



INDIAN BRITISH PANCH CHULI EXPEDITION  
1992

EXPEDITION REPORT

Sponsored  
by

*Godrej*®

# INDIAN BRITISH PANCH CHULI EXPEDITION 1992

## EXPEDITION REPORT

### SUMMARY

Six Indian and six British mountaineers climbed in the Balati and Pyunshani valleys, east of Munsiary in the Pithoragadh District, U.P. in May and June 1992. This was the first time that Panch Chuli had been approached from the west by the Balati valley for twenty years. The expedition was the first to explore the Pyunshani valley.

Seven peaks were climbed over a period of forty days with altogether twelve team members reaching summits.

Panch Chuli II (6904m) was climbed by a new route - the West Spur - and its south west ridge was climbed 19 years after the first ascent. The first ascents of Panch Chuli V (6437m), a particularly challenging peak and Sahadev East (5750m) were achieved. Rajrambha (6537m), which has had one ascent from the north, was traversed by its east ridge over Menaka peak and then down its west ridge and face in a five day alpine style push. Panchali glacier was explored and the southern valleys of Bainti and Rula glaciers were observed.

The expedition was led by Harish Kapadia and Chris Bonington.

**Indian contact address:**

72 Vijay Apartment,  
16 Carmichael Road,  
Bombay, 400026,  
India.

Phone:  
4940772, 313227

**British contact address:**

Badger Hill,  
Hesket Newmarket,  
Wigton, Cumbria, CA7 8LA  
U.K.

06998 286

*Indian British Panch Chuli Expedition  
Final Report*

**DETAILS OF CLIMBS**

	PEAKS CLIMBED	DATE	SUMMITTERS
1.	<b>Sahadev East -1st ascent</b> (5750m) via North snow rib.	28th May	Chris Bonington Graham Little
2.	<b>Rajrambha</b> (6537m) Traversed via east ridge over Menaka peak - 1st ascent.	5th June	Dick Renshaw Victor Saunders Stephen Sustad Stephen Venables
3.	<b>Menaka - 1st ascent</b> (6000m) Traversed on way to Rajrambha.	2nd June	as above
4.	<b>Panch Chuli II</b> (6904m) via south west ridge - 2nd ascent	7th June	Muslim Contractor Monesh Devjani Pasang Bodh
5.	<b>Panch Chuli II</b> (6904m) via west spur - 1st ascent.	8th June	Chris Bonington Graham Little
6.	<b>Panchali Chuli - 1st ascent</b> (5220m) via Panchali Glacier	20th June	Harish Kapadia Muslim Contractor Monesh Devjani Khubram Prakash Chand
7.	<b>Draupadi - 1st ascent</b> (5250m) via Panchali Glacier	20th June	Harish Kapadia Muslim Contractor Monesh Devjani Khubram Prakash Chand
8.	<b>Panch Chuli V - 1st ascent</b> (6437m) via south ridge	20th June	Dick Renshaw Stephen Sustad Victor Saunders Stephen Venables

*Indian British Panch Chuli Expedition  
Final Report*

	<u>COLS REACHED</u>	<u>DATE</u>	<u>PERSONS</u>
1.	<b>Bagarthora Col</b> (3800m) crossed	15th June	By entire team
2.	<b>Bainti Col - 1st ascent</b> (5100m) reached	20th June	Harish Kapadia  Muslim Contractor Monesh Devjani Khubram Prakash Chand

**RESCUED**

- A. VIJAY KOTHARI** Air lifted by helicopter from Glacier Camp on the 8th 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 the 25th June from 5600m below the south ridge of Panch Chuli V after an eighty metre fall on the 21st June whilst returning from the summit. He severely damaged his right knee, broke his left ankle and injured his chest.

**PERIOD OF EXPEDITION**

10th May to 29th June (Bombay and back).

**WEATHER**

Cloudy with snow every afternoon of the expedition almost without exception, deteriorating steadily from around 7th June with snow both at night and during the mornings. There were also frequent thunderstorms.

