

A RETURN TO LINGTI, 1987

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RETURNING TO AN area of past exploits is like re-kindling an old love affair. You have the knowledge and the experience but are still unsure whether all the excitement and expectations of the first time will ever be repeated. But this is all the excuse one needs to fall in love again with the old memories, pictures, peaks and people.

Three of us, who ultimately made it, were old hands at Spiti. Muslim and I had climbed in the Lingti valley in 1983.¹ The deep gorge and lack of proper logistic support stopped us at the half way mark. Dhiren had missed the trip though he had been part of the Spiti dream till the last. Now with this return trip, his attraction for Spiti stood vindicated, just as ours was reconfirmed. Ravi accompanied us during the initial trek and made every meal a healthy eating competition. Our four old Kumaoni porters were back too.

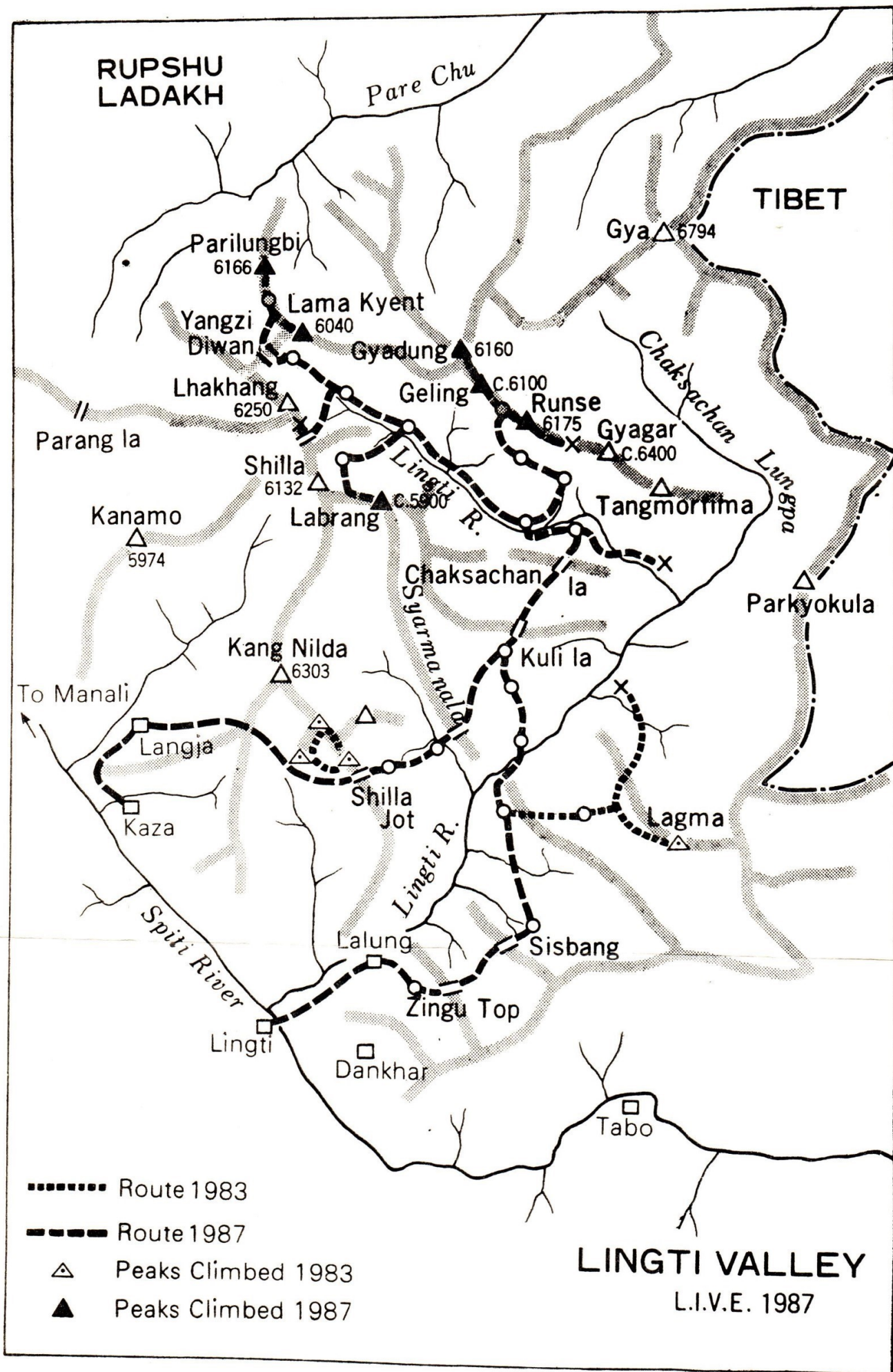
The bus journey to Kaja (3600 m) was completed with the usual hardships after the inner line permits were obtained at Shimla. We visited Dankhar and Ki monasteries, and were immediately greeted by the change. A lama passed us by on a battered cycle, a great achievement for an area which had missed the wheel revolution till almost 25 years ago (except the prayer wheel of course). We inquired about the Rimpoche (head lama) from a meditating priest. He pointed a finger upwards. Looking at our solemn faces about to offer condolences, he spat out a chewing gum which was helping him to concentrate and quickly stated, 'He has gone to Japan'. That was our reintroduction to Spiti, Japan was replacing heaven, there were buses and roads everywhere, electricity and supplies in plenty. Tons of wood stored in summer by the Commissioner is distributed in winter; solar energy is harvested for daily use, monasteries are well supplied, movie shows and travel have changed life styles. The Ladarsa 'mela' has been revived. For many years a fair used to be held at Ladarsa (near Kibar) where traders from Rupshu and Kulu gathered to barter goods with the Spitians. Now the fair is to buy modern goods of Kulu and traditional items of Spiti. Some of the old values still remain. Village laws rule and religious ceremonies are a way of life. But

