
FIRES ON THE MOUNTAIN

Ascents in the Panch Chuli Group

HARISH KAPADIA

‘**A** MOUNTAINEER NEVER RETIRES. In a sense he never hangs his boots to call it a day. As he grows in years he continues with treks and loving the hills...’

‘This is Chris certainly’.

‘Yes’.

‘Is he lecturing Graham so early in the morning?’

I peeped out of my tent and could hear Chris snoring loudly. It was the radio. BBC was broadcasting an interview with Chris Bonington. We were at ABC (4840 m). This must be surely a record of sorts, listening to an interview at this height, with the interviewee snoring in the next tent!

Our expedition had come a long way already. When Bonington and the others arrived at Bombay on 7 May 1992, we were ready with all the last minute preparations. A super fast train took us to Delhi (‘British rail can learn a thing or two from this’). A two day bus ride with half a day’s rest at Ranikhet followed. (‘Solving the case of the missing “tempo” with our all expedition luggage’). Finally everything was in place at Munsiaary, the roadhead.

By this time we were learning the diplomatic charms of Bonington. If he paid you a compliment, he wanted something done. His adaptability was amazing. In a jacket, so to speak, he was a great diplomat shaking hands and smiling for hours, enough to disarm a formidable bureaucrat. Once in a bus, or on the mountains, he was totally different.

‘Now you know why he has reached, where he has’, was the best comment on these amazing transformations.

Photos 10 to 20
Panoramas A to D

Front Cover

Starting on 15 May, we walked 3 days in an amazing virgin forest, halting at Domol, and Balati. Base camp (3200 m) was at the snout of the Uttari Balati glacier, one of the lowest BCs in the Himalaya. In fact, the height difference from BC to Panch Chuli II (6904 m) was 3700 m, more than on most high mountains, including Everest.

'Shit, how are we going to go through this?' It was exclaimed looking at the three icefalls of the glacier. The first one was by-passed and the Glacier Camp (3900 m) was established. Victor opened a route on the (true) left of the glacier. It was a maze of collapsing crevasses, and stones bombarded the fixed ropes after 7 a.m. We christened it 'Victor's Terror' and very reluctantly moved in.

'Surely the Pandavas did not go this way.'

'Why, this is the surest way to heaven'.

'But we have to reach the peak and cook a meal before that is ensured. These peaks symbolise their cooking fires on the mountain'.

'They are, figuratively speaking. It is the spirit that counts, isn't it?' We all certainly intended to return, let the Pandavas go their way.

'Forget the *Fires on the mountain, Run Run Run.*' Someone said reminding us of the childhood rhyme, warning us about the falling stones.

We were discussing the legend of the Panch Chuli peaks. Folklore has it that the five Pandava brothers cooked their last meal on these peaks and proceeded to heaven. These peaks were the hearths from which the sun-rays rose towards heaven, every morning and evening.

There was a loud sound. As we looked up Chris was hanging on a jummar on the fixed rope. The entire floor beneath him had collapsed.

'Chris do you still think we should follow this route with loaded porters.'

'If I were you, I would not follow this route,' he replied with perfect British understatement.

'I am certainly not you. We will try a route on the right hand edge'. I pointed to it and started descending. Chris and Graham continued upwards.

We found two gullies, leading up and by-passing the second and third icefall. This was the route followed by all the earlier teams. But it was highly exposed. All the difficulties we had faced on the



The third icefall, Uttari-Balati glacier. Panch Chuli II rising behind.
(Monesh Devjani)

left route on snow and ice, were present here on scree and rocks. We fixed a rope and on the first run I almost lost my rucksack. After crossing it once, Victor got even with me.

'I heard all about it Harish. If the left route was "Victor's Terror" this is "Harish's Horror".'

He almost proved right. Later on in the expedition Vijay slipped in one of these gullies and almost fell down the rocks. Sundersingh literally slid after him and stopped him at the last bump. Vijay broke an ankle and that's when the helicopter flew for the first time, to pick him up.

Above it we climbed another icy gully and reached ABC. Chris and Graham were there, having just climbed Sahadev (5750 m).

Sahadev East (5750 m):

(Chris Bonington writes)

Graham Little and I had the Upper Balati glacier to ourselves. The others had gone back down to help rejig the route round the second icefall, one of three that blocked the Uttari Balati glacier. Our camp, which was to become our advance base, nestled beneath a little rocky buttress on the northern side of the glacier. On the other side towered a tooth-like peak that had dominated the skyline both on our walk up the Balati valley and even more dramatically during our ascent of the glacier. It seemed a good objective for a first climb. A direct ascent up the ridge facing us looked too challenging — steep rock steps divided by snow-clad ice-slopes — but there appeared to be an easier option up glaciated snow-slopes leading to a spur that in turn led to the summit ridge.

We set out at three o'clock the following morning, picked our way across the glacier and then made an endless-seeming plod, lit by the small pools of light from our torches, up the slopes leading to the spur. It was good moving without the weight of a heavy rucksack. I could even keep up with Graham, taking my turn out in front. One of the problems of climbing with people nearly twenty years younger is that all too often they are tiny dots disappearing over the horizon, or tugging insistently out in front on the rope.

Night changed to the grey of the pre-dawn and, as we gained height, the skyline of the Balati glacier took shape, ridges and snow slopes becoming defined, then etched in the golden light of the sun, as it lit the tops of the peaks. Opposite and behind us was Rajrambha, a big sprawling peak, whose steep crenellated face fell away sheer to the glacier. At the head of the valley was unclimbed Nagalaphu, with twin rocky peaks and steep walls.

We reached the bergschrund as the sun crept round to us. It was my turn to lead. The bergschrund was bigger than it had seemed from below, Snow crumbled away. I sank up to my thighs, edged further across, ice-tools thrust into bottomless soft snow, and heaved myself up into a praying position with everything sliding away around me. Panting hard, I was able to stand and kick into harder snow above. I kicked my way up, twenty metres or so, cleared a stance, buried my axe and brought Graham up.

Pitch followed pitch, about nine inches of softish snow lying on ice at an angle of around 50°. Not difficult, but nerve-wracking. It was around 9.00 a.m. by the time we reached the crest of the ridge. Looking across to what had seemed the summit from below, it now appeared lower than us and we were only just short of the top of what we named the East peak. It looked a long way to the West peak, so we unanimously declared our summit the higher. It was only after returning to advance base, when we examined the map that we had to admit the West peak was a few metres higher. We called the two peaks Sahadev East and West after the second and youngest brother of the Pandavas.

Graham and I next decided to attempt Nagalaphu (6410 m) by a bold traverse. We left advance base on the afternoon of 29 May, walked up the Uttari Balati glacier in thick cloud and stopped below what we judged to be the face we planned to climb that night to reach the crest of the ridge. It was snowing hard by the time we had put the tent up and a violent thunder storm quickly followed, hail drumming on the sides of the tent through most of the night. It stopped at last and we got away at 3.00 a.m., plodding past serac walls and part hidden crevasses in the dark. It was only as it dawned, just after I had stepped into a huge bell-bottomed crevasse, that we could discern the mountains around us in the faint grey light. The dreadful realisation came to me that in the dark we had started up the wrong mountain and were just short of the upper Balati Plateau instead of the big face we had planned to climb.

We were so shaken by our mistake that instead of continuing we retraced our steps and after a half-hearted probe up the glacier, returned to advanced base feeling very shamefaced, to find the entire team assembled there. We decided we needed a rest so continued on down to base camp that same day.

Panch Chuli II (6904 m), southwest ridge:
(Harish Kapadia writes)

'Mus, do you think the porters will make it to the next camp today? I was shouting from behind, plodding in deep snow. The route appeared too long.

'They will bloody well have a long day', is all that Muslim said as he continued plodding.

C1 (5750 m) was established at the edge of the Balati Plateau. We were to take on the southwest ridge, while Chris and Graham were to climb the west ridge. Both the ridges were separated by a little distance. We were to open a main route to the foot of the peak as four Britons were traversing Rajrambha (6537 m) from ABC¹. On 3 June with Chris, Graham, and Monesh, I joined Muslim and Bhupesh who had already recceeded the Balati Plateau. The next day we crossed the maze of crevasses to C2 (6120 m) on the col at the foot of the southwest ridge. Chris and Graham bifurcated off half way through for the west ridge.

