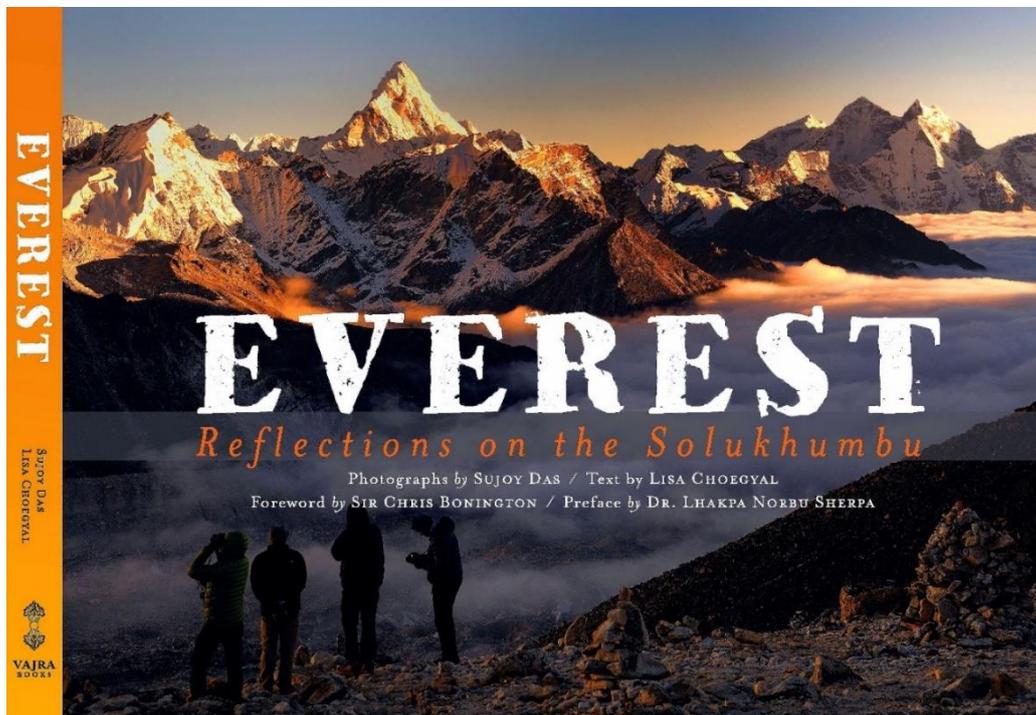


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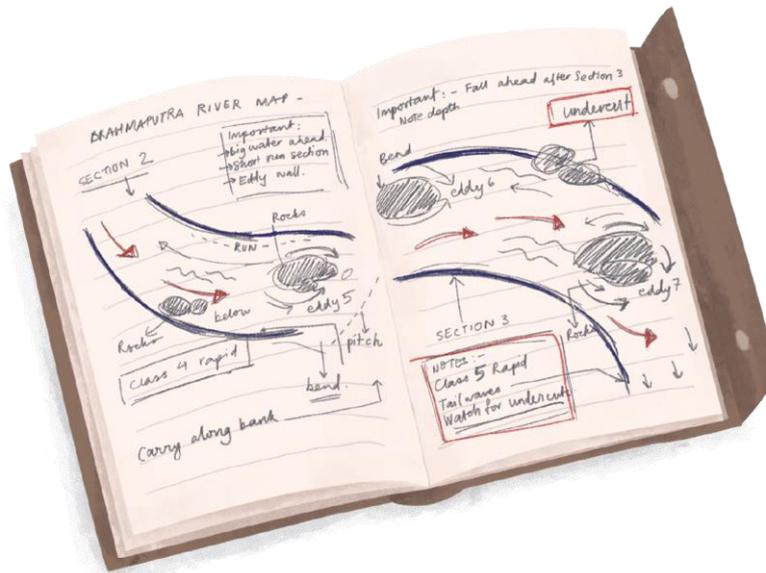
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Shail Desai

Brahmaputra Whitewater

Exactly thirty years ago, an Indo-Japanese contingent set off on an audacious rafting trip on the Brahmaputra.



On 23 January 1991, *Hindustan Times* readers woke up to the headline “10 rafting team members rescued.” The river runners were part of an Indo-Japanese expedition on the Brahmaputra. They’d been thrown off their rafts by high waves between Gelling and Pasighat in Arunachal Pradesh.

The report had few other details. It didn’t mention that there were six members each on two rafts. Those following the expedition grew anxious. There was no word from the team over the next couple of days. Rafting had just about found its feet in the country. The mighty Brahmaputra had never been attempted before. Far from being a breezy rescue story, there were missing men to be accounted for.

Should they have gone at all?

Over the years, I’d heard the stories on the adventure sports circuit: legends of a bold rafting attempt that ran over 1,300km from Gelling near the Tibet border to Dhubri, the last Indian village before Bangladesh. The upper section of the river is a stretch that had never been navigated before and hasn’t been navigated since.

That was thirty years ago. Last year, I began to track down members of the expedition. I took a road trip from Mumbai to Mussoorie through lockdown and relied on the interpretation skills of a new friend in Japan. I encountered exasperating dead-ends and patchy phone connections. But the thrill of the chase kept me going. It was a small taste of a very large adventure. Here is the story.

The Kumars

Colonel Narinder “Bull” Kumar was a legend in mountaineering circles. He was the deputy leader of the Indian expedition that finally summited Everest in 1965 after two unsuccessful attempts, though his finest hour came when he led an Army party to secure the Siachen Glacier in 1981.

In 1975, he’d been on an audacious five-man rafting expedition on the Indus. On that trip, the party had just one crash helmet (gifted to Bull by Austrian mountaineer Fritz Moravec) and two life jackets (borrowed from the Indian Air Force, “the kind used by pilots while bailing into the sea”) between them.

