

## CROSS-ROADS IN SPITI.

*Exploring Western Spiti Valleys*

HARISH KAPADIA

**Y**OU MEAN NO PERMIT of any sort is required to visit Spiti? No paperwork, no police check posts? My friend Muslim Contractor, an old hand at Spiti was reacting to the recent changes in the inner line rules.

'Remember how much we had to fight to obtain the entry permit and specially for the permit to take cameras.'

'Or we'd hide the cameras in biscuit tins,' Muslim quipped.

'And every khakhi policeman appeared like a reincarnation of Sherlock Holmes, bent upon proving us the spies in the cold.'

But everyone does not appreciate freedom. One senior bureaucrat friend at Delhi was distinctly unhappy.

'This way they will ruin the entire area, its security, environment, culture...' He firmly believed in the maxim, 'Power flows from the piece of paper called a permit' (with due apologies to Karl Marx). With the freedom to roam (and photograph) now restored after almost 30 years, we immediately seized the opportunity. Spiti had always held an attraction for me. In 1983 and 1987 we had undertaken the exploration of the Lingti valley, east of the Spiti river. Now we were back to complete the Spiti experience by exploring the western valleys.

### Pin Parvati Pass

To make it a thorough Spiti experience, we decided to approach from the southern most point, the Pin Parvati pass. To start our trek we had to reach Manikaran (1697 m) in the Kullu valley. The whole of north India experienced one of the heaviest monsoons ever this year. Kullu valley was flooded and the roads blocked. We

*Photos 25 to 31  
Colour plates 8 to 12*

*Panoramas A to E  
Fold-out sketch 1*

were delayed, and rain every afternoon was a common occurrence. In Spiti, it had rained 4 inches in one day — their entire yearly quota of rainfall. The rain had damaged the tracks and destroyed large stretches of mountain. We had to cut new tracks on the scree slopes at many places. In light of the havoc caused by the rains everywhere we were lucky not to be rained out or seriously delayed though it made things tougher and involved a lot of hard work. On the first day we walked to Pulga. Much has been written about this area and the trek in past *Himalayan Journals*.

A mile or two farther on, below Uchich village, the road passes just above the open shaft of an old silver-mine. In the past, several silver-mines worked in the Parbati valley, and on account of the presence of this metal the whole of this part of Kulu was called *Rupi*, a name still in common use. Most of the mineshafts were filled in and hidden at the time of the Sikh invasion, about 1810, and have never been reopened.<sup>1</sup>

The name *Rupi* extended almost till Sutlej in the south. A largish village in Kinnaur is called *Rupi*, south of the divide. Pulga bungalow retains its old-world charm and is surrounded by forests of exquisite beauty and good fruit trees.

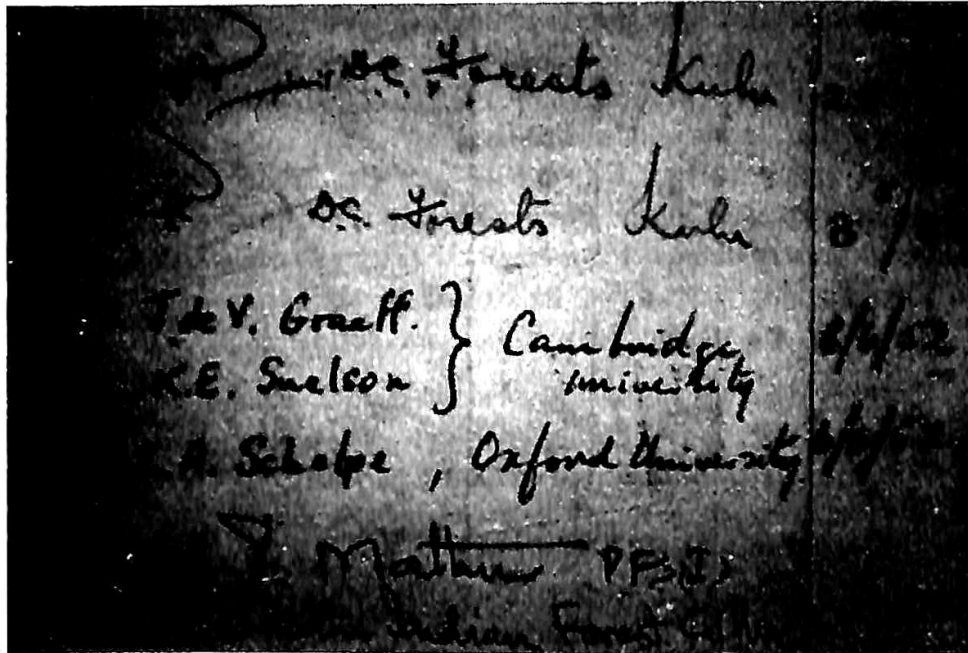
Pulga (7,000 feet) is the last bungalow in the main valley;... There are some fine views to be had around Pulga, and behind the bungalow, some 2,000 feet up, there is a wonderful amphitheatre of alpine pasture, backed by high peaks, called Swagani Maidan.<sup>2</sup>

