

# Letter from the Heritage Centre

## Mountainous Terrain in the Campus

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*Prof. M.V.C. Sastri mentioned the other day that we IITians are to be found everywhere ... even on top of mountains.*

— *Campastimes*, April 1966



*Joseph, with an ice axe, on the way to glaciers above Manali, 1983. Photo courtesy: Joseph Joy*

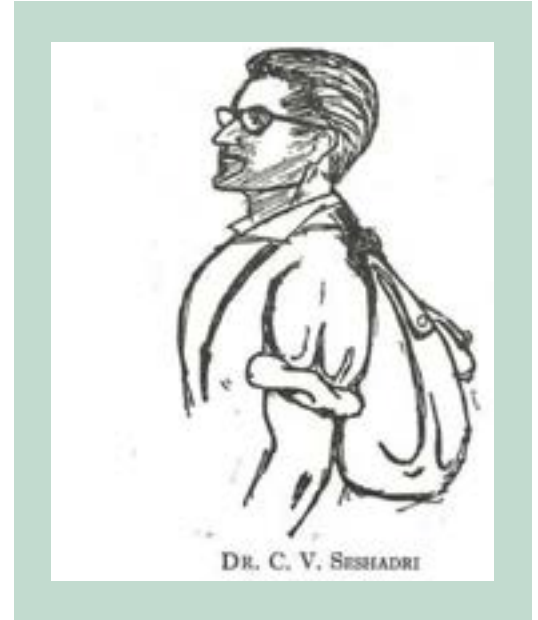
It is a little known and little documented fact that IIT Madras has provided the trigger that caused many rock climbers and mountaineers to take up their hobby or sport.

Joseph Joy, my classmate (1985 batch), was one of these enthusiasts. When we were in our second year, he came across a cyclostyled flyer posted somewhere on campus. The flyer was for a two-week course in basic mountaineering, being organised in summer by the Manali Institute of Mountaineering and Allied Sports.

Joseph had always been interested in mountaineering but had never had any formal training. The course description immediately appealed to him, and he signed up. My class went to Visakhapatnam in April and May that year for training at the shipyard, and Joseph prepared for the forthcoming course by exercising daily and by climbing the low hills of the Eastern Ghats near Vizag in the weekends.

In the 1960s, in the case of George Verghese and R. Jaikumar, it had been the NCC activities at IIT Madras that had introduced them to mountaineering. Cadet Jaikumar was selected one year for a mountaineering course, which was conducted near Manali. And Sgt. George Verghese was selected the next year for the NCC Adventure Course, conducted by the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute, in Darjeeling.

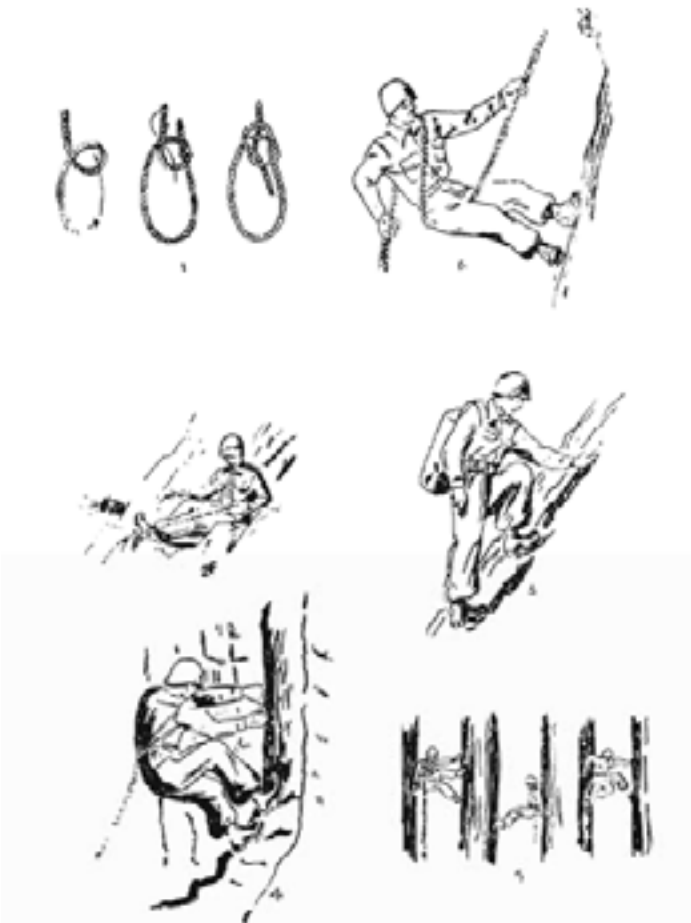
Many students were inspired to take up mountaineering, no doubt, by the Outdoor Club (originally called 'Tech-out') of IIT Madras. The very first outing of the club, which was formed in 1961, was to Pallavaram one morning, on a rock-climbing expedition. The members practised belays and abseils at the rock quarry there. Their account of their experience doubtless induced more students to take up rock climbing. 'A good time was had by all. After a frugal lunch of bread, butter, cheese, hard boiled eggs, more cheese, bread and butter, sausages and tea we came home tired but happy.'