Fold-out sketch 1

Photos 20 to 27

Panoramas A to H

1. Refer to H.J. Vol. 40, p. 96 for full details.



for how long, one wonders. There is talk of a helicopter service for the tourists (Heavens forfend) and even some small industry. But as Spitians themselves would say: 'Flow with the river, don't try to swim. If you swim you get tired'.

Back to Lingti

Lingti is the unknown valley in eastern Spiti. As there are no known passes at its head, locals don't venture beyond Chaksachan la, which is the last grazing point. From Lalung, it follows in a northeastern direction till it's junction with Chaksachan lungpa river. From here it takes a sharp turn to the northwest upto the watershed with Ladakh. A high pass ('Yangzi Diwan') leads across to Rupshu to join the trade route from Parang la (5800 m). In the distant past Yangzi Diwan may have been in use, but no one seems to remember it, particularly as the Spitian is neither a trader nor a traveller, and Parang la was always more popular. On the eastern rim of Lingti, high peaks of the Parkyokula range rise upto 6526 m, effectively blocking off Tibet (Pare Chu valley). Gya (6794 m) is at the head of this valley, at the important trijunction of Spiti, Rupshu and Tibet. No one seems to have heard of Gya or acknowledged it as the highest peak in Himachal Pradesh (or the highest between Nun-Kun and Satopanth). We intended to investigate the approaches to it, photograph it and establish the glory due to it.

The upper Lingti has side valleys, each with many peaks. On the north the major valley is that of 'Gyagar'. On the south lies Chaksachan la and the 'Labrang', and 'Lhakang' nalas which pave the way to high areas.

We were back at Lalung village, our entrance to Lingti. This year the yakwalas charged (fleeced) us almost double the previous rates. We had a 9 day journey over a known route. They agreed to take us upto Chaksachan la (5230 m). Beyond that they had no knowledge of anyone having gone and would not venture. From 17 June, we followed the route over the Sisbang pass to Sheru and down to Phiphuk, as we had done in 1983. We settled down to a routine, late start after the yaks were gathered, reined and loaded. It was instructive. This sturdy animal takes a long time to be gathered, shooed and pampered. But once the string attached to the nostril is caught, it resigns itself to its fate and carries for the day without any more trouble.

We went over rough terrain, absorbing lovely scenery. From Phiphuk (4005 m) started our new venture on 22 June. Initially in two days the route went up to Lakshitang (4560 m), Shelatse (4800 m), over the Kuli la (4880 m) to Shaktijung (4530 m). On the final day the route climbed up steeply to a high notch on a

ridge which they call Chaksachan la (5230 m). We were deposited here in front of a great view.

We surveyed the scene. 'Gyagar' (c. 6400 m) with all the peaks on the high ridge was opposite us. Below was the Lingti river. Since Phiphuk, where we had crossed the river, it took a sharp northwesterly turn. At this turn Chaksachan lungpa came in from the northeast. It was evident that Gya (6794 m) was very far from us, and the only way to it was to go down the Lingti to the junction with Chaksachan lungpa and then go up along the latter valley. This was our first objective. We had to ferry all our luggage 1000 m down for 3 days into the valley and were camped on its bank. We called it 'the cantonment'. A lovely glen with plenty of juniper. After a rest and a bath we were ready for our first failure. It was 29 June.

Going down the Lingti for 4 km, we realised it's difficulties. We had to wade across four times, having to climb up the adjoining steep scree slopes twice. At the end of it we ran into a gorge where true to its name Lingti ('an instrument that cuts rocks') cuts through steep walls on both sides. It was possible to go ahead only in winter or in early summer, but then the passes would be blocked lower down at that time. This was the problem of the approach to Gya, which we had to leave for a team with a year in hand!