He passed on the adventure bug to his children. “Akshay was born on skis,” he told me about his son, who was first taken to the ski slopes in Gulmarg at the age of three, and then packed off to Lake Manitoba in Canada for water sports training while still in his teens. “The water training was all hands-on in Canada—boat repairs, kayaking, canoeing, and of course, rafting,” his cousin Salil Kumar, who’d gone with Akshay that summer of 1985, remembered. “We were cut off from civilization and lived in the bush. Akshay was a natural in this environment.”

Bull retired in 1983 and founded an outdoors company that’s now known as Mercury Himalayan Explorations. He started offering rafting trips on the Ganga. “Around 1986, the Colonel invited Edmund Hillary to raft down the Ganga,” Salil recalled. “There was no better way to launch commercial operations. A number of rapids on the river got their name after that trip: Golf Course, Rollercoaster, Three Blind Mice.”

In Delhi, the Kumar cousins spent their weekdays distributing brochures to attract adventure-seekers to fill their 18-seater bus. On weekends, they headed to Shivpuri,

about 20km from Rishikesh. They used “bucket boats,” called so because the water that collected at the bottom had to be filled into buckets and then thrown out. Over time, other adventure-seekers joined them, and the “white water rafting” industry was born. About 300 operators run commercial operations in the area today.

As commercial rafting picked up, the thrill of running unexplored rivers was an attractive proposition for hardcore adventure sportsmen. Mixed teams featuring Indians took on rivers such as the Sutlej (1985), Teesta (1986), Sarda (1987) and Spiti (1990), descending some of the roughest sections of the white waters for the first time in recorded history. Skill levels and exposure improved. Some started dreaming of grander projects.

The Japanese

The Japanese fascination with the Himalayas is over a hundred years old. Since the Japanese Alpine Club was founded in 1905, its climbers made rapid progress, pulling off a number of first ascents, including Manaslu in Nepal and Nanda Kot on the Indian side. In 1975, Junko Tabei became the first woman climber to scale Everest.

India’s Northeast had a particular appeal for Sadashige Inada, president of the Himalayan Association of Japan. It was his idea to raft on the Brahmaputra. “He was looking for somewhat uncharted territory,” Kuniaki Yagihara, head of the Japanese contingent, told me over a phone call via an interpreter. “It wasn’t a mountaineering expedition, but the association was keen on exploring any place—mountains, rivers, highlands.”

In the summer of 1990, Inada sent a letter proposing the rafting expedition to Captain MS Kohli, then president of the Indian Mountaineering Foundation. He asked Yagihara to assemble a team that could join him on the river. Yagihara, who’d climbed Everest and Dhaulagiri IV, had little rafting experience. He’d been on the Yellow River in China in 1985, but that was an 80km stretch so calm that “even a child could do it.”

“That trip was actually cut short due to the slow flow of the river,” said Hiroshi Yashima, Yagihara’s long-time climbing mate who’d also been on the Yellow River expedition. Neither of the men knew how to swim.

“I constantly looked for a good excuse to withdraw from the project at the beginning, particularly because I was to head the Japanese crew,” Yagihara wrote later. They began their search for potential teammates at Tokyo’s University of Agriculture, which refused to commit any members. But through the exploration club at Waseda University, they found three students: Kazuaki Uehara, Toshio Nakatani and Akitoshi Sekiguchi.

Sekiguchi had rafted on the Mekong in Thailand. Uehara had run the Yukon in Canada. Yet, this was an opportunity they hadn’t seen coming: an all-expenses paid trip to experience one of the world’s toughest rivers, in a part of India that seemed especially remote. “I was an ordinary university student leading a relatively uneventful life. It was quite a shock to see people like Yagihara and Yashima who stopped at nothing to just go on long journeys to unexplored destinations,” Sekiguchi said.

Nakatani had done multiple rafting trips, mostly in Japan. It was his final year at university and he was due to begin a well-paying sales job. He turned it down to go on the expedition. For six months before their departure, the contingent prepared by taking on the rapids of the Abukuma and Yoshino rivers, popular rafting destinations in Japan today.

The Servicemen

Back in India, Kohli was keen to involve his former employers, the Indo-Tibetan Border Police. He approached DVLN Ramakrishna Rao, director general of the ITBP, who was quick to pledge the involvement of his best men. The expedition found a patron in Gegong Apang, then chief minister of Arunachal Pradesh, who was keen to promote tourism in his state.

Shiv Prasad Chamoli was a natural choice for team leader. As a boy growing up in Uprari village in Uttarkashi district, he’d see the Bandarpoonch peak on his way to school. Foreign climbers who wanted to attempt it would set up camp near the village. After a stint in the Army, he joined the ITBP in 1968, where he was able to pursue his passion for climbing.



SP Chamoli and Toshio Nakatani pose for the camera. Courtesy: SP Chamoli

Chamoli first went rafting during a Saser Kangri III expedition in 1986 when the party had to cross the turbulent Shyok River in Ladakh. For the Brahmaputra expedition, Chamoli called on a few old teammates who had little experience of running rivers, but relished a challenge. The deal was that the Japanese would bring the equipment, and the Indians would handle logistics.

The Japanese had started looking for funds to buy equipment. They approached Fuji TV, a television station in Tokyo, to shoot a film for primetime viewing, one that would capture the culture and natural beauty of the region in addition to the rafting. Coming along to host the documentary was the celebrity Japanese zoologist, Masanori Hata, who decided to take the land route along the river.

On 20 December 1990, the Japanese flew to Delhi. Their cargo included, but was not limited to, a brand new 16-foot oar-paddle combination Avon raft imported from the UK; a second raft made in Japan; a rubber dinghy; two sets of outboard engines; wet suits; oars and paddles. The rafts were 'self-bailing,' meaning that they drained

automatically. Bucket boats simply would not cut it on the giant rapids of the Brahmaputra.