'Pasang and myself will fix some rope ahead to move the camp. We will surely be up in 2 days', Monesh said with enthusiasm as we embraced wishing each other good luck. The next day as Bhupesh and myself returned to C2, Muslim, Monesh and Pasang were on the ridge, establishing C3.

7 June was a little cloudy. From C2 we could not see a thing at first.

'I can see three dots moving up the final ridge', I shouted at about 10 a.m. Slowly the dots moved up and disappeared from view. We could see two dots moving up the west ridge too from our ring-side seat.

Starting from C3 (6400 m) three of them had reached the foot of the upper rock band in 2 hours, at 6.45 a.m. This band was climbed with some difficulty in 45 minutes and in an hour they reached the point where the southwest and south ridges met at 6800 m. But the 'fun' started now. The cornices hanging on the east were very thin ('so thin that we could see sun shine through', Bill Murray had written about this ridge, observing it from the east). They carefully crept up, without any chance of fixing a protection. Finally they were on the top at 10.15 a.m. There was no time to waste. Descent was started immediately. A little below the top Monesh fell through the cornice almost up to his chest. As he pulled out he realised how close the heavens were. He left a scarf there to mark the spot. Losing their way in a white-out they abseiled the upper rock band and with difficulty reached C3. This was only the second ascent by this ridge. Whereas the earlier team had fixed the entire route, now

1. For details of the traverse of Rajrambha, climbs and accident on Panch Chuli V, see article 'Rajrambha and Panch Chuli V' in this issue. — Ed.

only about 60 m of fixed rope was used. Carefully they retreated to C2 where Bhupesh and I were waiting with hot mugs of tea.

After about 2 hours, two other figures were reaching us for cups of tea: Bonington and Graham after their ascent by the west ridge and descent by the southwest ridge had reached our camp.

Panch Chuli II (6904 m), west ridge:

(Chris Bonington writes)

When we returned three days later on the afternoon of 2 June, Victor Saunders, Stephen Sustad, Dick Renshaw and Stephen Venables had already set out for a traverse of Rajrambha. Harish Kapadia and the Indian members of the team were completing their build up of supplies on the upper Balati Plateau for their attempt on the southwest ridge of Panch Chuli II. Graham and I decided it was high time we also concentrated on the main objective and chose its unclimbed west ridge.

Starting out the next day with the Indian team, we carried heavy loads to the head of the icefall guarding the Balati Plateau. The camp was on the shoulder of the ridge between the Uttari Balati and Dakhini Balati glaciers. From there, the following morning (4 June) we reconnoitred a route to the foot of the west ridge and moved up the next day to pitch our little Gemini tent at 6120 m within easy reach of the bottom of the ridge.

At 3.30 a.m. on 6 June we began ferrying all our tentage and gear. It was a moonless but starlit night. A steep little bergschrund, climbed by the light of head torches, led onto the ridge itself. It was only 45° in angle but was hard ice with only the occasional thin smear of neve, clinging to it. We were climbing one at a time and, feeling the altitude, had slowed down. Dawn came and the sun crept up and over the crest of the southwest ridge. The view was magnificent; the two peaks of Sahadev were far below us, across the valley sprawled Rajrambha, whose long serpentine ridges the other four were climbing, while out to the west towered the steep pyramid of Nanda Devi, surely one of the most beautiful mountains in the world.

The angle steepened and the crest of the ridge was barred by a serac, forcing us onto the west face up steep, poorly consolidated snow. Our progress became even slower and the day was beginning to slide away. We had been on the go for ten hours and reached around 6500 m but there was no sign of a bivvy site. Graham led up a steep ice-gully and pulled out on a little vertical ice-wall leading back onto the crest of the ridge. I panted slowly up behind him and was happy to let him lead the next pitch. He was hunting for somewhere to camp, but to no avail. It was late afternoon and the cloud was swirling around us. The occasional lump of ice or

the belay and started moving up behind him. At last, I heard a tired shout of triumph. He had found a camp site.

I joined him on the crest of the ridge. Just above was a small ledge below a serac wall. We were able to dig out a camp site with minimum of work and pitched our little Gemini at 6610 m. It feels very secure, can stand up to almost any weather, but it is small. It would make a reasonable one-man tent but is cramped for two, especially if one of the occupants (Graham) is six feet two inches tall. Fortunately I had had a modification made of a commodious sleeve entrance in one end. Graham was able to put either his head or feet into that extra space to stretch out.

It started snowing almost immediately, but what was more serious was that Graham had a savage headache, something that is always worrying at altitude. Inevitably I thought of cerebral oedema, but Graham told me that he had fractured his skull as a child and suffered from time to time with debilitating headaches. There was none of the puffiness associated with oedema around his eyes and they weren't unduly bloodshot, so I was slightly reassured.

We were slow in getting away the next morning. We were both tired from the previous long day, and anyway there was not too much urgency. We wanted to reach the summit very early in the morning to be sure of being rewarded with a view. We only had 400 m to go to reach the top, and therefore decided to push our camp a short way up and closer to the southwest ridge which we planned to descend once we had completed our climb.

Fortunately Graham's headache became more bearable once he started moving, and we took alternate leads, progressing slowly over the crevassed upper face in the direction of the southwest ridge. Just after midday we saw three small figures moving down the crest of the ridge. It was the Indian team descending after a successful ascent. We shouted, but got no reply.

By this time the cloud had rolled in once more and we stopped on the lip of a bergschrund at around 6730 m. It was snowing again by the time we pitched the tent and once Graham got into his sleeping bag, his headache returned with renewed fury. I could almost feel the pain he was obviously experiencing. Neither of us slept that night. The snow pressed in on the tent, making it even smaller. Had the weather finally broken? Would Graham be able to go for the summit if it was fine in the morning? Could I go for it on my own? Perfectly feasible, but how could I justify leaving Graham alone? The snow stopped just before dawn. I started melting some in the gas stove hanging from the roof of the tent, asked

Graham what he wanted to do, and to my immense relief he said he'd have a go for the summit.

We left the tent in place, and cut across towards the crest of the southwest ridge. It was easy-angled but hard ice. Just below the summit we came across some red rag (Monesh's scarf) left by the others the previous day. Graham had rallied once he got going, took his turn in the lead, and suddenly we were almost there. Graham led the last few feet towards the summit of Panch Chuli II. We had our reward for our high camp and early start, for the sky was still clear, the view magnificent, with fresh vistas to the north of mountains in Tibet, of Gurla Mandhata, massive, majestic to the northeast, and further to the north, a distant pyramid, Kailash, most holy of all mountains in both Hindu and Buddhist mythology. Looking to the east we could see Api and the mountains of West Nepal, shapely snow peaks in the distance, while in the immediate foreground, much lower but still dramatic, were the peaks of Panch Chuli IV and V (III was hidden by the lip of a huge cornice), Telkot and Nagling, all of them unclimbed, all steep and challenging.

We spent half an hour on the summit before returning to our camp, where we stuffed the frozen tent and all the gear into our packs and started the long descent of the southwest ridge to rejoin Harish and the others who were still encamped on the col at the foot of it. It was wonderful to enjoy their hospitality, crammed three to a two-man tent, to have endless cups of hot tea and to share with each other the stories of our two ascents. It had been an immensely satisfying climb snatched in the teeth of deteriorating weather.

To Pyunshani valley:

(Harish Kapadia continues)

'There is nothing more to do in the Balati valley. The others have climbed Rajrambha also'.

'Venables and co. are coming up to climb Panch Chuli II'.

'We will talk to them'.

Chris and myself were discussing plans as we descended together after ascents of Panch Chuli II. I was to see the master diplomat in action. We met the others on the glacier below. Congratulations to each other and lots of laughter followed.

'What are your plans', Chris inquired.

'We will try another ridge on Panch Chuli II'.

'Harish and I are going to the Pyunshani valley, a little to the south'.

'Graham is up at ABC, waiting for us'.