Returning to 'the cantonment', we decided that what could not go down, should go up. For the next 3 days we went up the Lingti to its head bordering on Ladakh. A most beautiful and difficult valley unfolded. The gorge was narrow but luckily always allowed us a passage. Crossings were frequent. By now we had settled down to a routine for the crossings. The spot was decided after observations, one of us would probe and go across with a rope tied. Once the rope was fixed across, we went in turns carrying light loads and making ferries to and fro. At some places where the river was too wide, it had to be done in batches, with belays from both sides moving up and down. It was not possible to cross after midday and as the days passed by, each crossing required more time and expertise, the last one being almost disastrous. In the unknown Transhimalayan areas these river-crossings are a challenging aspect of the trip, and assume as much importance as climbing a peak. We did about 15 major crossings, and had to be very careful to remain unscathed.

Climbs in the upper valley

We established a camp at the junction of Lhaxhang nala on 3 July. Muslim left with Harsinh (jr.) to climb Lhaxhang (6250 m), a shapely dome. In two days they were established at a 5900 m col between the peak and Shilla. Next day the 6th, as they went

up the porter complained of headache and a frustrated Muslim had to return. We did not divide ourselves after this.

Dhiren and I had left with Balamsinh for Yangzi Diwan (5890 m) on 4 July. We had to negotiate a minor glacier and ice-walls upto the high ridge at 6000 m. 'Lama Kyent' (6040 m) was next to the col and was climbed, offering a fine view. Many peaks stood on the same ridge, giving an appearance of a 'village' full of peaks.² We crossed the watershed and descended to Rupshu. This was a high camp at 6000 m above the pass. Parilungbi (6166 m) was in front of us. It was separated from Lama Kyent ridge by the Yangzi Diwan pass and was standing aloof in Rupshu. At its foot Parang la trade route passed by and on its two sides the valleys dropped towards the trade route.

On the 6th, we descended 250 m to the pass and climbed unroped on the south ridge. It was very steep scree with gendarmes which we had to bypass. By 9.50 a.m. we were on the summit of Parilungbi — marked by a survey cairn and a pole. The survey party must have climbed here from Rupshu as it was standing on the trade route. It was called 'Parang la Station No. 1' but we could not ascertain the year of ascent.

We spent a delightful hour on the top. The view extended right across the Rupshu plain till Tso Morari lake and Demchok in the north. Nearby towards the northwest were Parang la and unnamed peaks of 6364 m and 6343 m. On the northeast were very high peaks of 6623 m and 6642 m. We almost mistook one of them for the elusive Gya, which was in the distance. On the south Lhakang, Shilla and the Lingti completed the circle. The visual and intellectual delight to solve the panorama was just as great as the physical pleasure was in climbing to it. What a forbidding country lay across. We had spent hours studying the maps and dreaming as to how it would look from up there. Almost like a dream of the poem Kubla Khan fulfilled and confirming the topography.

Back to the reality and in Lingti valley we were united with Muslim at the upper base on the 7th. We withdrew one valley camp to enter the Labrang nala. Shilla (6132 m) was our next aim. This famous peak had aroused attention to Spiti by its wrongly given height.³ It was called 'Parang la Station No. 2' and with Parilungbi played an important role in the survey. On its south lay Syarma nala, but we were approaching it from the east through the Labrang nala. We quickly went up the valley in 2 days to establish ourselves at foot of the northern ridge on 10 July. It was corniced and may possibly allow access only with great difficulty.

2. For explanation of names, see note at the end.

3. See H.J. Vol. 40, p. 105, for early history of Shilla.

The next day I staggered on the slopes due to a late dose of Valium. Muslim and Dhiren continued, reaching within a striking distance of the north col. But the ridge they saw ahead was sharp and certainly not easy. Our hopes of trooping up the 20° slope with a flag-pole, like the unnamed khalasi in 1860 evaporated.

Next day (12 July) we decided to attempt it from the east col. Last year an Indian team had reached the summit via this route.⁴ They had come up from Syarma nala while we climbed the slopes from the east. From the col we could see that the ridge was full of gendarmes and cornices. The true peak lay over the subsidiary hump. The time to climb Shilla easily is after the disappearance of snow and on the summer scree. We proceeded south to climb 'Labrang' (c. 5900 m). It gave us a good ridge walk and an excellent view all around.

By this time Muslim had run short of tobacco for his pipe. He put his foot down for a refill in the true Shiptonian fashion. That was all the excuse we needed and we were quickly down to 'the cantonment' again on 13 July.

Gyagar nala

By 16 July we were ready to move up the Gyagar nala for our last climbs in the valley. As we entered the valley we were faced with a gentle col of scree at 5840 m on the north. We christened this as 'Chaksachan la north' as it appeared to lead down to the foot of Gya. We studied this on the map and later confirmed it by observing it from above. Our excitement to view this peak now mounted. In two days we were at the foot of the very steep névé coming from Runse. Climbing this was tricky, and our porters excelled here. We had to fix ropes and on 18 July we were on the Gyagar ridge at 5970 m. And behold, across the valley in the north stood Gya. It was a majestic rock monolith, rising about 1200 m steeply from the valley bottom. A sharp conical top guarded the view to Tibet. It was awe-inspiring and this view was a fitting finale. It will defy the best of rock climbers and will require immense logistic arrangements to approach it.