Few people knew the technical aspects of river navigation better than Akshay Kumar, then 20 years old. In Canada, he'd trained to be a river guide, someone who studies a river—from currents to rock formations—to figure out the best course to run it. With him was Chewang Motup, from the mountains of Ladakh. Motup had fallen in love with water during his school days in Srinagar, where he'd captained a boat during the Dal Lake regattas.

By Christmas day, the team was in Rishikesh for a short training camp. Over the next few days, they were taken through the basics by Motup and Akshay: reading the river; assessing currents; understanding rescue protocols. "Our main aim was to get rid of their fear," Motup remembered. "We got them to jump before some of the biggest rapids."

The camp was also a selection trial for the ITBP men. Bihari Lal and Tajber Singh were well-known for their strength on skiing and mountaineering expeditions. Attar Singh was also an experienced mountaineer. He had grown up swimming in the Bhagirathi river. Shasidharan Pillai and Bharu Mohamad from Kerala were likewise strong swimmers. Others, on standby, would join the party providing land support to the river runners.

Once the camp wrapped up, Motup hopped on his Yamaha RX100 at midnight, eager to ride to Delhi for final preparations, but the bike flew off a speed breaker in the thick fog at dawn, and Motup broke his shoulder.

It was down to Akshay to salvage the situation. Back in Delhi, he got in touch with a 23-year-old named Ajay Maira he'd met on the Ganga. Together, these Delhi boys had run smaller rivers like the Teesta and the Beas. The following day, a coiffed and besuited Maira rode to the ITBP headquarters on Lodhi Road to meet Chamoli, and was signed up as Motup's replacement.

"Any new river is a draw," Maira recollected. "You want to test the waters like a skier wants to run a new slope. Almost 90% of the game is about reading the currents and deciding where you want to be; the paddling and man management makes up the other 10%." It was just that when it came to the Brahmaputra, there were hardly any points

of reference. There was no one to call to figure out logistics. The young river guides were on their own.

The River

The Brahmaputra takes on multiple identities through its 2,800km course. Rising from the Chemayungdung glacier, it flows through Tibet as the Tsangpo. It enters Arunachal Pradesh as the Siang and becomes the Brahmaputra on the plains. On the last leg of its journey, in Bangladesh, it is called the Jamuna.



The upper section of the Brahmaputra in Arunachal Pradesh. Courtesy: SP Chamoli

British colonists were keen to figure out whether the Tsangpo and the Brahmaputra were the same river, particularly given the sharp difference in their altitudes. Some early expeditions went in search of a waterfall that would explain the precipitous drop. At the end of an arduous four-year journey that started in 1880, a Lepcha man named Kinthup concluded that the Tsangpo flowed into India as the Siang. His finding was not widely believed until it was confirmed by the 1912-13 Bailey-Morshead expedition to the steep gorges of the Tsangpo canyon, the deepest in the world.

After Pei, one of the last settlements along the Tsangpo in Tibet, the water drops from an altitude of around 3,000 metres. The mountaineer Harish Kapadia, former editor of *The Himalayan Journal*, noted that the river enters Indian territory at around 580 metres above sea level. Pasighat, about 260km into India from this point, is located at just 150 metres. Chunks of the river rage relentlessly over a series of drops for most of the year: the Brahmaputra has the fifth highest mean discharge in the world at 19,300 cubic metre per second. Rapids are more navigable when the river is at its lowest. That is why winter, despite the freezing waters, is the ideal season to mount an expedition.

The American Whitewater Association classifies rapids from 1 (Easy) to 6 (Extreme and Exploratory Rapids). Maira told me that the Brahmaputra is a Class 5 river, which means it offers “extremely long, obstructed, or very violent rapids which expose a paddler to added risk.” In Class 5 stretches, swimming is dangerous, and rescue is complicated even for experts. (For comparison, the Ganga is a Class 3—Intermediate level.) The Brahmaputra’s altitude drops send the water hurtling downstream in a series of rapids and cascades. For a river runner, this is paradise.

The Scouting

This home in Delhi, Maira pulled out a diary with a bleached cover and a title that read ‘Brahmaputra 1990-91.’ Its pages contain the maps he made of almost every section of the river. There was information about rapid grades, markings for holes, waves and eddies. Maira had also marked portage spots, those stretches of unnavigable river where the rafts have to be carried on land along the banks. For many future expeditions, this was the bible.

“I went on the river a few times after that, as have other river runners, but that stretch from Gelling to Tuting has never been done again. It’s pure hardship,” Maira said.

Back then, the only thing the team was sure about was that the Brahmaputra was a pool-drop river, meaning that there were calm stretches after a rapid to help gain composure before the next one. Chamoli, Rao and Apang had undertaken an aerial scouting trip but couldn’t make precise observations. In November, Attar Singh and Bihari Lal followed the land route. They took a train to Dibrugarh and a ferry to Pasighat, before hopping into a car that drove them to Yingkiong, observing the river along the way.

“Beyond Yingkiong, we had to continue on foot until we reached a section through dense forest, high above the river,” Attar remembered. “It was not possible to proceed beyond this since time was running out. We turned back and submitted our report once in Delhi.”

Another cause for concern was the fact that the expedition involved foreigners, who needed travel permits from the defence and home ministries. Bull Kumar decided to take matters into his own hands. “There were elections at Delhi Gymkhana and a gentleman who was additional secretary needed the votes to win,” he told me. “When he won, we threw him a party and I told him we needed inner line permits for the expedition. Even though the next day was a Sunday, he got the offices of the home ministry opened.”