The register at the Pulga bungalow had entries of many mountaineers. Dr J. de V. Graaff, K.E. Snelson and Dr E.A. Schelpe (1952), De Aisio and Forneo Alletto of Italy (1961), and many visits by Harnam Singh of Manali. And of course, it had a stern warning written on the first page, that the area ahead was in the 'inner line' and no one without a permit should proceed further.

We proceeded gradually ahead, savouring the beautiful forest which gave way to huge grassy meadows and finally to the snowfields. Passing Khirganga (2920 m — 9 km), Tunda Bhuj (3400 m — 12 km), Pando Seo Thatch (3780 m — 12 km), Bara Dwari Thatch (3920 m — 10 km) to Mantalai lake (4150 m — 10 km) was a lovely trek. The highlight was the crossing of two huge natural rock bridges over the Parvati river.

1. H.J. Vol. V, p. 81, 'Kulu', by A.P.F. Hamilton.

2. *Ibid.* p. 81.



Entry in the Pulga forest rest house register by early mountaineering expeditions. (Harish Kapadia)

The Pin Parvati pass has not often been crossed by Europeans; it is not difficult in fine weather but it involves tramping over miles of glacier and camping on it for a night.<sup>3</sup>

This is exactly what we did to cross the pass on 25 July 1993. Pin Parvati (5400 m) was crossed by Sir Louis Dane (1884), F. Skemp (1906) from Spiti and H. Lee Shuttleworth (1921) from Kullu. Col. J.O.M. Roberts in 1939 missed its location and crossed by another pass to Spiti. Now it is crossed by many parties and by shepherds too.

On the other side we descended into the Pin valley of Spiti. A stark barrenness greeted us in Mud village, on the second day. We made it to Sagnam, the largest village in the Pin valley, on 28 July. The advent of a new world for the Spitians was evident. The villagers were now cooking on gas. The latest electric cooking ranges, heaters, and of course, televisions, were making their presence felt. Telephones, roads, daily transport and foreign trekking groups are a new onslaught on Spiti culture. Later on at Kaja, where several new hotels are being built we met many foreigners. In all this euphoria, the Spitian continues to lead a simple life, but for how long will it remain so? They still wonder why there is no police post at Sagnam to check permits? Will my bureaucrat friend be proved right?

3. *Ibid* p. 81.



Or will these transhimalayan people with their old world culture and values take this new wind in their stride?



*Kullu Eiger (5664 m), South Parvati area.*

(Harish Kapadia)

### **Pin Parahio Valleys**

From Sagnam we turned west along the Parahio river. In early mountaineering literature the large valley was called Parahio valley, but on the modern map Parahio runs up from its junction with the Pin river for a few kilometers and is joined by three major river systems which form the Parahio. Killung nala comes in from the south, Debsa nala comes in from the Ratiruni-Parvati river divide in the southwest and the main branch continues west and is called the Khamengar river. The Khamengar branch leads to the divide between Dibibokri and Bara Shigri. One side valley of Khamengar turns north towards a high pass leading to the Ratang valley. All the three rivers meet almost at Thidim which we reached comfortably in a few hours from Sagnam. Two researchers were spending winter here to study the eating habits of the Ibex. After introducing them to the eating habits of the Bombaywala we turned ahead into the Khamengar valley. We camped near a survey cairn opposite Chom (4200 m — 9 km). From here we ferried loads to the South Ratang pass (5600 m—4 km) in two days. In the meantime I went ahead towards the head of the valley to photograph and locate the pass through which the 1956 British team had crossed over to the Dibibokri.