The same evening, 18th, we went up 'Runse' (6175 m) in an hour, now easily within our reach. But ahead the ridge dropped to a col and to 'Goor' (c. 6160 m). It was impossible to cross this peak to reach the final slopes of Gyagar (c. 6400 m). So we decided to go west from the camp next day. 'Geling' (6080 m) was a rounded dome while 'Gyadung' (6160 m) was a sharp ridge top. Both were fairly good climbs. Again and again the views from the tops were exciting.

'The cantonment' was humming with activity on 21 July. We had ferried the luggage up and it was time for the final departure

4. See H.J. Vol. 43, p. 190.

from Lingti, now quite familiar to us. We quickly withdrew to Shelatse below Kuli la, each stage being a hard repeat ferry for the luggage. No yaks would come up as Lingti lower down was unfordable in July. We took a different route to return, something that would complete a full inquiry into the valley.

We climbed up to Syarma la (5040 m) and down the steep scree slopes to the Syarma nala on 24 July. It was turbulent and next day in cold cloudy weather Dhiren was almost swept away in the crossing. Wet and shivering we climbed up to Shilla jot (5850 m) to link up with route of our 1983 trip. It was a long two-day march that led us through to Langja and Kaja — back to chhang, momoes and a rough bus journey to Manali.

For 5 years we had dreams of Lingti and Gya. Now it was fulfilled, substantially if not in a full measure. Working to fulfil a dream is satisfying. And it was important to pursue it: for if Samuel Coleridge's dream was broken, Kubla Khan would have never been written.

Nomenclature in Lingti valley: (Please refer also to H.J. Vol. 40, p. 106, for earlier names and explanations).

Gyagar: Indian.

Runse: A famous monastery.

Geling: Piped instrument of lama.

Gyadung: Long trumpet of lama-band.

Yangzi Diwan: A new pass.

Lama Kyent: Monk's village. (For many peaks on the ridge).

Lhakhang: God's house.

Labrang: Lama's house. (Both near Shilla, 'the place of monastery').

Goor: A disciple through whom a local deity manifests. (The peak led to Gyagar).

Summary

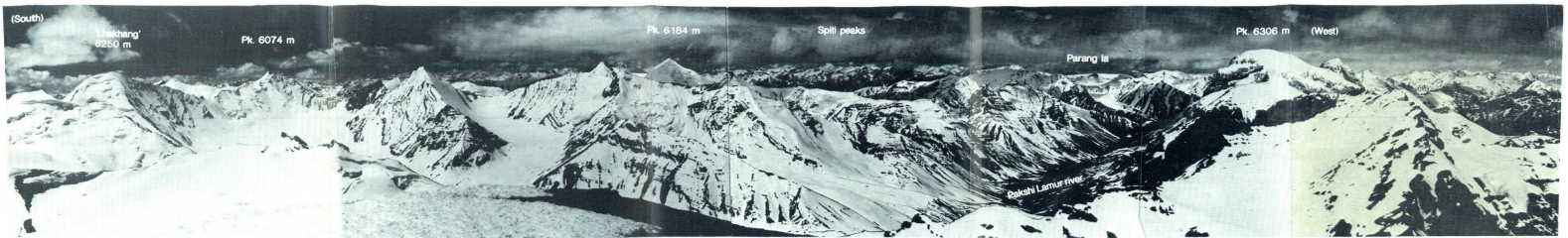
The expedition approached from Sisbang gorge and returned via Syarma nala and Shilla jot, covering 210 km. About 15 rivers and nalas and 11 high passes were crossed in 45 days.

Peaks climbed: 1. 'Lama Kyent' (6040 m — 19,820 ft), 2. Parilungbi (6166 m — 20,230 ft), 3. Labrang' (5900 m — 19,360 ft), 4. 'Runse' (6175 m — 20,260 ft), 5. 'Geling' (c. 6100 m — c. 20,000 ft), 6. 'Gyadung' (6160 m — 20,210 ft). All except Parilungbi are first ascents.

