
EAST OF SASER LA

Exploring Aq Tash and Chong Kumdan Glaciers

HARISH KAPADIA

LIKE MANY GOOD expeditions ours began with problems. There are always too many bureaucratic obstacles on the way to climbing in the East Karakoram. This time we had few added difficulties which almost ruined our trip. To begin with our flight from Delhi hovered over Leh and due to the cloud cover landed us back at Chandigadh. We flew to Srinagar with all the luggage. Muslim and Vijay were packed off with it in a truck. They suffered-out a three day journey with road blocks, drunken driver and the other usual hardships. Rest travelled by a bus. We all gathered at Leh 5 days behind schedule on 6 July 1989. We contacted the army and everything seemed to be in order.

On 7th evening as we roamed about in the streets of Leh eating *kababs* there was a small riot, and suddenly a furious mob attacked a gompa and masjid which were situated opposite each other. Police intervened, and this was the starting of the four months of riots which were to change the face of Leh. The Buddhists of Ladakh and Shia Muslims were protesting against Sunni Muslims from Kashmir who had cornered the trade. There were bomb blasts and Leh was put under total curfew for 3 days. 'This must be the first violence in Leh after the days of Zorawar Singh' (1840), one Ladakhi scholar said sadly. The army staged a flag march and we could finish our purchases during the breaks in the curfew. Leh looked different, desolate and tense. How sad for this Shangrila which we had enjoyed so much in the past. When we returned in late August not a single tourist was around. It was an eerie atmosphere, with insecurity rampant in the streets. But luckily late in the year, in November, a settlement was reached and an uneasy calm returned.

We managed to leave Leh at last, after 8 days, on 13 July in a private truck. Quickly we went across Khardung la (5080 m) and enjoyed an excellent view of the northern ranges. We left Shyok at Khalsar and turned into the Nubra valley and approached Sasoma. We found a truck stuck in the nala, the poor drivers were stranded in it. We threw some food

Photos 10 to 20
Panoramas B to H
Fold-out sketch 1-2



15. Mules crossing Saser la, the historic pass.

Article 13

(Harish Kapadia)



16. The bend of Chong Kumdan glacier to the dam site. The northern glacier pushes from the left. Note the water level marks of the 1929 dam on the walls on the right.

Article 13

(Monesh Devjani)



17. Memorial pillar for Ferdinand Stoliczka built in 1876 at Leh.



18. Inscriptions on the Stoliczka pillar.



19. Climbing to Tulum Puti la on the Central Asia Trade Route.



20. 'Chogam' (6250 m) towering in background and 'Skyang' (5770 m) in foreground rising above the Chong Kumdan glacier.

across to them and spent the night in the open. Next morning we prepared a diversion and cleared our truck. Sasoma was reached in time for breakfast with the army there. This 158 km route took 7 days for caravans in the early days to cover, but now it is a one day journey. The road ahead leads to the Siachen snout and army convoys pass in both directions with monotonous regularity.

Subedar Raftan, who was in charge of the camp at Sasoma, welcomed us with a firm handshake but discouraging news. We required 12 to 15 mules for crossing the Saser la. First, due to the uncertain weather, the pass which was feared by muleteers, was open only intermittently. Secondly, a large army expedition to Mamostong Kangri on our route had acquired 125 mules. No other mules were available in the Nubra valley. So all we could do was to wait. Our days were spent quite interestingly with the jawans and subedars, all veterans of the Siachen war. There was a relaxed routine here. It involved some office work, telephone messages and preparation of food for the convoys. Evening was spent playing a volleyball game. The air in the ball was filled using a primus-stove. The night was, of course, 'filled' with rum. Some of us visited Yarma gumpa (also known as Charsa gumpa) which is believed to be as old as the Potala. Nubra river on the map is marked after this gumpa as 'Yarma Tsangpo'. There is still the tradition of painting the walls and stones in the Nubra valley by lamas and these painting sites are known as 'Goomfa'. The valley itself was beautiful and full of flowers and poplars, living up to its original name 'Dumra' ('valley of flowers and trees') now changed to Nubra.

Finally, after 5 days the mules arrived and what a happy sight it was for us. Mules were loaded and we left on the 20th, having finished our third delay and ready to face the fourth. The track climbs *chhatis mod* (thirty six bends). A route is hewn over a tough rock about 550 m in height. It takes 36 U-turns and reaches Tulum Puti la (3750 m). It is a masterpiece of road making by an engineer Ali Hussain who was sent from Central Asia. When the pilgrims on their way to Mecca complained of hardships at this place on the route, the Sultan of Yarkand in the 19th Century had despatched a brilliant engineer to construct this well-engineered track with local materials. If this sounds improbable, even more fantastic is the route to the valley ahead leading to the base of Saser la. This is unique, considering the terrain involved. This is what Eric Shipton wrote of the area, which has not changed much:

'From the fertile valley of Panamik, the track climbed a slab of rock, 2000 feet high, so steep and smooth that from a distance it looked scarcely passable for a mountain goat. Beyond it we entered a wilderness of rock and ice surrounded by lofty peaks and by the evening of the second day we reached the foot of a glacier cascading in a series of steep ice-falls from the Saser Pass (17,480 feet). The only way through was up a narrow gully of large moraine boulders between the ice and a vertical cliff. Though this type of ground is familiar enough to any mountaineering expedition, never before had I dreamed that

it would be possible to climb it with heavily-laden animals. There was no vestige of a path, and as the ponies clambered up the great boulders, their hooves scraped and slithered agonisingly in their efforts to gain purchase and retain their balance on trembling, bleeding legs.¹

Ahead of Tulum Puti la we followed the river, crossing it at Umlung over a natural rock bridge. Above it were the plains of Lama Kheti. We crossed the Thangman nala to make a camp (4054 m). We continued along the river, crossing the Lashi and Namlung nalas which come from the south. Each of these nalas drained the glacier of the same name. Each glacier has number of peaks upto 6500 m. Only Lashi (6265 m) has been climbed. One of the high cols lead to the Chamshen group of peaks which drain into Shyok and are otherwise difficult to approach. All these glaciers are a store-house of peaks for future climbers. After the open ground of Turtyalak, the track climbed up 280 m to Skyangpoche. Mamostong Kangri glacier was opposite us in the north. Yarkandi travellers had tried to find a way through this glacier across a col to avoid the much feared Saser la. They crossed the col at 5885 m to Thangman glacier (Kichik Kumdan glacier). This would have led them quickly to the Chong Kumdan glacier and the Karakoram Pass. But the party perished and the glacier and the col were called Mamostong — of 'thousand devils' and the 'glacier of medicinal herbs' (Thangman). We camped ahead at Changmolung nala. The rains arrived, and that was our fourth problem. It rained heavily for the next two days, almost as in Garhwal. The weather in Ladakh is surely changing. Gone are those days of constant blue skies and dry weather. Clouds can gather anytime and it rains quite heavily. The heavy rain in the fragile Ladakh landscape has a devastating effect and is not always welcome. It is difficult to point out any reason for this change, though some blame the large plantations in the lower valleys of Ladakh. But as we learnt to our chagrin on this trip, weather in Ladakh cannot be relied upon. But the army is very business-like and operates in any weather. They have a simple saying as Subedar Wani had later put it:

*Mausam ka illaj nahin
Hukum ka jawab nahin*
(You cannot rely on the weather,
you cannot reply to an order)

On 24 July we could move at last, with the muleteers already grumbling. The route became wilder and steeper. Another aspect was added which all the earlier travellers had written about.

