

MOUNTAIN OF LONG LIFE

First Ascent of Chiring We

HARISH KAPADIA

CHIRING WE is a shy mountain. It remained unheard of till recently and refused to allow itself to be seen by human eyes at close quarters. Situated in the remote corner of the Kumaon Himalaya on the border of Tibet, it remained aloof and evaded any contact with mountaineers. It was beyond the purview of the local people with this Bhotia name. We had to cross a treacherous icefall to have a first glimpse of it. But then, at that point, it shed all its shyness and rose nakedly 5000 ft in front of us, presenting boldly its southwest face. It added the tests of crevasses, strong Tibetan winds, sharp ridges and giant cornices. We climbed three of its surrounding peaks to be ready to approach it. And at last, this 'Mountain of Long Life', yielded to our persuasion and perseverance, to allow us the first ascent.

Situated at the head of the Kalabaland glacier, it is in great company. On the west is the Milan glacier with Hardeol, Tirsuli and the Eastern wall of the Nanda Devi Sanctuary. On the north is Tibet with numerous peaks, while the east (across the Darma Valley) is dominated by the Api and Nampa group of peaks of West Nepal. The south is closed off with Chaudhara, Rajramha and Panchchuli. The glacier itself is 15 km in length, running NW. to SE. It joins the Yankchar glacier and both together form the Shankalpa glacier, which is also a rare phenomenon. Administratively, it is in the Musiary division of the Pithoragadh district of U.P.

The area had no colourful past. In the *Himalayan Journal* it has received mention only once, by Kenneth Snelson.¹ The Scottish Himalayan Expedition acknowledged its existence while crossing the Ralam Pass in 1952. Then in 1967, a small group from Delhi visited the glacier but their activities are not recorded. After ten years, in May 1977, we organized an expedition to the glacier, but being knotted in our own logistics, failed to get near it.² A peak of 18,372 ft on the shoulder of Suli Top was all that we could climb. In October, in the same year, a team from Calcutta penetrated the icefall and at the third attempt climbed Bamba Dhura, via the south ridge. In October 1978, another group from Calcutta climbed one of the peaks during a scientific exploratory trip. Equipped with our familiarity of the area and information from the above expeditions, we were back again in

1. See panorama, H.J., Vol. XVIII, p. 99.

2. H.J., Vol. XXXV, p. 221.

May-June 1979 to resume our challenge to this highest virgin of Kumaon.

Sherpas say that a mountain selects its own climbers. Our team was a natural choice of close friends and climbing companions of past years. Zerksis Boga (Deputy Leader) a veteran of many expeditions, with Nayankumar Katira formed the lead team. Vijay Kothari and Chandrasinh Danthi had climbed high before and were excellent organizers. Kanu Pomal, cine photographer, Dr Rodhan Shroff and Dr Vasant Desai had a fair amount of high-altitude experience, while Kali Bordiwala and Rajendra Desai were on their first major Himalayan venture. As the most experienced member, I was to lead the team. Chewang Tashi, Kami Tsering and Lakhpa Tsering joined the team. We were under the aegis of 'The Mountaineers', of Bombay.

A typewriter is as important to a mountaineer as an ice-axe, wrote Tilman.¹ We did not forget his words. We found thorough planning as interesting and essential as climbing techniques. On a number of occasions, it was our saviour, though it did provoke a comment from one of the members: 'If we have any time left after filling up all the files, we may climb one of the peaks.'

In two fields particularly, we had new approaches, a sort of Indianization. A Hindu calendar is based on the phases of the moon, which is closely related to the weather. During the years of climbing, we found the people in the hills and Sherpas strictly following it in their day-to-day life. And as a hypothesis, we always noticed a pattern in the weather which corresponded to this calendar. This was particularly true during the years when a 'leap month' was added, to correct the calendar according to the seasons. It was noticed that it might not necessarily be clear till the third week of June or stop raining after mid-September; but the weather did coincide with this calendar. We were helped by this theory at the planning stage and our high-altitude days were deliberately made to coincide with the expected clear weather in the first fortnight of the month of Jyestha when the moon was waxing. This worked out well as in the previous years, but one still cannot vouch for the general accuracy of the procedure. Local storms may vary and our observations relate to Garhwal only.