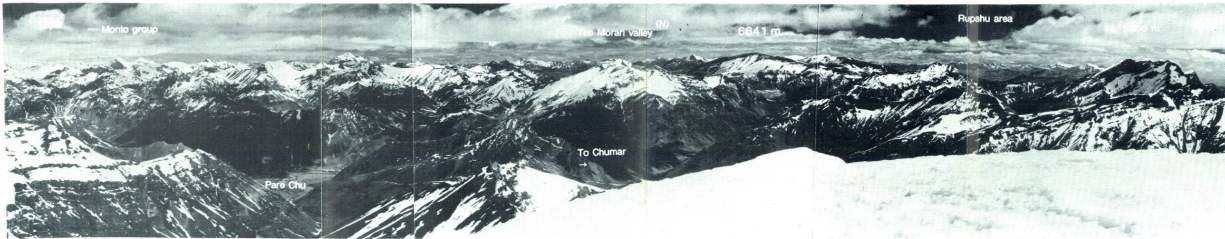
Peaks attempted: 1. 'Lhakhang' (6250 m — 20,506 ft), 2. Shilla (6132 m — 20,120 ft), 3. 'Gyagar' (c. 6400 m — c. 21,000 ft).

Period: 6 June to 9 August 1987.

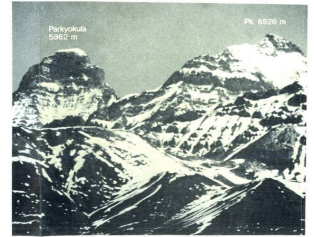
Members: Harish Kapadia (leader), Muslim Contractor and Dhiren Toolsidas. Ravi Mariwala accompanied the team during approach. Team sponsored by: 'The Mountaineers', Bombay.



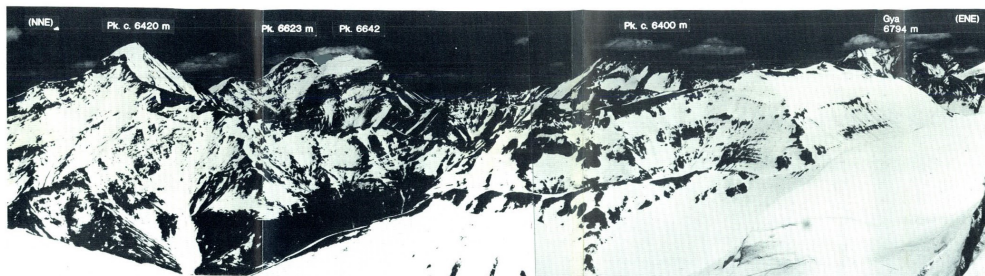
PANORAMA A. View from the summit of Parilungbi (6166 m)
Article 15 (Harish Kapadia)



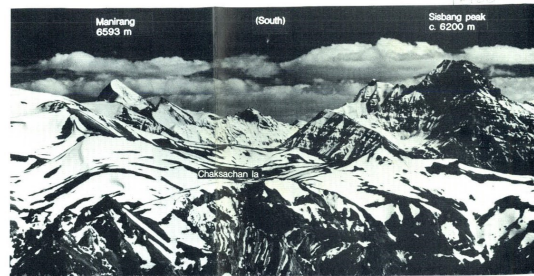
PANORAMA B.



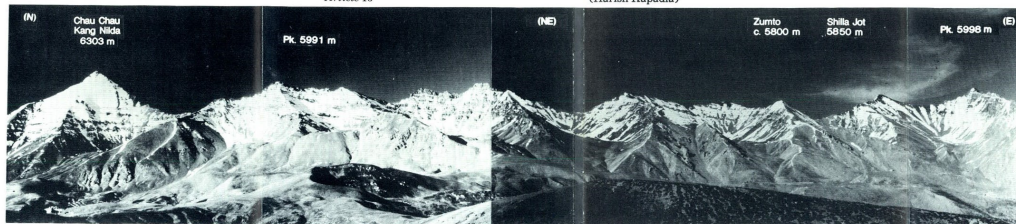
PANORAMA C. Peaks on Lingti-Tibet watershed.



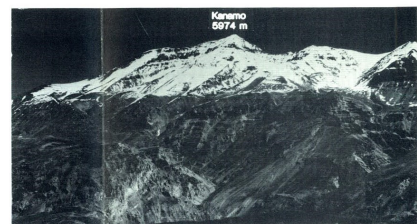
PANORAMA D. View from summit of 'Lama Kyent' (6040 m)
Article 15 (Harish Kapadia)



