

THE SUNDERDUNGA-THARKOT (20,010 ft.) EXPEDITION, 1969

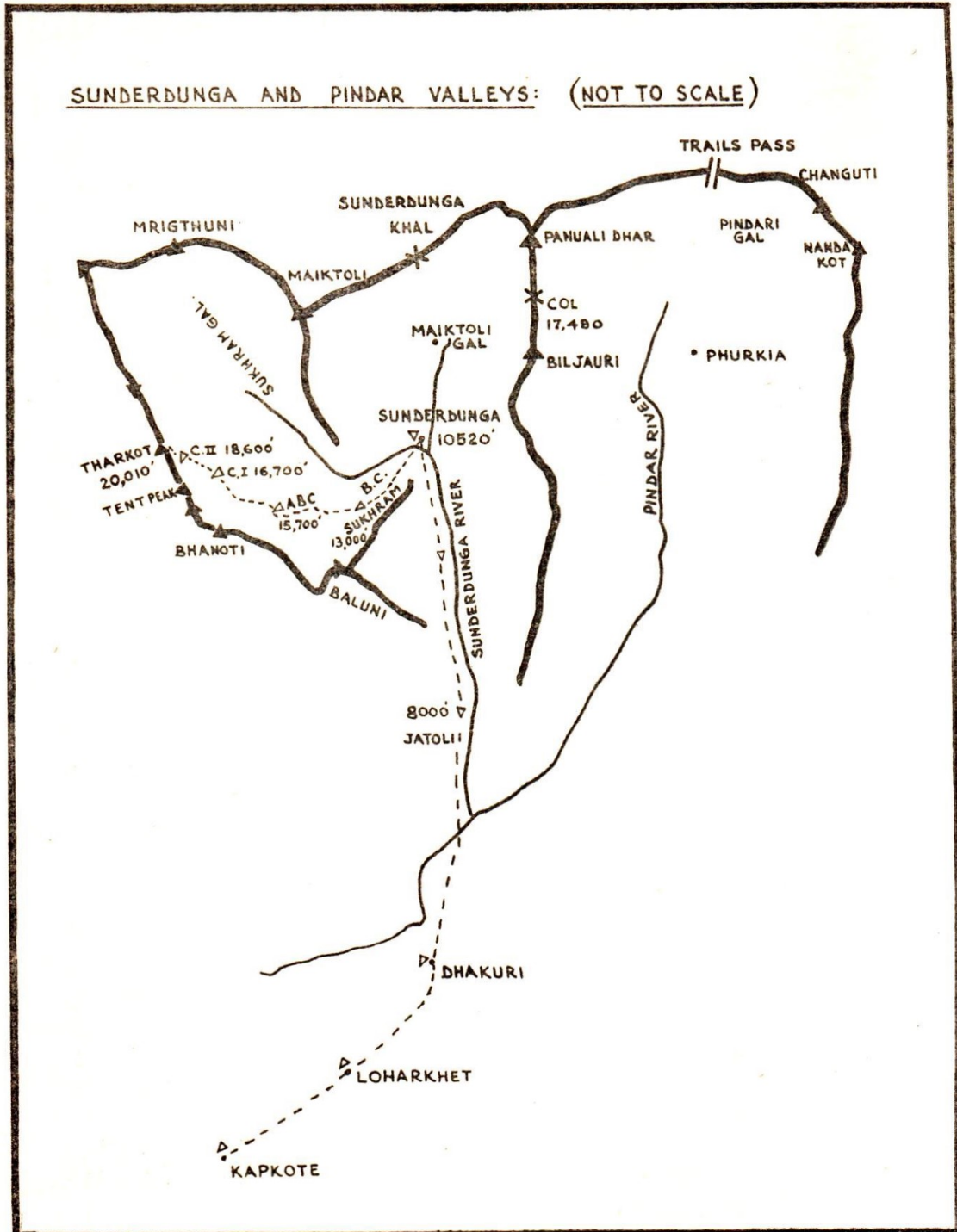
By HARISH KAPADIA

THE yearly itch for the mountains started troubling us as early as January and we willingly succumbed to it. Selecting the team was no problem as we decided to have a small group of friends to enjoy a good climbing holiday in the Himalayas. Our team consisted of Zafar Vasi, Zerxis Boga, Bharat Merchant, Manu Dattani and myself as leader. Though we were a very young team, all of us being under 24 years in age, we had had a good amount of training and experience in Himalayan climbing to support our plans.