*Ratang Dru (5960 m), Ratang valley..*

(Harish Kapadia)

The history of the Western Spiti area is short. Only two expeditions, both British, in 1955 and 1956, have entered the formidable Ratang gorge. In 1955 P.F. Holmes with T.H. Braham entered the Ratang gorge and climbed peaks on its divide with Khamengar. Returning in 1956, Holmes with G.W. Walker climbed several peaks in the Ratang valley. On their return they crossed the South Ratang Pass, hoping to reach the Parvati valley. They should have gone down to Thidim and followed the Debsa nala but instead they followed a branch of the Khamengar to the southwest and crossed over by a very difficult pass to the Dibibokri and hence to Parvati valley. These two expeditions were excellent pieces of exploration, seeming more remarkable without proper maps. They reached this formidable terrain after a long walk from Manali to the Spiti valley. The two peaks east and west of the South Ratang pass that we climbed were both first climbed by the British team in 1956.

From the pass, and from our two peaks, Khamengar (5760 m) and Parahio (5920 m), we could observe many peaks. Shigri Parbat (6526 m) and the Bara Shigri divide, Dibibokri Pyramid (6408 m), Ratiruni Pyramid (6243 m) and many peaks on the Parvati divide. But the *piece de resistance* was the peak of Kangla Tarbo (6315 m). This peak, with its twin, rises sharply in the west Khamengar valley. It is worshipped locally, and if you do not count the peaks on the divide, Kangla Tarbo is the highest peak in the Western Spiti region.

### Ratang Valley

The descent from the South Ratang pass to the Ratang valley in the north was complicated. We had to guide the porters over rocky patches and loose scree. Once at the base, we quickly proceeded to camp near the main Ratang river and moved our camp up the valley the next day. From this camp we explored a col in the north (North Ratang col, 5600 m). This was on the ridge of Ratang Tower (6170 m) one of the prominent peaks of the valley. Our intention of descending to the Gyundi valley was thwarted as no route could be discerned. We could see, however, a large valley towards the northeast draining into the Ratang river lower down.

From the lower camp we visited the head of the Ratang valley and observed a snow and ice pass leading to the Bara Shigri glacier. This pass would have easily led to the Bara Shigri but in deteriorating weather conditions it would have been too much for our ill-equipped porters. We decided to exit through the Ratang gorge, going down the valley. As we had a few days on our hands, we turned north to climb to a high col, Sanugba col (5400 m), which overlooked

the Sanugba valley and a number of peaks on the Gyundi divide. We started our return via the Ratang gorge on 9 August. In the upper Ratang valley we had seen a herd of Ibex and now we saw many herds of bharals. They were running around on the rocks with a sense of balance that would put many rock climbers to shame. We had to cross the Ratang river several times a day to keep going, but now, at the height of the melt-season, the water never reached beyond our waists and it was possible to cross the river by noon. Lower down, the gorge narrowed and the crossings were fearsome, to say the least. Huge walls of rock rose more than a thousand metres, exposing the entire geological history of the area. These were unique formations, slab upon slab both vertical and horizontal. They were a practical geography lesson about the tectonic thrust that created the Himalaya. On the last day we camped near the Chomo Guru cave. It was a cave hundreds of feet above the river with smaller caves for the lamas nearby. The main cave was big enough to allow a tree to grow inside. The tree is believed to embody the spirit of the guru. As per the legend, Ama Chomo was a Buddhist nun who stayed in this cave in the ancient times and was worshipped by the villagers. She became pregnant and had to flee the wrath of the villagers when a son was born to her. When attacked she disappeared into the sky with the divine son and is reputed to have stayed at another cave in the Gyundi valley (a cave is marked on the map there). This legend of the simple faith of simple people has led villagers to this formidable gorge.

On 11 August we made our third river crossing for the day and came out on the left bank of the Ratang river. We climbed up a slope and suddenly in front of us was a pucca metal road leading to Kaja 12 km away. This was the road along the canal for the Ratang hydro-electric power project. A technological achievement deep inside the gorge. Our trip ended suddenly. At Kaja we mingled with many foreign tourists with cameras round their necks. The local shopkeeper refused to sell us fossils, preferring to sell them in dollars to the foreigners. The change was seen everywhere and more people were seen in western dress than in the traditional Spitian costume.

There is a Tibetan saying which warns of the strife and unhappiness which comes with the foreigner. Modern ways are seldom conducive to peace.<sup>4</sup>

The Spitians have adapted to the modern ways as readily as fish to water. Their intermingling with the culture from the Indian plains is complete. Now they will have international exposure with the advent of tourism and the arrival of foreigners. It is hoped that Spitians

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4. *Mountains and a Monastery*. By Peter Holmes (Geoffrey Bles, 1958).



will keep their cultural traditions alive even as they imbibe new values. Spiti is at the cross-roads of a new phase in its history.

These adjustments are always challenging, particularly for a protected civilization like Spiti — almost as difficult as its deep gorges, forbidding rivers and remote peaks. It will be interesting to observe this change and the process of adjustment. Like our exploration in the west Spiti, it will be both difficult and delightful.