The expedition booked an entire train bogie to carry the ration that had been packed away in wooden boxes by Devendra Mulasi, the administrative in-charge. It went to Tinsukia in upper Assam from where it was moved onto another train to Mohanbari. An air force carrier transported the ration further to the small town of Tuting in Arunachal Pradesh, where it was segregated in smaller loads for the porters to carry to Gelling, one of the first settlements after the river enters Indian territory.

The expedition was flagged off by Prime Minister Chandra Shekhar in Delhi. On 2 January, the team flew to Dibrugarh, where they met those who’d travelled by train. Together, they stood on the lip of what was to them an unknown world.

ad weather caused the cancellation of all plans the following morning. Maira and Akshay realized that one of the rafts needed repairs. That afternoon, the residents of Mohanbari were treated to the sight of a little tricycle rickshaw carrying a 16-foot raft over to the welders.

When the weather cleared, the team piled into an Mi-17 transport helicopter. They flew over the Brahmaputra as it lazily crawled past signs of civilisation, tea gardens and sand banks. The hills appeared soon their foliage interspersed with clusters of huts surrounded by barren fields. A newly cut road snaked its way along the river, the only thing out of place in the gorgeous world of cascading waterfalls and creamy white river foam.

“We asked the pilot to fly as low as possible to have the opportunity to scout,” Maira said. “There’s only that much you can observe over a distance of 250-odd kilometres, yet we were looking out for landmarks that could help us identify rapids when on the river.”

In Gelling, around 4km from the India-China border, the team was greeted by the first of many reception parties. That afternoon, a few of the members hiked down 6km to Bona, and looked at what Maira called “a mother of a rapid,” right where they were supposed to begin. Winter in the east meant that the light was already fading by the time they got back to Gelling at 4pm. In the evening, they were treated to a dance performance by local monks in the morung. That night, the team lay under a canopy of stars, restless for the dawn light of the big day.

The Beginning

The following morning, Gelling was buzzing with hushed whispers about a bunch of crazed men who planned on taking on the river. Overnight, locals had cleared a path wide enough to carry the rafts down. A few men lined up long bamboo poles and tied the rafts on it. “It was like a massive *baraat* on foot as we carried the raft down,” Maira said.

Chief Minister Apang and his family had flown in to flag off the expedition, but he took one look at the humongous waves and hopped over to Chamoli. “He suggested we

descend to Tuting and start from there. We were army men, so we decided to go for it and deal with the consequences. It was simple—*maaro ya maro*, like going to battle,” Chamoli said.

The first raft set off amidst cries of ‘Brahmaputra ki jai,’ with Buddhist lamas chanting prayers on the banks. Almost immediately, it was tossed about by the churning water as the waves came crashing down: the raft went near vertical at one point. The rafters leaned over to the front to counter the lift, paddling furiously down the river. There was excitement in the air when the two teams reunited after negotiating the first rapid. It was a relatively short day with just 5km of rafting, but that evening the apong tasted sweeter than ever.

As they set out in the chill of the following morning, the team noticed a few people, sitting by the banks. Over time, they figured it was a cue for them: locals would park themselves at the big rapids because they knew there was a good chance of the rafts flipping there. They pulled over to the left bank and scrutinised the best line to take. Soon, they were tackling 15 feet high waves: a converging tributary had brought debris and gushing water with it. Over the next couple of hours, both rafts manoeuvred rapids of various grades, some featuring big drops and gaping holes.

Later that day, they came face to face with their biggest challenge yet: the river dropped 30 feet over a 100-metre stretch. This was a Grade 6 rapid. With a heavy heart, they decided to portage this section. Portaging meant dismantling the raft, carrying the heavy load over the slippery rocks of the bank, and putting it all together again before taking to the water: “a lot of sweat,” as Maira said, “and absolutely no fun.” It wasn’t even the only time they’d have to do it: up ahead before Tuting, the river roared down a vertiginous drop that looked exceedingly dangerous.

Just before Tuting, villagers crowded the banks and the suspension bridge above them. On land, curious locals touched the paddlers’ dry suits with wonder. Though Tuting had an airstrip that was built during the 1962 war, there was no road connectivity at the time. “If you saw a tractor and a trailer in town, it had been choppered in,” Maira said. “If it needed major repairs, it had to be choppered out.”

That evening, the Japanese film crew started pouring into Tuting. They were escorted by a dao-wielding local, who had been guiding them on the long trek through dense undergrowth.

The film crew had had its own set of adventures on land. “We weren’t that interested in the rafting,” Jeremy Angel, a still photographer who travelled with the crew, told me. “But it was the only way we could get to this territory where no film crew had been for decades. We even crossed into Bhutan on one occasion, quite unknowingly.”

That night, the crew enjoyed a grand reception hosted by the locals. The team joined the residents of Tuting village in dancing the ponung around a bonfire. The celebrations ran late into the night.

The Escape

The next day was a rest day. Maira recalled looking at the bows and poisoned arrows with which the locals would hunt. In some instances, because of the similarities in facial features, the Japanese were mistaken for Indians. “They would say these Japanese are like our brothers,” Maira said.

Everywhere they went, they were welcomed: they got rice cakes cooked in bamboo shoots, oranges in abundance, and massive jungle rats, though they preferred to stick to local fish and chicken.

Hata endeared himself to the locals by getting a haircut with a dao. In Tuting, Uehara and Sekiguchi noticed something hanging on the wall in a local home. It turned out to be fatty pork meat, which they were offered and ate without complaint, despite a rancid smell. In the days ahead, both suffered a severe bout of diarrhoea.

The communication barrier posed a problem for the Japanese. The ITBP members simply didn’t consult them before making decisions. “I was not part of any of the planning and organization,” Sekiguchi told me. Things had been smooth sailing until then, but now there were upset stomachs, and for some, a palpable fear of death.