To the west of the Pindari glacier and under the high Sunderdunga Khal lies the Sunderdunga Valley. It is situated in an enchanting cirque of mountains dominated by the gigantic Maiktoli wall on the one side and the gentle Tharkot range on the other. With its deep and narrow gorges, thick forests, lush green meadows, abundant wild life and the snow-capped mountains, the valley offers all its name stands for—beauty in all its forms. It first came to be known when Shipton and Tilman made their exit from the Nanda Devi Sanctuary by climbing down from the Sunderdunga Khal to this valley. Wilfried Noyce visited Sunderdunga in 1944 making the first ascent of Tharkot and Biljauri peaks. The first and only Indian ascent of Tharkot was by K. P. Sharma's team in 1963. Apart from this the valley has not been disturbed frequently. With its short approach-march and good climbing-propositions, it suited us ideally. Our plans were to climb Tharkot (20,010 ft.) and to attempt to cross the col (17,490 ft.) between Panwali Dhar and Biljauri peaks connecting the Maiktoli glacier to Pindari glacier.

Since all of us were students, it was a formidable task for us to raise enough resources to support such a venture. We were fortunate enough to receive help from various sources and especially from the Climbers Club, Bombay, which agreed to sponsor us. After hectic preparations finally we set off for the hills on 11 May.

Our Sherpas Dawa Ringzing and Wangchuk met us at Kapkote, our road head. After the usual bargaining with the porters, we started along the route to Pindari glacier. Crossing the Dhakuri



Khal the route led down to a small bridge over the confluence of the Pindari and Sunderdunga rivers. Here we entered the Sunderdunga Valley. Jatoli, the only village in the valley at 8,000 feet and housing very hospitable people, was our first halt. Some of the elders still remember the visit of Shipton and Tilman and the rope they left as a souvenir. Walking along the river, the track climbed up and down to reach Sunderdunga (10,520 ft.). It is an open grazing ground with mountains on all sides except the south.

To get to the Base Camp at Sukhram from Sunderdunga one can either walk along the river or climb a steep ridge and then traverse the entire slope. We selected the latter course, for the former route involves danger of rockfalls. Though this involved nearly 1,500 feet of climbing, the effort was rewarding. From the top we had a most gorgeous view of the Panwali Dhar (still unclimbed), Biljauri, Maiktoli and the Tharkot range. Cutting our way through rhododendrons and steep snowy slopes, we reached the Base Camp at Sukhram (13,000 ft.) and camped underneath a huge rock.

Sun up and we were off for Camp I, which by my reckoning was 2,500 feet above us. We were at the beginning of the Tharkot range and so before we could hope to reach the slope of Tharkot, we had to traverse the range entirely, for Tharkot is right at the far end. In fact, the peculiar thing about this mountain is that all along you are only approaching it and except for the last 1,000 feet or so you are never on its slopes at all. The route to Camp I was far from difficult, but because the snow was soft and deep it became an exhausting affair. The route involved a very steep climb traversing the long arms of the mountains of the Tharkot range coming down to the Sukhram glacier. By 10 o'clock the clouds had engulfed us and it became suddenly very cold and started snowing. We pressed on but by 11 a.m. the visibility became very poor and it looked as though the clouds would never lift. So it was decided to dump the loads where we were and return. This was our Advance Base Camp at 15,700 feet.

We came up the next morning by 9 a.m. and went ahead to find a camp site for Camp I. After crossing a huge snow-field, we climbed up a rotten-looking rock patch of about 100 feet. There the route lay through a giant ice-lip nearly 200 feet high and 300 feet broad but the route was quite safe. On top of it we dumped the loads. It was 2.30 p.m.