On the food front, we improvised many home-made fresh foods, to which we were more used. It was carefully packed; and once above Munsiary it was almost in a 'natural refrigerator' and kept well. For example, instead of cheese, we preferred equally nutritious home-made sweets. We found eating according to our natural habits very palatable and none of us lost any weight or felt the altitude. And it reduced costs to a great extent too. Only the cook and the quarter-master Danthi were kept very busy!

1. *Nanda Devi*, by H. W. Tilman.

5 May 1979 and we were off with 3000 kg of luggage to Kathgodam. Changing to a bus, we reached Munsiairy, facing the five peaks of Panchchuli. With load-carrying goats and 23 porters, the first party started for Ralam (11,970 ft) four days away via Lilam, Pilthi and Sapo. Three members stayed behind to arrange for the rest of the 27 porters, and followed after three days. But then on, the adventure began in right earnest. On the 14th, the porters did not reach the proposed Base Camp site, but dumped us at 13,300 ft in the middle of the moraine on the Shankalpa glacier. By evening, a steady snowfall started which continued for 24 hours and even at our altitude left an unusual amount of snow. The goats were following a day behind; they refused to go further, and dumped loads at Ralam. The second team joined us on the 16th, but all except our 6 porters left for home in face of the inclement weather. The situation was gloomy. There we were with 2000 kg load and still a day away from the base. Any thoughts of Chiring We sounded downright remote.

But it was in this situation that the team rose to the occasion. One porter was sent down to recruit a few more, and with the available manpower we started ferrying loads, which was to continue for five stages to Camp 3. Even Dr Vasant Desai, at the age of 62, climbed up to Camp 1 with the usual loads and we said to ourselves that now, with his spirit at this age, we have no business to fail. Rodhan, Raj and I occupied the Base Camp on the 17th, to open the route and ferry to the Advance Base Camp at 14,900 ft. Snow conditions were atrocious, to say the least, an A.B.C. was placed at the foot of Suli Top, on the Kalabaland glacier.

At 4.30 a.m. on May 21, we were rudely awakened by a strong tremor. It was an earthquake. As we learned later from the radio broadcast, the epicentre was our area. At the Base Camp, to our horror, we felt the moraine floor shaking. A few crevasses widened and there was a heavy discharge of stones from the nearby walls. It was rather frightful, feeling the mighty Himalaya in action. Those at Ralam were sleeping in a dilapidated school. They ran out, since it had a roof of loose stones. Luckily nobody was hurt, but this earthquake at high altitude was a real shaking experience. We consolidated A.B.C. for three days and the situation improved with five porters joining us. Boga, Nayan, Raj and I forged ahead with Sherpas to A.B.C. and Camp 1 (16,200 ft) at the foot of the icefall, climbing steadily over the knee-deep snow of the glacier. But as we slept in our tents at A.B.C. on the night of 24 May, a strong blizzard struck our area. Winds with a velocity of about 100 km drove powder snow on to our tents. We were confined to the tents for 40 hours. When we emerged, three feet of snow lay all round. But the weather had cleared and it was to remain clear for the next 15 days. Boga, Nayan, Tashi and Kami started opening the route in the icefall, while we ferried loads to Camp 1.

The icefall was a place of wonders. It had everything, giant crevasses, ice-pinnacles and ice-walls. The route at first cut across to the west, towards Burphu Dhura. Then for 300 ft it passed under overhanging ice-walls where everybody had to run across. A very breathless affair! Then bypassing a huge ice-wall on the east, it followed a prominent gully again to reach the westernmost point, Camp 2 at 17,400 ft. It was a great experience to go over the route and none of us will forget it easily. After improving the route, on 2 June we pushed through a ferry of 10 persons to Camp 2 and this solved all our supply problems for the next few days. But think of it, we had as yet not even seen the mountain we wanted to climb!