'Good luck then. We will tell you about those unclimbed peaks. No one has been to the Pyunshani before us. It will be a wonderful exploration for us'. Chris started walking down.

The others looked alarmed. Graham was pulled down, camps wound up and the entire party was moving to the Pyunshani valley.

There was no record of any party visiting this valley which drained the Panch Chuli glaciers from Panch Chuli peaks III, IV and V. After some persuasion we found a guide, Dhansingh, who as we discovered later, had been up here years before. But he promised fresh meat from the shepherds in the valley. All went well to begin with. We retreated to Phunga Gair (2920 m) a gem of a place as the name implied. On 15 June we climbed a steep incline through dense forest to cross Bagarthora col (3800 m) and camped at Shyama Gwar (3600 m). Ahead the route traversed up and down numerous ridges. Dhansingh stopped every five minutes. Ultimately it was too much for Britain's best mountaineers.

'Harish, there is no meat here, Shall we eat Dhansingh?' They started descending to the river wanting to follow it to the base camp in the upper valley.

Dhansingh nodded his head in disapproval to say that no route was possible from there.

'We have a rebellion on hand. What shall we do Chris?' I asked helplessly.

'If I were you, I would follow Dhansingh', Chris replied in his characteristic style. He had dealt with many such restless climbers.

After a while as the others descended, Chris gave a shout.

'Follow the river, camp in the open and in rain. Remember we have the tents. See you at the base camp in 2-3 days'.

Four cursing Britons climbed back in line behind Dhansingh!

On 16 June we established our second base camp (3320 m). We had 5 days. Two plans were made. Muslim, Monesh and myself were to climb in a side valley and explore the adjoining Rula and Bainti glaciers. The five Britishers were to try one of the Panch Chulis and meet us back at Munsary. We were to leave some food and three porters for them and go back early to wind up the expedition at Munsary. Accordingly both teams left on 17 June.



12. Uttari Balati glacier icefalls. Final route proceeded on true right.



13. Crevasses on 'Victor's Terror' in Uttari Balati icefall, on true left edge.

Article 9

(Graham Little)



14. Fixed ropes on true right of the Uttari Balati icefall: 'Harish's Horror'.

Article 9

(Harish Kapadia)

These were the most delightful days for us. We had already achieved the main objective, Panch Chuli II. Where most teams would have gone back, here we were in a valley never visited before. Totally relaxed we moved two camps to reach the Bainti Col (5100 m) on 20 June. Two peaks rose to the northeast and southwest of the col. We climbed both, Panchali Chuli (5220 m) and Draupadi (5250 m). The view to the east was of the Bainti and Rula glaciers, looking most fearsome. Many unclimbed peaks like Bainti (6072 m), Nagling (6041 m) and others rose above it. These icefalls would keep experts busy for sometime.

'Surely the Pandavas could not have gone this way', was the clear verdict as we saw Panch Chuli II rising in the north.

'Make sure, you have gone up that ridge', I said to Monesh and Muslim pointing to the southwest ridge, looking steep, and exposed with ice shining on it. Both of them looked at it with satisfaction.

We came down and in rain and clouds returned to Munsiairy on 23 June leaving the Britishers to follow.

Little did we realize the drama that was being unfolded on Panch Chuli V.

The Rescue

We were finalising the expedition account on the afternoon of 23 June. We could hear someone running towards our room.

'There is a phone call for you. It is Chris from Madkot. He says there has been an accident'.

We ran down to the office below. 'Harish, Stephen Venables has fallen, breaking his right knee and left ankle'. Chris' voice was choked with emotion.

'The only way to rescue him is by helicopter. They could all perish. Their camp is in the line of avalanche slope'.

We exchanged grid references and other details. Action followed. Our most efficient liaison officer Wing Commander Anil K. Srivastava started flashing out messages. Muslim ran down to gather our porters scattered all over Munsiairy, relaxing and celebrating. Monesh started hectic purchases for a ground party to start in a hour. We drove down to Madkot, 22 km away.

Looking at Chris was half the story. He was shaken, disturbed and choked with emotion as he narrated the details of the accident. With a big gash on his cheeks, due to his own fall, he looked ghastly.

An eight-strong party left for the base camp with lots of food and supplies. We came up to Munsriary, feeling cut off without much communication with the outside world. For the next 2 days and nights no one slept well, particularly Chris. He kept tossing about.

'Why did this have to happen on the last day? Why always on my expeditions? They are all happily married. What will I say to others' or sometimes in excitement he would say, 'I'll talk to the higher ups. Let's go by the ground route. We will get him out'. We were seeing the human side of Chris.

We waited two days on open ground, with binoculars scanning the skies. The helicopter went in twice and came out. The lack of communication was killing. We did not know what was happening. In fact as we learnt later, the chopper was flying the next morning, on 24 June itself. Due to clouds and the height the pilots could not locate the tent.

We prepared a complete ground plan. If the chopper was not able to pick up Venables on the third day we would go in with a 20 strong army party with a doctor and all the support required. We requested that the helicopter should land at Munsriary and take Chris with them to show them the exact spot.

On 26 June we were waiting at the helipad. Chris ready in full mountain gear to go aboard. We saw the helicopter going into Pyunshani valley and returning after half an hour. Chris was ready and we waved to the pilots. It came towards us, and turned to land. Suddenly we could see a red duvet jacket with Stephen Venables smiling in it! There was hugging and dancing — our joy knew no bounds. The pilots, Sqd. Ldr. P. Jaiswal and Flt. Lt. P.K. Sharma had done a magnificent job and picked up Venables on the last attempt at great risk to themselves. This view of the helicopter and the red duvet in it is a sight we will never forget.

'Harish, I did not put Mother's petals, given to me by Nawang on the summit. That's why I fell', Venables instantly said on being brought out on a stretcher.

He was referring to the votive petals from the Samadhi of Mother of Pondicherry. He had carried a similar packet to the summit of Everest in 1988 during his solo ascent. He had put it on the summit, photographed it and survived a night alone above the South Col.²

'You survived because you had the blessings with you', I consoled him.

2. For details of this earlier experience, see article 'The Climbing Partner — The Other Experience in the Himalaya' in the present issue. — Ed.

The helicopter flew off and we sent Muslim with the porters by taxi. All of them met at Bareilly hospital. Within the next 48 hours Venables was on a flight to London.

That evening Chris, Monesh and myself sat quietly at a small temple of Shiva, in a Hindu gesture of thanksgiving for Venables' rescue. It was peaceful and the feeling of gratitude total. I was surprised to receive a letter from Chris months later, recalling that sojourn and the strange peace we all experienced then.

On 27 June, tired and emotionally drained Renshaw, Saunders and Sustad returned. We had a lot to talk about. The narrow escape, the hard work by our porters, dangerous avalanches and of course the incredible rescue.

They were full of praise for Harsinh jr. In boots four sizes too large, without any previous technical know-how, he had carried loads higher up the icefall to feed the stranded climbers. The British wanted to sponsor him for a training course at a mountaineering institute in India. I pointed out that these courses are generally undertaken by the educated and by army officers. Harsinh jr., a shepherd by profession, would be a misfit there.

'We will get him over to England. He can do the course at Plas y Brenin. Ask him if he would go'.

I translated the offer to Harsinh, jr. Pat came his reply.

'I just want to go back to my goats. My flock has been unattended for a long time now'.

We sat in a way-side hotel and Chris typed out the expedition report on a Laptop Apple McIntosh Computer, taking the place a generation ahead in technology. Around him there was no electricity and ladies were carrying wood as fuel for cooking. We were packing up for the final bus ride home after a most satisfying expedition.

'We are one up on the Pandavas. We came back from the Panch Chulis'.

'We lit enough fires on the mountain though'.

'Venables almost reached heaven, didn't he?'

'In a way we all reached "heaven". It's the spirit that counts, isn't it?'

'I am in heaven now'. We turned back. Victor was sucking the first of the hundred mangoes we were to finish that evening.