'In the valley leading upto the Pass we had seen first of the corpses, skeletons and heaps of bones which formed a continuous line of hundreds of miles until we reached the first oasis beyond the ranges.'²

1. Shipton, Eric: *That Untravelled World*, p. 143.

2. Ibid: p. 144.

These skeletons made a gruesome sight but soon we were used to them. Even today many mules die on the pass and you have to pay compensation for them. The army can afford it but a private expedition has to be careful in pressing the muleteers too hard. We camped about 2 km before the pass, at a usual camping ground used before crossing the pass. The condition of weather on the morning you have to cross the pass is crucial. If it is cloudy the snow does not consolidate hard enough and mules will sink in. As it is one has to make a mid-night start, which we did. But after one hour the mules were sinking in the snowfield. Our ponies began to weaken and many were limping and several kept collapsing sadly and hopelessly. There were blood marks on their legs. We had to stop. Back we went to the camp. Now we were stranded once again, for the pass was not open yet. The only way out of our fifth problem was to ferry our loads to the crest of the pass and arrange for mules from the other side to pick them up. This we had to do for the next 3 days. It was a gallant effort by the team and it almost appeared that we were engaged in a desperate attempt to establish a high camp, rather than travelling on a trade route.

Bad weather did not leave us and we could see the wisdom of Francis Younghusband as to why this pass is so much feared.

'The Saser Pass was not so difficult at this time of year as it often is. But on the day after we crossed it a terrible squall of snow and rain over-took us, and on looking back I saw the pass hidden in a cloud as black as night; and it is because of these terrific storms that the pass is so much feared.'³

Finally on 26 July we left at 1 a.m. with torches. It was a clear night for a change and walking on the snow was a pleasure. The route went over the scree to the final ice-wall. It traversed across the wall to a plateau above. It is surprising how mules can at all go on such a route, as it was like something one encounters on a mountaineering expedition. When you felt concerned about safety of a mule, the muleteer always reassured; 'This is a *sharif* (gentleman) horse. He knows where to place his legs. He won't fall.' These sturdy beasts-of-burden, the Karakoram mules, are legendary. They have played no small role in supporting trade, travel and now defence in this area. A small temple on the eastern side marked the end of the pass, which was about 3 hours from our high camp. A steep descent to the Shyok valley led us to Saser Brangza camp.

Subedar Dorje and Subedar Wani greeted us warmly. The former was in charge of the camp while the latter introduced us to many wise sayings and to the BBC Urdu news bulletins to which he listened without fail. All these soldiers had experience of living more than a quarter century in the area and knew it like the back of their hands. They talked of extreme winter, different routes, life at altitudes and of course about the war. But surprisingly no one bothered about the peaks, glaciers, mountaineering history or early travellers. Even in the present days a mountaineer - visitor can still explore, gather knowledge about unknown valleys even though people have now

3. Younghusband, Sir Francis: *Wonders of the Himalaya*, p. 131.

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lived here for decades. Mountaineers here are not totally useless and a pain-in-the-neck as some times it is thought.

The army at Saser Brangza loaned us mules to get all the luggage down from the pass. They further agreed to loan us mules for two days — (but strictly for two days only) to reach our proposed base camp at Chong Kumdan glacier. We had to go upstream along the Shyok river and cross two major streams on the way. This route is a short cut to Gapshan and the Karakoram Pass and is regularly in use. It is fordable till the Chong Kumdan dam in all seasons and beyond that only in winter. By this time we were all quite tired and depressed. To make our cup of misery full the mules stopped at the first difficulty; crossing of Aq Tash nala. It was flooded and as the night was cloudy the water did not recede next morning. The mules could not wait and we had to make our base here. Finally the sixth trouble had stopped us. We were exactly one month away from Bombay and still 5 km short of our proposed base. We wondered what would have been the reaction of Westerners if this was a joint expedition. None of the difficulties we faced could have been solved quicker or by better organization. All these were part of the game of climbing in the East Karakoram. In spite of all the support, how could we have stopped the rain, changed the terrain or forced the bleeding mules? As it is said 'You can change history but you cannot fight geography'. We bore it with oriental fortitude, while a foreigner in a hurry may be angry and impatient. But how that would have helped?

The Skeleton Trail

The track we were travelling was the famous Central Asia Trade Route. This historic route was the main trade route between the plains of India and Central Asia. In his autobiography, the great explorer Sir Francis Younghusband wrote :

'The crossing of the Himalaya by the main caravan route to Central Asia over the Karakoram Pass is about as dreary a piece of travel as I know. The part through Kashmir is delightful. After that, and especially over the Karakoram Pass itself, the scenery is inexpressibly dull and as much of the route lies at an altitude of about 17,000 feet, and the pass itself is nearly 19,000 feet, there is a good deal of that depression which comes from high altitudes. And even in August the temperature was low enough at night for small streams to be frozen. It is a hateful journey.'⁴

His observations were not far from the truth. Almost all the early travellers suffered this way. Diana Shipton called it 'The Headache Mountains', while all the bones of Ngabong (double humped camels of Central Asia), men and mules earned it the name of 'The Skeleton Trail'. The route carried heavy traffic. It was used by the Yarkandis on their way to Mecca. They had to return before the winter, and many were trapped and died. Robert Shaw and Hayward were the first foreigners to pioneer this route in 1864 followed

4. Younghusband. Sir Francis: *The Light of Experience*, p. 54.

by the two Forsyth missions. Andrew Dalgleish was the other Englishman to cross it and he was murdered north of the Karakoram Pass. He was buried at Leh (near the Stoliczka memorial) and a small plaque put up a little north of the Karakoram Pass where he was murdered. Dr Ferdinand Stoliczka, a naturalist attached to the Forsyth mission, died at Murgo in 1874. He was buried at Leh and his monument stands proudly even today. A common bird in the area is named after him: 'Stoliczka's Bush Chat'. Literally hundreds of travellers frequented this route including Ney Elias, Godwin-Austen, Eric Shipton and Ph. C. Visser. After 1946 the route was closed by the Chinese once they had a stranglehold on Central Asia. Finally in 1962 a small force of the Indian army was driven back from east of Saser la, and some returned via Chong Kumdan and Saser la to Leh. The area far to the east is Aksai Chin and under Chinese control. The Indian army now controls the Shyok valleys and travel is strictly regulated.

The two expeditions allowed before ours were the Indian Sappers team, which climbed Rimo IV in 1984 and the Rimo expedition led by Col Prem Chand.⁵ They travelled by the trail to Daulat Beg Oldi (D.B.O.) and Rimo glacier, the latter returning via the Chong Kumdan snout.

At Saser Brangza, east of Saser la, the track descends to Shyok. From the south the winter route from Darbuk and Mandalthang joins it. Towards north goes the route via Chong Kumdan to Gapshan and D.B.O. The summer route crosses Shyok to Chhongthash and Murgo to turn north to Burtsa and Depsang plains. These plains are a unique feature and extend for many kilometres, and are now bordered by the Chinese on the east. This is what Sir F. Younghusband wrote:

'Of all parts of the world this is the most God-forsaken — dreadful in anyway. The plain itself is over 17,000 feet above sea-level, and consists of an open expanse of gravel, bounded by rounded, dull, barren hills. Across it incessantly sweep winds of piercing cold. . . . To add to the gloom the plain is strewn with the bones of animals who have succumbed to the strain of carrying loads at these great heights.'⁶

Finally all the routes meet at D.B.O. and cross the Karakoram Pass, which is quite unspectacular compared to the terrain already passed. Ahead, over the plains of Central Asia it joins the famous Silk Road at Yarkand, running east-west. (Though silk was traded on the Central Asia Trade Route, it was never called the Silk Route. It is a feeder to the Silk Road.⁷

The Indian army officers who are stationed in the area have done extensive trekking. Many relics have been found, like the metal boat, perhaps of J. P. Gunn, left in 1929 in the Chong Kumden lake, memorial stone of Visser expedition of 1935, Burtsa stones, remains of caravans and of course bones and few partly decomposed bodies. Some of these have been air-lifted to army HQ at Partapur lower down on the Shyok

5. Hillary, Peter: *Rimo* and H.J. Vol. 41, p. 117.

6. Younghusband, Sir Francis: *Wonders of the Himalaya*, p. 132.

7. See *Foreign Devils on the Silk Road* by Peter Hopkirk.

and are preserved for posterity. Government agencies, geologists, archaeologists and surveyors operate in the area and have collected much information and relics. Few are preserved at Leh and others at different museums. Books and papers on the area are published in scientific journals.