Exploring is delightful to look forward to and back upon,  
but it is not comfortable at the time, unless it be of  
such an easy nature as not to deserve the name.

Samuel Butler (*Erewhon*)

## NOTES

### 1. Naming of peaks and passes

Many passes and peaks in these areas are named after their explorers, for example Gunther's col, Abinger col, Snelson col and Holmes' col. The Survey of India on the present maps, or even later, would never agree to accept the individual nomenclature. Sometimes these names are not representative of the area, for example A.E. Gunther never reached the Gunther's col but only mentioned the possibilities of its existence. It is suggested that these passes should now be named after the terrain or area so that one day they will be incorporated on the maps and any confusion about the area dispelled. No disrespect is meant towards the early explorers. These changes are as essential today as those names were essential in the yesteryears.

### 2. Gyundi Valleys

Though we could not cross over into the Gyundi valleys north of Ratang, we could gather enough first hand information about it. The energetic gaddis (shepherds) of Kangra have penetrated deep into the valleys and they stay there for the summer. The popular routes by which they take their horses with supplies are; from Batal up the Karcha nala and across a pass into Gyundi; or from Losar up the Takcha nala across a different pass into the Gyundi; and from Hal in the main Spiti valley along the Gyundi gorge. All these routes are in regular use. There are high passes leading to the Bara Shigri from the Gyundi valley. The riddle of the Gyundi gorges is solved by the energetic gaddis.

## References

1. *Himalayan Journal* Vol. 40, p. 96, Vol. 44, p. 96 and 120 (Explorations of the eastern valleys, 1983 and 1987).

2. H.J. Vol XX, p. 79  
(Exploration of the western valleys, 1955 and 1956).
3. *Mountains and a Monastery*, by P.F. Holmes (Geoffrey Bles, 1958).
4. *Himalayan Odyssey*, by Trevor Braham (George, Allen and Unwin, 1974).
5. *Exploring the Hidden Himalaya*, by Soli Mehta and Harish Kapadia (Hodder and Stoughton, 1990).
6. *High Himalaya Unknown Valleys*, by Harish Kapadia. (Indus Publishing Co., 1993).

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SUMMARY

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**Peaks climbed**

Name/height	Date climbed	Summitters
1. Khamengar (5760 m — 18,900 ft) 2nd ascent	2 August 1993	Harish Kapadia Kesarsinh
2. Parahio (5920 m — 19,425 ft) 2nd ascent	2 August 1993	Kaivan Mistry Yog Raj Surat Ram

**Passes crossed**

1. Pin Parvati Pass (5400 m — 17,716 ft)	25 July 1993
2. South Ratang Pass (5600 m — 18,372 ft)	3 August 1993

**Cols reached**

1. North Ratang Col (5600 m — 18,372 ft)	25 August 1993
2. Sanugba Col (5400 m — 17,716 ft)	8 August 1993

**Members:** Harish Kapadia and Kaivan Mistry. (Vijay Kothari, Kekoo Colah and Saif Bijliwala joined for the first part).

**Supported by:** Harsinh Sr., Harsinh Jr., Kesarsinh (Kumaoni), Yog Raj Thakur and Surat Ram (Manali).

**Period:** 11 July 1993 to 5 August 1993.

**Sponsored by:** The Mountaineers, Bombay.

Exploration of the western Spiti valleys of Khamengar and Ratang. The two-member team from Bombay, approached via Kullu.

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Plate 7. Chaukhamba group (left) and Balakun (6471 m) from northeast ridge of Nilkanth.

*Article 15*

(Akira Matsuyama)



Plate 8. Pulga forest rest-house.

*Article 16*

(Harish Kapadia)





Plate 9. Pk 6127m, Parvati valley.

*Article 16*

(Harish Kapadia)