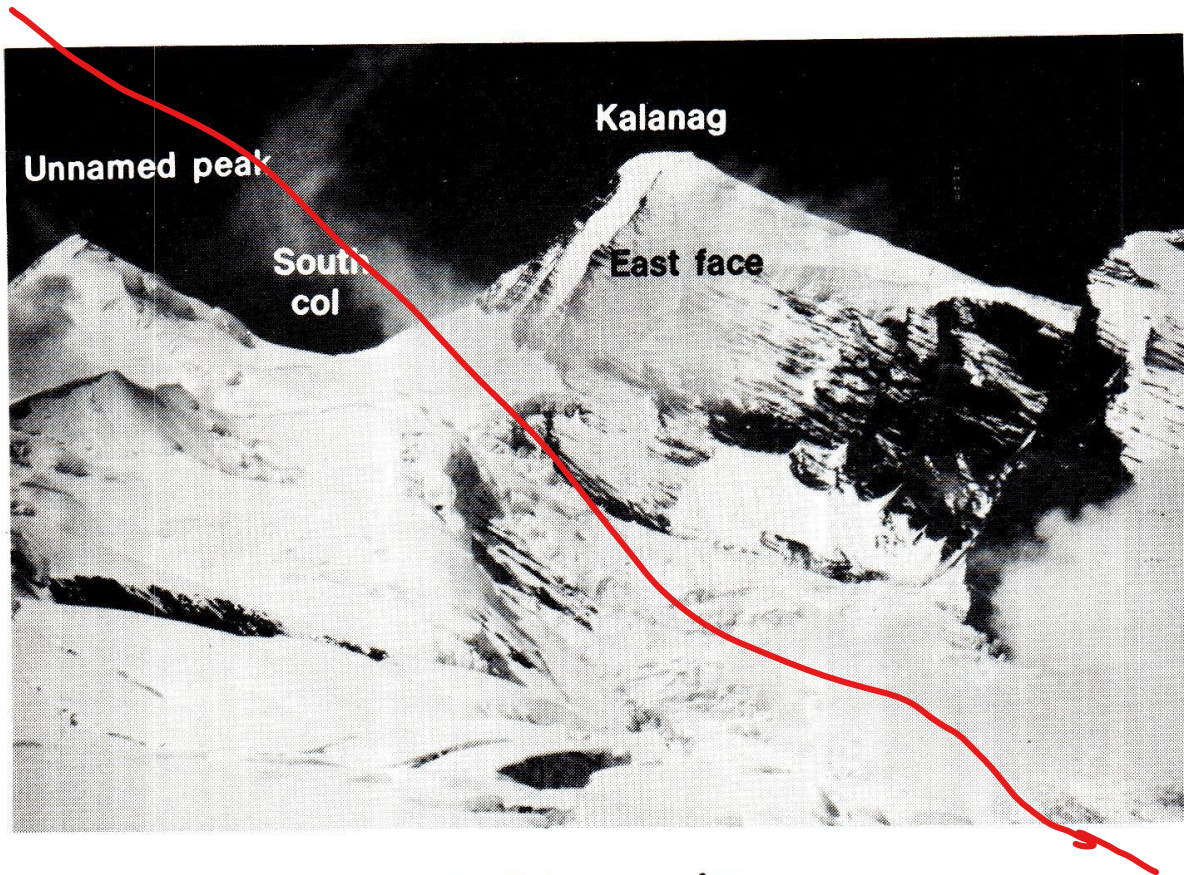
PANORAMA E. From camp on Gyagar ridge.



Article 15 PANORAMA F. Peaks above Langa village. (Dhiren Toolsidas)