But it was not far from us now. On 4 June, Boga, Nayan, Tashi and Kami occupied Camp 3 at 19,000 ft about half a kilometre in the south, from the wall of the Bamba Dhura. The route first climbed over a huge plain up to a prominent projection, 'Elephant's Head'. Onwards, it passed on the true left over many crevasses and ice-bridges to climb to the top of the head. A few more nasty crevasses and we reached the camp. All along the route, we could see Chiring We. The first sight was staggering. The southwest face rose 5000 ft with ice shining. Giant cornices clung to this face. The west ridge was at least 60° steep with a narrow curve, descending to the glacier. On the north, giant cornices were hanging all along. The south was joined to two smaller peaks. But anyway, it was Hobson's choice to us, and the west ridge was the only possibility. Now we were ready for our skirmish, but a lot was to follow.

Bamba Dhura : (6334 m - 20,780 ft)—I was feeling a bit off-colour as we left Camp 2 on 5 June. Vijay shared some of my load. As we were on the top of the 'Elephant's Head', we could see climbers returning to Camp 3 above. A little ahead, we could hear the sounds of jubilation, and I started running. They had climbed Bamba Dhura! Tashi, Boga, Nayan and Kami left camp at 5 a.m. in two ropes. Moving due east, they opened a route over a ramp again over crevasses. An ice-wall was climbed to reach the col at 20,100 ft between Bamba Dhura and Chiring We. On the plateau they traversed to the SE. ridge and soon hit hard ice, and a steep angle. Here, Nayan discovered that his crampons were missing and this was to cost him the summit climb. After about 500 ft the angle became gradual and, avoiding cornices on the north, Boga and Tashi reached the summit at 11 a.m. They had perfect weather conditions for grand views and studying Chiring We, now in the south. It was the second ascent of this peak.

Kalabaland Dhura (6105 m - 20,030 ft)—As one turns to the Kalabaland glacier, a shapely peak in the form of a triangle is visible at the head of the glacier. This peak, marked 20,030 ft, guards the western edge of the icefall and unlike Chiring We,

it is a prominent landmark all along. Now from Camp 3 it was approachable.

On 6 June, again at 5 a.m., the camp hummed with activity as Lakhpa, Vijay and I left for this peak. As our camp was situated with Chiring We in mind, we had to traverse for about 2 km to reach the base. A seemingly gentle slope suddenly steepened to 60° but with soft snow which allowed steps to be kicked. Apart from a giant bergschrund, it was strenuous but not difficult. We reached a col in the north, 300 ft below the peak. It was like paradise gained. We were face to face with Nanda Devi and the peaks on the eastern walls of the sanctuary from Maiktoli to Rishi Pahar, Hardeol, Tirsuli. Dunagiri and Kamet peeped from behind. On the north, Uja Tirthhe, Lampak and Kalganga Dhura were seen. On the east, Chiring We rose high. It was a rather sobering thought that in the next few days we would be attempting it. As clouds were rolling in, we started putting on crampons, as ahead was a steep ice-gully leading to the high corniced summit. After some struggle Vijay declared that the crampons didn't fit him. As he was approaching his first twenty-thousander, I offered him my pair. Leaving me anchored in the above company of mountains, Lakhpa and Vijay climbed slowly to the top. Steps were cut all along with strong belays. The summit was reached at 10 a.m. and Vijay climbed down in half an hour. I gleefully accepted his suggestion to climb up on the safe route and was up at the top in no time. As it looked down to the Milam Valley, the summit was not a place to linger around. We rushed back to the col and were back to the tents by 3 p.m.