But the final word on the trail is so well expressed by Shipton:

'Nothing is known of the men who, centuries ago, first ventured across this monstrous wilderness in search of trade or conquest. It is easier to imagine the toil, hardships and frustration they must have endured than to understand what inspired the courage and tenacity needed to discover a way.'⁸

Exploring Aq Tash glacier

Considering the time available to us, and our limited strength, we had to improvise. The alternate plan was for Arun and Muslim to enter the Aq Tash glacier, 8 km long, and to try out peaks there. Accordingly on 31 July they climbed via the right hand moraine and crossed the glacier to make C1. This glacier has prominent white stones giving its name. (Aq—white, Tash—stone). As the Yarkandi caravans passed at its snout they must have given this simple identification, as in this land of 'Karakoram' (black rock) an Aq Tash itself attracts attention. For next 4 days Arun, Muslim porters established two camps to reach the col at 6200 m on the shoulder of the peak Aq Tash (7016 m). This was 'Col 62'. On the other side it offered excellent views of the Thangman glacier (Kichik Kumdan glacier). The entire massif of Mamostong Kangri could be viewed to advantage. After the 'Mamostong Col' the entire route on the glacier and the east ridge of Mamostong Kangri (7516 m) were observed. But the most challenging view was of the peak Aq Tash (7016 m) lying to the southwest of the col. The ridge rose sharply and was broken. This is one of the last three unclimbed 7000ers in the area and is a stupendous monolith. It would take a strong all out attempts to climb it. Arun and Pasang proceeded northeast of the col following the ridge. They stopped on the sharp 'Aq Tash Tower' c. 6400 m. Soon they all retreated to the base camp on the 8th for a rest leaving all their campsites intact.

After two days Muslim and Pasang returned there to continue their efforts on the Aq Tash glacier. Their first aim was a peak 6090 m above their C1 (5200 m). It took them 7 hours to reach the summit on 12 August. The route went up a nala draining from the north and via a snow-gully. A series of false summit humps had to be overcome. The final climb was of 150 m to reach the summit which was christened 'Lokhzung', (6090 m). ('Eagle's Nest'). To the south of Aq Tash glacier two small glaciers lead to the ablation valley. On the southernmost valley stands 'Chathung Thung' (5645 m) ('Black neck crane') with a lovely snow-slope and back-rock jutting up like a neck on the top. On 13th they established a camp below this peak. On 14th they overcame three pinnacles to reach the true summit. It overlooked the entire Shyok valley here and gave a bird's-eye view of the Kichik Kumdan river-block of yesteryears. They examined the possibilities of

8. Shipton, Eric: *That Untravelled World*, p. 144.

climbing the adjoining peak of 6225 m but found the slopes avalanche-prone. So by the 16th they were on their way down and towards the Chong Kumdan glacier to unite with the main team.

Chhongthash

After Arun and Muslim had left for Aq Tash glacier Harish started suffering from high fever. When contacted, the nearest army doctor arranged mules for his evacuation to their camp with Monesh. From the crossing point on Shyok, on the other side they mounted horses equipped with wooden frames which were made for carrying luggage. A painful journey began. The route entered the Chhongthash gorge.

'The Saser Pass led us again into the Shyok valley, 160 miles upstream from the place where we had crossed it near Panamik. Instead of following the valley we plunged almost immediately into a ravine, so narrow that the opposing walls also met, 1,000 feet above our heads, so dark that we seemed to be in a vast cavern.'⁹

We were now in this cavern. Ladakhi troops marching with us were fit and a confident lot. 'Who needs bullets here, we can just throw stones from above' they joked, Chhongthash (big stone) was a huge plain with a big rock in the centre, the only one in miles. Ahead you can see the barren fearsome mountain walls of Murgo. As strong winds and clouds gathered a battered Harish and suave Monesh were greeted with :

*Ladakh ki mausam aur
Bombay ki fashion ka bharosa nahin.
(Ladakh's weather and Bombay's fashion
cannot be trusted).*

The army was friendly, comforting and literally warm with *bukharis*. Four comfortable days were spent under the expert care of the army doctor. After sufficient rest, drugs, video films and the warmth of friendly people, Harish recovered sufficiently to return to the base camp on Aq Tash glacier.

Chong Kumdan glacier

We all gathered together on 9 August. Riots, weather, terrain, sickness and mules had effectively left only 11 days now to visit this unknown glacier. We divided ourselves. Muslim and Pasang continued to climb in the Aq Tash glacier while Arun, Monesh and Harish with three porters left for the Chong Kumdan glacier.

There was a good beaten track leading to the glacier. Aq Tash nala was now crossed easily and we trekked along the Shyok bed. The river flowed majestically and very quietly. Thangman nala (old Kichik Kumdan) was crossed with some difficulties and by evening we camped at the plains leading to the historic dam. Arun and Koylu Ram tried to cut across the ice-penitents of the Thangman glacier with disastrous results. It was tiring and they barely managed to cross it. It is a hard task to cut across these pinnacles and walls of about 50 m. Thangman or Kichik Kumdan (small dam) had also blocked Shyok in the past and

9. Shipton, Eric: *That Untravelled World*, p. 144.



Ice-penitents of the Chong Kumdan glacier in 1989. Note the retreat of the glacier in 50 years as compared to the 1939 photograph reprinted on p. 84.

(Harish Kapadia)

we could observe a deep gorge near the eastern wall where the river had broken through. Now of course the glacier has receded at least 2-3 km and would pose no danger. Thangman (Kichik Kumdan) glacier is 1 km long and an expedition led by Maj. A. M. Sethi traversed it fully to climb Mamostong Kangri.¹⁰

The Glacier Dam

This is the meeting point of Chip Chap river from the north and Chong Kumdan river from the west. The Chong Kumdan glacier had advanced rapidly over the years and pressed against the opposite eastern walls. A little higher up, the glacier takes a sharp turn; the movement of mass was so forceful that it pressed hard against the walls. This blocked the flow of Chip Chap and Kumdan river. (The earlier literature (gazetteer) called it 'Kumdan river'.) However, a glacier is liable to retreat and weakened by the retreat, water broke the dams and bursts occurred. All the dammed water rushed out and death and destruction had been caused right up to Attock. Fort, about 1200 km down stream. Hence, the river acquired the name Shyok — the river of death. Such dam-bursts have occurred in 1780, 1826, 1835 and 1839. It had been a regular feature for many years. The dam-waters rose for about, 125 m at the peak and the water marks can still be seen. The dam was studied by Ney Elias and Godwin-Austen in 1877. Kenneth Mason, the first editor of the *Himalayan Journal*, took keen interest in this dam.¹¹ He collected a large amount of material, and made

10. H.J. Vol. 46. See Article 12, p. 70.

11. H.J. Vol. I, p. 14.

observations and diagrams about it. The major dam-burst occurred in 1929. Mr T. Durgi of Public Works Department was then posted at the dam-site to warn against a future burst. In 1932 he sent two runners to Khalsar over the Saser pass to warn about the floods.. Flood waters had already reached Khalsar, but by this phenomenal fast trek (130 km in 28 hours) they did pass on a warning. Kenneth Mason calculated the frequency of advance and retreat of Kichik and Chong Kumdan glaciers. He predicted :

As I shall not be here to be proved wrong, I will be precise. The Chong Kumdan will advance rapidly during the winter of 1968-69; the Shyok valley be blocked; a lake will form above it, some 10 miles long; and there will be floods caused by the collapse of the dam in autumns (July to September) of 1971, 1974 and 1977, the first one occurring probably in the autumn 2¹/₂ years after the glacier has advanced.¹²

However as per all the available records the last major burst which caused destruction occurred on 16 August 1929. Since then minor bursts have taken place in 1932-33 and 1937-39. The dam waters escaped slowly in these cases and no major damage was caused. But no bursts or dams have occurred after that. The Karakoram glaciers in this region are in a state of retreat. Indian forces are stationed in the area since long and their records of the Shyok water-level do not speak of any floods.

