

# Tenjing Norgay and Edmund Hillary ascended the Mount Everest in May 1953. Amirul Islam Khan narrates the expedition

## On top of the world

The South Pole and the North Pole were first reached by man on December 14, 1911 and April 6, 1909, respectively, and the explorers were Roald Amundsen and Robert E. Peary. But it was only 25 years ago, on 29 May, 1953 when two men conquered the Third Pole. It was on this day that Tenjing Norgay, a shy and unassuming Sherpa, and Sir Edmund Hillary — the summit of the Mount Everest, the highest peak in the world.

The world mountain means different things to different peoples. People who live in a vast, nearly level plain, such as the steppes might call even a small hill a mountain. But those who live in high, hilly lands will not call a region mountainous unless it is extremely high and rugged. Tenjing Norgay, the Great Sherpa mountaineer, was born in Solo Khumbu, the district south of Everest. He was named Namgyal Wangdi. He played in the vicinity of the great Everest, enjoyed the warmth and innocence almost in the arms of the mighty mountain. A born mountaineer, he knew and loved Everest right from his infancy — it was no last-minute impulse that brought him to mountaineering and the ultimate triumph. Nature and environment literally reared and trained him up to scale the "top of the world".

To men of spirit the opposition of Nature constitutes a challenge which cannot be ignored. The sense of battle rouses a fierce joy in them that no mere adverse reasoning can ever destroy, and the very idea of impossibility is foreign to them. This spirit

taught them to fly, regardless of the laws of gravity. It taught them to jump down through thousands of feet of space aided by nothing better than something resembling a large umbrella. It taught them to defy the pull of the Earth and zoom into the dark and unknown space and set foot on the Moon. The same spirit actuated Tenjing Norgay. Even in his infancy, he dreamt of scaling high and lofty mountains. An ordinary and illiterate Sherpa as he was, he had no scientific reason for climbing mountains. To him it was a noble thing to endeavour to surmount difficulties and to penetrate into realms where ordinary men do not venture.

Mountains have influenced history in many ways. Early man stood in awe of mountains, because of their enormity. The beginning of modern religions are also connected with mountains. Mountains have influenced people in their choice of home sites when numbers of people migrated in search of new lands. Many conquering armies have been forced to retreat when they reached mountain areas. But Tenjing Norgay created history in a different way. Like Napoleon accepting the challenge of the mighty Alps, Tenjing also accepted the challenge of the Himalayas and climbed the highest peak in the world.

Mount Everest, the highest mountain in the world, is called the "top of the world." Many also refer to it as the Third Pole. It rises to a height of about 5 and a half miles above sea level. The mountain is in the Himalayas range. Surveyors agree that Mr Everest is more than 29000

feet high but they are not on its exact height. The British government survey in the middle of the 19th century put the height at 29,002 ft. A later survey put the figure at 29,028 feet. But a widely used unofficial figure is 29,141 ft. Everest was known to the Tibetans as Chholungma, "mother goddess of the world," presumably for its gigantic size and height. The Nepanese used to call it Sagarmatha. It was in 1852 that it was named after Sir George Everest (1790-1866) a British Surveyor General of India.

Many climbers have tried to scale Everest since the British first saw it in 1850. But the real organised attempt began with opening of the Tibetan route in 1920. Seven successive attempts on the North-east Ridge were made between 1921 and 1938, but each of those failed. Three more missions up the Southeast Ridge between 1951 and '52 failed because of avalanches, crevasses, strong winds, cold arid air, difficult terrain, high altitudes combined with extreme steepness and lack of oxygen in the higher altitudes. In 1924, George Mallory of Britain — one of the greatest climbers of all times — lost his life in an attempt on Everest, and along with him perished Irvin, another brilliant mountaineer. Day in and day out, the people from all the corners of the world made frantic attempts to reach the summit but all the attempts failed.

Tenjing migrated to Darjeeling in 1932 at the age of 18 and he started carrying loads for the mountaineers. In 1935 and 1936, he went as a porter on Everest expeditions. A born mountaineer, he carried to camp VI at 27,200 ft. in 1938.

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From right to left : the author (then four years old) and his father with Tenjing Norgay in 1953.

After the second World War he became 'sardar' (chief) of porters and accompanied a number of Everest expeditions. In 1952, the Swiss made two attempts on the Southern route up Everest. In both these attempts Tenjing was the sardar. But it was in 1953 that his cherished dream came true when the Royal Geographical Society in collaboration with the Joint Himalayan Committee of the Alpine Club sponsored an expedition to conquer the mighty Everest. The expedition which included ten experienced climbers was led by Sir John Hunt. Tenjing went as a sardar.

The expedition was well equipped with modern and up-to-date instruments and appliances like insulated boots and clothing and portable radio equipment and open-and-closed circuit oxygen systems. It

left Kathmandu on March 10 and approached the mountain from the southern side. As the climbers advanced up the slopes, they set up a series of camps. Tenjing formed the second summit pair with Edmund Hillary. The last camp, a small tent, at an altitude of 27,900 ft. was established by them. From there, on May 29, 1953, Tenjing and Hillary ascended the Southern Ridge, past South Peak, to the summit at 11-30 a.m. It was Tenjing Norgay who first set foot on the top of the world closely followed by Edmund Hillary.

The conquest of the Third Pole rightly brought Tenjing many honours at home and abroad. But the shy and simple Tenjing Norgay remained totally unchanged. He was as simple and modest as before. His strength lay in his simplicity.