History of the Panch Chuli Group of Peaks :

The Panch Chuli peaks lie in the eastern Kumaon area. They form the watershed between the Gori and Darma ganga valleys. The eastern approaches are through Sona and Meola glaciers. The Uttari and Dakhini Balati glaciers guard the western approaches. The peaks are numbered NW to SE. I (6355 m), II (6904 m), III (6312 m), IV (6334 m) and V (6437 m). It is not known how the highest peak came to be regarded as peak II, (and not peak I), but the nomenclature is too well established to change now.

Legend

As per the legend, these peaks are named after the five Pandava brothers from the Indian epic *Mahabharata*. These peaks represent their cooking hearths (*chulis*) as they cooked their last meal before proceeding to their heavenly abode. As one watches the group from the bungalow at Munsiairy before sunrise, the rays directly reflect on these tops and throw the light upwards to the sky. The same scene is repeated in the evening, a little after sunset, for the people in the Darma valley. Thus the legend is firmly established in folklore.

Early Explorations from the East

The mountaineering history began with Hugh Ruttledge. He saw the group at close quarters reaching high up on the Sona glacier. He examined the routes and thought that the north arete may be possible. After 21 years two teams examined the eastern approaches again. W. H. Murray and his Scottish team followed the Ruttledge route. They intended to reach the north col and follow the northeast ridge. They found the terrain too difficult.

North Col was ringed below by a bergschrund, from which 300 ft of bare ice swept up to the rocks and ice was everywhere raked by stonefall. We were beaten.

And about the upper ridge they opined that it '..... was so thin that we could see sun shine through.' Later Murray and Douglas Scott went up the Meola glacier. From its junction with the Sona glacier they climbed 'till 16,000 ft. by way of the central cliff and found the only way to Meola.'

Just 20 days after them came Kenneth Snelson and J.de V. Graaff. By early September they reached the upper Sona glacier and 'found that at its head was a cradle of 600 foot cliffs offering no route to the northeast summit ridge.'

They then followed Murray's route to upper Meola and reached the south col to examine the west side.

The Goriganga side of the col falls precipitously, to the Panch Chuli glacier and the almost vertical face rises another thousand feet above the col making the lower part of the ridge razor edged. Hardly a route!

They thought of the south ridge but wrote; 'The ridge towards south col has a rather easier gradient but is very broken and heavily corniced'. They gave up the southeast face also after 400 ft.

With such verdicts, the eastern approaches were left alone. Only a team each in 1970 and 1988 tried them unsuccessfully.

Attempts from the West

The western approaches were tried one year after Murray, in 1951. Heinrich Harrer and Frank Thomas were joined by two Sherpas and a botanist. Though their account in the *Himalayan Journal* is not very explicit, their photographs in the archives clearly indicate that they pioneered the route through the Uttari Balati glacier, bypassing three icefalls. Harrer with Sherpas reached the Balati Plateau and examined the north and west ridges. They tried the west ridge but a Sherpa fell off on hard blue-ice. Harrer gave up. They had spent only 16 days on the mountains but pioneered the route which was followed by all subsequent expeditions from this side.

In 1952, P. N. Nikore followed the Harrer route and his attempt in June almost coincided with an attempt by another team led by D. D. Joshi which included Maj. John Dias. Both the teams reached the Balati Plateau. Nikore returned in 1953 and claimed a solo ascent of the peak without any conviction or proof to corroborate his claim. He was disbelieved and claim ignored.

Wrong Claims

Group Capt. A. K. Chowdhery led a team sponsored by the Indian Mountaineering Foundation to this group in 1964. Following the Uttari Balati glacier they reached the Balati Plateau. Their cursory attempt on peak II failed. They then claimed mistaken ascents of peaks III, IV and V in two days, in fact two peaks on the same day.

These peaks stand above the southern valley of Pyunshani and are completely unapproachable from the Balati Plateau at all. To climb these peaks, as claimed, the party would have to traverse and climb over very difficult terrain covering almost 10 km in one day, above

6300 m and crossing low cols. The party had mistakenly climbed three distinct humps situated near their camps and running east-west from peak II instead of peaks III, IV, and V, which broadly run north-south. The mistake was ultimately accepted by the sponsors, after, at first, the so called summiters either refused to reply or were adamant in their claim. The records were corrected after 28 years, when the mistake was pointed out by the 1992 Indian-British expedition.³

First Ascents

The history of the group continued with two large expeditions from the Indo-Tibet Border Police teams. The first team in 1972, was led by Hukum Singh. They powered their way to the Balati Plateau via the Harrer route and made the first ascent of peak I. The first of Panch Chuli had fallen. Repeating their route, Mahendra Singh led another team in 1973. They fixed almost 3000 m of rope. The entire route on the final southwest ridge was fixed. On 26 May 1973 18 people summited. The highest peak was climbed.

The mountain was left alone for 18 years. In 1991 two routes were climbed by the eastern approaches. Both teams were from the Indian army. The first team followed the Sona glacier, climbed the northeast slopes to reach above the north col and established a camp on the north ridge. The ridge was followed to the top. Thus the route suggested by Ruttledge in 1929 was completed after 61 years. The second army team followed Murray's route to the Upper Meola glacier. They pitched a high camp following the southeast slopes to the east ridge. The summit team broke the cornice to reach the top. Thus the route suggested by Snelson-Graaff was completed after 41 years.

Last Climbs

The scene finally shifted back to the west. The Indian-British expedition 1992 followed the route along the Uttari Balati glacier to the Balati Plateau. On the way the team divided into groups to climb Sahadev East (5750 m), Menaka (6000 m) and Rajramba (6537 m). On peak II, a team of three climbed the southwest ridge. It was a hard climb on ice, keeping well away from the hanging cornices. Compared to the earlier ascent only 60 m of rope was fixed on the ridge. This was the second ascent of the southwest ridge, now after 19 years.

Another team of two, pioneered a new route up the steep and icy west ridge, with bivouacs. They descended the southwest ridge completing the traverse. Thus the route tried by Harrer was completed after 41 years.

3. See 'Correspondence' in this issue.

The 1992 expedition made the first ascent of peak V later. Peaks III, IV and the direct south ridge on peak II still remain unattempted.

EXPEDITIONS TO THE PANCH CHULI GROUP

(All the expeditions were to Panch Chuli II, 6904 m, the highest peak of the group, except in 1972 and 1992.)

Expeditions from the eastern approaches

- | | | |
|-----------|---|---------------------------------------|
| 1. 1929: | Hugh Ruttledge reached c. 5730 m on the Sona glacier. He thought that a route to the summit was possible via the north arete. | Book Ref. 5-6 |
| 2. 1950 : | W. H. Murray and the Scottish Himalayan expedition reached c. 5790 m via the Sona glacier. They tried to reach the north col. | H.J. XVI, p. 38
Book Ref. 1-2 |
| 3. 1950 : | K. E. Snelson and J. de V. Graaff reached c. 6100 m from the Meola glacier. They ruled out the south ridge, southeast face and northeast ridge from the Sona glacier. | H.J. XVII, p. 97 |
| 4. 1970 : | C. K. Mitra led an Indian team from the National Cadet Corps. They reached c. 5950 m, both on the Meola and Sona glaciers. | H.M.J. 6, p. 112
H.C.N.L. 28, p. 2 |
| 5. 1988 : | Aloke Surin and his team from Bomay attempted it via the Meola glacier and stopped before the south col. | H.J. 45, p. 196
H.C.N.L. 42 p. 29 |
| 6. 1991 : | Capt. N. B. Gurung led the Gorkha regiment (Indian army) team. They climbed via the Sona glacier to the northeast ridge to the summit in August. | H.J. 48, p. 48
H.C.N.L. 45, p. 18 |

Second ascent of peak II

- | | | |
|-----------|---|-------------------------------------|
| 7. 1991 : | Col. Suraj Bhan Dalal led a Kumaon-Naga regiment (Indian army) team in September. They climbed via the Meola glacier up the east face and east ridge to the summit. | H.J. 48, p. 54
H.C.N.L. 45 p. 18 |
|-----------|---|-------------------------------------|

Third ascent of the peak



15. Sahadev East (5750 m) rising above
advance base camp.

Article 9

(Chris Borington)

16. Climbing on Rajrambha, Panch Chuli
II behind.

Article 10

(Stephen Venables)



