

THE ENJOYABLE DIFFERENCE

A trek to Zanskar

HARISH KAPADIA

'YOU WILL BE standing in a queue to cross Shingo la,' Mahavir Thakur at Manali mountaineering institute was advising us. 'There are so many foreigners trekking to Zanskar that camp sites are crowded.'

'But surely the monasteries are beautiful,' quipped in Muslim.

'Oh, on some days there are more tourists than lamas at some monasteries.'

Sabina, on her first trek to the Himalaya was kicking Muslim under the table.

'We will surely meet many interesting people on the way,' I tried to salvage the situation.

'Those large parties hardly mingle with anyone and they don't speak our language, you see they are mostly French and Germans.'

Our exasperation was complete. We had selected the popular trek to Zanskar as someone called it 'the best trek around' and now at Manali at the start of the trek situation looked different. We were used to climbing and trekking in the unknown valleys, beyond the Inner Line, where we never saw another human for weeks. Now we were threatened with an explosion of trekkers, so to speak. Moreover we generally went in all male teams moving fast and harmonious. We were three couples, Muslim Contractor, Arun Samant and myself with our spouses. 'How lucky' someone said. It was fun but in some ways it hindered our plans too. After many permutations and combinations finally we were to trek on easy route together and via Shingo la, though to go in from Phirtse la is far better. And unfortunately beforehand we had planned for a long hard trek. So we had extra porters and mules. I will always remember mules half loaded, porters drinking *chang* and playing cards and myself doling out payments to them.

'Don't worry, you will meet lamas on the pass chanting *Om Mani Padme Hum*.' I tried to encourage the ladies.

'And Zanskari landscape will surely be striking.'

Photos 13 to 20

Muslim, after a puff on his pipe gave the final edict, 'Let's say simply, it's going to be different.'

20 July 1990 saw us camped at Darcha. We had come here by bus from Manali-Keylong. We were camping with about a dozen other people. That evening Lesenfants Main from Switzerland introduced himself to us. 'My name means *chilling wind* and I am a lama.' His knowledge of the monasteries was very educative and he was on his fourth visit to Zanskar. He educated us into the intricacies of Buddhism and talked about its spread in Europe. Two tough looking physical training instructors joined us. And so it was going to be all along the trek. We left for Shingo la on the 21st. The track followed the valley to Jankar-Sumdo in short stages, first along Jankar nala and then along Sumdo nala. We had to cross Jankar nala in a pulley. In Manali a trekker had given us a photo of the pulleywala to be handed over to him. As we waved out the picture he came across promptly and posed for another photo with us. Almost all Zanskaris have their pictures sent in from Europe.

All along the track till Shingo la we saw excellent peaks on both sides of the valley. With only 2-3 days of approach on a mule track these peaks offer excellent climbing around 6000 m. (1) Peak 6248 m (20,500 ft) (above Ramjak in SE in Sumdo valley) (2) Peak 5915 m (19,407 ft) (towards west on the climb to Shingo la) and (3) the dome shaped peak of 5973 m (19,600 ft) (rising above Shingo la in the east) were attractive. But the pick of the lot is a sharp square peak 6318 m (20,730 ft) to the south of Shingo la and above Ramjak in the west. From Jankar-Sumdo camp the valley to NW along Jankar nala would lead to upper Miyar nala at Khanjar via Tarasalmu pass (5358 m) and to many other peaks. There are numerous possibilities of peaks, passes (and glaciers!) around here with easy accessibility.

The ladies were finding the going tough. Lack of acclimatization and physical strain was slowing them down. The fit French parties crossing us with their *Saluts* did not help matters. The climb to Shingo la (5090 m) was strenuous for them. As we waited at the pass for the ladies, I heard the lama chant from far away. 'Om Mani, Om Mani; terrible... terrible...!' It was Sabina who reached the pass utterly exhausted.

'Where are your lamas,' was the only thing she could ask.

'Look at the better side, at least there is no queue at the pass.'