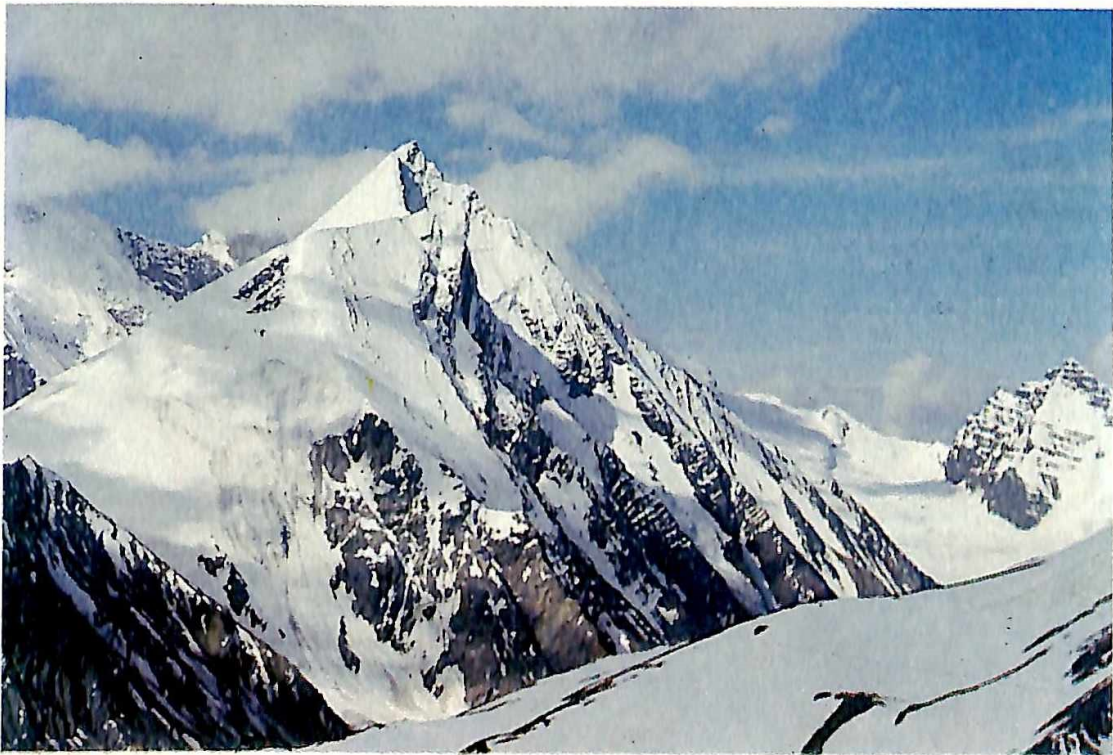


Plate 10. Kangla Tarbo Peaks.