Expeditions from the western approaches

1. 1951 : Heinrich Harrer and Frank Thomas pioneered the route via the Uttari Balati glacier. They reached c. 6100 m. on the Balati plateau, and attempted the west ridge. They found the north ridge in bad condition. H.J. XVIII, p. 171
2. 1952 : P. N. Nikore attempted via the Harrer route.
3. 1952 : D. D. Joshi led an Indian team via the Uttari Balati glacier to reach the Balati Plateau in June. Book Ref. 3
4. 1953 : P. N. Nikore claimed a solo ascent, via the Uttari Balati glacier route. Claim not believed and not accepted.
5. 1964 : Group Capt. A. K. Choudhary led a team from the Indian Mountaineering Foundation. Reached the Balati plateau from the Harrer route. Tried the southwest ridge of peak II. Later claimed mistaken ascents of peaks III, IV and V in two days. Now corrected. H.J. XXV, p. 207
H.M.J. 3,
No. 1, p. 53
H.C.N.L. 22, p. 5
Claim corrected:
H.J. 49,
H.C.N.L. 46, p. 19
6. 1972 : Hukam Singh led the Indo-Tibet Border Police Team (I.T.B.P.) via the Uttari Balati glacier. They climbed peak I. I.T.B.P. Report.
H.C.N.L. 33, p. 26

First ascent of peak I

7. 1973 : Mahendra Singh led an another I.T.B.P. team by the same route. They climbed from the Balati Plateau and via the southwest ridge, to the summit. I.T.B.P. Nov.-Dec. 1973 and Jan. 1974
H.C.N.L. 29, p. 23.

First ascent of peak II

8. 1992 : Chris Bonington and Harish Kapadia led the Indian British expedition via the Balati Plateau. They climbed peak II via the southwest ridge and also the west ridge — a new route. H.J. 49
H.C.N.L. 46, p. 17

Fourth ascent of peak II

The expedition also made the first ascent of peak V, from the Pyunshani valley.

Summary: 1929-1992: expeditions to Panch Chuli II.

From eastern approaches: 5 attempts and 2 climbs
From western approaches: 6 attempts and 2 climbs

Totally 11 attempts, 4 ascents; 15 expeditions in 64 years (not counting the heavenly journey of the Pandavas!).

H.J. = *The Himalayan Journal*

H.C.N.L. = *The Himalayan Club Newsletter*

H.M.J. = *Himalayan Mountaineering Institute Journal*

I.T.B.P. = *Indo-Tibet Border Police Bulletins*

Book References:

1. *The Scottish Himalayan Expedition.* By W. H. Murray.
2. *Ultimate Mountains.* By Tom Weir.
3. *Panch Chuli Abhiyan* (in Hindi). By D. D. Joshi.
(Himalayan Publications, New Delhi — Bombay, October 1953)
4. *Throne of Gods.* By Arnold Heim and August Gansser.
5. *Abode of Snow.* By Kenneth Mason.
6. *Exploring the Hidden Himalaya.* By Soli Mehta and Harish Kapadia.

Nomenclature of western valleys of the Panch Chuli peaks:

Panch Chuli: Five (panch) cooking hearths (chulis) of Pandavas (of Indian epic Mahabharata)

Rajrambha: Apsara (celestial nymph) of Kings.

Menaka: A beautiful apsara.

Chaudhara: Four cornered peak.

Sahadev: Younger brother of Pandavas.

Draupadi: Wife of Pandavas.

Panchali: Another name for Draupadi.

Nagling: Peak of serpent.

Nagalaphu: Serpentine peak.

Halsyun: A plough

Balati: Strong (fearsome)

Madkot: Fort of devil 'Mad'.

Madkani: Wife of devil 'Mad'.

Munsiary: Place of snows.

Domol: Meeting place of two rivers.

Phunga Gair: A meadow of flowers.

Bagarthora: A place where shepherds stay.

Athansi: Staying alone.

Ringapani: A round (valley) containing water.

Kamrani: A nala at corner.

Kachautha: Place where crows die.

Pyunshani, Dhunakhan, Jauni, Shyama: Different types of grass.

SUMMARY

Details of climbs by the Indian British Panch Chuli Expedition, 1992.

Peaks Climbed	Date 1992	Summitters
1. Sahadev East — 1st ascent (5750 m) via north snow rib.	28 May	Chris Bonington Graham Little
2. Rajrambha (6537 m) Traversed via east ridge over Menaka peak — 1st ascent	5 June	Dick Renshaw Victor Saunders Stephen Sustad Stephen Venables
3. Menaka — 1st ascent (6000 m) Traversed on way to Rajrambha.	2 June	as above
4. Panch Chuli II (6904 m) via southwest ridge — 2nd ascent	7 June	Muslim Contractor Monesh Devjani Pasang Bodh
5. Panch Chuli II (6904 m) via west spur — 1st ascent	8 June	Chris Bonington Graham Little
6. Panchali Chuli — 1st ascent (5220 m) via Panchali glacier	20 June	Harish Kapadia Muslim Contractor Monesh Devjani Khubram Prakash Chand
7. Draupadi — 1st ascent (5250 m) via Panchali glacier	20 June	Harish Kapadia Muslim Contractor Monesh Devjani Khubram Prakash Chand
8. Panch Chuli V — 1st ascent (6437 m) via south ridge	20 June	Dick Renshaw Stephen Sustad Victor Saunders Stephen Venables

Cols Reached	Date	Persons
1. Bagarthora col (3800 m) crossed	15 June	By entire team
2. Bainti col — 1st ascent (5100 m) reached	20 June	Harish Kapadia Muslim Contractor Monesh Devjani Khubram Prakash Chand

RESCUED

- A. Vijay Kothari: Air lifted by helicopter from Glacier Camp on the 8 June due to a broken ankle sustained in a fall on the way to advance base camp.
- B. Stephen Venables: Air lifted by helicopter on 26 June from 5600 m below the south ridge of Panch Chuli V after an eighty metre fall on 21 June whilst returning from the summit. He severely damaged his right knee, broke his left ankle and injured his chest.

Period

10 May to 30 June 1992.

Members

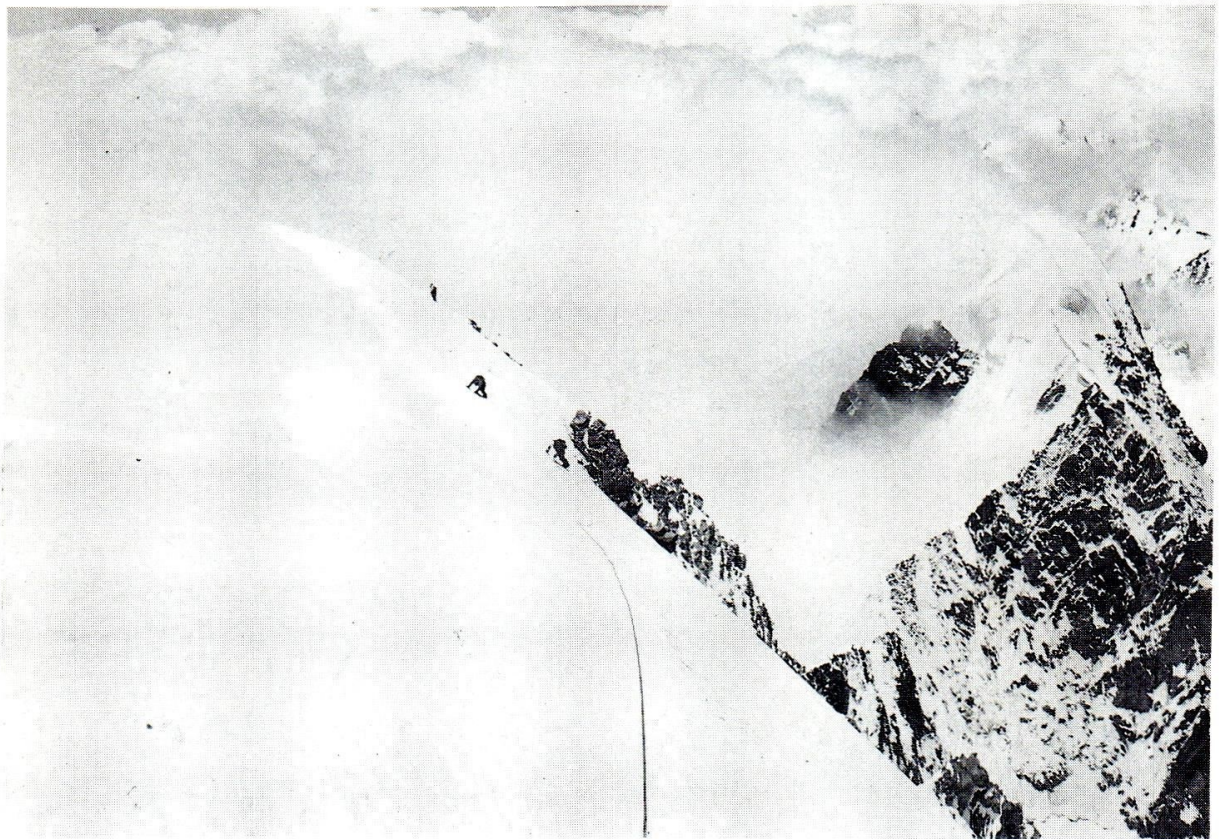
Harish Kapadia (co-leader), Muslim Contractor, Monesh Devjani, Bhupesh Ashar, Vijay Kothari and Wing Cdr Anil Srivastava (liaison officer).