'There they are,' my wife Geeta finished the subject, pointing to the south.

Sure enough a party of very fit Austrians arrived in jiffy at the pass. A quick look all around, drank some water and they were on the way down giving us a 'what's wrong with you' look, along with an encouraging *Berg Frei* (happy climbing).



15-16. Unnamed peaks near Shingo la. Peak 6248 m (above)
and Peak 5915 m (below).

Article 13

(Harish Kapadia)





17. Phuktal gompa, Zaskar.

Article 13

(Harish Kapadia)

We started on the way down to Zanskar and it was quite late and cold. Following behind us was a lone lovely German girl in shorts and sweat-shirt. Suddenly she walked a step backwards and collapsed. Muslim rushed to her and with gestures she conveyed that she was feeling extremely cold. Our good Samaritan offered a thick pullover which was Sabina's! He never heard the end of it till the end of the trek.

This trek to Zanskar and the route over Shingo la was made so popular by publication of the book *Zanskar The Hidden Kingdom* by Michel Peissel who also made a TV film on Zanskar. This has, in particular, attracted many French trekkers, in what Bill Aitken calls 'Peissel's cultural colonisation of Zanskar' in his article. (See H.J. Vol. 45, p. 103). The book by Peissel abounds in distortions and was severely criticised in India. 'Thus, we are told that the Shingo la leads to India. Where pray, does Peissel believe Zanskar is? In Tibet? or outer Mongolia? One hopes that the next time he sets out to 'discover' a hidden valley, he starts from his backyard where, perhaps, he could do some genuine soul searching.' So wrote Sudhir Sahi while reviewing the book. (See H.J. Vol. 37, p. 221).

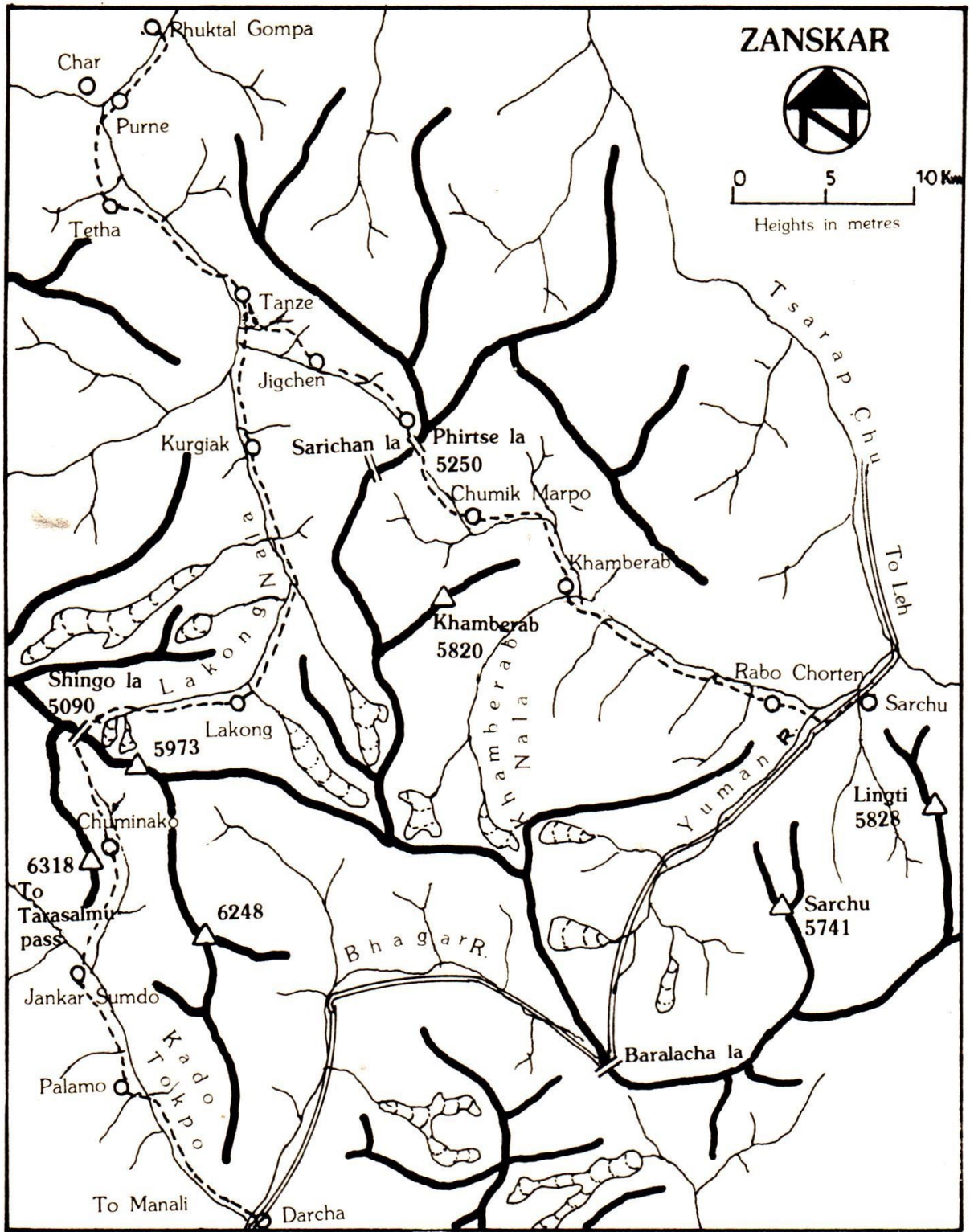
Many of the trekkers we met had heard about or read the book but were not bothered about its contents.