**SPONSORS**

GODREJ - Bombay.

**CO - SPONSORS**

KODAK LTD - UK  
PHOTO PLUS - UK

**SUPPLIERS AND SERVICES**

Air India  
Benbo  
Berghaus  
Cotswold Camping  
N.D. Daga (Bombay)  
Gandhi Stores (Bombay)  
Karrimor  
Olympus  
North Cape  
Tasty Bite Eatables (Bombay)  
Wildcountry

**TEAM 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, Sundersinh, Revatram (cook), Harsinh Snr.. and Harsinh Jnr.

## DETAILED REPORT

### A. HISTORICAL

Panch Chuli has always been worshipped and admired by local people, pilgrims and traders on their way to Tibet. Its name signifies the five hearths of the legendary Pandavas who are supposed to have cooked their last meal on their way to heaven on the five peaks. The first mountaineer to recce the approaches of the range from the east was Hugh Ruttledge in 1929. W. H. Murray's Scottish expedition and K.E. Snelson, with J.de V. Graaff attempted the mountain from the east by the Sonar and Meola glaciers respectively in 1950, but made little progress. In 1951 Heinrich Harrer made an attempt from the west up the Uttari Balati glacier reaching the foot of the west ridge at a height of 6000m, a very impressive achievement by a two member team. P.N. Nikore of India claimed a solo ascent of Panch Chuli II in 1952 but this has been discounted. Another attempt was made in 1964 by an expedition led by Sqdn. Ldr. A. K. Chaudhury. They failed on Panch Chuli II, but claimed ascents of Panch Chuli III, IV and V, the two latter on the same day. There seems little doubt that they mistook the three small peaks running down from the end of the South West Ridge for Panch Chuli III, IV and V.

Panch Chuli I (6355m) was the first peak of the range to be climbed by an Indo-Tibet Border Police Expedition led by Hukam Singh in 1972. The South West Ridge on Panch Chuli II, at 6904m the highest peak, was climbed the following year by another large ITBP expedition led by Mahendra Singh when eighteen climbers reached the top after almost the entire route had been fixed with rope. In 1991 two Indian army expeditions climbed the north west ridge and the east ridge.

There can be no doubt, Panch Chuli III (6312m), Panch Chuli IV (6334m) and Panch Chuli V (6437m) had never been attempted.

Rajrambha (6537m) was first climbed from the north by another ITBP team in 1976.

### B. ACTIVITY AROUND THE UTTARI BALATI GLACIER

#### 1. The Approach.

The expedition left Bombay on the 10th May and travelled via Delhi and Ranikhet to Munsiary and the roadhead at Madkot. The team started the approach on the 16th May and reached base camp at 3270m below the snout of the Uttari Balati Glacier on the 18th May. The last village is Ramthing, only three hours walk

from Madkot and the route beyond this is along narrow paths across rocky and heavily forested terrain up the dramatically steep Balati valley. 84 porters were employed to carry the expedition baggage. They were willing, cheerful and honest.

## **2. Establishing Advance Base**

The Uttari Balati Glacier flows to a particularly low altitude and has three formidable icefalls which were eventually turned on the true right bank. Glacier Camp was established on the 22nd May near the centre of the glacier above the First Icefall at a height of 3900m. A route was initially fixed on the left edge of the Second Icefall through a series of tottering seracs. An easier, but still frightening alternative, was found by Harish Kapadia on the right bank, avoiding the 2nd Ice Fall. This was probably the route chosen by Harrer. Another gully led to the top of the Third Icefall where advance base was established below a small rock buttress (4840m) on the 26th May.

## **3. Sahadev East (5750m)**

Graham Little and Chris Bonington moved up to Advance Base on the 26th May and after a day's rest decided to attempt the magnificent peak, later named Sahadev East and West (after the second youngest brother of the Pandavas), on the other side of the glacier. Sahadev West is marked as Point 5782m on the map. They set out at 1.45 am, crossed the glacier and climbed easily to the foot of a snow spur leading to the summit of Sahadev East. A difficult bergschrund covered by unstable snow led to steep soft snow lying on ice that led up to the summit. The pair reached the top at 8 am and descended by the east ridge to get back to base camp at 11.45 am.