On 25 May we rose to a cloudless sky. By 11 a.m. we reached the point where we had dumped the loads the day before. After

a snack we did a steep climb for about 100 feet and reached a vast snow plateau. Crossing the plateau we began climbing yet another steep couloir of 150 feet. Camp I was on the top of it at 16,700 feet. The view around us was stupendous. In front lay Tharkot. Around, we had a panoramic view of the gigantic Maiktoli wall, the Panwali Dhar with its ice-fluted walls rising above the upper *névé* of the Maiktoli glacier, the gentle Biljauri, the famous trapism of Nanda Kot and far in the distance the mountains of Eastern Kumaon and Nepal.

From Camp I the slopes became more and more treacherous and the terrain more and more tricky. We decided to rope up. To avoid the main icefall leading up to Camp II, we took the route under the ridge coming from the adjoining Tent peak. Carrying heavy loads and sinking hip-deep in snow, we climbed zigzag towards the Tent peak for about 1,000 feet before traversing under a rock slope towards Tharkot. After crossing a small icefall we rested on a small plateau. The route traversed ahead under a prominent black patch of rock towards the east ridge of the Tent peak. Making our way through a maze of *séracs*, we ultimately reached a small depression directly below the Tent peak. This was our Camp II (18,600 feet) in line with the top of the lower rock face of Tharkot. It started snowing by the time we pitched our tents. Life seemed pleasant after a cup of coffee, for we were badly dehydrated. None of us slept well, for half the time we had to kick the flaps to keep the snow building up on our tents.

By 4 a.m. we were out of our sleeping-bags hoping to make an early start. Unfortunately, we had soon to return to our sleeping-bags, for the weather was very bad. It was 2 o'clock in the afternoon before the weather improved a little to enable us to see for 300 feet or so. Three of us set off immediately to make a route ahead. It was a steep slope of 600 feet on to a plateau whence the pyramid of Tharkot rises. The track climbed up the slope which at its top was flanked by a giant *sérac* on either side. The *séracs* appeared absolutely harmless. Having reached the plateau, we crossed and reached the base of the pyramid. A long bergschrund extended in a semicircle from the Tent peak to the place where we now stood. We were in line with the col between the Tent peak and Tharkot. From that I estimated our height to be 19,500 feet. From here a steep climb led to the east ridge of Tharkot, which was rising gently to the summit dome. The summit appeared quite near and well within our reach as there was no technical difficulty on the way. The weather took

a turn for the worst and we had to return, hoping to make an early attempt the next day in good weather. On our return we were treated to a fantastic view of Panwali Dhar and Maiktoli aglow with the evening red, rising high above the clouds.

It was 5.30 a.m. on 28 May. We were full of enthusiasm and our thoughts turned to the summit. I decided to keep Dattani at the camp as he was not feeling too well. We followed the track made the day before. We were five on a rope led by Sherpa Dawa, Bharat, Boga, myself and Sherpa Wangchuk. We had walked for about 10 minutes and suddenly startled by an ominous sound loud and violent. Though we had never heard such a sound before, we instinctively knew that it was the sound of an avalanche. The *sérac* above us, about 100-foot tall and 600 feet above us, had cracked into several blocks and were tumbling down. It did not give us any time at all and within seconds we were in the avalanche and there was no way out of it. We could offer no resistance at all as the ground slipped from under our feet and we were in mid-air. We rolled and tumbled unconscious of everything else. I felt very breathless and the swimming motions, which I did vigorously, helped a little.

After a minute or two—which actually seemed an eternity to us—it was all over. We had fallen about 500 feet. We were all buried in the debris of snow. Luckily, none of us were buried too deeply. Sherpa Wangchuk was free and came to help us, with blood running down his cheek. He pulled out Boga who was covered with blood and groaning with pain. Then with his bare hands he dug Dawa out. Soon both of them relieved Bharat. I was buried up to my neck and finding it increasingly difficult to breathe, I struggled helplessly shouting for help. To see three of them coming to my help was also a great relief. After some hard digging with hands they hauled me out by my arm-pits, all entangled in ropes. They tried to find a knife, but there was none; crampons and teeth were of no use. Suddenly Wangchuk had a brainwave. He broke his Thermos flask and used its glass to cut the rope. The idea worked and I was freed from my misery. We quickly dragged ourselves from the line of the avalanche and then had a quick personal check-up. Luckily, no bones were broken but some of us were bleeding profusely. Boga was quite bad with his upper eyelid badly cut and his face bleeding all over. Dawa had a swelling on his knees and I had bad cuts on my left thigh. But we were all in position to walk or drag ourselves. It was 6.30 a.m. We had suffered the agony for 40 minutes and in the process had lost everything: sun-glasses,