Our first camp in Zanskar at Lakong (4420 m) on 26th was great. Steep brown rock walls contrasting against green camping site and of course a 'queue' of tents. That evening it was Catherine Maout and Laurence Yvinec two school teachers from France who continued talking with gestures and sign language. One thing you had to admire. Without knowing the language, with very little resources or without adequate information these trekkers were enjoying themselves. We were getting into the act too.

Next three days along the Kurgiak nala were gentle walking. A track went east from Kurgiak village over Sarichen la to Lingti plains.¹ Lovely villages and green fields continued. Village children came out in numbers asking for chocolates. You cannot blame them, anyone would love Swiss chocolates. The Zanskaris life-style has not been completely devastated by the foreigner's influx. No doubt they are more commercial, charge for camping, more heavily for food and facilities. Many have travelled all over India, some lamas have been abroad too, but surprisingly most have come back to face the Zanskari winter.

There are many other aspects of change too. Food depots, schools, medical facilities and planned cultivation of trees. But progress comes slowly to these areas, perhaps mercifully so.

1 See H.J. Vol. 45, p. 100, for Bill Aitken's trek here.



At Purne we had to turn east along Tsarap Lingti river for Phuktal gumpa. This river, originating near Pangpo la (Rupshu) zigzags here. Ahead it meets Zanskar river at Padum, goes north to meet Indus at Nimo in Ladakh, travels west and south to Arabian Sea near Karachi. What a journey for the water rushing at Purne.

As we were about to leave Purne, a three member Japanese T.V. crew rushed in, looking very fit and urbane. With them was Yoshio Ogata, the famous Japanese mountaineer. We immediately spread mats under the poplar trees and talked endlessly about his climbs (Everest, Kangchenjunga, Rimo) and future plans. Suddenly Karakoram, Tibet, Arunachal, Nepal and many other areas were alive at Purne in the disarming smile of Ogata. Meeting even one such personality in mountains makes the trip worthwhile. Purne must have seen umpteen meetings like this.

After an hour's walk we crossed a bridge. The track climbed a little. Geeta who was ahead of me suddenly stopped, pointing to a giant cave about 100 m above the riverbed. We both stood motionless. The Phuktal gumpa was inside and around this cave. What a site! Of all the gompas I have seen, this one was the most spectacular.