PANORAMA G. Kanamo above Kibar Village



19. Kalanag east face.

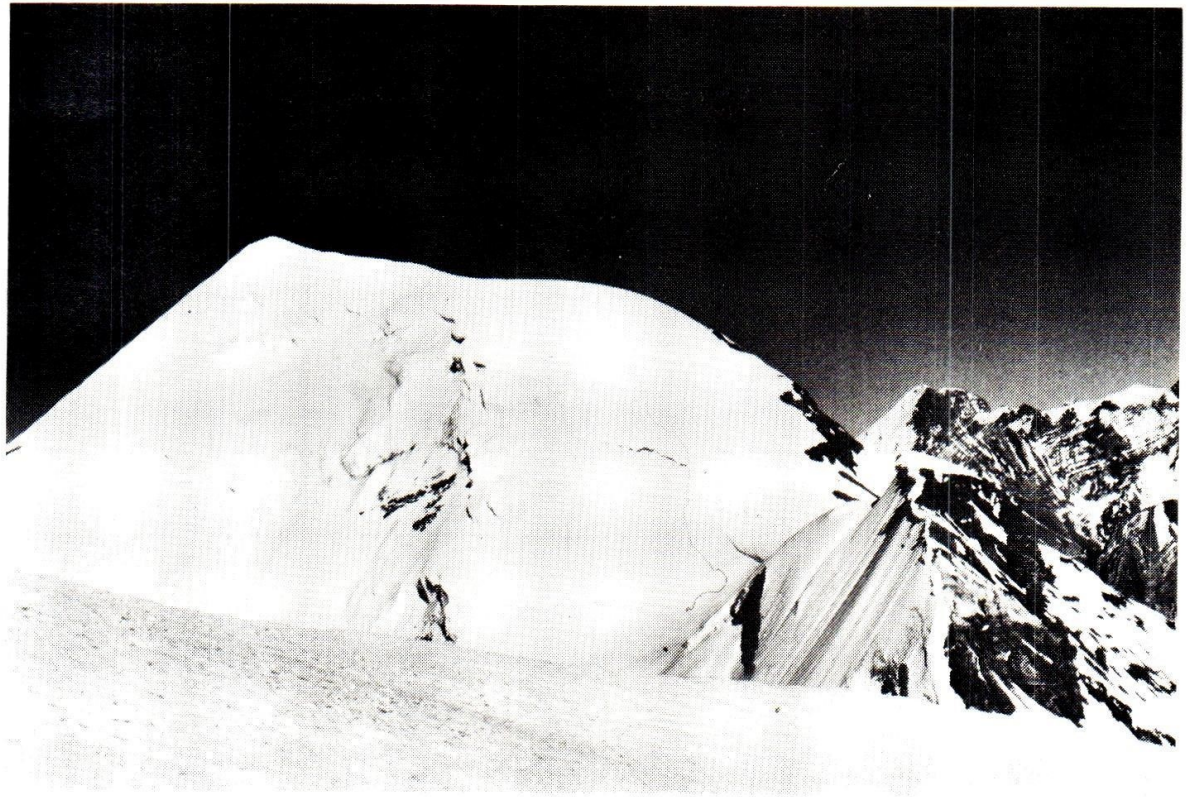
Article 13



20. Lhakhang (6250 m) Lingti valley.

Article 15

(Harish Kapadia)



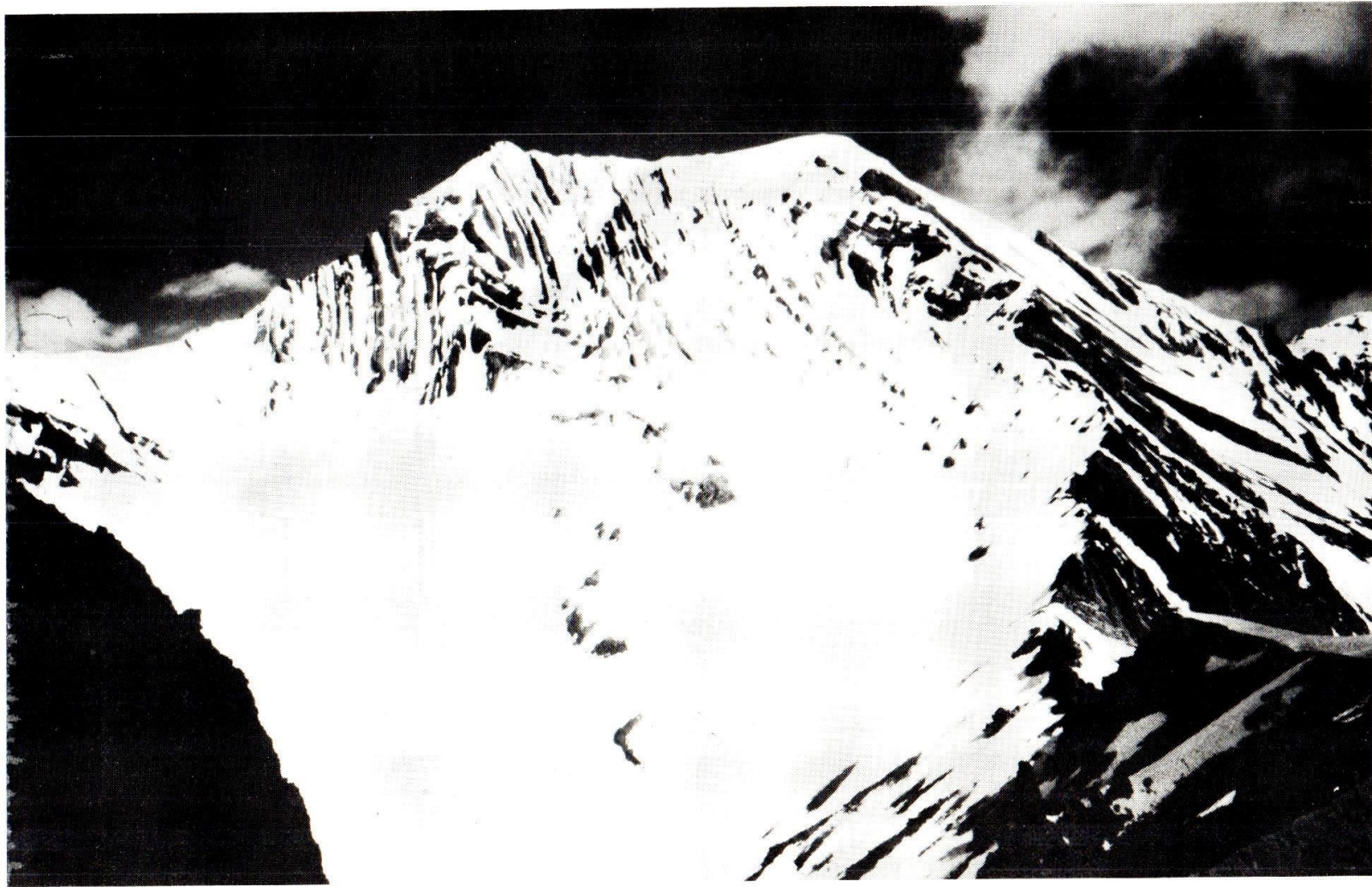
21. Gyagar — the upper reaches, as seen from Runse.