gloves, ice-axes, rope and even our two cameras were consumed by the white fury. We worked by instincts, all that mattered was life and survival.

Since the avalanche had come in a diagonal way, it had thrown us off the track between Camps I and II. Now we found ourselves in the middle of the icefall we had deliberately avoided while coming up. With Wangchuk in the lead we decided to make a dash for the Base Camp. Walking was painful. Tumbling under many a fearsome *séracs* we reached Camp I when we were about to be snow-blind due to walking without sun-glasses. Soon the weather worsened and we were spared this experience. As Boga was finding it difficult to walk, I decided to stay with him while others would rush down to send up porters. It was a long day for us since then. We dragged ourselves slowly, walking at the most 20 steps at a time. Soon Boga's condition worsened and he collapsed. We sat on a rock patch waiting for the rescue. Boga was putting up a brave fight. Later on we found out that he had cracked two ribs and had injured his skull. After about three hours of waiting the porters came up and we started our painful walk again on their shoulders. At last after 10 hours we were at the Base Camp, nursing each other's wounds. We had to spend the night around a fire as all our belongings were at Camp II and in spite of taking sleeping pills we remained awake feeling the pain and cold.

At Camp II Dattani lived through a different experience. He was waving good-bye to us when the avalanche swept us away. He was too dazed to do anything. Gripped by fear and bad weather he decided to stay where he was. In the night, alone at 18,600 feet he started getting hallucinations, heard our voices and even found himself in conversation with us. Believing us as lost, he collected our personal belongings with a hope of restoring them to our families. According to him the blocks of *séracs* were so big that even if one of them had hit us we would have been crushed!

Next day at the crack of the dawn he moved down. Losing his way often ultimately he met the porters sent up by us to fetch him. They informed him that all of us were safe. He almost ran to the Base Camp to make himself double sure. Our reunion was very warm.

Now all the members were at the Base Camp but the equipment was still at Camp II. Since Boga's condition was serious, I decided to move down. Moreover, due to the injuries and the continuing bad weather any further attempt on Tharkot or attempting