## **4. Rajrambha (6537m)**

Dick Renshaw, Victor Saunders, Stephen Sustad and Stephen Venables set out from advance base at 4 am on the 1st June to make a complete traverse of Rajrambha from the head of the Uttari Balati Glacier. That day they reached 5800m on the east ridge of Menaka (6000m), a subsidiary peak of Rajrambha. The following day they crossed Menaka to stop at 2 pm for the usual afternoon storm. On the 3rd June they reached the foot of the first gendarme on the summit mass of Rajrambha itself. The following day they tried to reach the summit with difficult climbing on snow, ice and rock. They had reached 6300m when they were hit by an electric storm. Saunders, carrying a broken tent pole they couldn't dismantle acted as a mobile lightning conductor and was hit by lightning, though fortunately was not injured. They left their rope in place to ease their progress the following day and retreated to a possible camp site, where Saunders fell about 5m through a cornice, injuring his back. Visibility was nil with high winds and driving snow.

The following morning (5th June) it had cleared and they set out as usual at around 4 am. Venables fell through a cornice on the way to the summit which they reached at 7 am enjoying superb views of Panch Chuli II to the east and Nanda Devi and its Sanctuary to the west. They then descended the west ridge to a col and then

went on down the steep snow of the south face to the glacier below.

They had to descend the complex glacier in cloud but reached advance base just before dark. The five day traverse was both long and committing over varied ground and gave some magnificent climbing.

#### **5. Panch Chuli II - South West Ridge**

The Indian team found a route up a shelf leading from the upper Uttari Balati glacier to the Balati Plateau establishing Camp I SW on a shoulder at the start of the plateau at 5750m. On the 5th June, the first summit team of Muslim Contractor, Monesh Devjani and Pasang Bodh moved up to Camp II SW (6120m) on the south west col. They were supported by Harish Kapadia, Bhupesh Ashar and Yograj. The summit team fixed the lower rock step with a hundred metres of rope that day.

On the 6th June the summit team established and moved up to Camp III SW at 6400 m on the south west ridge (the route taken by the ITBP expedition of 1973). The support team occupied Camp II SW that day.

7th June was cloudy and windy. However the summit team left camp at 4.45 am reaching the foot of the upper rock band (6600m) in two hours. It was climbed from the right over steep snow and ice in forty five minutes to 6700m. Battered by strong winds, they climbed 45° ice to the junction of the south ridge and south west ridge (6800m). The route ahead was very exposed with stretches of hard ice and huge cornices to the east over looking the Meola Glacier. Using protection and climbing very slowly they reached the summit at 10.15 am in heavy cloud. They immediately started descending and on the way down Devjani fell through the cornice but arrested himself.

By 12.15 pm they were at the bottom of the rock band with the weather now turning for the worse. It took them two hours to locate and reach the tent in white out conditions with strong winds. They had frequent sightings, throughout the day, of Bonington and Little on the west ridge.

On the 8th June the three summitters, now very tired, descended the lower rock step through deep powder snow to be received by the support party. Because of the unsettled weather and poor snow conditions it was decided not to put in a second bid for the summit.

#### **6. Panch Chuli II - West Ridge**

Chris Bonington and Graham Little accompanied the Indian team as far as Camp 1 SW and then branched left onto the upper Balati Plateau through a complex crevasse system to establish Camp II W (6120m) at the foot of the west ridge on the 5th June. Next morning they left camp, carrying their tent and cooking gear with them, at 3.30 am. They climbed a steep bergschrund at the base of the ridge which led to continuous ice which at times was made easier by a thin but precarious crust of old snow. It was necessary to 'pitch' the entire arete and at approximately 6400m the pair were forced to traverse onto the west face to avoid a serac barrier. The snow now became very unstable and progress was very slow. Finding a possible tent site became very problematic, and it was only at 3.30 pm, after twelve hours of climbing,



that they reached a good tent site below a serac wall on the crest of the ridge at a height of 6610m.