Chris Bonington (co-leader), Graham Little, Dick Renshaw, Victor Saunders, Stephen Sustad and Stephen Venables.

Supported by: Pasang Bodh (Sirdar), Yograj, Khubram, Prakash Chand, Suratram, Sundersingh, Revatram (cook), Harsinh Snr.. and Harsinh Jnr.

Sponsored by: Godrej, Bombay.

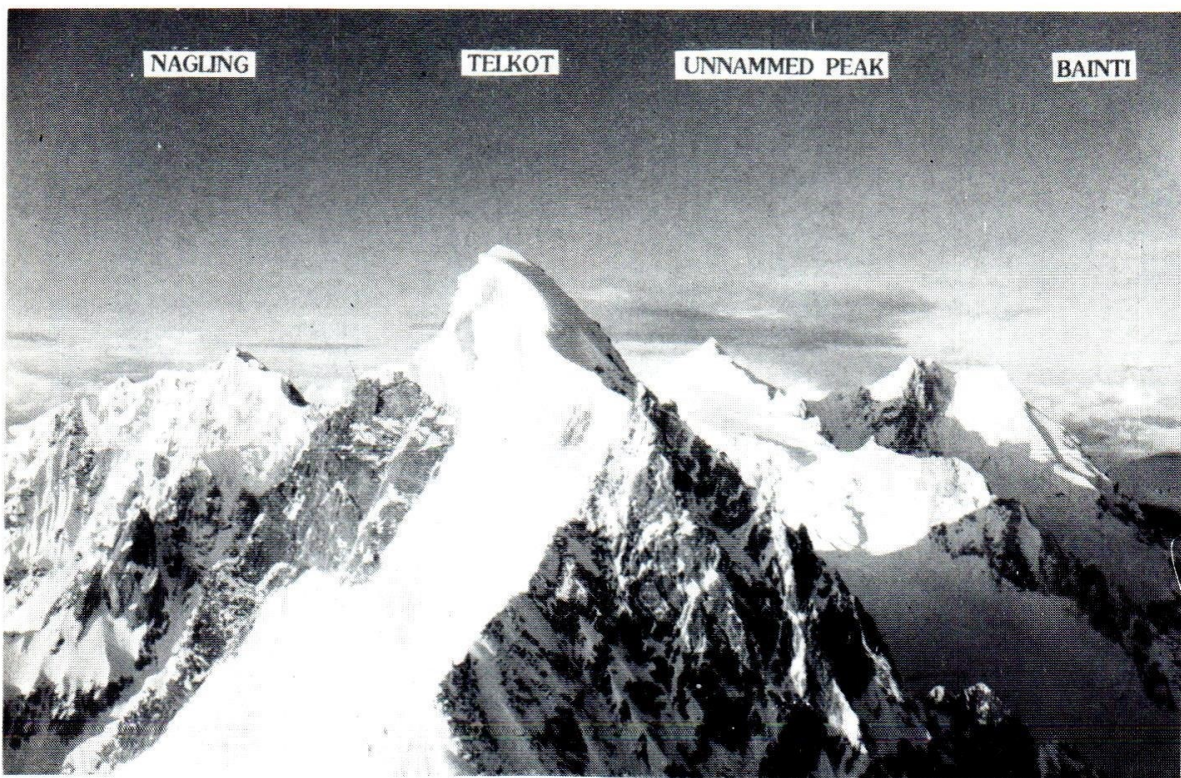
(Also refer to the article 'Rajrambha and Panch Chuli V', in the present issue covering other climbs on this expedition.)



19. The huge summit cornice on Panch Chuli V (6437 m). Telkot on right.

Article 10

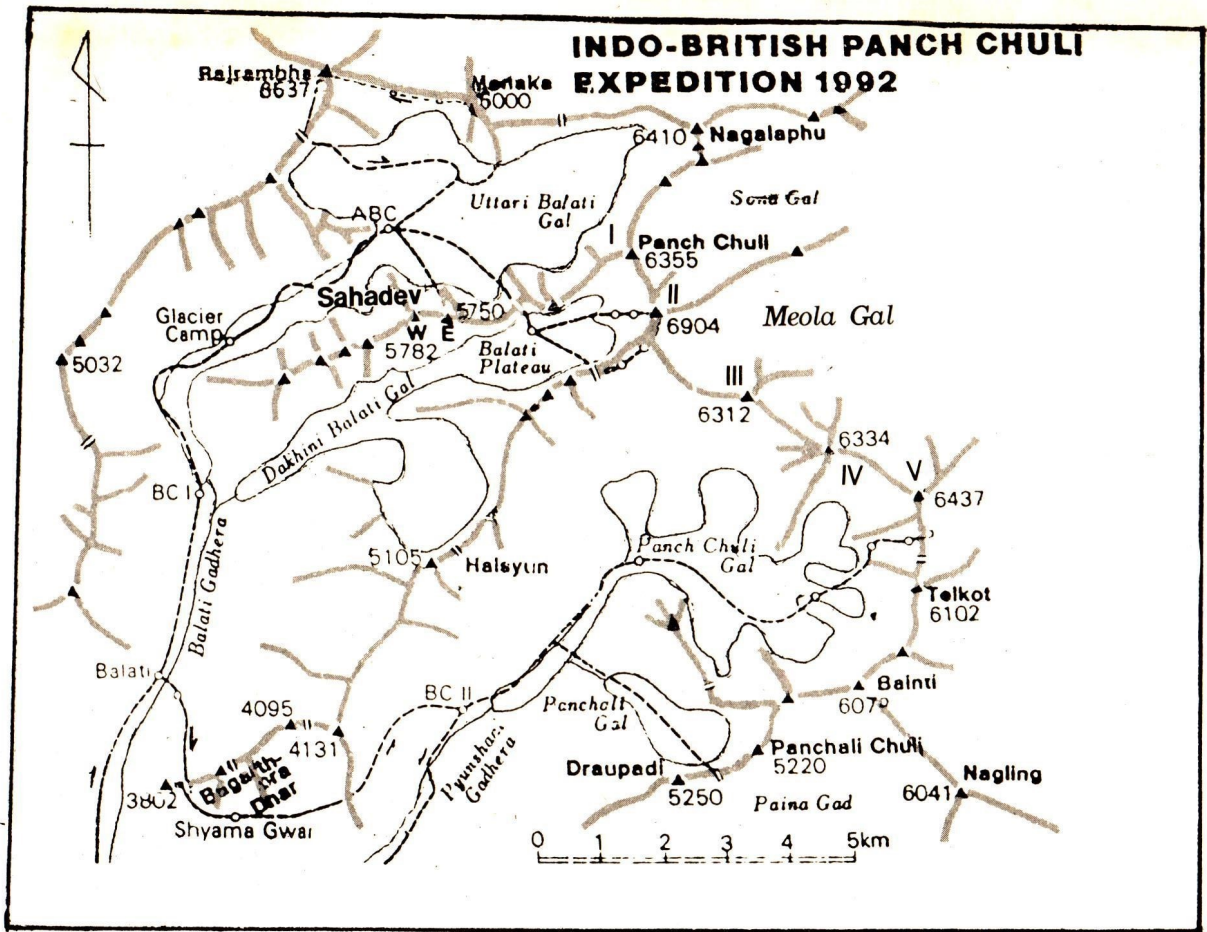
(Stephen Venables)