It is truly like the imagined Shangri la, clinging to the cliff like a cluster of swallows' nests. The name Phuktal or Phugtal as it is sometimes spelt, comes from the Zanskari word 'Phug', meaning cave, and gumpa is built into a massive cave in the cliff face, spilling out in a cascade of whitewashed cells and buildings.²

The full mountainside was lined up with houses, colourful gumpa on the top and Tsarap Lingti river flowing at the bottom. As the legend goes the gumpa was built here due to a forest on the slopes above it. On the barren slope, a lone tree now stands out. It is supposed to be housing the spirit of the first guru — Rimpoche.

Three Indian sages had discovered the cave and settled in it when along came the saintly Lama, Chamsen Cherap Zampo who, on meeting the three holy men, suggested that a great monastery be built here. The three men answered that the cave was too small, so the Lama, performing a miracle, made it grow to its present gigantic size. According to this account the monastery was originally of the Sakyapa (Red Hat) sect. But contradicting this account is the statement that Rinchen Zangpo founded Phugtal.³

Staying in the gumpa on the upper floors is a pleasure you won't forget for a long time. The view down to Tsarap Lingti river, lama

² Mike Harding in *Footloose in the Himalaya*, p. 59.

³ *Zanskar The Hidden Kingdom* by Michel Peissel, p. 175.

chants and walk in the cave along the houses medieval in character is an experience. We saw the memorial stone of Alexander Csomo de Kóros, the Hungarian scholar who stayed here from August 1825 to November 1826. While we were there a variety of trekkers visited the gompa. Young lone Swiss trekker, French Everest climber, rich Countess, European lamas and of course Muslim's 'pullover lady'. Some stayed the night. The talks revolved around their travel, life and climbs. It was an international *mela*. The ladies were refreshed with the rest and joined in the fun with the foreigners. Sabina excelled at stories of 'great river crossings', and 'climbing high peaks' that thrilled the audience. The exclamation sounds in many languages *Oui*, *Wow*, *Ach* and *Vah* mixed well. But it was time to go back and the 'terrible terrible' chant returned as we climbed towards Phirtse la.

The trek bifurcates from Tanze, till where we had to retrace our route. As we climbed up slowly out came a small boy followed by his mother, both obviously French. Little behind was Mireille et Michel Daon, his father, with a typical flowing French beard. He was a wood sculptor and a famous one at that. Out came the stove and over tea and pancakes we learnt about the art scene in France. He had visited Zanskar many times before and trekked without porters and any other paraphernalia.

On the other side of Phirtse la (5230 m) the terrain opened up. The flat long Lingti plains stretched in front.

Lingti plains — lie above Lingti, and though presenting a fine level expanse of grass, with abundance of fuel, (*dema* or Tibetan furze) have no surface water, and cannot be irrigated, so that in this dry climate cultivation would be impossible.

(*Gazetteer of Kashmir and Ladakh*, p. 569).

We walked on the plains for the next two days, crossing Khamberab nala on the way. Our final camp was at the end of the Lingti plains. This was a great site and I will always regret not having began our trek from here. Yunan river came in from SW, Sarchu river from SE, Lingti river from the west and all merged with Tsarap river coming from the east and continued to Zanskar. Above the scenery rose peak Lingti, 5828 m (19, 121 ft) in the east, Khamberab, 5820 m (19,094 ft) in the west and peak Sarchu, 5741 m (18,835 ft) in SE, three of the earliest triangulated points on the map. We exchanged a final *Gruss Gott* (greetings to God) and our Indian *Ram Ram* with German trekkers and left for the civilization.

At the edge of the plains was the border of Lahul and Ladakh marked by a square stone called 'Phalang Danda'.