Article 15

(Harish Kapadia)



22. The route to Shilla Jot from Syarma nala.



23. The legendary Shilla peak. True summit on the left, N ridge on right, and E ridge in foreground.

Article 15

(Harish Kapadia)



24. Gya (6794 m) — the highest peak in Himachal Pradesh.

Article 15

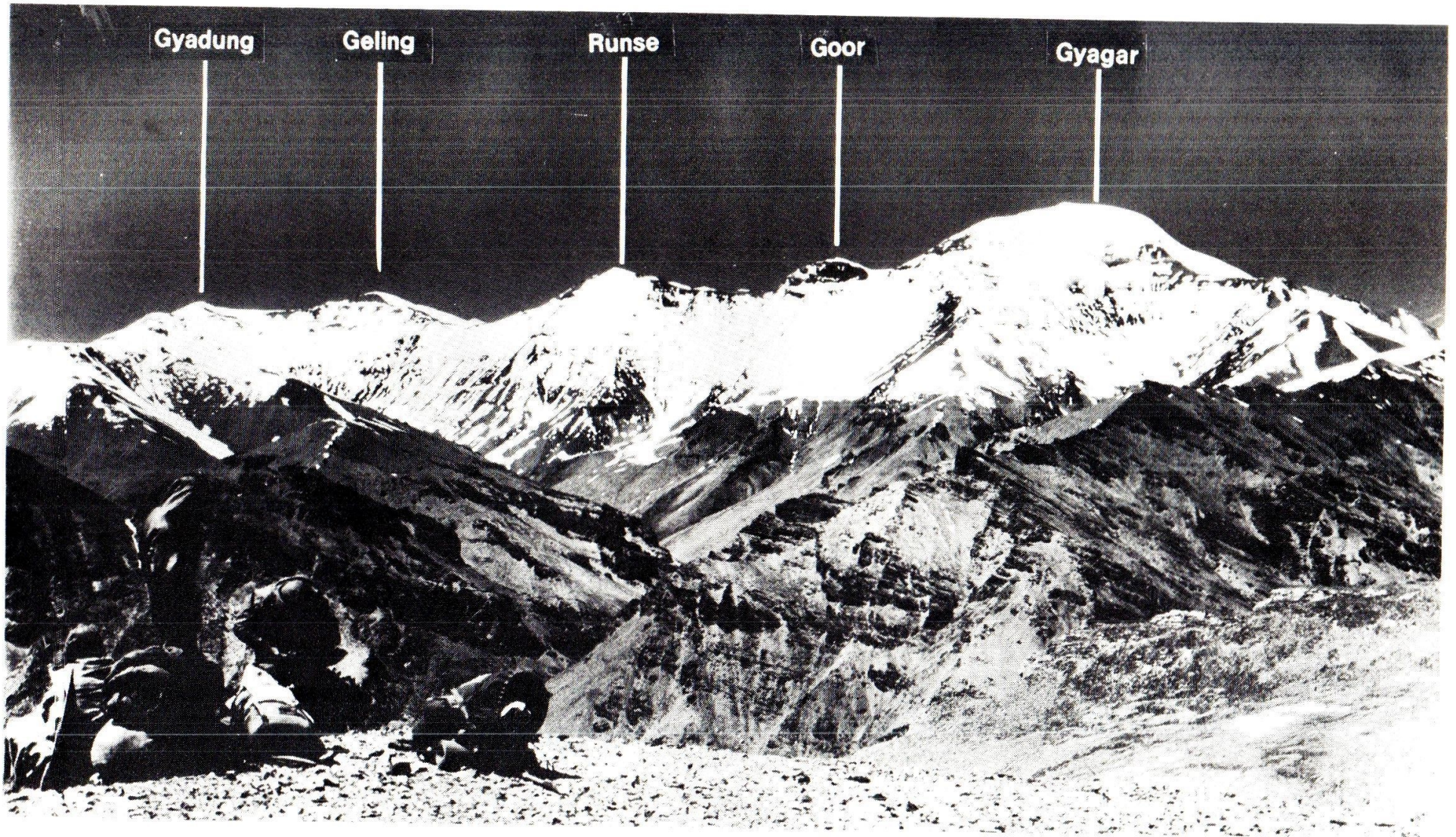
(Harish Kapadia)



25. Parilungbi south ridge. Yangzi Diwan pass in foreground.

Article 15

(Harish Kapadia)



26. The Gyagar ridge (Lingti valley).

Article 15

(Harish Kapadia)



27. Manirang, 6593 m (right) and Pk 6223 m.

Article 15

(Harish Kapadia)