

CROSSROADS

Source of Confusion

In a world of digital maps, satellite-powered compasses and missions to Mars, the earth's topographical mysteries don't amount to much. At least not in the same way they did to generations of terrestrial adventurers lured in centuries past to boldly go where no man had gone before. The competition to be the first to stand on a remote piece of turf touched off epic races to get to headwaters, poles or summits before anybody else. Disputed firsts were the order of the day. And as the 21st century dawns, an echo of those tiffs has come to light in one still-large corner of the globe.

Ernst Aebi, a New York City artist, claims that on June 9, 1993, he and his wife, Emilie, were the first Westerners to trace the legendary Brahmaputra River to its source in Chang La Pass, a snow-filled gorge straddling the border of Tibet and Nepal. But Aebi's evidence—Defense Department maps, altitude disparities and the word of local yak herders—doesn't jibe with an existing claim held by Jere Van Dyk, an author also based in New York City. In the November 1988 *National Geographic*, Van Dyk writes that it was he and photographer Galen Rowell who were the first Westerners in over a century to find the "Celestial Horse," the lone glacier that supposedly begets the mighty river (the duo gives original honors to a band of 19th-century English hunters).

The essence of the debate is that Van Dyk's glacier and Aebi's gorge lie 14 miles apart, and neither explorer is ready to budge an ice cube or boulder to relinquish his stake on the map. "I never assumed that I could possibly be the first," says the jovial Aebi, a writer and fellow of the Explorers Club. "This was the beginning of one of those impossible dreams."

And no pipe dream it was. Aebi's expedition targeted one of the most

influential rivers in the world. The Brahmaputra is Mother Nature's own Sybil, changing names—and personalities—no less than six times along its twisted 1,800-mile journey from the craggy alpine peaks of Tibet to the soggy lowlands of the Indian subcontinent. After swiveling south through Bangladeshi plains, it joins the other holiest of holy rivers, the Ganges. Both then spill into the Bay of Bengal.

Aebi and Van Dyk are only the latest in the quest for the Brahmaputra starting line. Edmund Smyth, a British officer in India, led an 1864 trek to the source that historians discount because his descriptions of the Tibetan high-



lands didn't add up. In 1907 a Swedish mountaineer named Sven Hedin also failed the acceptance test.

The allure of being number one is as compelling now as ever. "I was just driven to go as far as I could," says Van Dyk.

Though maybe that wasn't far enough. To the chagrin of geography buffs, the truth about the river's origins may prove as evasive as its actual course, which shifts constantly due to erosion. The authorities are staying on the sidelines. "*National Geographic* is not an arbiter," says a diplomatic Joe Blanton, director of research correspondence for the Society. "I don't know that there's a formal policy here to settle these things."

"It's a matter for Mr. Aebi and Mr. Van Dyk to clear up on their own," adds a noncommittal Janet Baldwin, curator at the Explorers Club.

Just as well. Cartographers today have it too easy anyway.

—VICKY GOMELSKY

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