Phalang Danda or Lingti boundary mark on the borders of Lahoul and Ladakh; situated north-east of the Bara Lacha



18. Memorial stone for A. Csoma de Koros at Phuktal gumpa.

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(Harish Kapadia)



19. Lingti plains, Ladakh. Peak Lingti (5828 m) rising on the right.



20. Khamberab (5820 m) at the edge of Lingti plains, Ladakh.
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pass and just above Lingti (or Sarchu) camp. It is called Lingti by the Lahoulis, and is a high, square, insulated rock rising out of the Lingti plain.

(*Gazetteer of Kashmir and Ladakh*, p. 663)

Now a metalled road (Manali-Leh highway) passes next to this stone. About 200 vehicles pass every day (particularly after the closure of the Srinagar-Leh road). This spectacular road, passing through a great mountain country, has become popular to 'jeep-safari' travellers. To mountaineers it opens up scores of peaks: on Lingti plains, around Baralacha pass, above Darcha and Patseo — to name a few areas. You can shift base camps by trucks and climb a dozen peaks in a fortnight or so.

We climbed on to a truck for Manali. A long line of trucks and jeeps were held up at Darcha due to overflowing of the river on the road. A hapless international crowd stranded here was impressed to hear Sabina:

'This is nothing, we crossed many rivers like this in Zanskar.'

Our driver heard that too and the truck rolled ahead in grand style. A little scary affair though. We were at Manali past mid-night in about 14 hours from Phalang Danda.

'How was it,' Mahavir asked us at Manali.

'Well we heard the lama chants on the pass, met people and crossed rivers.' Geeta and Sabina were now in form. 'It was fun, making so many new friends; flowers, Zanskari landscape, gompas. . . . ' It went on and on.

But again the final word came from Muslim:

'It was different. But the difference was enjoyable.'

For return we decided to take a ride on the Kangra Valley Railway, which runs from Joginder Nagar to Pathankot. This narrow gauge railway passes through a spectacular countryside of Dhaula Dhar.⁴ It was in pouring rain that we started the journey in a leaky bogie to reach the military camp at Yol. 'You are lucky that the train is running today at all' was the comment of the Station Master at Palampur. We were going to Yol to stay with our friend Col Prem Chand and to visit Dharamsala.

Italian prisoners transported from Europe were interned at this military camp during the Second World War. During the day they were taken out in the surrounding hills. In the evening a whistle announced: 'To

4 See note at the end of the article.

Your *Own Locations*, to return to the camp. Italians, not knowing English well shortened it to 'YOL', giving this camp a new name. Now the village, area and the camp is known by this name as if it was always there. After two enjoyable days the Colonel shouted, 'To YOL' and we were on way to Bombay.

The route :

Manali-Keylong-Darcha (bus).

Trek :

Darcha (3303 m) to Palamo (3600 m)	8 km
To Jankar-Sumdo (3910 m)	6 km
To Chuminako (4660 m)	5 km
To Shingo la (5090 m)	5 km
To Lakong (4420 m) in Zaskar	5 km
To Kurgiak (4025 m)	14 km
To Tetha (3960 m)	16 km
To Phuktal gompa (3870 m) (via Purne)	8 km

Return :

Phuktal to Tanze (3810 m) (via Tetha)	12 km
To Jingchen (4480 m)	6 km
To foot of Phirtse la (4790 m)	8 km
To Phirtse la (5250 m)	3 km
To Chumik Marpho (c. 4880 m) in Ladakh (junction of Phirtse la and Sarichen la routes)	7 km
To Khamberab (4420 m)	12 km
To Rabo Chorten (4360 m)	16 km
To Sarchu (4240 m)	4 km

(We took 8 day each but some do it in even half that time on this popular trek).