Continuing the pattern, again at 5 a.m. of 7 June, Tashi, Kami and Boga left for the first attempt on Chiring We. We could see them on a ramp by 8 a.m. making brisk progress. By 9 a.m. they were stopped by a giant bergschrund and the three dots stopped moving. After two hours of fixing ropes, the steepness and exposure defeated them and they withdrew. Back at the camp, Chewang Tashi opined that Chiring We appeared 'impossible' to him and we should withdraw. The peak was difficult and dangerous in his view. He was a climbing instructor at the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute, Darjeeling, and had to his credit the first ascent of Changabang in 1974. We considered his opinion but then we had also rubbed our nose against the mountain and after a thorough observation, it was felt that we might lose a battle but the war could be won. As Tashi was firm in his pessimism, we parted company and accordingly on 8 June he left the mountain which ironically we were to climb in the next two days!

Unnamed Peak (5989 m - 19,450 ft)—Strong winds were lashing at the tent walls and none of us could move out on 9 June. Two porters arrived at Camp 3 by the afternoon, with a note. Deciding on the spur of the moment, Raj and Kali were attempting this gentle peak, a little above our well-trodden route above Camp 2.

Waiting for some time below, they had perhaps lost patience and considering that they had no experience, we were worried for their safety. Luckily we were not at grips with Chiring We as scheduled; otherwise, we would have been stretched at both ends. Leaving Camp 2 early, they reached the base of the peak to follow the eastern and south-eastern approaches. It was a long trudge to the top, facing strong winds. This was the third ascent of the peak, situated about a kilometre south of Kalabaland Dhura. After good views, they returned to the camp exhausted, but proving the maxim that all is well that ends well.

Chiring We (21,520 ft - 6559 m)—10 June, and the support team of Kanu and myself were up by 1 a.m. It was a beautiful moonlit night and extremely cold -20°C , but luckily, the wind was low. The summiters were ready to leave by 4 a.m. after breakfast, and we were again cosy in our sleeping-bags.

Boga, Lakhpa, Nayan and Kami left in two ropes, heavily loaded with fixed ropes and a variety of pitons. The going was good, as they reached the col. Later, Boga vividly described that the pleasure of a full moon setting on Nanda Devi was so satisfying that he wouldn't have thought twice if they had to return back at that moment. But the hard work remained. Sunlight touched them on the ramp at the base of the north face of Chiring We. After some rest they climbed up to the fixed ropes left on 7 June. Very gradually they crossed the bergschrund and going over umpteen crevasses they hit the west ridge at about 8.30 a.m. On the other side was the southwest face with a drop of 5000 ft to the glacier, and the ridge rose at an angle of 60° to 70° and had four giant cornices hanging on the north. Thus all along they had to stick to a narrow path between the drop and the cornices. Reluctant to take any chances they fixed ropes all the way to the summit 1500 ft above them. Naturally the progress was slow and about 800 ft below the summit, Nayan and Kami sat down while Boga and Lakhpa, who were faster, pushed ahead. Cutting steps and with fixed ropes, they were on the top of the highest virgin peak of Kumaon exactly at 12.10 p.m. At Camp 3, Kanu could film the full ascent and we embraced each other in joy and relief. But the celebrations were still to come. We filled thermos flasks with hot liquids, and loaded with food, started climbing towards the col at 20,100 ft.

The summit, as always, was a wonderful place. They had a look around at numerous peaks far and near. A staggering view was looking down towards the icefall. And of course, the grand view of the great Tibetan plateau to the north. In the east, Api and Nampa and in the west Nanda Devi, were the only peaks above them. Like all good things, it was too good to be true and they had to leave quickly. By 1.30 p.m. they met the second team. Nayan and Kami followed the steps and the fixed ropes to reach the summit at 2.30 p.m. They all descended together towards the col.

At the col, we could see them coming down. They all looked like ghosts and collapsed above a crevasse. We climbed up further, and with hot drinks and food they revived quickly. We reached the camp at 7 p.m. exactly 15 hours after they had left.

On 11 June, we wound up Camp 3 and slowly climbed down to the 'Elephant's Head'. We had a last look at 'our' Chiring We. It was standing with the same arrogance. 'A mountain never lowers itself, we have to rise to climb it,' says a hill proverb. We looked down to see the three sturdy figures of our Kumaon porters climbing steadily upwards, and we knew that it was time to return home.