Is it likely Mason may still prove correct about the future ?

'It must be remembered that it will be a coincidence that the Chong Kumdan and the Kichik Kumdan glaciers both be at their maximum advance at approximately the same time (1970) and that at their subsequent advances, the Chong Kumdan in 2013 and the Kichik Kumdan in 2005, they will again be 'out of phase'. We can perhaps leave any further speculation to our grand children!¹³

Chong Kumdan peaks

Though the trade route and many caravans passed at the snout of the glacier no one seems to have entered inside the glacier. The Chong Kumdan glacier was first surveyed by E. C. Ryall in 1862 and a sketch-map published by the De Filipi expedition in 1914. It is about 15 km long running east to west generally. To the western end lies a high col of 6250 m leading to the South Terong glacier. On the south lies the high Mamostong Kangri wall with many high peaks that discharge avalanches.. To the north of the glacier are the two unattempted peaks of Chong Kumdan I (7071 m) and II (7004 m). A high col (6500 m) between the two overlooks to the northern branch of the Chong Kumdan glacier. After about 3 km from the snout the glacier bifurcates with the North Chong Kumdan glacier leading towards the South Rimo glacier. At this junction where both the glaciers meet it takes a sharp bend and thrusts ahead to the walls opposite.

On 11 August we entered this glacier. We followed the right moraine. A side glacier had cut through creating a narrow gorge hence we had

12. H.J. Vol. XII, p. 62.

13. Ibid. p. 63.

to climb up to go across it. It opened to our view the entire northern vista upto Gapshan. Valley which had reddish slopes and the site of the old lake with marks on the side walls could also be clearly seen. We moved ahead but after about 2 km were forced to descend to the glacier moraine and proceed along it. After the junction of the glaciers we cut across to the north towards the left bank. We camped on the glacier late in the evening. Next day ABC (5040 m) was made on the flat camping ground at the entrance of a small subsidiary northern glacier, christened 'Chogam glacier' by us. While two porters were sent down to ferry more loads we went up this northern glacier quickly. On the left bank of this glacier a moraine slope climbed steeply avoiding the lower broken glacier. C1 was placed at 5540 m below a prominent 'Dimple' on the ridge on the 14th. Arun and Koylu Ram left early with their camp followed soon by Monesh and Harish. We reached a prominent col at 5900 m ('Col 59'). Ahead to the NW was Chong Kumdan I (7071 m). It rose from the glacier to a col, then to steep rocks and a tempting rounded summit. The eastern ridge fell sharply to join our peak.

Sir Francis Younghusband was perhaps the first to see it from a distance on his way to Central Asia.

'There followed some deary marches across the summits of the base and desolate Depsang Plains from which, through 17,000 feet above sea level, the snowy peaks of Saser and Nubra "appeared above the horizon like sails of some huge ships" :.....¹⁴

Nursing a recent fracture Harish found the steep slopes painful to climb and hence opted out. The remaining three followed the steep southern slopes of the peak 6250 m. After climbing a pinnacle at the end they were on the summit of 'Chogam' (6250m) ('a box of holy scriptures'). The entire panorama was filled with Rimo in the northwest to Mamostong Kangri in the south.

On 15 August, Arun and Koylu Ram climbed 'Stos' (6005 m) ('goat which gives Pashmina wool') from their high camp. It is a peak between the descending ridge of Chong Kumdan I and 'Chogam'. They had a clear view of the surrounding peaks and glacier.

16 August was our last day of action. Early morning Monesh and Yog Raj left to climb 'Skyang' (5770 m) ('wild horse') above our ABC to the north, with the energy and speed matching the name of the peak. Going up steep slopes the summit ridge was reached by 9 a.m. There were three pinnacles spread over half a kilometre on the summit ridge. To be absolutely sure, they climbed all three. The bend of the glacier and the dam were clearly seen. That evening we made a huge cairn and on a stream 'constructed' our own dam. Exactly, 60 years ago to the day, 16 August 1929, the Kumdan dam had broken with a bang and heard by Vissers camped at D.B.O. ('like the noise of a cannon-shot', almost 30 km away) and by J. P. Gunn who visited it immediately from Chhongthash, this was the last major burst of a lake which had formed

14. Seaver, George: *Sir Francis Younghusband*, p. 106.

in 1923. Godwin-Austen, who was crippled at the age of fifty, died in that year at eighty-seven. A little before he had written in *The Times*, which had just reported another block of the river, vividly recalling his visit to the dam with Ney Elias forty-three years earlier.¹⁵ After 1935-39 both Chong Kumdan and Kichik Kumdan went into oblivion and did not cause further blocks or news.

Muslim and Pasang after their satisfying climbs met us at the Chong Kumdan plain. A tired but satisfied party exchanged notes. We were fascinated with the area and even charmed by its barrenness. As Shipton had said :

As on a long sea voyage, many weeks in the mountain wilderness, remote from the habits and concerns of our former world, had made us intensely sensitive to our new environment.¹⁶

A tired party staggered back across Saser la. Subedar Wani had reserved the final quote for us :

*Kaun kaheta hai ke Mehboob mera
Langda ke chalata hai;
Woh to hushn ke boz se
Lachak lachak ke chalta hai.*

(Who says my (mountain) lover is walking with a limp,
Because of the load of love (beauty)
he is staggering a little).

SUMMARY

Peaks climbed : *All First Ascents*

In Aq Tash glacier : 1989

- | | | |
|---------------------------------|-----------|----------------------------------|
| 1. 'Lokhzung'
(6090 m) | 12 August | Muslim Contractor
Pasang Bodh |
| 2. 'Chathung Thung'
(5645 m) | 14 August | Muslim Contractor
Pasang Bodh |

In Chong Kumdan glacier :

- | | | |
|-------------------------|-----------|--------------------------------------------|
| 3. 'Chogam'
(6250 m) | 14 August | Arun Samant
Monesh Devjani
Koylu Ram |
| 4. 'Stos'
(6005 m) | 15 August | Arun Samant
Koylu Ram |
| 5. 'Skyang'
(5770 m) | 16 August | Monesh Devjani
Yog Raj (Buruwa) |

15. Morgan, Gerald: *Ney Elias*, p. 126.

16. Shipton, Eric: *That Untravelled World*, p. 145.

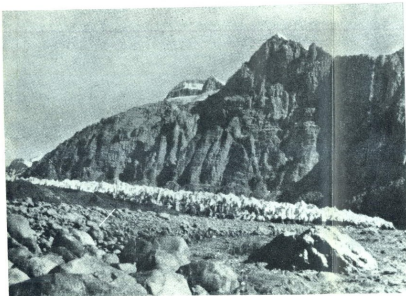
BK-46



PANORAMA G. The moraine of the Chong Kumdan glacier in 1989, sixty years after the last major dam burst. Dry Gapsan lake on right (background). Water-level marks can still be seen on the scree slopes on the left above the lake-bed, and on the rocks on the right.
Article 13
(Harish Kapadia)