20. Telkot (6102 m), foreground, from Panch Chuli V. Background: left to right: Nagling (6041 m), Unnamed peak (5800 m) and Bainti peak (6072 m)

Article 10

(Stephen Venables)

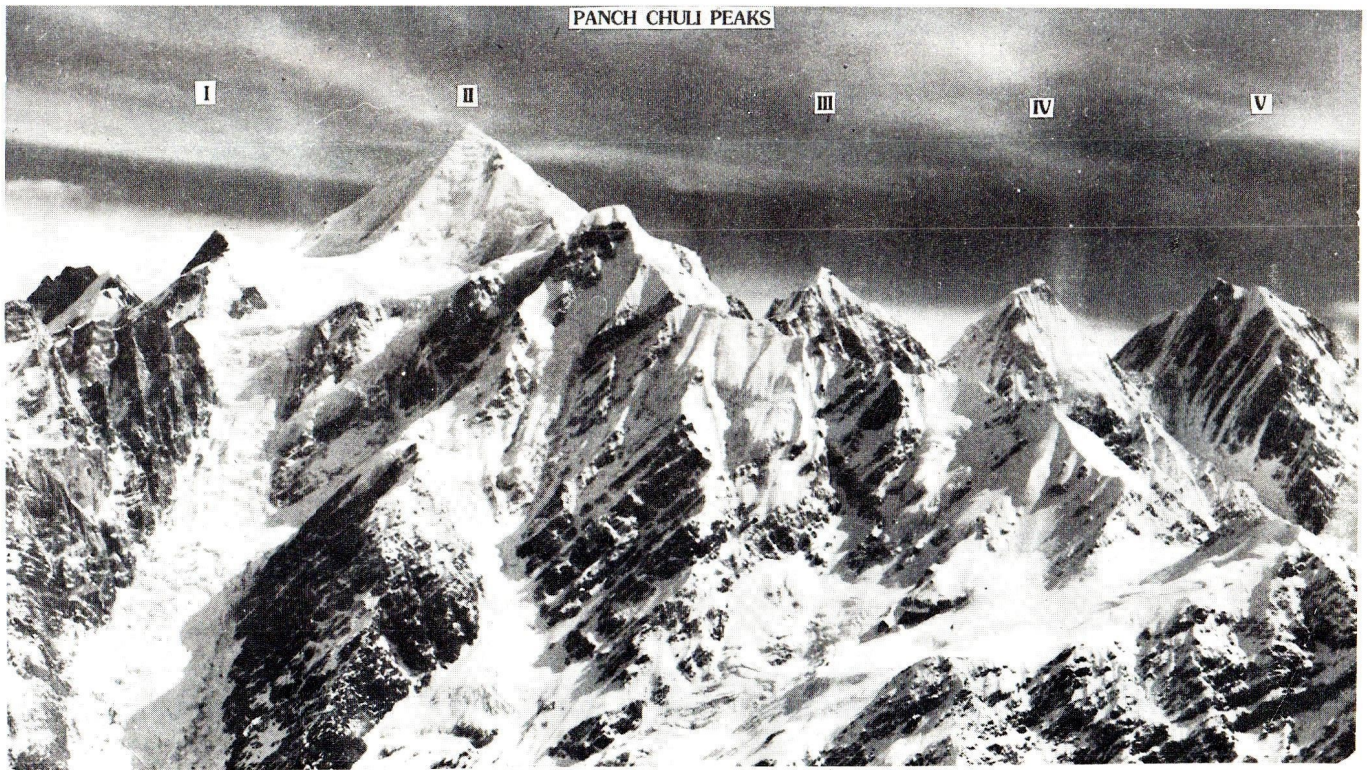




11. Panch Chuli II (6904 m) seen from Sahadev East (5750 m). West ridge on left, southwest ridge on right above the Balati Plateau. Three points on right were possibly climbed by 1964 I.M.F. expedition.

Article 9

(Chris Bonington)

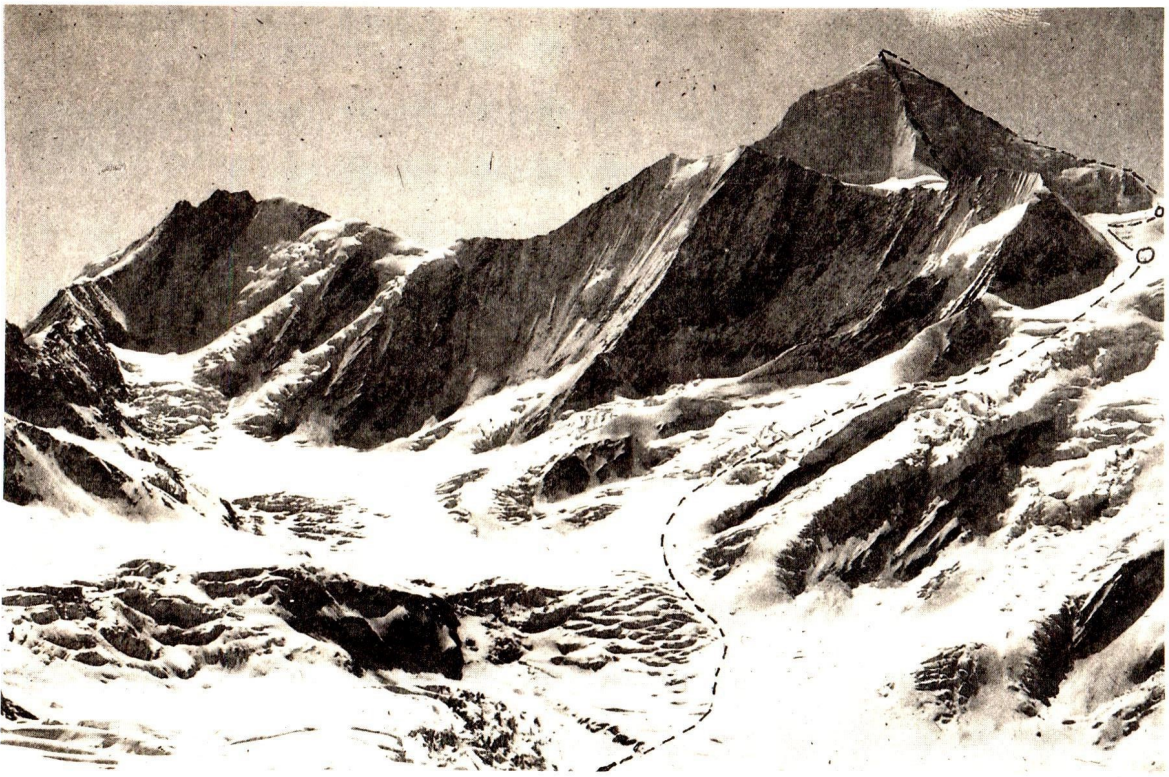


10. Panch Chuli peaks, aerial view. Dakhini Balati glacier on left foreground, Nagalaphu (6410 m) far left, the Balati Plateau in centre with west ridge rising up. Southwest ridge on right, north ridge on left.

Article 9

(Capt. N. B. Gurung)

slurry of snow came tumbling down, but he could find nowhere large enough for our tent. The rope came tight between us. I abandoned



Upper Balati glacier and route to Panch Chuli II (right). Nagalaphu on left.

