangboche, sometimes as many as 80 tents are pitched in the little field in front of the monastery. Waste, disposal and sanitation related problems are compounded as a result of the overcrowding in campsites. Plastic and cellophene mingled with bottles and cans are a frequent sight all along some trails. The Everest trail is often referred to as the "garbage trail". Neither are mountains free of the garbage. Captain Kohli reports "hundreds of empty oxygen bottles, food tins, gas cylinders" lying around in the South Col at a height of 8,200 m. The Mountaineering regulations stipulate that every mountaineering team shall, before its departure from the camp pitched, burn or bury underground all the materials to be discarded. In practice, however, most items are just buried and often surface in a few months or a year's time. Cooperation from expeditions in keeping the environment clean is as essential as the follow up, through regulation and monitoring, by the concerned agencies of the government in general and the liaison officer in particular. Like the problem of fuel depots, the environmental management problem should receive due and timely attention.

3) Administrative Needs: Many of the managerial needs that have been referred to earlier have administrative connotation in terms of new provisionin existing regulations, monitoring and so on. Some of the explicit problems will be highlighted here.

Existing mountaineering regulations provide a list of equipments.

Because of the fact that peaks have not been graded according to equipment needs, at times, the equipment might not be enough for larger expeditions. Certain provision in the list underrate the needs, for example, in the provision for local porters elementary things like the snow goggles have not been mentioned. In fact some agencies that manage mountaineering expeditions detail their own equipment lists which appear to be more comprehensive than that provided under the Mountaineering Expedition Regulations.

Coordination is an internal administrative need in facilitating mountaineering expeditions. Coordination between the Ministry of Commerce, the Ministry of Communication and the Ministry of Tourism appears to be essential in clearance, storage and monitoring of mountaineering equipment.

Mountaineering expeditions are required to ensure all the personnel including porters. The regulation also require that the insurance be effected from the National Insurance Corporation of Nepal or the insurance company authorised by the Ministry of Tourism. National Insurance Corporation of Nepal does not have provisions for group insurance for porters. This appears essential in view of the fact that the mountaineering teams are required to pay compensation for injuries to persons without insurance.

Mountaineering, at least for the Nepali Sherpas, guides and high altitude porters, is pretty often the only opportunity available to better their economic prospects. For the Sherpas in particular one might say "the mountains have come to them" unlike the foreign mountaineer "who comes to the mountains". Most of these persons are illiterate and extra agricultural occupations other than mountaineering are non-existent. For the professional Sherpas and high altitude porters who carry the "Sahib's load" and some times the Sahibs themselves, and whose contribution is pivotal to the success of any and all expeditions disability or sickness as a result of mountaineering is a disastrous prospect. For these people, apart from insurance, welfare provisions through setting up of a High Altitude Porter Welfare Fund under governmental auspice will act as an added incentive not only to high altitude porters at present but also to professionalise the porter system in the long run.

4) Auxillary Needs: Tourism in general is the largest foreign exchange earner in Nepal. In 1979/80 tourism contributed nearly US\$ 45 million to the national economy. It is evident that the effects - both income and environmental effects - of tourism in general and mountaineering in particular chain react throughout the Nepali economy and environment.

The need therefore is to meaningfully link tourism and mountaineering to Nepali national economy such that these become the vehicle of articulating and effecting the developmental aspirations of the Nepali people. Interaction introduces novel elements to economies, cultures and environment. This is natural. Mountaineering is simply one mode of interaction and has had effects of a far-reaching nature on our remote economies, cultures and environments, not all of which are negative.

Environmental implications in particular have been rather frightening. The need therefore is to "intergrate" - to use a fashionable terminology in Nepal today - developmental activities like agricultural extension work, efforts in soil, water and forest conservation with tourism and mountaineering. In this regard, trekking and mountaineering routes should receive high priority in development. These efforts, taken towards the right direction and with the right spirit, will go a long way in abating the environmental problems that have the potentiality of causing irreversible damage to the mountain eco-system of Nepal.

Finally, there are other areas which allow for a better integration of mountaineering and mountain tourism to national economy. Encouragement should be given to local production of quality high altitude food and in the manufacturing of clothing, kit bags, luggage and other trekking and mountaineering equipment. Some small ventures are already underway, the need is to provide official encouragement. Such efforts will not only save time and money for mountaineering expeditions but also aid in the process of directly relating mountaineering to the national economy of Nepal. For ultimately, the prospects of mountaineering in Nepal will have to reinforce the prospects of Nepal's economic development and to that extent the needs of mountaineering in Nepal cannot be divorced from the needs of Nepal's economic development.