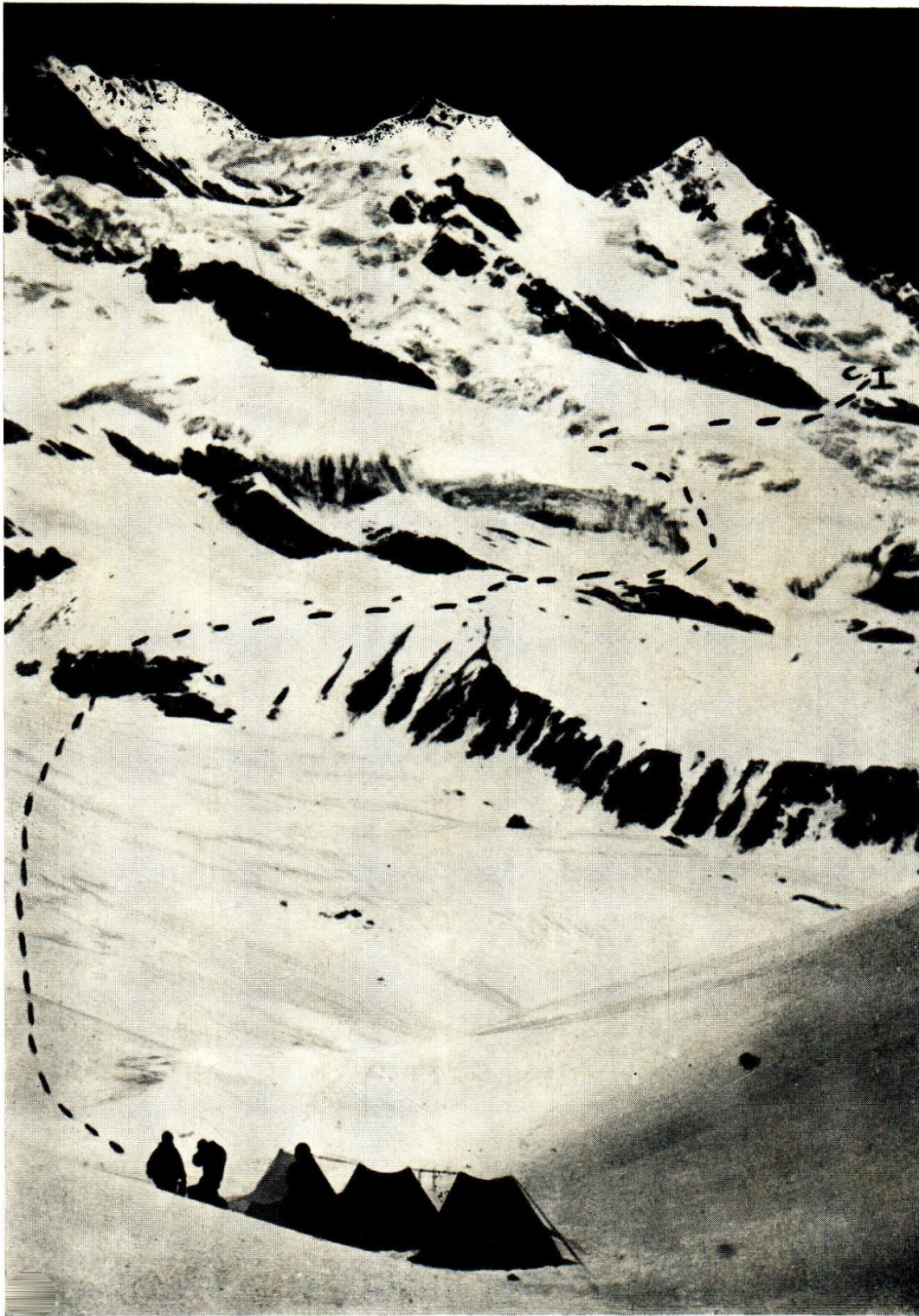


Photo: Harish Kapadia

THE THARKOT RANGE. THARKOT (20,010 FT.) ON THE EXTREME RIGHT, TENT PEAK IN THE MIDDLE AND UNNAMED POINTS ON THE LEFT. THE A.B. CAMP IN THE FOREGROUND WITH THE ROUTE TO CAMP I MARKED. X SHOWS THE HIGHEST POINT REACHED



Photo : Harish Kapadia

PANWALI DHAR PEAK AS SEEN ABOVE SUNDERDUNGA (10,520 FT.). MAIKTOLI NULLAH IN THE FOREGROUND. THE RIDGE ON THE LEFT LEADS TO SUNDERDUNGA KHAL AND THE RIDGE ON THE RIGHT TO THE COL (17,490 FT.) BETWEEN PANWALI DHAR AND BILJAURI PEAKS

the col was not possible. On the 30th we were all at Sunderdunga. Zafar, who had gone on a reconnaissance trip towards Maiktoli glacier, met us here. At first our porters were too frightened to go up to fetch the equipment. We offered some rice and money to the local priest who made the route safe by some wild gestures and prayers! Our porters, Shamsing and Devni, made their fourth trip to Camp II to fetch the equipment. Walking back was particularly painful for Boga and Dawa and they would take almost a whole day to cover a short march. We all assembled at Jatoli, with our equipment on 2 June. The next day we began our plod down to Kapkote.



Photo : Harish Kapadia

THE UPPER ROCK-TRAVERSE ON WAY TO CAMP II. THARKOT (20,010 FT.) IN THE BACKGROUND