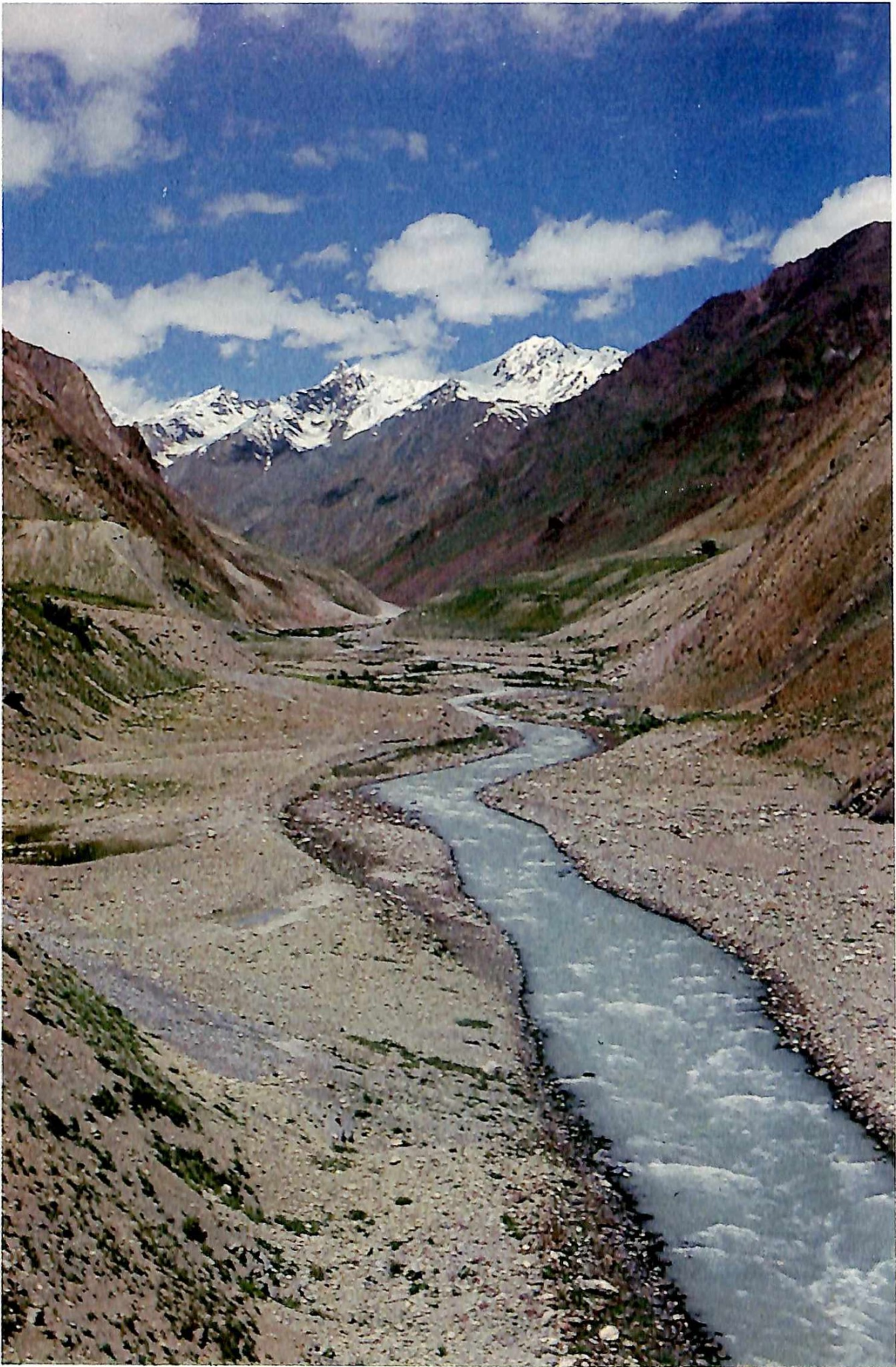


Plate 11. Parahio valley, west Spiti.

Article 16

(Harish Kapadia)



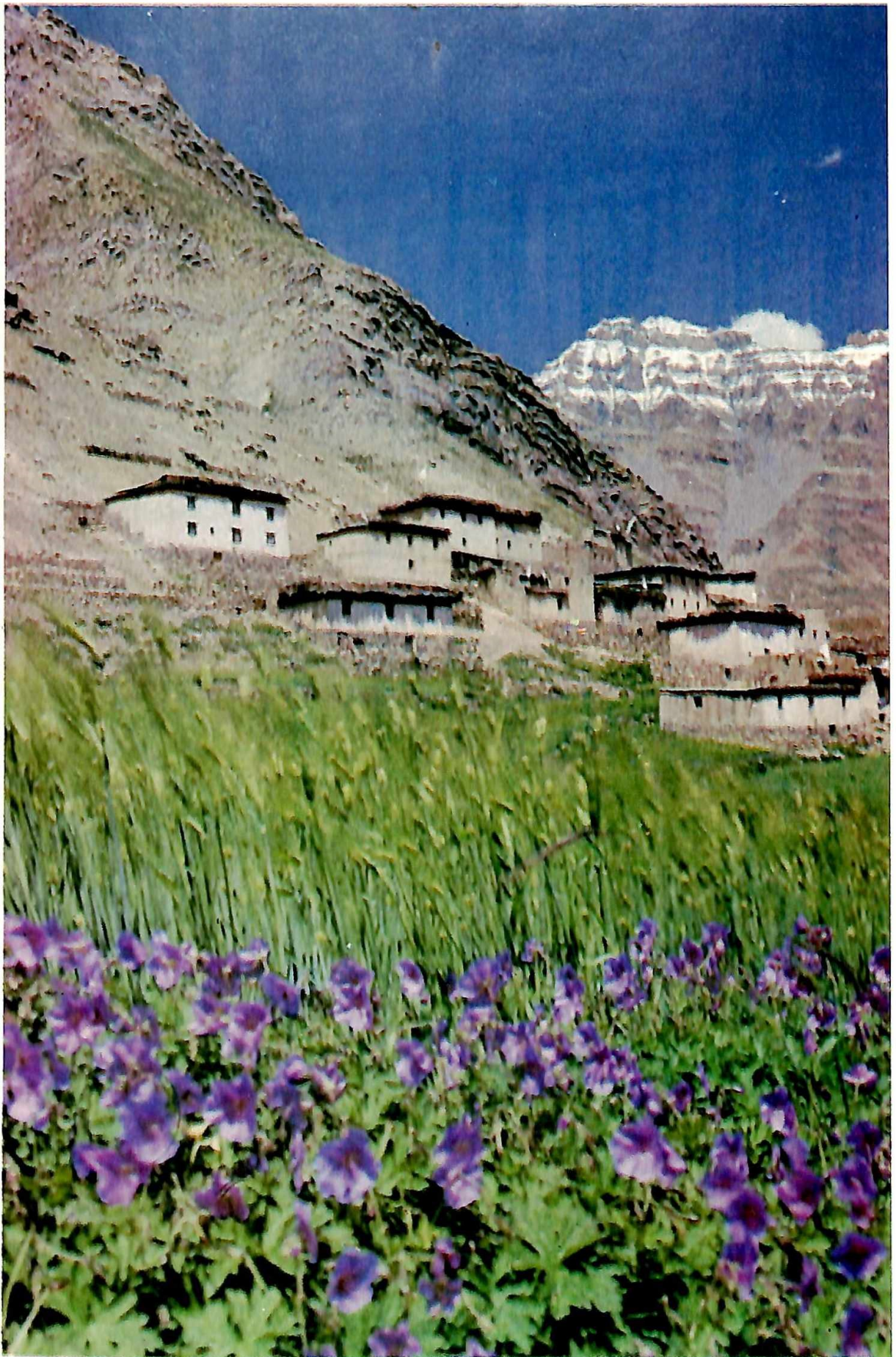
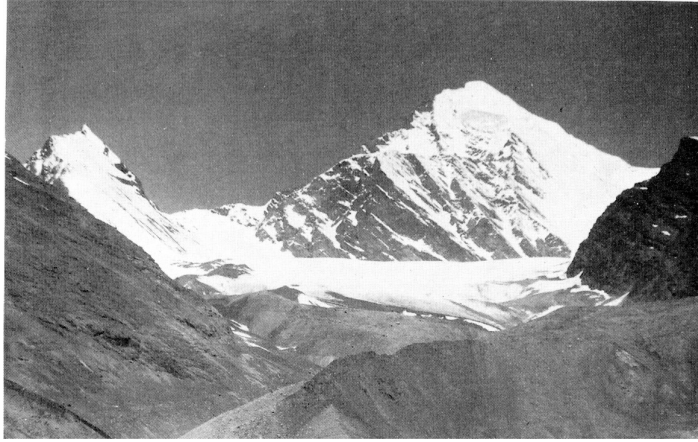