Period :

14 July to 14 August 1990

Kangra Valley Railway :

The Kangra Valley Railway (KVR) was begun in 1926 and completed in 1929 and cost Rs. 296 lakhs, overshooting the estimate by a mere Rs. 162 lakhs! It is 164 km long and the highest point is 1210 m at Ahju. The start at Pathankot is 333 m and Jogindernagar 1139 m with 30 stations on the way. It has only 2 tunnels, unlike Shimla line which has 103. The line is remarkable for its scenic beauty and environmental wisdom in following contours. It has 971 bridges, some of unique design. In 1973 the Pong Hydro Scheme demanded

re-alignment of 27 km of track (Jawanwala Shahr to Guler) and this was reopened in 1976. The KVR has the nearest approach to the snows than any railway line in India, it's the 2' 6'' narrow gauge running parallel to the Dhaula Dhar range only 16 km away. Its severest gradient (beyond Baijnath Paprola) is 1 in 19. This is the steepest gradient for any *Adhesion* line of Indian Railways (Ooty — 1 in 12, uses *Rack*). The KVR has 20 crossing stations and 11 slip sidings in case of backsliding runaways. The blue livery of the rolling stock add to the appeal of this unobstrusive railway.

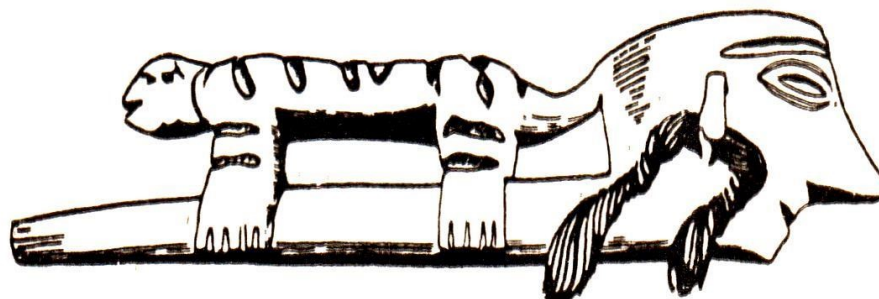
Above Jogindernagar is Shanan Power House where the narrow gauge ends. A metre gauge 'trolley' goes up the mountainside to the reservoir. The KVR locos were the steam *ZE* and class *ZF*, now diesel ZDM3. The Nagrota-Jogindernagar section (55 km) was closed in 1942 and the line uprooted and sent abroad for the war effort. It was relaid and reopened in 1954. The famous steel-arch bridge across Reond nala, opposite Kangra, 60 m above the river bed was erected in 1927. Banganga bridge between Guler and Jawalamukhi was twice swept away in pre-monsoon storms during erection. Both bridges are epics in Indian Railway engineering history.

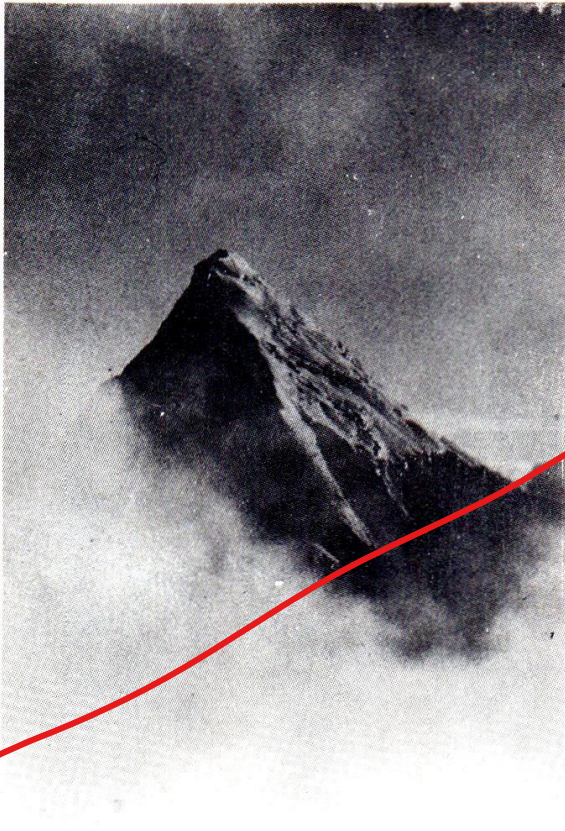
KVR is probably one of the most scenic light railways in the world, its success being to blend successfully the engineering works with the aesthetics of the Kangra valley. As an unremunerative line it can be closed any time and those who value gentle modes of the Himalayan transport should set aside a day to jump aboard soon.