Dr. C. V. Seshadri Source: Campastimes, August 1962

The driving force behind Tech-out was Dr. C.V. Seshadri, of the Chemical Engineering Department. He published an article titled 'Rock-Climbing (in One Easy Lesson)' in the *Annual Number* in 1962: 'Rock Climbing is a pre-requisite for mountain climbing', he wrote. 'It can also be a good week-end activity for people far removed from high mountains. It develops bodily coordination and provides enough challenges of the "Man against Nature" type to set it apart from milder activities such as Cricket, Hockey, etc. It is neither more dangerous nor more difficult to learn than other skills such as swimming.'

Need we identify any more reasons why IITians have taken up mountaineering?



Rock-climbing in one easy lesson Source: Third Annual Number

In Himachal Pradesh, Joseph underwent training at the institute itself, on the outskirts of Manali, for a few days. He learnt climbing skills here. In one of the abseiling manoeuvres, Joseph had to literally walk down a vertical cliff.

After this he and other participants and instructors walked for two days to higher ground, by the glaciers. They stayed in tents for the rest of the duration of the course. The evenings were often rainy, and Joseph says that his tent was one of the few that did not leak. At the glaciers, Joseph and the group practised various skills required for mountaineering. These included self-arresting with an ice axe. This involved flinging oneself down a snow-covered slope. As one slipped and slid downhill, one had to strike the ice axe into the snow and lean on it to slow the slipping. On one occasion Joseph picked up quite some speed and bumped into others as he hurtled down. The others also carried ice axes, and so this could have ended badly. Fortunately, Joseph eventually came to a halt, and no one was hurt.



*Literally walking down a vertical cliff. Photo courtesy: Joseph Joy*

Eighteen years earlier, R. Jaikumar had broken the under-20 (age) world record when he climbed a 20,400 foot peak in the Himalaya, a fact that was celebrated in the annual report of IIT Madras. The next year (1966), Jaikumar 'had the honour of leading the Indian Universities Mountaineering Team to Mount Shilla, 23,050 feet high in the Himalayas'. The team members included George Verghese and G. 'Shrieks' Srikanth. 'Not content with their wanderings on the IITian plains, Jai, George and Shrieks decided to try something

more adventurous' is how an editorial in *Campas-times* described their effort. And did they succeed? '[The] Outdoor Club of the Institute carved a name for itself in the annals of mountaineering history when they provided three members of the team led by R. Jaikumar which climbed many peaks including the virgin peak Mt. Shilla' is how the *Annual Number* reported it. The Outdoor Club's report went on to say that Jaikumar was appointed the Joint Leader of the All India Expedition to Mt. Sa-sir Kangri, the highest unclimbed peak in the world (25000 ft). The expedition was to be carried out in the summer in 1967.

What does someone on the IIT campus do who has the itch to climb? The April 1966 issue of *Campas-times*, which carried a caricature of Jaikumar, gives you an idea. 'Quite undaunted by the sad lack of mountainous terrain in the campus, [Jaikumar] is seen climbing hostel walls at all odd hours. Tiring of this, he exhibits his marvellous feat of balancing on the terrace ledge.'