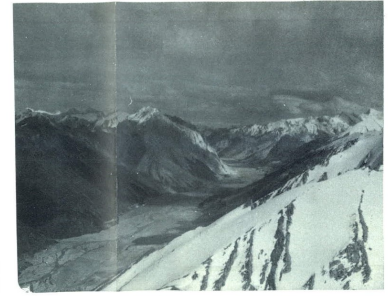
PANORAMA H. The Gapsan lake and the Chong Kumdan glacier dam at its peak in 1929. View from the upper right bank of Shyok valley.
Article 13
(Reprinted from *H.J.* Vol. IV, opp. p. 68)



PANORAMA D. Kichik Kundan (Thangman) glacier block.
(Reprinted from H. J. Vol. XII, opp. p. 58)
 Compare it with the present state of the glacier in Panorama E.



PANORAMA E. View of the northern Shyok valley from the summit of 'Chathung Thung' (5645 m).
 Note the retreat of both glaciers in the last few decades.
Article 13 (M. H. Contractor)



PANORAMA F. The southern Shyok valley, Chhongthash gorge on left of centre.
Article 13 (M. H. Contractor)

Other activities :

- (A) While attempting peak 6739 m in the Aq Tash glacier, a high point 'Khara Tower', c. 6400 m, was reached by Arun Samant and Pasang Bodh on 7 August.
- (B) Two unexplored glaciers, Aq Tash and Chong Kumdan, were visited and photographed. These were perhaps the last unexplored regions east and north of Saser la.
- (C) Remains of the historic glacier dam at the meeting point of Chong Kumdan glacier moraine and Shyok river were observed, studied and photographed.

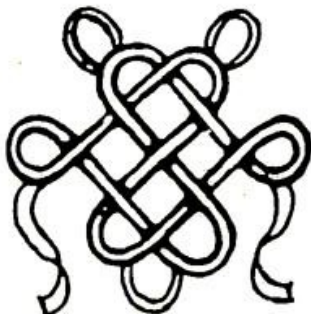
Area : East Karakoram. Leh-Sasoma-across Saser la (5395 m) to the east — to Saser Brangza. To north along the Shyok river to Aq Tash and Chong Kumdan glaciers.

Team : Harish Kapadia (leader), Arun Samant, Muslim Contractor and Monesh Devjani with Vijay Kothari and Ashwin Popat in the early stages.

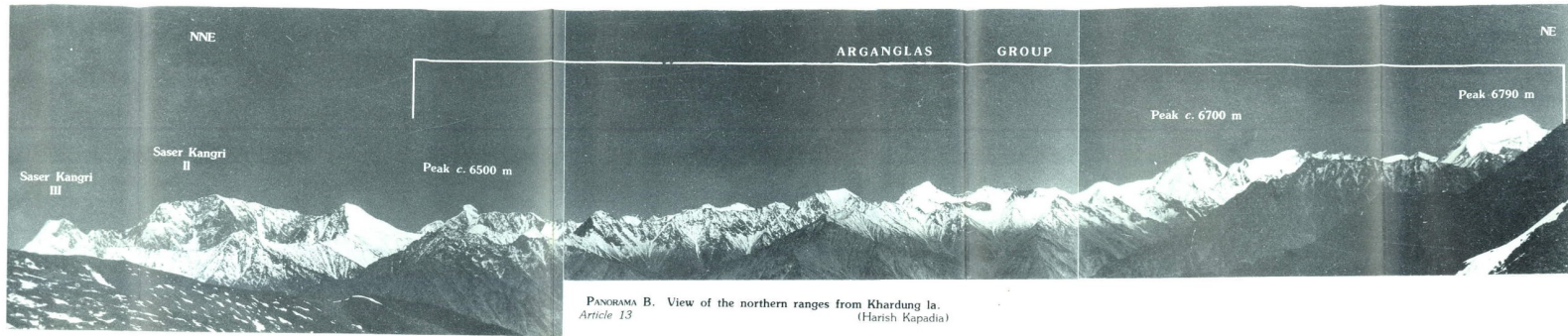
Supported by: Pasang Bodh, Koylu Ram, Yog Raj (Buruwa) and Ram Lal — all from Manali (H.P.).

Period : From 1 July 1989 to 29 August 1989.

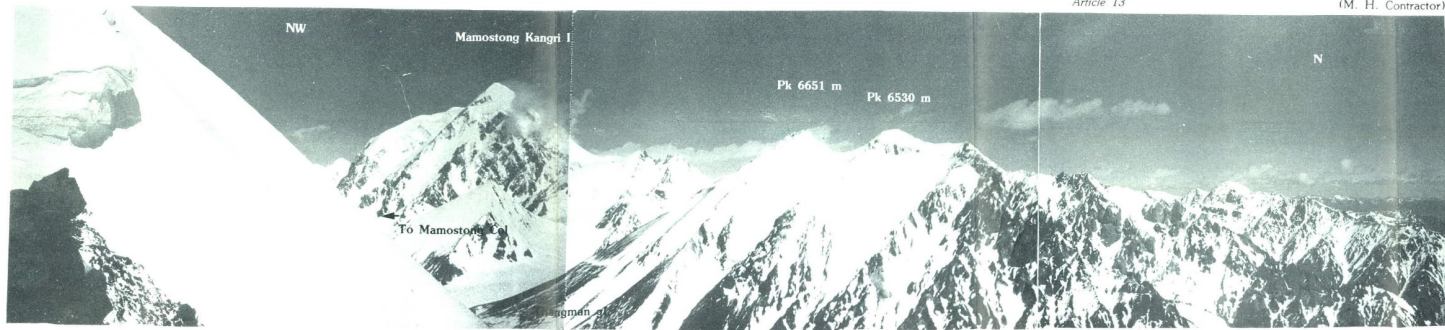
Sponsored by : *The Mountaineers*, Bombay.