(Bill Aitken)

SUMMARY

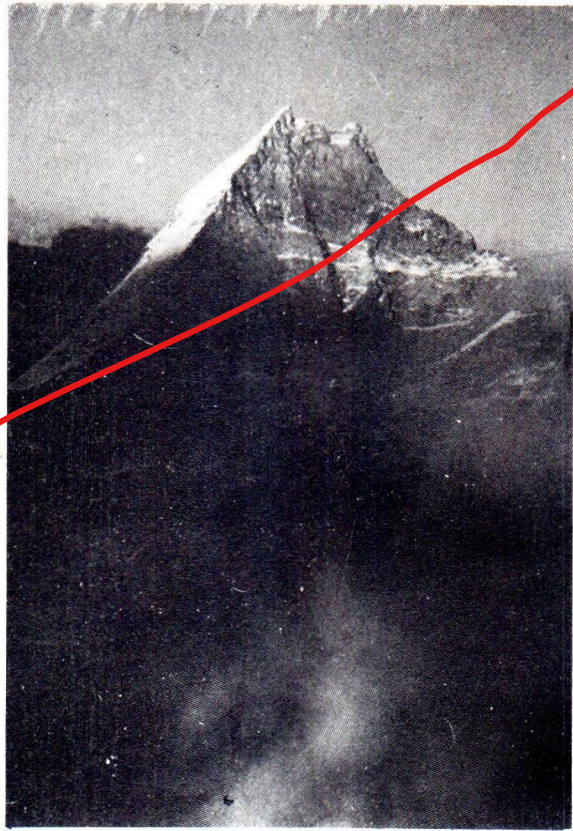
A trek in Zanskar via Shingo la (5090 m) and Phirtse la (5250 m) in July-August 1990.





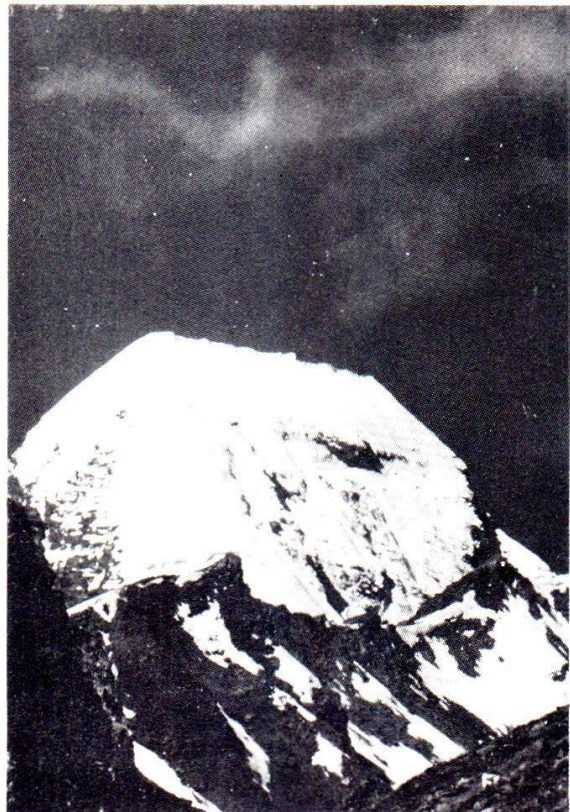
11. Mana (7272 m) from
Kagbhusand.

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12. Unnamed Peak 6245 m from
Kagbhusand.

(Divyesh Muni)



13-14. Unnamed peaks near Shingo la.
Peak 5973 m (left) and Peak 6318 m (right).

Article 13

(Harish Kapadia)