Soon after setting off from Tuting, Chamoli noticed a 20-foot-high spray, a sure shot sign of a massive rapid approaching. “I felt all my years of rafting in Japan had been completely diminished,” Nakatani remembered, “looking at the sheer magnitude of the river.”

The river guides concluded that it was a Class 5 rapid: dangerous but worth a shot. This daring attempt had to be recorded for posterity, so Attar suggested Chamoli park himself on the bank to take photographs. Akshay went first and Maira saw his raft disappear behind a big wave for what seemed like ages. “I waited and waited but he just wouldn’t be seen again, that’s how big the wave was. When I finally saw him rise on the crest, he was also the only one on the raft.”

Uehara remembered paddling hard, unable to think of anything else. The waves increased in size as they advanced, until he saw a massive wall of water in front of him. “Our guide shouted ‘Over front!’ which is when I moved to the front of the boat. Then I heard ‘Over right!’ and I moved to the right. After the third or the fourth wave, he yelled ‘Drop!’ which is when the team lay flat on the bottom, trying to hold on.”

The raft hit the wave at an angle and swung to the left. The next moment, they had fallen into the freezing river and were being battered by the waves. Through it all, Uehara tried to keep his head above the water. By the time he reached a calmer stretch, Tajber was around to pull him out.

The waves pummelled Maira’s raft too: five men were tossed into the choppy waters. Most managed to recover until Chamoli, from the bank, realised that someone was missing. He spotted a red helmet bobbing about in a whirlpool. It was Nakatani, frantically trying to grab onto some slippery rocks. He was having trouble moving after injuring his leg during the fall. To Chamoli, it looked like he had given up.

“I was spun around vertically multiple times and thrown against a rock. At one point, I lost consciousness after drinking a lot of water,” Nakatani told me.

Attar ran down the bank and hurled a throw bag at Nakatani. It took him a few attempts to grab the line, until he was finally drawn in, exhausted and speechless. For the next

hour, the team kept pumping water out of him. “That incident made me realise that death was not a distant thing,” Nakatani said, “that it was right next to me.”

On the opposite bank, Chamoli sat holding his head in his hands. He felt guilty for having hopped off the raft despite being the leader. He realised that they had been lucky to escape with just the loss of equipment. That evening, honouring protocol, Chamoli sent out a message to Dibrugarh through the wireless operator. It was relayed to headquarters in Delhi via Guwahati: “Big rapid, 10 paddlers rescued.”

When Maira called home a couple of days later, his father heaved a sigh of relief. He had read the terse newspaper report about the 10 rescued men. No men were missing after all—two simply didn’t fall off the rafts, and a third had been taking photographs on the bank.

The Gorges

The focus now shifted to two gorge sections near Pango. The river could be seen plunging in between the steep walls of the gorge and disappearing in the distance. Nobody had an inkling of what lay ahead. That evening, the team got together to formulate a plan over the sake and dried squid that the Japanese had brought along. There was dense forest on top of the cliffs, making a recce difficult. None of the locals had any information nor volunteered to accompany them.

Uehara had now left the expedition to sit for university examinations back in Tokyo. His place was taken by Yagihara, who hadn’t been on the rafts until then. An experienced mountaineer, he agreed with Chamoli’s suggestion to carry rock climbing gear, which they would use to scale the walls of the gorge in case of an emergency. They also decided to carry enough rations on the raft to be self-sufficient for a few days.

“I was glad they asked for our opinion,” Yashima said. “This was the riskiest part of the journey where lives could have been lost had someone smashed into a rock or gone down a waterfall.”

On the other side of a Class 4 rapid, the river narrowed as they drifted into the dark chasm of the gorge. It was dank and cold. Sunlight was blocked by the high walls. The

azure sky above them would turn overcast at times. The resulting rain hampered visibility. At each blind curve, it was difficult to figure what lay around the bend. On a few occasions, they had to clamber up a rock to get a good look ahead.

There were anxious moments when the raft would momentarily disappear behind the menacing wave of a rapid, and whoops of joy when it was spat out by the tempestuous water. “We had youth on our side and had also been on many rivers, so it wasn’t something untoward that we were thinking about. At the same time, you rely a little bit on the almighty as well,” Maira said.

A boisterous crowd awaited the team in Yingkiong, Apang’s home ground. But the gorges held up the advance. The locals would gather along the banks each morning in anticipation of the crew’s arrival, only to return home at sundown. Finally, on 13 January, the two rafts appeared in the distance. In Yingkiong, it took some time for the team to get accustomed to the Maruti Suzuki Gypsies zipping around town. Modern construction rose above traditional bamboo huts. The team was treated to the luxuries of running hot water and a lavish dinner hosted by Apang.



The team was warmly received by many such local parties in the villages of Arunachal Pradesh. Courtesy: SP Chamoli

After a day's rest, they set off again, this time in the company of honking vehicles on the road that ran above them. The land party now travelled by government trucks. Though they ran rapids every now and then, it was evident that the river was gradually calming down. The team finally sailed into Pasighat under pouring rain and flashes of lightning. It had taken two tense weeks to get there.

The Lower Reaches

Exortion bids and killings had grown common on the lower section of the river, as the United Liberation Front of Asom, ULFA, rose to prominence. In November 1990, the outfit had been banned by the government, and the Indian Army had launched Operation Bajrang to rein in the “underground” elements.

It presented a different kind of challenge altogether. “ULFA commander Paresh Barua had sent out a warning that if we came there, he would shoot us,” Attar recalled. Two Border Security Force (BSF) patrol boats with armed personnel escorted the expedition from here on. One raft was packed up and the crew shifted to the rubber dinghy. The other was fitted with a Yamaha outboard motor. It was a convoy of sorts, with the two expedition vessels in between the bigger patrol boats.