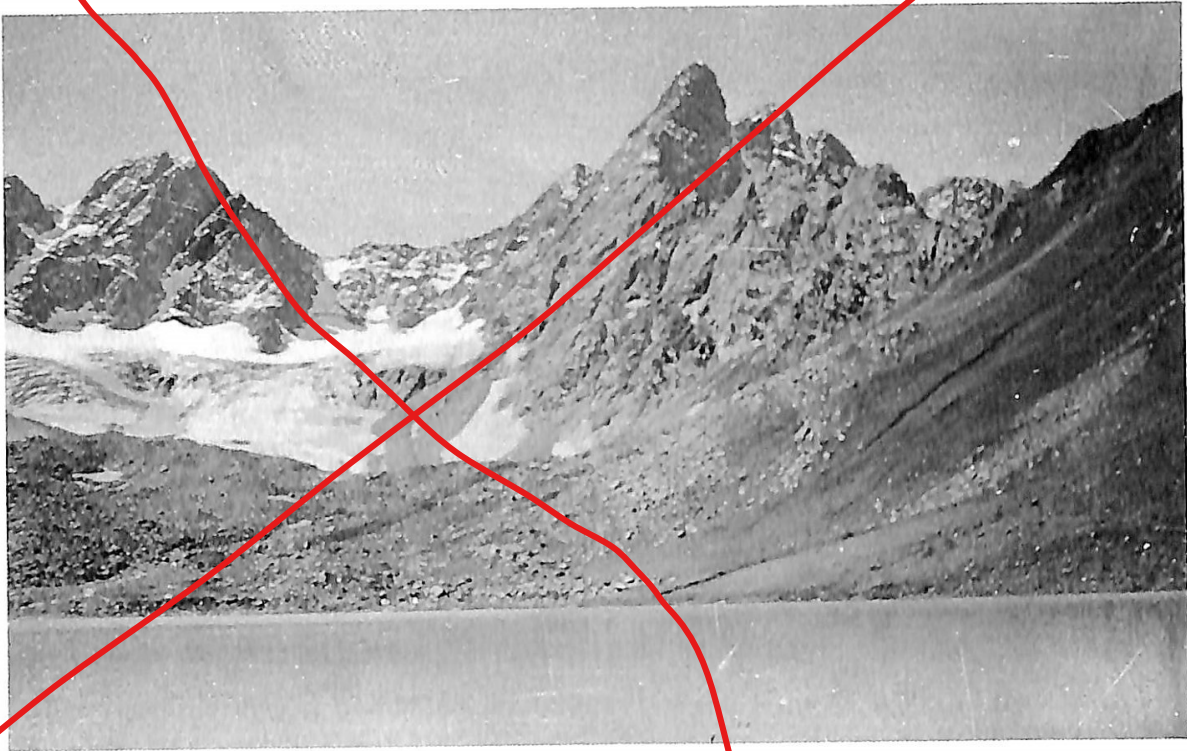
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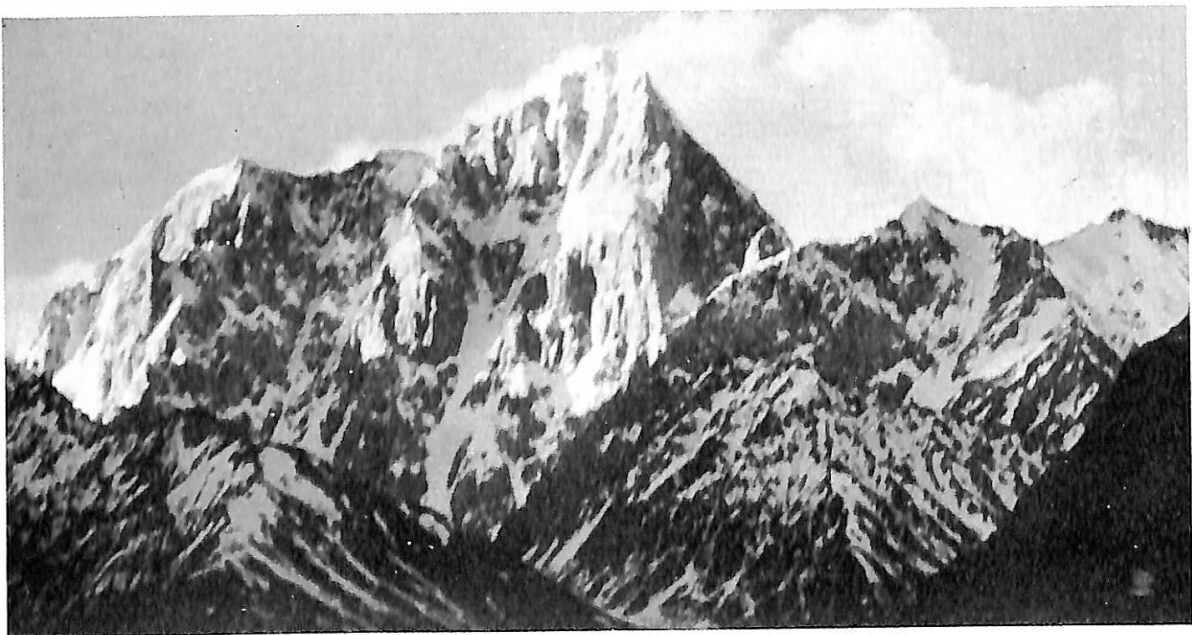
PANORAMA B. View of the northern ranges from Khardung la.
Article 13
(Harish Kapadia)



PANORAMA C. Mamostong Kangri from 'Col 62' on Aq Tash glacier.
Article 13
(M. H. Contractor)



9. Brahma Sakli (5076 m) peaks rising above Brahma sar lake.
Article 10 (M. Amin)



10. Aq Tash peak (7016 m). SW face rising above Tulum Puti Topko valley.
Article 13 (Maj. M. P. Yadav)

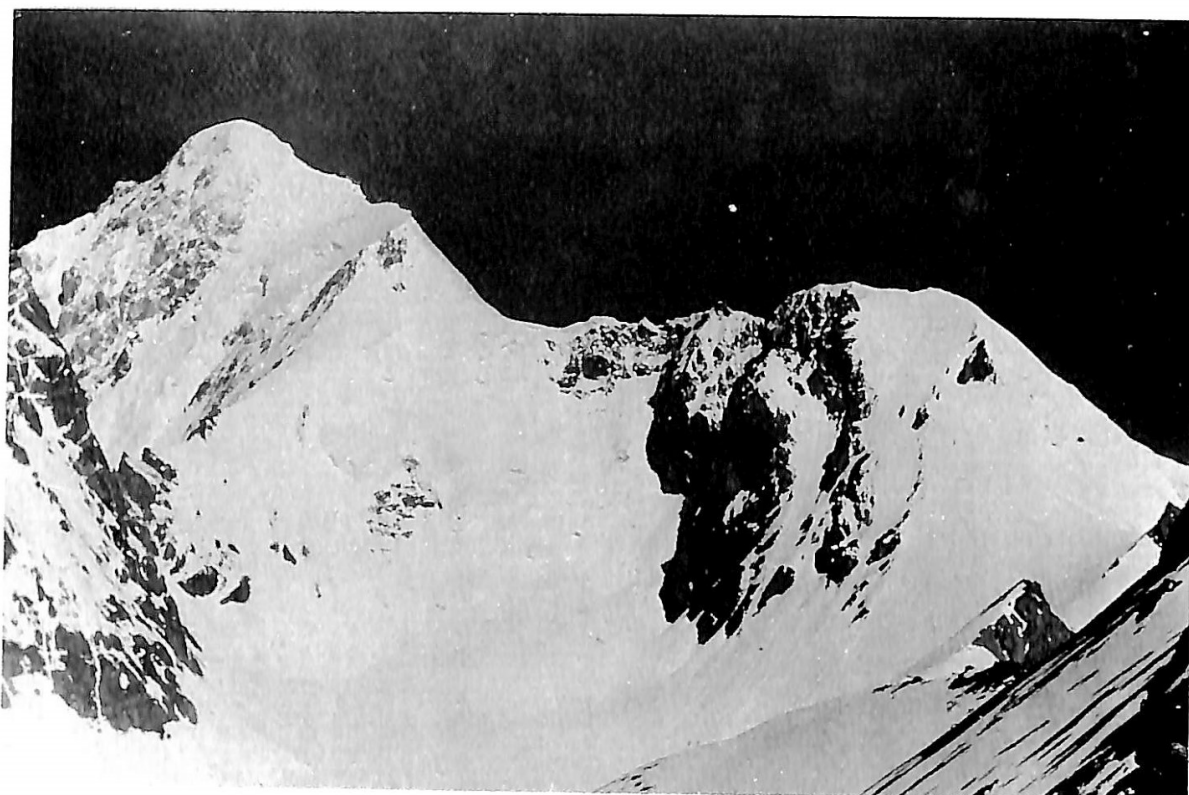


11. & 12. Two views of unclimbed Aq Tash peak from Aq Tash glacier. East face above and below NE ridge leading to 'Col 62' on its right.