The following day, (7th June) they worked their way below a series of serac walls and crevasses towards the upper stretch of the west ridge to camp early in the afternoon at the bergschrund below the summit cone at a height of 6730m. It had been a short day but they wanted to be in position to reach the summit in the early morning with a good chance of a view and to be able to leave their sacks behind.

It snowed heavily that night but dawned fine but cold and windy. They set out at 6 am, joined the south west ridge about 150m below the summit and reached the top at 7 am to enjoy a magnificent view of Gurla Mandhata in Tibet, and Api and Nampa in West Nepal, to the east. After half an hour on the summit, they returned to their tent, dismantled it and crossed to the south west ridge to descend to the south west col, where they received a wonderful welcome from the Indian team.

The weather had deteriorated even further on the 9th and the entire party descended to advance base in heavy cloud and deep snow. They dropped back to base camp the following day. This marked the end of the Balati Glaciers phase of the expedition.

### **7. Rescue of Vijay Kothari**

On the 4th June, while descending the steep gully bypassing the Second Icefall, Vijay slipped and gathered speed falling towards a giant bergschrund at the bottom. With great presence of mind, Sundersinh ran down behind him and at great danger to his own life caught hold of Vijay at the last moment. Suffering a broken ankle, Vijay was carried by Harsinh Jnr. and Suratram back to Glacier Camp. Wing Cdr. Srivastava rushed to Munsiri and initiated a helicopter rescue on the 7th June, which took place the following day at 8.30 am, carrying Vijay from Glacier Camp to Bareilly Hospital, from where he went on to Bombay after receiving treatment.

## **C. ACTIVITY AROUND THE PYUNSHANI VALLEY**

### **1. Approach**

After three days of rest, the expedition members decided to use the few remaining days to explore the Pyunshani valley and attempt some peaks around the Panch Chuli glacier. At this point Graham Little and Bhupesh Ashar had to start for home because of previous work commitments.

Guides, porters and provisions were arranged for ten days and the team set out on the 14th June, descending the Balati Valley for a short distance and then crossing the river at a makeshift bridge and camping at Phunga Gair (2920m). The following day a route through dense, pathless forest led steeply up to Bagarthora Col (3800m), on the continuation of the SW ridge of Panch Chuli II. A tired party

descended to Shyama Gwar (3600m) and camped. The next day the party traversed across many ridges, high above the densely forested valley in heavy cloud and after many ups and downs descended into the valley to establish a second base camp (3320m) amongst birch woods near the foot of the glacier.

## **2. Climbs from the Panchali Glacier**

Kapadia and Contractor made a recce up the Panchali glacier on the 17th. This small glacier, situated south of Point 4934m led up to a high col. They left some loads on the glacier and on the 18th June, joined by Devjani with Prakash and Khubram, the party climbed to the head of the glacier and established a camp at 4220m. In view of the poor weather the camp was shifted to 4860m on the 19th.

The 20th June dawned fine and they climbed to Bainti Col (5100m) which lies at the head of the Panchali glacier. A route descended to the Bainti Glacier and Paina Gad and this could be used as the pass between the two valleys.

The team first climbed the peak to the north east - Panchali Chuli (5220m) and then the peak to the west - Draupadi (5250m). Both peaks gave excellent views of the unseen valleys of Bainti and Rula glaciers, Nagling and a host of other unclimbed peaks to the east.

The party returned to base camp the same day and leaving three porters and provisions for the British team as had already been agreed, set out for Munsriary the following day (21st June) to complete the final arrangements of the expedition. They reached Madkot on the evening of the 22nd June and Munsriary the following morning.