The river dynamics, too, had completely changed. The Brahmaputra is known to have the second-highest sediment yield in the world, bringing a large volume of debris down to the plains. ^[10] This meant that it was important to stick to navigable channels. The lead boat used a bamboo stick to gauge the depth of the river before proceeding.

“You have markers on the river to indicate shallow waters. With the motors, we were simply logging distances, yet you had to see where you were going,” Maira said.

On this stretch, the river was busy with signs of life: steamers ferried commuters and cars; fleets of trawlers sailed across purposefully. The sun set behind giant Chinese fishing nets. Playful river dolphins showed up on occasion. Yashima, who always carried

fishing gear, could now try his luck at procuring fresh catch, though he always returned empty-handed. “Akshay and I went to the market to get Yashima-san fresh fish at Dhubri,” Maira laughed.

Soon, the last of the snow-capped peaks faded into the distance. The landscape came to be dominated by low-lying green hills and elephant grass marshes. Sand and reed islands dotted the course. Despite the idyll on the river, reminders of the violence that the region was dealing with were never far away. As they unfurled the tricolour on 26 January, the ground party received news of an ULFA ambush just 5km from their location. At Tezpur, the team was asked to move their tents because of the threat of a guerrilla attack. In Guwahati, they saw a double-decker bridge that was heavily guarded by armed men.

The river became increasingly human from here on. Yagihara recalled seeing giant patches of foam as they made their way further downstream to Guwahati. After meeting dignitaries and journalists in the capital, the team set off towards its final destination. At Dhubri, in the fading light of the last day of January 1991 and amidst cries of ‘Brahmaputra ki jai,’ the crew hopped off the river one final time.

The expedition was a formative experience in the lives and careers of its participants, young turks and grizzled veterans alike. The ITBP members won medals and out-of-turn promotions. The ITBP formally included rafting as part of its adventure activities. Chamoli and Attar went on to lead multiple expeditions in the years to come. Commercial rafting in the Rishikesh area became a mainstream tourist activity in the 1990s. Its success was replicated in other spots around the country. In Japan too, rafting picked up after the expedition. Akshay and Maira returned to the Brahmaputra with clients who had heard of their adventure.

The months leading up to the thirtieth anniversary of the expedition were tragic for Indian adventure tourism’s first family. Akshay Kumar died due to an unexpected cardiac arrest last September. Then Bull Kumar, aged 87, died on the last day of 2020, just weeks after he regaled me with stories about his son and their mutual passions. The Brahmaputra expedition is an indelible part of their legacy. Its planning and execution

displayed trademark Kumar traits—a thirst for the untried; doggedness in the face of adversity; a tireless curiosity about the country they loved so much.

For Akshay, the river was literally where it all began. His wife Dilshad Master-Kumar told me what it meant to him: “It tickled him, how as a 20-year-old kid, all he had to say was *kudo paani mein*, and all those tough ITBP men would jump in the river.”



Akshay Kumar in 1990, a few months before the expedition. Courtesy: Salil Kumar

Shail Desai is a freelance writer based out of Bombay. Besides writing about the outdoors and endurance sports, he likes to chase stories that give him his next excuse to wander the mountains. His other work can be read at shailwrites.com. He tweets @dshail.

Acknowledgement note:

This story wouldn't have been possible without the enthusiasm of the Indian expedition members, who agreed to meet me despite the pandemic and dug out material from three decades ago. I would like to thank Akshay Kumar's family for sharing their memories during such a difficult time in their lives. The Japanese team patiently answered my questions despite the communication barrier. Eri Okazaki in Japan was really kind to steal time from her hectic work schedule at a law firm and patiently play the role of a translator.



Sibi Arasu

Reflections on the Solukhumbu by Lisa Choegyul

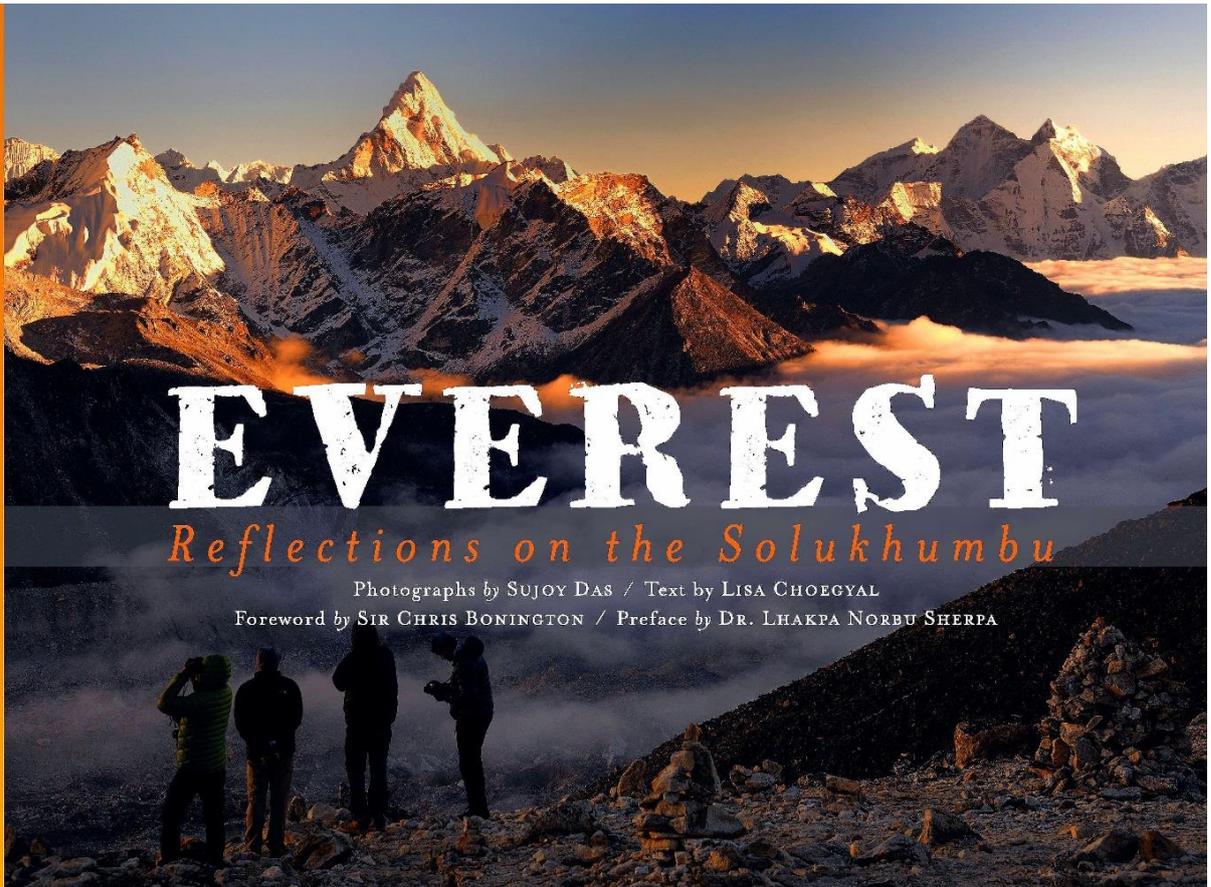
Everest is more than just a mountain, more than the highest point on earth, and more than Nepal's most majestic icon. Everest, or Sagarmatha or Jomolungma to Nepalis and Tibetans, is the tallest of a pantheon of peaks worshipped by billions as the abode of the gods, the 'brow of the sky' and 'mother goddess of the world'. A vital source of spiritual wellbeing, many millions depend on water from the Himalaya's life-giving glaciers and rivers. Everest ignites our collective imagination, its lofty heights etched into our hearts and embedded in our dreams.

