

THE HISTORY OF EVEREST

SINCE it was pinpointed on a map in the middle of the 19th century, Everest, the highest point on this little earth of ours, has continued to fascinate man. The reason is obvious. Satellites circling the Moon and Mars place before earth-viewers marvellous pictures of fabulous mountain chains, craters and valleys. Similarly, an astronaut circling the earth sees with a God's eye the marvels of our own globe — the snake-like great rivers, the awe-inspiring deserts, the oceans, the green fertile cultivated lands across the continents and, above all, the silver sword that is the great Himalayan chain. Among the giants of the Himalayas, this mountain towers above all. Man has always been fascinated by mystery and a supreme challenge. Like the deep ocean or the Arctic wastes, Everest is also one of the great challenges on this earth.

Ever since its discovery, Everest has haunted the imagination of man. Some wanted to see it, others to climb it and still others to worship it. In their own way, all men that have gone to the beautiful haunting valleys of the Himalayas have paid tribute to this one mountain. The attempts to climb it started seriously at the beginning of this century. Starting from the twenties, team after team of intrepid British mountaineers measured their physical and mental stamina against Everest. General Bruce, Mallory, Kellas, Colonel Norton and a host of other names spring to mind when one thinks of Everest. Among all these, Mallory stands out as a kind of romantic, Keats-like figure. Mallory failed, or perhaps even succeeded in climbing Everest, losing his life on the peak, and leaving an immortal legend behind. He also gave the ultimate answer to why men climbed Everest. As he said "because it is there".

The British climbed Everest in 1953 and many nations and individuals, including women, have now made their pilgrimage to the peak. Among them was Major H. P. S. Ahluwalia, who climbed with the successful Indian team in 1965. Though unable to climb any longer due to a personal injury, Major Ahluwalia has had a love and fascination for Everest. He has poured this out in this remarkable book. So far, climbers had always written their own personal stories about how they got to the top or failed. Ahluwalia has written the history of Everest, of the men and women who battled against this

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giant, some succeeding and many falling.

He has catalogued this record of human endeavour beautifully — the early expeditions with poor equipment but indomitable spirit; the British success of 1953, Chris Bonington's efforts to climb the south-west face, the Bahuguna tragedy, and even the Chinese efforts, of which we know so little. The writing is supported by a superb collection of colour and black and white photographs. It is from some of these that I discovered that the Chinese had gone to the summit in a group of 10. They can all be seen in a single picture taken at the top. This in itself is a kind of record. It also removes any doubts that anybody might have had about the Chinese claim. Apart from the history of Everest climbs, Ahluwalia has given an excellent set of annexures on the weather patterns around Everest and a chronological history of the mountains from 1711 onwards.

This book interests me for two other reasons. Major Ahluwalia, after climbing Everest in May, 1965, took a bullet injury in September, 1965, in the war against Pakistan, and this left him permanently incapacitated. Since then he has been climbing another Everest, a more personal one. In this, he has been as successful as in the first, and if I were to look for an Indian parallel to Group Captain Douglas, Baader, I would name Hari Ahluwalia. He has already achieved remarkable success with his autobiography, higher than Everest. This book is another milestone on the way to climbing his private Everest. From the point of view of Indian publishing too, this book is a landmark. An expensive but beautifully produced book with excellent paper and coloured photographs, it rivals the very best of such type of books produced by publishers abroad. This venture is an indication of the levels which Indian publishing have achieved, and I have no doubt that henceforth the little interest that people have in being published abroad will vanish. It is quite obvious that the best of Indian publishers now handle any theme and any type of book with confidence and competence.

— MANOHAR SINGH GILL