Article 13

(Arun Samant)

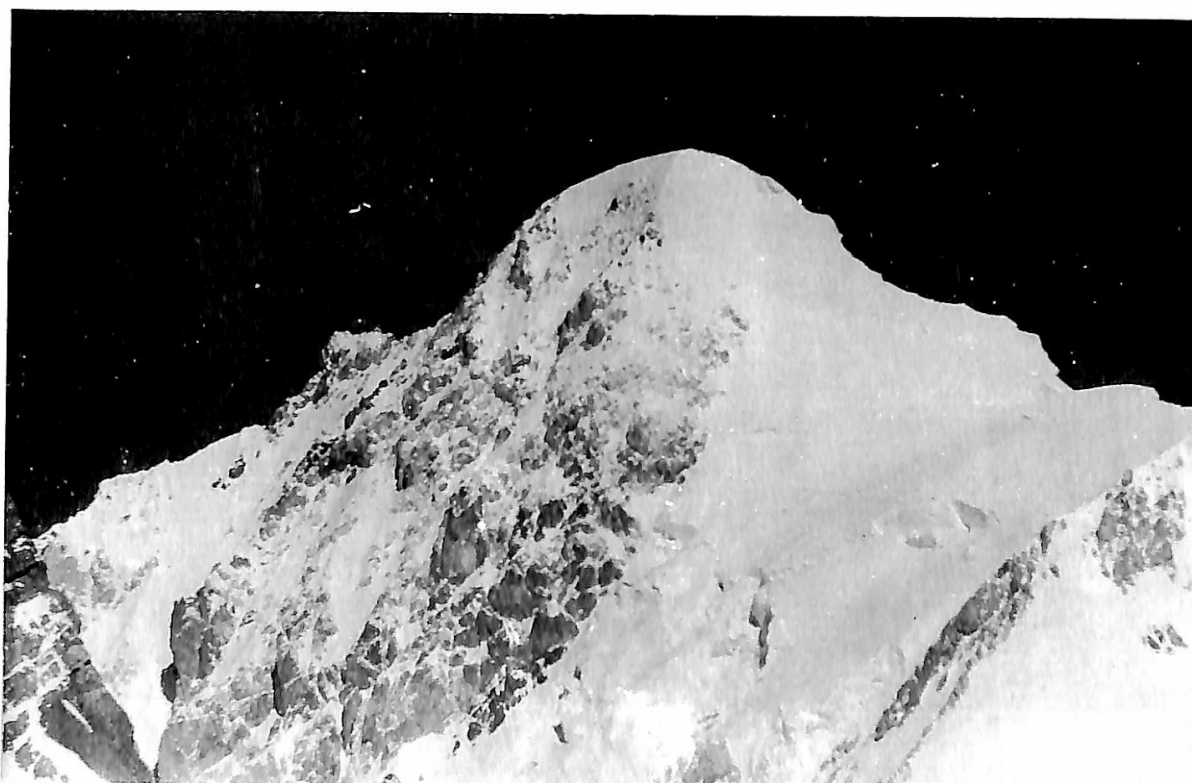


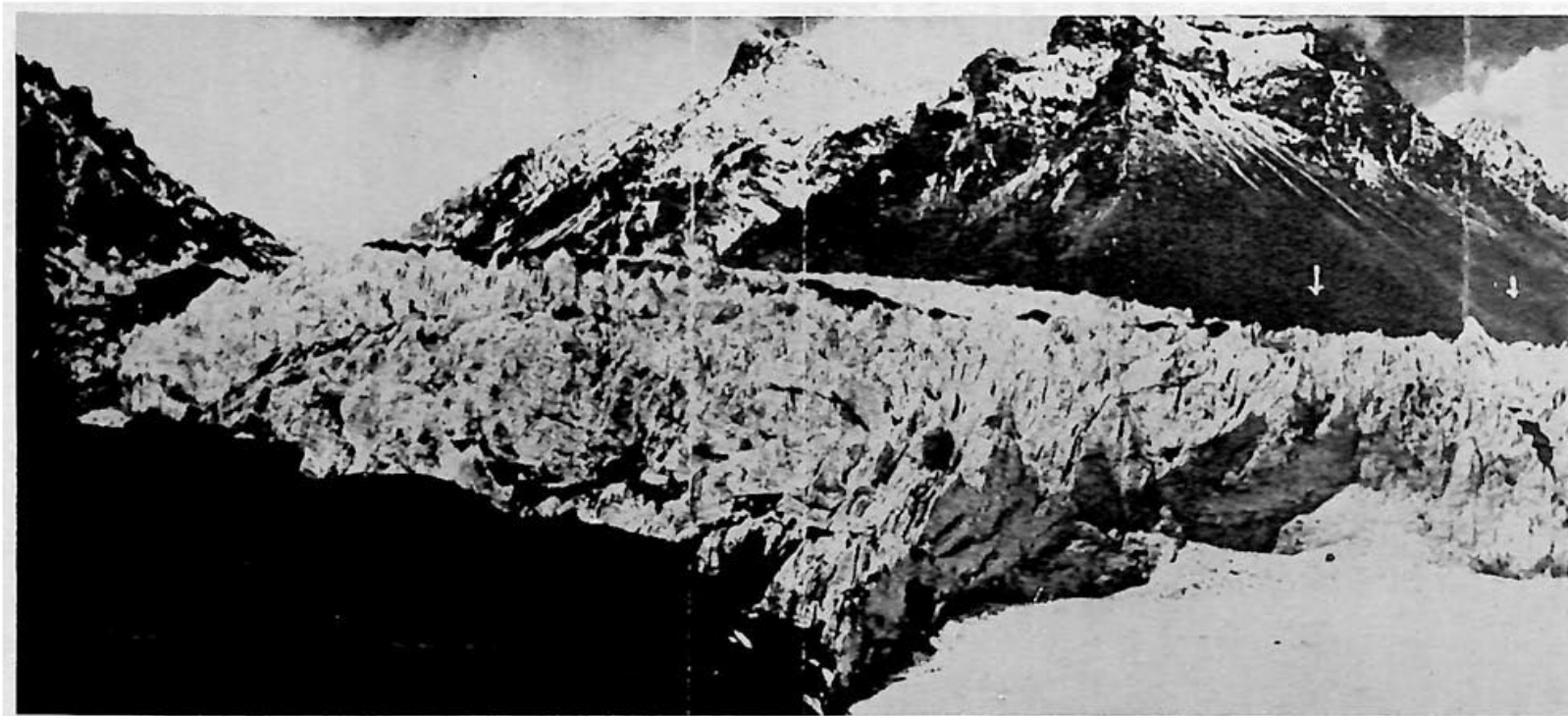


13. & 14. Chong Kumdan I (7071 m) as seen from 'Col 59'. Above, east ridge extending on right and south face falling on left. 'Stos' (6005 m) on extreme right.
Below, close-up of east ridge and south face.