Plate 12. Mud village, Pin valley, west Spiti.  
Article 16 (Harish Kapadia)





**25. Upper Khamengar Valley. L to R: Pk. 5360 m, Parhio col and Shigri Parbat (6526 m)**

Article 16  
Kapadia)

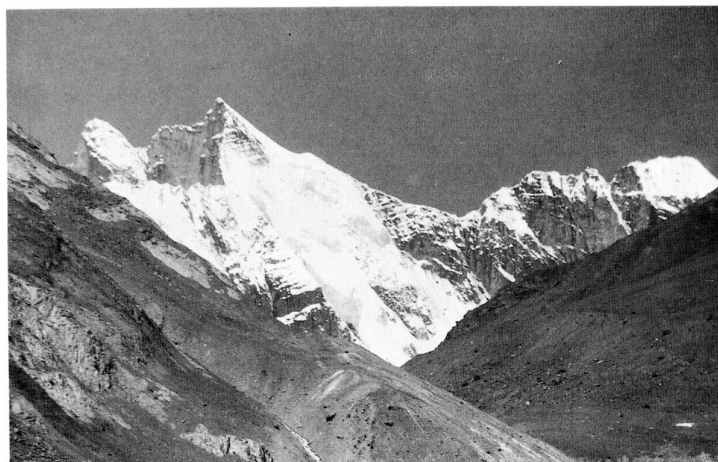
(Harish



**26. Ratiruni Pyramid from Parahio valley**

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Kapadia)