(Stephen Venables)



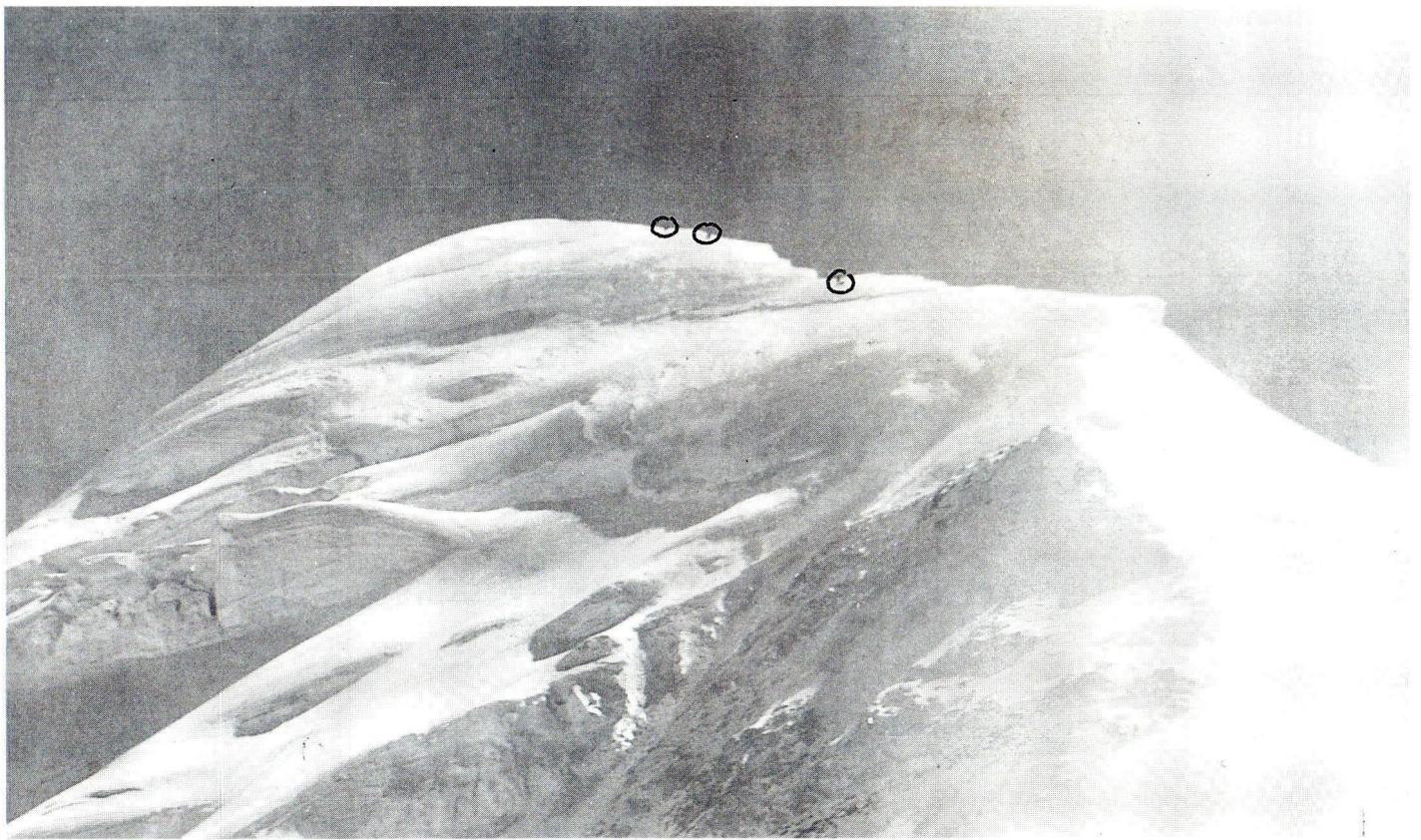
Panch Chuli II from summit of Chaudhara, looking at northwest face. Three small points on right background were possibly climbed in 1964. (S. N. Dhar)



17. View from the traverse to Rajrambha. Left to right: Panch Chuli II, the Balati Plateau, Sahadev West and East. Note three points on the edge in centre, possibly climbed by mistake in 1964.

Article 10

(Stephen Venables)

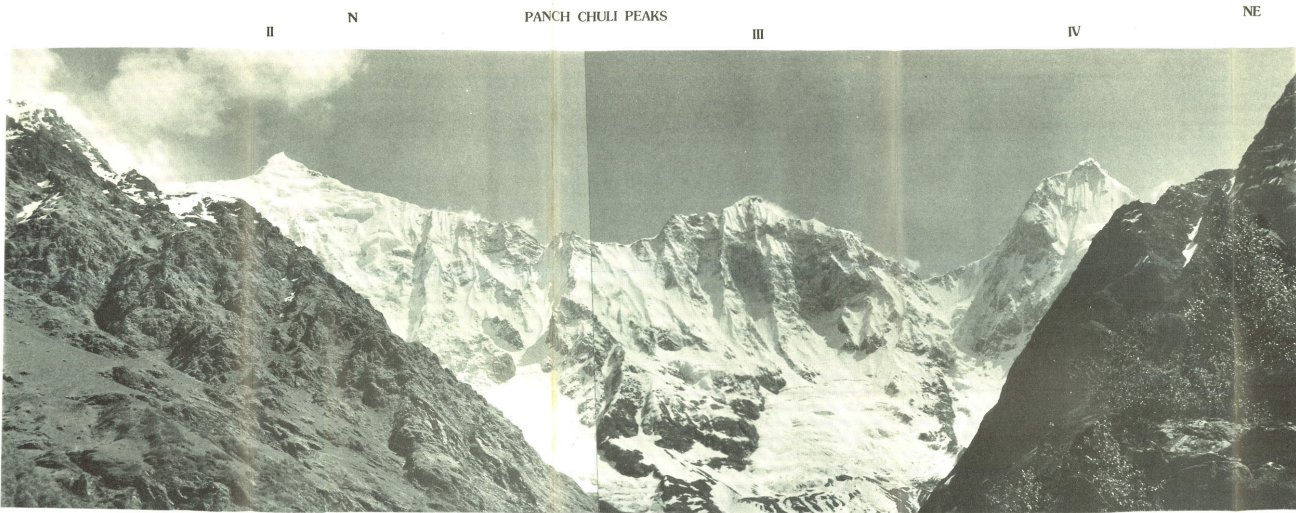


18. Southwest ridge of Panch Chuli II. Three climbers on the final cornice.

Article 9

(Harish Kapadia)

BK-49
P-66-67



PANORAMA B: Panch Chuli peaks, southwest faces rising above the Panch Chuli glacier (Pyunshani valley). Left to right: Peak II (6904 m) Peak III (6312 m) and Peak IV (6334 m)

(Harish Kapadia)

Article 9

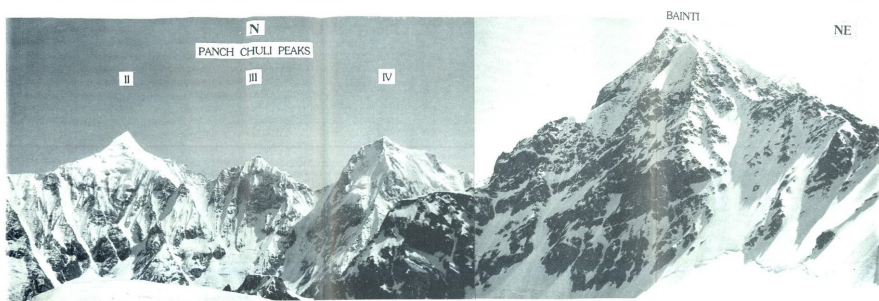
RAJRAMBHA

MENAKA



PANORAMA A: Rajrambha (6537 m), Menaka (6000 m), and Chandhara (6510 m), (left to right). Seen from the Balaji Plateau. The route traversed over Menaka, along the connecting ridge to Rajrambha and descended via the slopes on the left.
(Harish Kapadia)

Article 9



PANORAMA E: View from Draupadi (5250 m). Above: looking north. Below: looking east to Rula and Bainti glaciers. Bainti Col (5100 m) (left) with Panchali Chuli (5220 m) rising above it. (Harish Kapadia)

Article 9

