

The background of the cover is a photograph of two large, ornate stone lion statues in a courtyard. The statues are made of dark stone and are highly detailed, with intricate carvings on their bodies and faces. They are positioned in front of a multi-story brick building with a traditional architectural style. The scene is brightly lit, suggesting a sunny day.

India and Nepal –

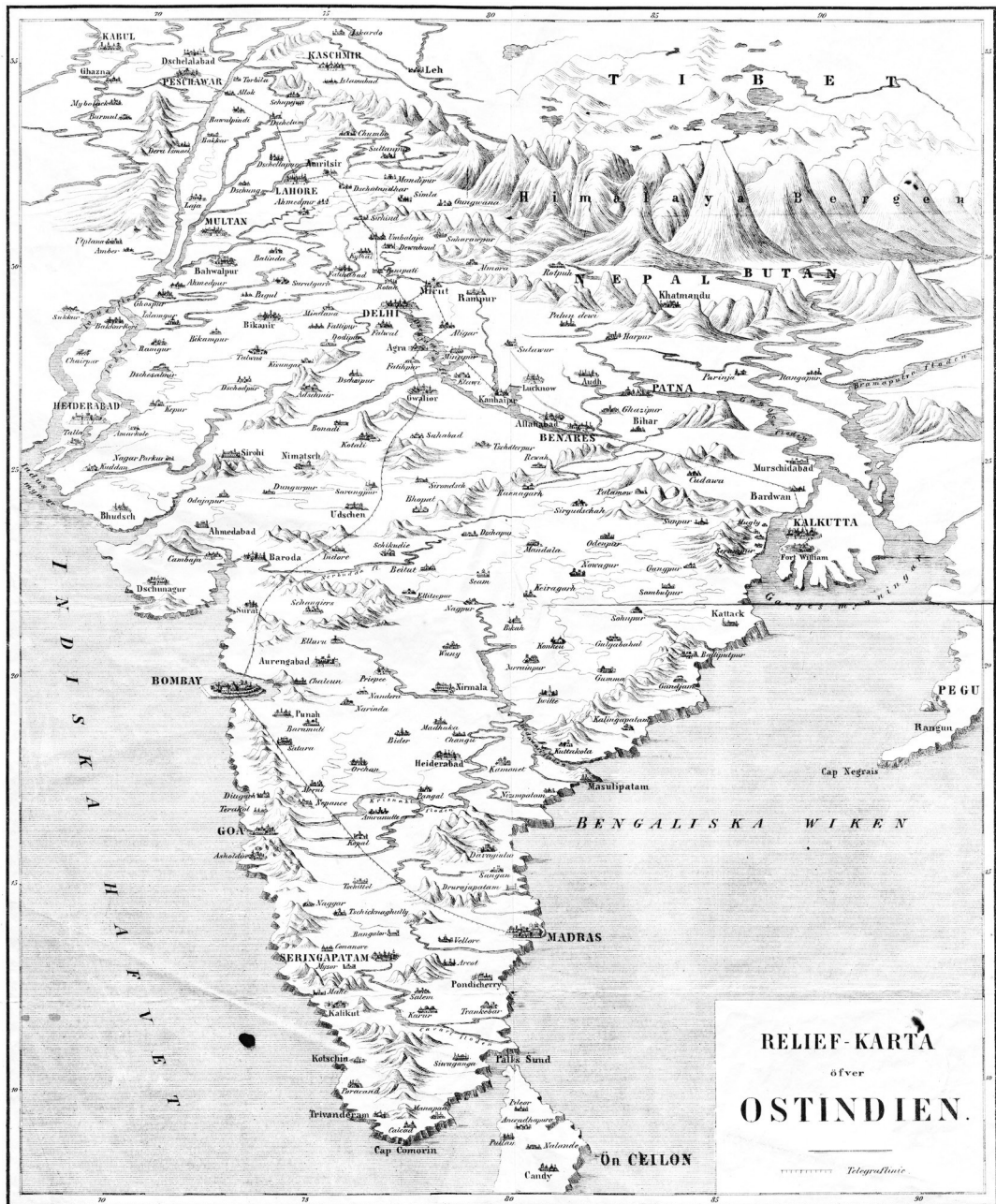
Truth is stranger than fiction

Matti Munnukka

A Himalayan Adventure 1984

India and Nepal -

TRUTH IS STRANGER THAN FICTION



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A Himalayan Adventure

Matti Munnukka

Translated from the Finnish

by Annukka Klinge

Originally published in Finland under the title Intia ja Nepal - Truth is
stranger than fiction