## **3. Panch Chuli V - South Ridge**

Bonington, Renshaw, Saunders, Sustad and Venables set out for the head of the Panch Chuli Glacier on the 17th June following the ablation valley on the true right hand side of the glacier which was filled with wild flowers, dense clumps of azalea, juniper and rhododendron that were still in flower. At the end of the ablation valley the route continued on the right side of the glacier to near the foot of Panch Chuli IV at a height of 3900m where the group camped for the night. They were helped by Prakash and Khubram who returned to base that same afternoon.

The team were first attracted by Panch Chuli IV, whose south ridge seemed to offer a reasonable though challenging line of ascent. That afternoon however they walked up the glacier to look round its corner at Panch Chuli V and were unanimously attracted by its impressive south ridge, which seemed reachable by a series of glaciers though there was an area of dead ground that was to prove more extensive than they had predicted.

They had with them three days' food and fuel which seemed sufficient for the climbing involved and had promised to be back at base camp by the evening of the 22nd June at the latest to fit in with the travel arrangements for the return.

The morning of the 18th June started with a thunderstorm and as a result they only set out at 4.20 am up the left hand side of the first big icefall on the Panch Chuli Glacier. The next icefall seemed impassable, but a gully up the ridge on its left

hand side seemed to bypass it. The bottom was a short waterfall pouring over steep rocks, which Saunders led with great determination and flair, getting soaked in icy water in the process. The rest jumared up the rope, while Venables found an alternative route round the side.

This led to a shoulder overlooking an even more formidable icefall. After a brew of tea, Sustad and Venables set out to find a way through it, picking an ingenious line through heavily crevassed seracs leading to another gully climbing the ridge that guarded the upper cwm under the south ridge of Panch Chuli V. They found a camp site on the side of a large crevasse in the lower part of the basin at a height of 5400m. The weather was cloudy but there was little wind. The team discussed whether to go on early the following morning (19th) and decided to move the camp to a point 100 metres above the col which would be at a height of 5900m, from which a bid for the summit could be made.

It was cloudy all day, but a spectacular tent site for the two tents was dug out of a cornice in the mid morning. That afternoon a huge avalanche from seracs high on the south west face of Panch Chuli V swept the whole lower part of the basin and much of the route they had followed that morning.

The team started cooking at 1.45 am on the morning of the 20th June. Although there was cloud around, the sky above was clear. Bonington decided to stay at the camp. He was going slower than the other, still tired from his ascent of Panch Chuli II and he felt that a team of five would be too slow. The others set out at 3.30 am. There were eight steep and challenging pitches on snow, ice and rock up a two hundred metre buttress alternately led by Renshaw and Sustad, out in front. It was slow going and it was midday when they finally reached the top of the buttress at 6200m. The weather had now deteriorated and it was both windy and cloudy.

The ridge was now less steep but very icy and progress remained slow, the summit being reached at 3 pm. They had already resigned themselves to descending in the dark and they all had head torches. They got back to the top of the buttress at 8 pm, and then started abseiling, moving slowly and carefully, through the night. The rope frequently jammed, but by three thirty in the morning, they were within two rope lengths of the camp. They had been on the go for twenty four hours and were looking forward to the cups of tea already being prepared by Bonington.

#### **4. The accident to Venables**

Throughout the descent they had placed back up anchors. On the penultimate abseil, Renshaw, Saunders and Sustad had descended safely. Venables, the last to come down, had removed the back up anchors, a standard procedure, and started down. After 6m the angle piton, which had supported the other three climbers pulled out sending Venables hurtling down in a blaze of sparks from his crampons scraping down the sheer rock face. He fell about 80m down steep but broken rock, landing on steep snow just as the rope became taut. Renshaw had been preparing the next abseil and the rope coiled itself around his leg, holding Venables and preventing a further 300m fall to the glacier below. He had an open fracture of his right knee, a broken left ankle and chest injuries.

Saunders prusiked down the rope to him, since Venable's weight was still on the rope. He gave what first aid he could in the circumstances and the others abseiled down to join him. Venables was now nearly level with the camp site but it would have been impossible to cross the steep intervening snow. It was therefore decided to lower him straight down the snow slope to the glacier basin below from where it was hoped he could be picked up by helicopter.