Article 13

(Harish Kapadia)

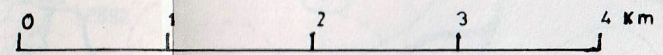




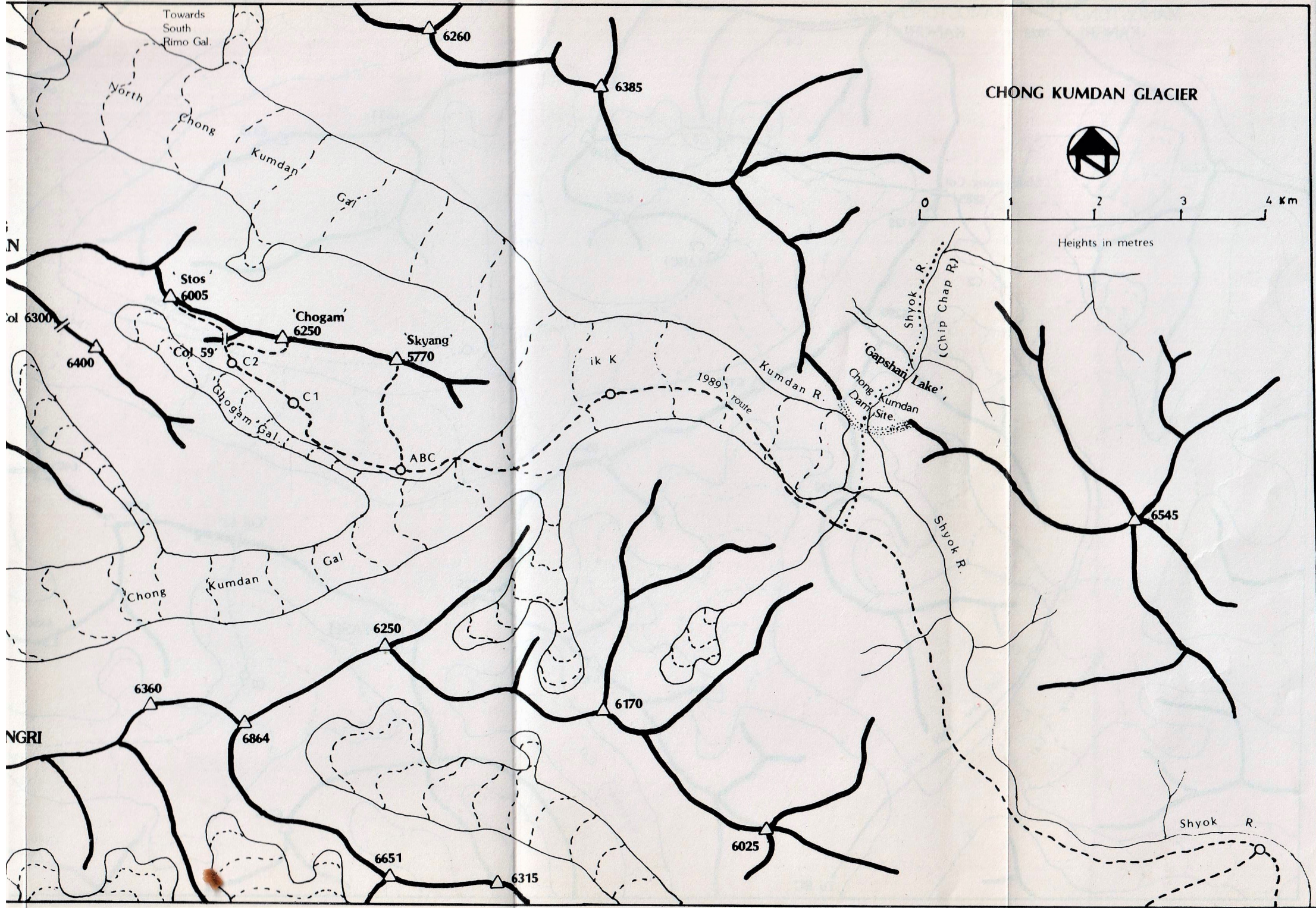
Chong Kumdan glacier dam on 28 May 1939. The height of the dam in 1929 before the break marked on the right hillside.

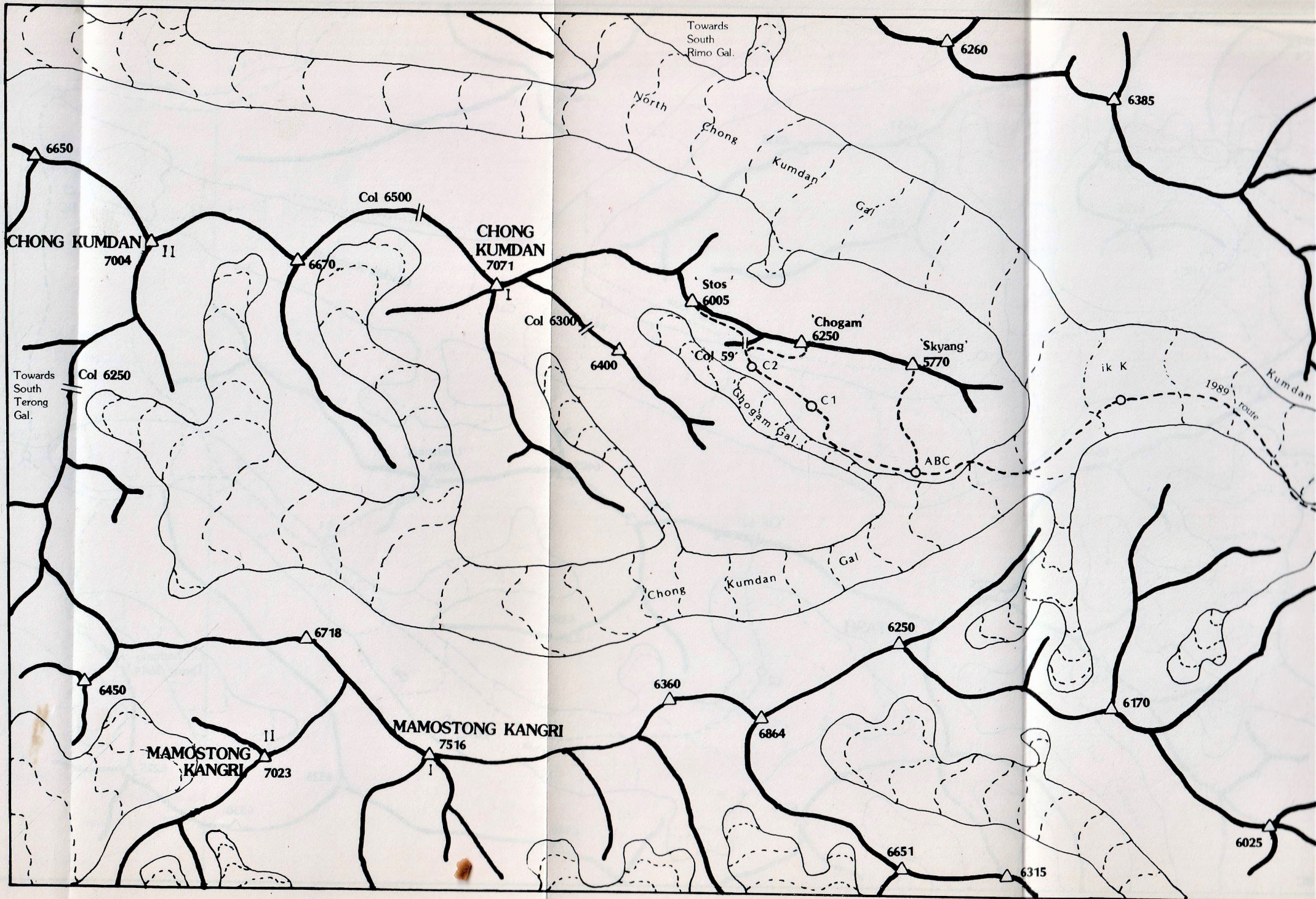
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CHONG KUMDAN GLACIER

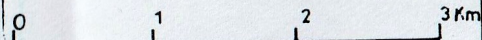


Heights in metres





MAMOSTONG - THANGMAN - AQ TASH GLACIERS



*Heights in metres

Mamostong Kangri I

Route of first and third ascent ———
Route of second ascent ······