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1. edition 2016

Publisher: BoD – Books on Demand, Helsinki, Suomi

Printed by: BoD Books on Demand, Norderstedt, Saksa

ISBN 978-952-330-434-5

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PROLOGUE

”We’re going to Tibet, Nepal and India next summer”, Kai said. I am walking down Simonkatu Street towards Mannerheimintie Road with Kai, my old childhood friend and schoolmate. It is a grey, cold winter day. He describes at great depth their preliminary plans for travel. I am a third year student in geography and have started my subject studies in planning geography last fall at the University of Helsinki. The contents taught in planning geography have been a great disappointment to me from the very beginning. Already after a couple of months I knew that this was not what I wanted from life. Tibet, India and Nepal offered much, much more than what I had now. We had already come down Simonkatu Street to the corner of the future Forum shopping centre, which was one huge construction site. On an impulse I asked Kai: “Could I come with you to Tibet?” Kai looked at me, a little surprised and taken aback, and answered: “I’ll have to ask the others.”

I went home and had soon forgotten our meeting and our conversation. Late that night as I was getting ready for bed, the phone rang. I wondered who could be calling at such a late hour. I picked up the phone and a familiar voice greeted me, asking without preamble: “Were you serious?” I wondered aloud what was going on. “Well, are you coming with us to Tibet? I’ve asked everyone and no-one has anything against you joining us.” I only thought about it for a second or two before answering Kai: “Sure as heck I am coming with you, if we go to Nepal in addition to India and Tibet.” Kai assured me that that was the intention.

I was the first person in my family to graduate from high school, and the second after my little sister to study at the University of Helsinki. A certain amount of expectations were directed towards my studies already, and travelling wildly around the world would certainly not fit the bill, especially

in India and Nepal, which were well-known for drugs and hippies. Luckily my parents did not know too much about that kind of thing. In fact, when I announced that I was going to Nepal next spring, my mother had taken out the atlas and tried to find Nepal on the page with Africa on it, without success.

I had been interested in geography ever since I was a little boy, and had drawn maps before I learned to read, write or count. Journeys of exploration, scientific expeditions and remote places like the arctic regions and mountain ranges had always fascinated me. When I pored over the globe and atlases as a little boy, the area that I found most fascinating by far was the Himalaya and its states. The Himalayan mountain range was portrayed in dark brown on the big globe that we had at home, and on all the maps that showed differences in altitude. In the middle of that dark brown colour I found very exotic small states such as Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim and Tibet. These states, and particularly Nepal, for some unfathomable reason, were the destination of my dreams. As a school boy I borrowed from the library all the books I could find on the countries of the world and on geography. There were few books about the Himalayas in Finnish those days. When I found in the library “Annapurna”, a book written by Maurice Herzog, which describes the first ascent by a French expedition of the Annapurna Mountain in western Nepal, which is over 8000 metres high, I couldn’t go to sleep at all and read the book from start to finish, all night. Heinrich Harrer’s “Seven Years in Tibet” made as great an impression on me, and shortened my sleep that night to just two hours. These two books made the greatest impression on me during my school years.

We met three times during the spring. For our second meeting Kai had invited Finland’s greatest expert on Tibet, Harry Halen, to tell us about Tibet. The original destination of our trip was Lhasa and Tibet, but the unfriendly disposition of the Chinese officials and the systematic repression of the Tibetan people and culture by Communist China made our expedition to Tibet impossible. Then we discussed northern India, Kashmir and Nepal as

possible alternative destinations. Kai met Mr. Soodi, who was the director of an Indian travel agency on Yrjönkatu Street. Mr. Soodi suggested Sikkim as a destination instead of Kashmir. We thought that was a good idea, but the Indian Embassy put paid to that excellent idea right away and would not allow any kind of expeditions to Sikkim on the border between China and Tibet. Thus we settled on Darjeeling and the Kalimpong mountain area, south of Sikkim, and the border area to Nepal, as our destinations in addition to Nepal itself.

The other important question that occupied us during our meetings was the timing of our trip. From the start I was against travelling at the worst time of year, in the summer, which is rainy or “monsoon” season. I would have wanted to start out immediately, or then in the fall, when the weather would be propitious for the success of the trip. I gathered together all the possible books and maps to support this idea, which would prove how difficult it would be to travel in India and Nepal in the rainy season. Unfortunately Mr. Soodi, the director of the Indian travel agency, had convinced the others that the rainy season is not so bad and that travel in South Asia would be possible then. In his diary, Kai described my attempts to avoid the rainy season like this: “Matti usually brought with him to our meetings plenty of maps and weather maps and lots of pessimistic thoughts on the success of the trip.” Kai told me later that part of the group misunderstood many times what I was saying in crystal clear Finnish.

The last time we met was just a couple of days before the trip, at the Department of Theoretical Physics. There we took a group photo of our expedition, placing ourselves around the maps. There were five members in our expedition:

- Kurt Fagerstedt: MA, postgraduate student in botany, University of Helsinki (in 2014: Professor and Head of Department of Biosciences, University of Helsinki)



ISBN 978-952-330-434-5