The crowning glory of the regal ramparts of the Himalaya, Mount Everest is the centrepiece of a crystal tiara of peaks that curve 2,400 kilometres from Pakistan to Myanmar. The world's highest mountains, averaging 6,000 metres in height, rise dramatically from the subtropical *Tarai* and Gangetic lowlands only 100 metres above sea level. Across Nepal's 200-kilometre width the swell builds through the gentle folds of the Siwalik (Churia) ranges, ever upwards through the waves and troughs of the fertile *pahar* mid hills, before the massive up-thrust sweeps relentlessly to the icy snow-clad summit crests. Of only 14 mountains that tower above 8,000 metres in the world, eight are found within or bordering Nepal, and four of them in Solukhumbu.

On the centenary of Sir Edmund Hillary's birth, this book is a personal reflection on the sacred landscape of Solukhumbu and the Sherpa people who live there in the shadow of Mount Everest and its flanking attendant giants. Sujoy Das, a veteran trek leader, photographer and blogger, has regularly visited Nepal since 1978. The startling purity of his images reveal the intricacy of mountain moods and cast a fresh light on the pervasive spirituality of the Sherpas, capturing the intimate essence of contemporary life beneath their magnificent scenic backdrop.

Everest at 8,848 metres (29,028 feet) is so high and its environment so extreme that winds whip the snow from its southern slopes, leaving a black pyramid and trailing plume. From Nepal, Everest is set back, appearing dwarfed by its looming neighbours of Lhotse (8,516m) and Nuptse (7,861m). For trekkers, Ama Dablam (6,812m), Thamserku (6,623m), and even the sacred peak of Khumbila (5,761m) present more impressive profiles. They dominate the walking trails that wind through Khumbu's villages, fields and woodlands, past gnarled rhododendrons, fluttering prayer flags, squat lichened walls and ancient carved *mani* stones.

This is the heartland of the Sherpas, the hardy high country people originating from east Tibet who have made north-eastern Nepal their home for centuries - the name derives from Tibetan, 'dweller in an eastern country'. The origins of the Sherpa people are lost in the mists of time, but according to legend the steep valleys of the upper Dudh Kosi river and its tributary Solu Khola are a *beyul* or holy refuge, set aside by Guru Padmasambhava as a secret sanctuary to be discovered by their ancestors.



EVEREST

Reflections on the Solukhumbu

Photographs by SUJOY DAS / Text by LISA CHOEGYAL

Foreword by SIR CHRIS BONINGTON / Preface by DR. LHAKPA NORBU SHERPA

'Mountain tourism, trekking and climbing, has changed Sherpa lives since we took the "last step" on Everest back in 1978. They have become great mountaineers, and today I would like to see Sherpas take over the management of Sagarmatha – it is their mountain. I highly recommend this spectacular tribute to Everest and its valiant people on the centenary of Sir Edmund Hillary's birth.'

Reinhold Messner, mountaineer, writer and filmmaker

'This captivating book portrays the contemporary Sherpa people of Solukhumbu and their amazing mountain home. As Patron, I am delighted that the Himalayan Trust has played a crucial role in the development of the Everest region since it was founded in 1960 by Sir Edmund Hillary, touching so many lives over the decades, and giving choices and options to many Sherpa women and men in their changing world.'

Rt Hon Helen Clark, Patron of the Himalayan Trust, Prime Minister of New Zealand 1999-2008, and UNDP Administrator 2009-2017

'There are many books about the splendours of Sagarmatha and our Sherpa people who live in its shadow, but EVEREST is very special. Sujoy Das' stunning images capture the spirit of our Solukhumbu community and show our mountains in a new light. Lisa Choegyial's text reveals insights born from her many years living and working with us in Nepal. We are proud that this book is published, and I think you will enjoy it.'