SUMMARY

The expedition climbed the following peaks :

1. *Chiring We* : 6559 m - 21,520 ft, First ascent. Climbed on 10 June by Zerksis S. Boga, Lakhpa Tsering, Nayankumar Katira and Kami Tsering. Route : From Camp 3 to the col between Chiring We and Bamba Dhura. Then on north face to the west ridge, which was followed to the top. This was the highest unclimbed peak in Kumaon. About 1500 ft of rope was fixed on the final assault and the angle of climb was about 60° steep.
2. *Bamba Dhura* : 6334 m - 20,780 ft, Second ascent. Climbed on 5 June by Zerksis S. Boga and Chewang Tashi. Route : From Camp 3 to the col between Bamba Dhura and Chiring We. Then followed the southeast ridge to the top. Some portion about 50° steep.
3. *Kalabaland Dhura* : 6105 m - 20,030 ft, First ascent. Climbed on 6 June by Harish Kapadia, Vijay Kothari and Lakhpa Tsering. Route : From Camp 3 to a col on north of the peak. Followed a steep gully to the top. Heavy cornices on the top, situated on the Kalabaland-Milam watershed. This is a suggested name for this unnamed peak.
4. *Unnamed Peak* : 5928 m - 19,450 ft, Third ascent. Climbed on 9 June by Kali R. Bordiwala and Rajendra A. Desai. Route : From Camp 2 traversed to its eastern approaches and easy climb to this dome-shaped peak, situated on the watershed, south of the above peak.

△ TIRGULI
23,208'
7,074 M
HARDEOL
23,461'
7,151 M

TIBET

KALGANGA DHURA
20,390'
6,215 M
KALABALAND DHURA
20,030'
6,105 M
BAMBA DHURA
20,780'
6,334 M
CHIRING WE
21,520'
6,559 M

NANDA-DEVI

△
25,642' 24,390'
7,816 M 7,434 M

19,450' 5,928 M
BURPHU DHURA
20,160'
6,145 M
KALABALAND GLACIER
C III 19,100' 5,892 M
C II 16,200' 4,938 M
C I 17,400' 5,393 M
ABC 18,372'
18,110' 5,520 M
SULI TOP
20,610'
6,300 M
18,590' 5,666 M

NEPAL

TRIGAL
19,630'
5,983 M

BIRATGANJ
DHURA
15,310'
4,666 M

Bc
13,300'
4,054 M

SUITILLA
20,778'
6,333 M

THE KALABALAND EXPEDITION

MAY-JUNE 1979.

PEAK △
VILLAGE ○
PASS $\frac{1}{2}$
ROUTE - - -
CAMPS □
PEAKS CLIMBED
BY EXPEDITION (△)

RALAM
12,000'
3,648 M

RALAM DHURA
18,500'
5,630 M

TIHUTIA
17,230'
5,252 M

20,640'
6,291 M

CHAUDHARA
21,360'
6,510 M

BURIA

SHIYU
17,240'
5,255 M

RAJ RAMBHA
21,448'
6,537 M

SAPO
UDIAO

GILDING
18,468'
5,629 M

THE MOUNTAINEERS

B O M B A Y.