Caricature of Jaikumar, Campastimes 1966



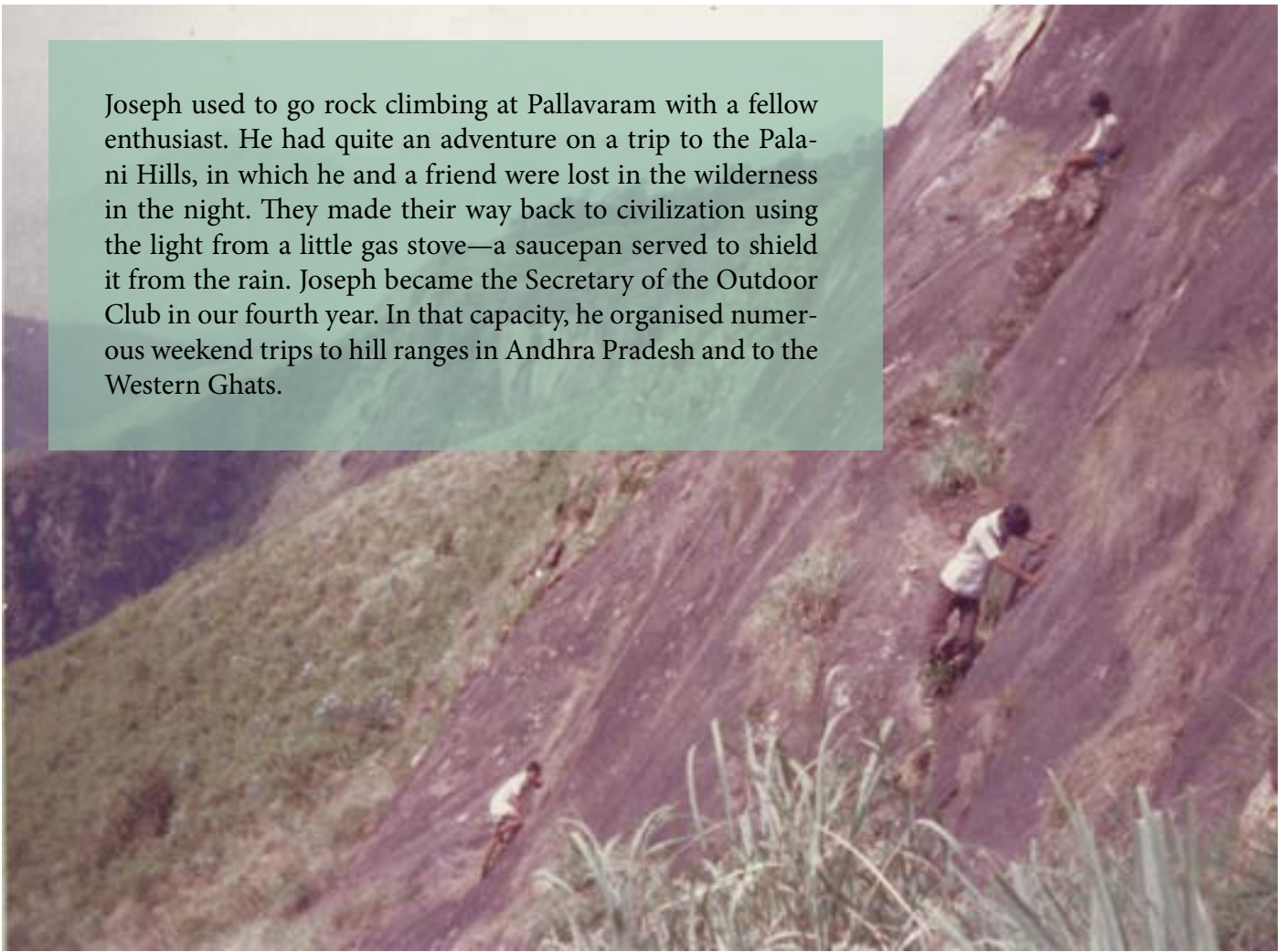
George Verghese, Campastimes 1966



Srikant, Campastimes 1966



Joseph used to go rock climbing at Pallavaram with a fellow enthusiast. He had quite an adventure on a trip to the Palani Hills, in which he and a friend were lost in the wilderness in the night. They made their way back to civilization using the light from a little gas stove—a saucepan served to shield it from the rain. Joseph became the Secretary of the Outdoor Club in our fourth year. In that capacity, he organised numerous weekend trips to hill ranges in Andhra Pradesh and to the Western Ghats.



Previous image and above: Outdoor Club members learn rock-climbing. Photos: Joseph Joy



The view from the top of the tank: MSB in the foreground, HSB and Ad Block behind it Photo: Joseph Joy

Joseph's enthusiasm for mountaineering was infectious. I joined Joseph on a Youth Hostel Association-organised trek in the Nilgiris.

But on campus, my enthusiasm for climbing steep surfaces was tempered by abundant caution. I did not climb a 'chimney' on the outer walls of SAC although Joseph demonstrated to me how easy and safe it was. I would certainly not have ascended the wall of Sarawathi Hostel from the ground, raising myself with the strength of my arms and hands to climb from one window to another; Joseph did—he told me this many years after the feat.

But I did join Joseph in 'summitting' the water-tank near BSB. The incredibly high metal ladder that we ascended then was entirely unencumbered with protection of any sort. The experience was the stuff that turns knuckles white—at least for me. But what a view we had from the top!

**Kumaran Sathasivam**