Ang Tshering Sherpa, Khumbu elder, tourism entrepreneur and doyen of Nepal mountaineering



Sujoy Das

A seasoned trekker and photographer, **Sujoy Das** (www.sujoydas.com) feels most at home in the high Himalaya. Founder of South Col Expeditions, he has introduced many trekkers to the magic of the Everest and Annapurna regions in Nepal, where he has been photographing for 30 years. His images and

accompanying essays have featured in the *Washington Post*, *Alpinist*, *Insight Guides*, *Outdoor Journal*, *Outlook Traveller* and many other publications. He has co-authored and photographed several books including *Nepal Himalaya A Journey Through Time*, *Sikkim A Travellers Guide* and *Lonely Planet Nepal for the Indian Traveller*.



Lisa Choegyial

British-born **Lisa Choegyial** has made Kathmandu her home since 1974, deeply involved with Nepal tourism and conservation. She worked for 25 years with the Mountain Travel Nepal group of adventure tourism pioneers and is director of Tiger Mountain Pokhara Lodge. As a specialist in sustainable

tourism, she consults throughout the Asia Pacific region. Author and editor of *Nepal Himalaya A Journey Through Time*, *Kathmandu Valley Style*, *The Nepal Scene Chronicles of Elizabeth Hawley* and *Offerings from Nepal*, she produced the *South Asian Insight Guides* series and contributes a fortnightly column to the *Nepali Times*. Lisa serves as trustee on a number of pro-bono organisations, and since 2010 is New Zealand's Honorary Consul to Nepal.





Children at Khumjung school



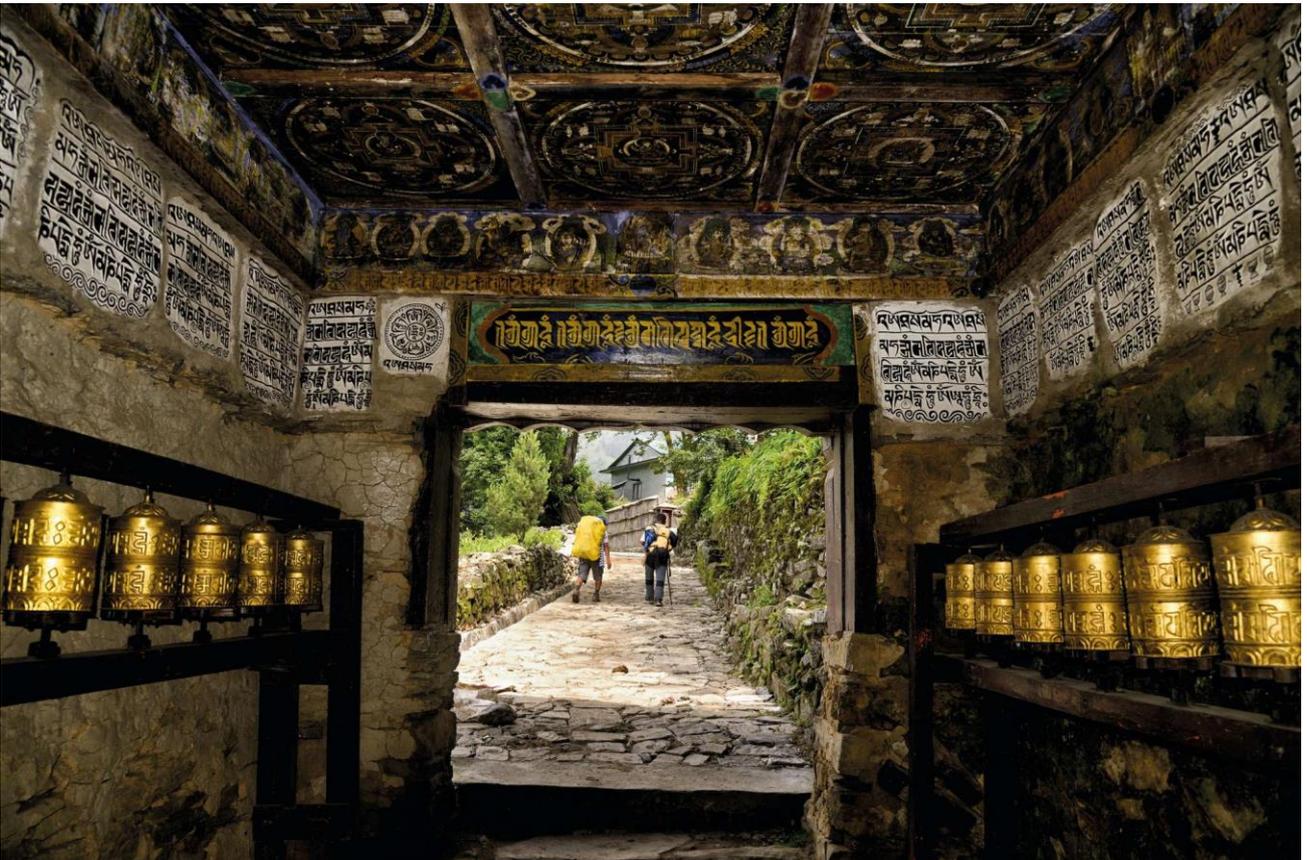
Sherpani elders on the final day at the Dumji festival Mamche monastery



The third lake of Gokyo 4800 meters



A large mani stone on the trail from Namche to Thani



A kani (doorway) at Chaurikharka village



Setting moon on Mount Taboche at sunset from Dingboche



A porter carries corrugated sheets in the ghostly mist near Khari La pass



Pasang Nuru a yak herdsman brings a prayer flag to Khumjung monastery



Pemba Dome lights juniper in the morning at Kyanjuma



Rhododendrons in bloom near Monjo



Shartse Island Peak and Cho Polu from Chukung



The three chortens commemorating Sir Edmond Hillary, his wife Louis and daughter Belinda standing on a high ridge above Kunde village

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