Renshaw and Saunders alternately lowered Venables down the snow while the other looked after his leg. Bonington and Sustad stripped the camp and carried heavy rucksacks down the slope. They were unroped since both ropes were needed for Venables. It was about 150m above the bergschrund that Bonington slipped, was unable to recover himself and cartwheeled out of control down over the bergschrund, coming to rest when the angle of the snow eased. It was very fortunate that he only suffered superficial facial injuries from his flailing ice axe.

Hauling Venables down the easier angled slopes got him to the tents at 5600m which Bonington and Sustad had already prepared, at around midday.

## 5. The Rescue

It was decided that Bonington and Sustad should go down to Base Camp the following day. Bonington was to continue down to Munsiairy to raise the alarm and help co-ordinate the rescue, while Sustad with one of the porters, would make a carry of food up to the top of the shoulder (5100m), from where Renshaw and Saunders could collect it, since food stocks were now very low.

Bonington and Sustad reached base camp at 2 pm on the afternoon of the 22nd after a difficult and dangerous descent. The route had deteriorated considerably. The following day Bonington set out for Madkot in heavy rain, guided by Harsinh Snr.. It took nine hours to reach Madkot. Bonington informed Kapadia of the accident at 2 pm.. Wing Cdr Srivastava immediately raised the alarm through police and ITBP radio channels since there is no telephone outside the district. The ITBP, the police and the sub magistrate's office were immensely helpful throughout this period providing vital communication links and considerable support.

Meanwhile, that same afternoon Sustad, with Harsinh Jnr. and Devendra carried food up to the dump (the site of the first camp) and the following morning Sustad and Harsinh ferried it up to the shoulder as arranged, a particularly impressive effort considering that Sustad had had no rest and Harsinh had no experience of altitude or technical climbing. From the foot of the gully Sustad continued alone. Renshaw and Saunders, as arranged went down that same night, leaving their camp at 7.30 pm to collect the food. They had now been without food for four days, and if Sustad had failed to deliver the provisions, they would probably not have had the strength to get back to Venables. On their return, five minutes after passing the danger area at 3 am, a huge avalanche from the seracs above, swept their trail. It was providential that they had set out so early in the evening.

The response of the Indian Air Force was most impressive and the following

morning (24th), a helicopter, piloted by Sqdn. Ldr. P. Jaiswal and co-piloted by Flt. Lt. P.K. Sharma flew up the Panch Chuli Glacier but could not reach Venables because of cloud. They tried again early on the morning of the 25th, but again were forced to turn back. They succeeded on their third attempt, flying into the high cwm below the south ridge of Panch Chuli V. It was an extremely difficult rescue because of the height and the enclosed nature of the basin. There was no flat spot to land and it took several nerve wracking attempts before they managed to place one skid on the tent platform so that Venables could be heaved and pushed on board and they could take off again. It was an outstanding and very courageous piece of flying.

They flew down to Munsiri and then on to Bareilly in the plains where Venables was booked into the district hospital, had a temporary cast placed and was flown back to England on the 29th June.

Renshaw and Saunders left that same afternoon, reaching base camp after a hazardous descent, late that evening and getting back to Munsiri on the evening of the 27th June.

### CONCLUSION

We found the peaks of the Panch Chuli range, though of moderate height, were very steep and provided challenging climbs in a remote and serious setting.

The expedition had not only been extremely successful in terms of peaks climbed and area explored it was also a very happy one, in which every one got on well together and there was not one angry word throughout the period. Old friendships were strengthened, new ones made. It was marred by the two accidents, but thanks to the courage and efficiency of the Indian Airforce and the steps taken by the team members themselves a potentially very dangerous situation was avoided and both Kothari and Venables should soon be back in the hills. In spite of everything it was one of the best and most enjoyable expeditions that the team members have ever taken part in.



Harish Kapadia



Chris Bonington

30th June,  
Bombay.

ROUTES TAKEN BY INDIAN BRITISH PANCH CHULI  
EXPEDITION 1992