TO MUNSIARI, ALMORA,
KATHGODAM

0 1 2 3 4 5 MILES
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 KMS



Photo : Harish Kapadia

37. Suli Top from
Camp 2.
Article Page 68.

Photo : Harish Kapadia

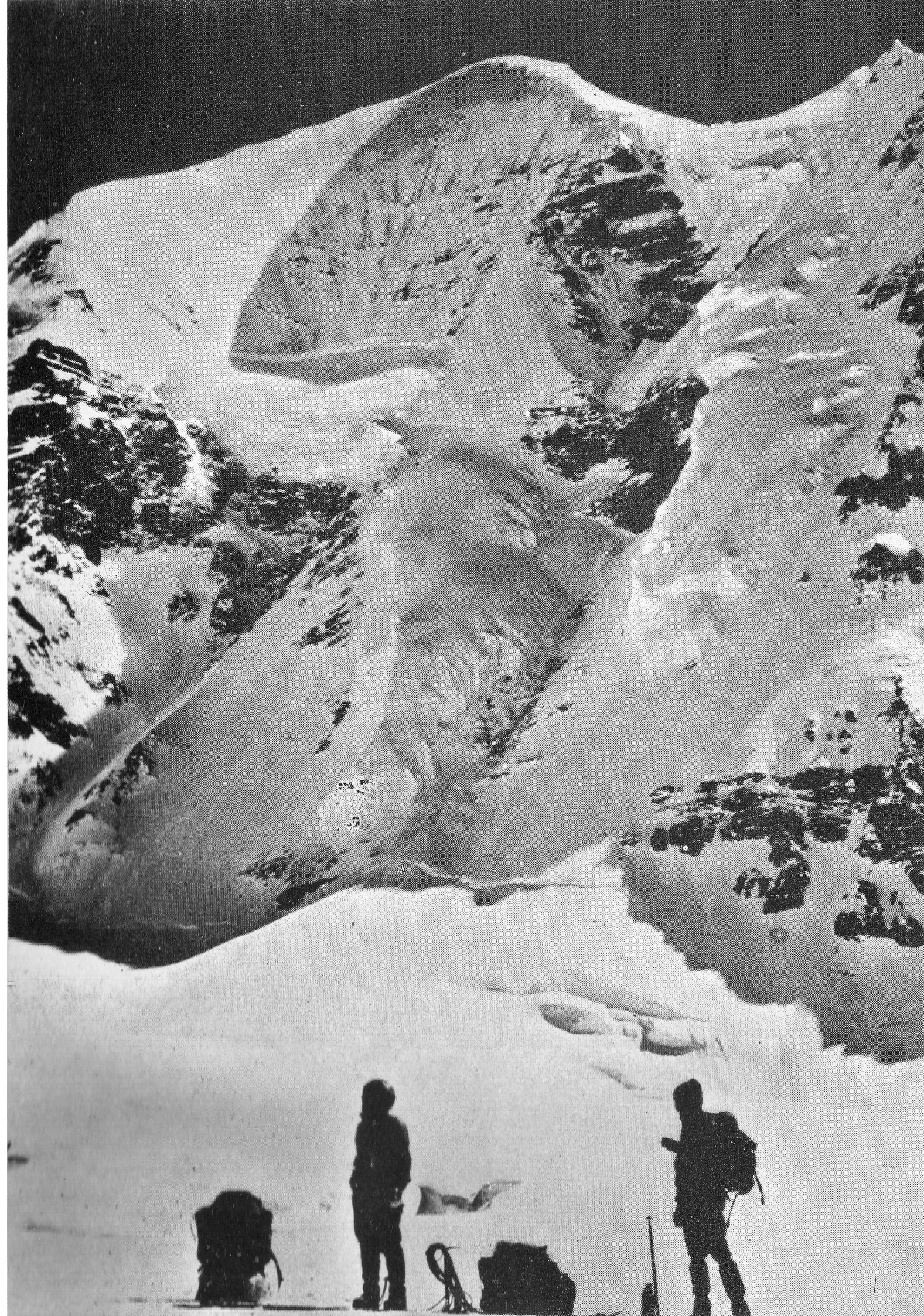
38. Route through the
Kalabaland icefall.
On left unnamed
peak 19,450 ft
(rounded), Kalabaland
Dhura, 20,030 ft
(triangular) and
in centre — 'Elephant's
Head'.

Article Page 68.



