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Prince of the Himalayas

The highest place on earth—Everest—has a distinct taste of tameness. Never really known as a tricky, technical climb, the real challenge of climbing Everest lay in solving the problems of its extreme altitude, sudden outbreaks of bad weather and inaccessibility. But these problems have been mitigated with high-tech equipment and clothing, satellite weather bulletins and a base camp that provides warm food, shelter and bottled oxygen. Today, climbing Everest seems like a trip to Disneyland with groups swarming like ants on a piece of cake every May.

Yet, every once in a while the mountain asserts itself,

He was the first to scale Everest. Better still, he helped create a 'thousand Tenzings'.

● **By Vijay Jung Thapa**

like in 1996 when eight people died on its slopes on one day to make it one of the worst disasters in Everest's history. It was a grim warning: Everest can still win.

It's incidents like these that put Tenzing Norgay's and Edmund Hillary's

achievement in 1953 in the right perspective. Back then Everest was unreachable, tantalising, deadly. A mountain that had defeated 15 other expeditions. Some of the strongest climbers had perished while trying to climb it. The North Pole had been reached in 1909, the South Pole in 1911. But Everest—often called The Third Pole—had defied all man's efforts until an impish Sherpa from Darjeeling and a gawky beekeeper from New Zealand came along. Their feat electrified the world, made them legends in every lan-

who after speaking to Tenzing wrote up fictitious accounts of how the Sherpas virtually carried the sahibs up the peak. Then, both India and Nepal claimed Tenzing to be theirs. But the man from Thami was learning fast—he told the world: "I was born in the womb of Nepal and raised in the lap of India."

Tenzing was probably happiest away from the crowds and politics. The two things he held close to his heart were his community, the Sherpas and the love of climbing. For the Sherpas, of course, he was a champion, someone who had broken the shackles of an unprivileged life. But his best-known legacy to Indian mountaineering is the

TENZING NORGAY

guage—partly because they were men of heroic mould and represented the spirit of the times.

For Tenzing, born in Thami village of the Everest region—an 11th child of 13 children—it spelt a kind of wondrous stardom. For India, stumbling out of a post-colonial haze, Tenzing was like a virile new south Asian icon. Nehru personally befriended him and set him up as director of field training in the country's first mountaineering institute in Darjeeling with the message: "Now you will make a thousand Tenzings".

But there were pitfalls to this popularity. First, a kind of East-West rift was created by South Asian journalists

Himalayan Mountaineering Institute (HMI), which he nurtured almost up to his death in 1986—churning out superb mountaineers.

It was here that he was at his pragmatic best—using the skills he'd learned over a lifetime and passing them down to younger generations. And they were simple skills—those of courage, determination, resourcefulness and the ability to put up with hardship. Skills that had held him in good stead—and made him a figure as large as the mountains he loved. ●

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