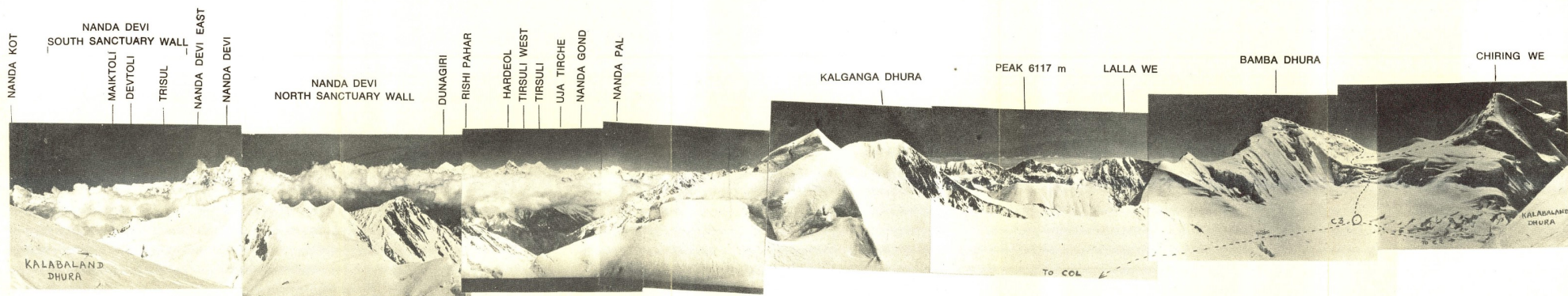


Photo : Vijay Kothari





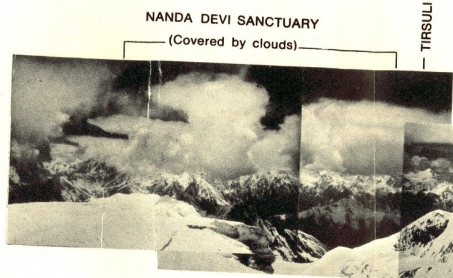




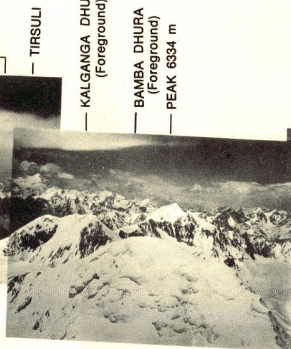
Panorama from the col below Kalabaland Dhura, 20,030 ft.

Photo : Harish Kapadia

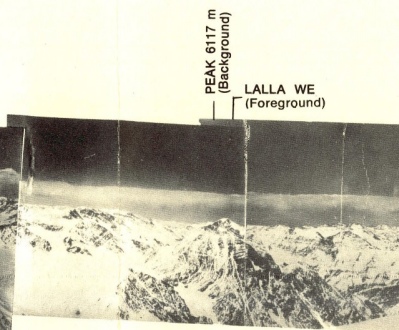
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NANDA DEVI SANCTUARY
(Covered by clouds)

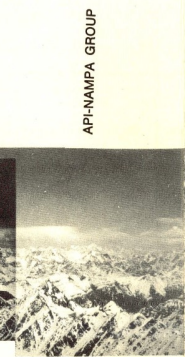


TIRSULI
— KALGANGA DHURA
(Foreground)
— BAMBHA DHURA
(Foreground)
— PEAK 6334 m



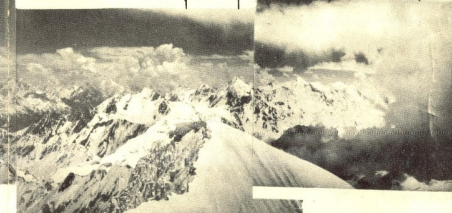
PEAK 6117 m
(Background)
LALLA WE
(Foreground)

TIBET



API-NAMGA GROUP

DARMA VALLEY



SULI TOP
(Foreground)
— SUITILLA
— PANCHACHULI
— CHAUDHARA
— RAJRAMBA
KALABALAND
GLACIER

Panorama from the summit of Chiring We, 21,520 ft.

Photo: Zerkis Boge