(Harish



**27. Peaks on Dibibokari divide and SW branch of Khamengar valley. Pk 6507**



**28. South Ratang pass (5600 m) from Ratang valley. Route descended from behind the right hand rocky ridge.**

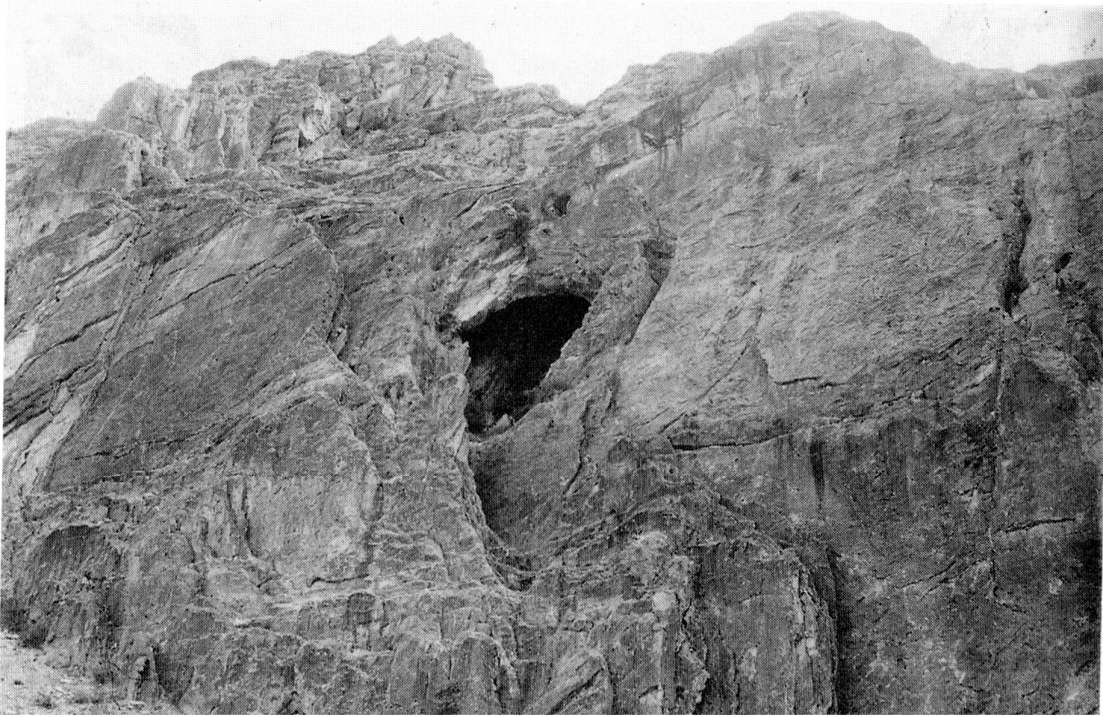
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**29. Bharals in the Ratang valley, west Spiti.**





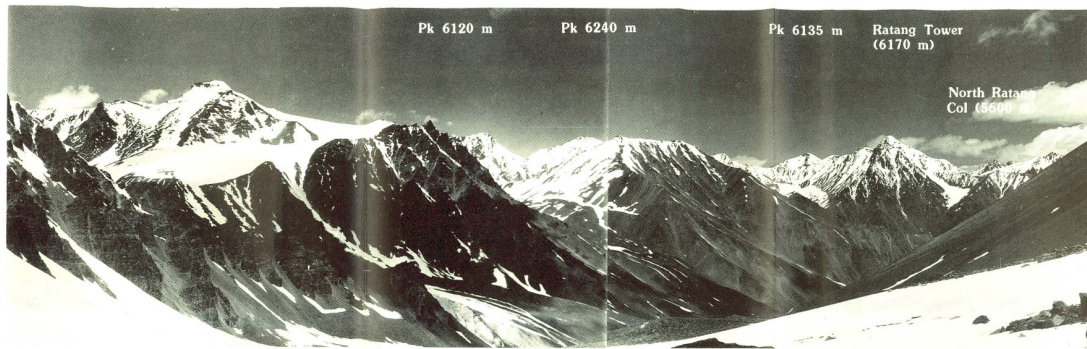
**30. The legendary Chomo Gurr cave at the entrance of Ratang gorege, west Spiti.**

Article 16  
Kapadia)

(Harish



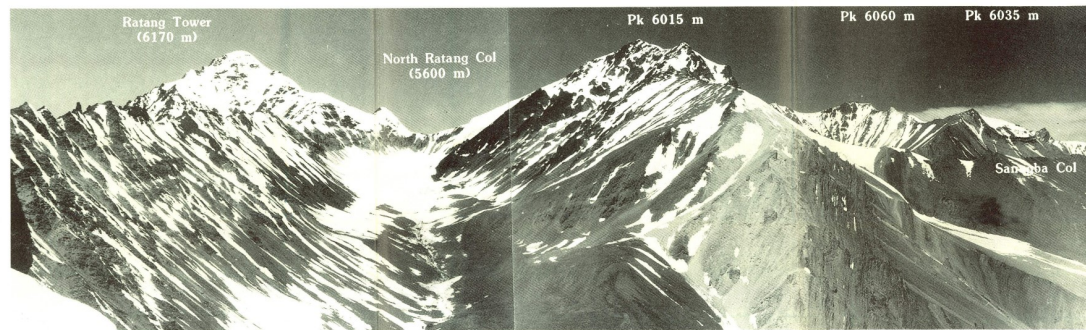
**31. Rangrik village and Ki gompa, Spiti.**



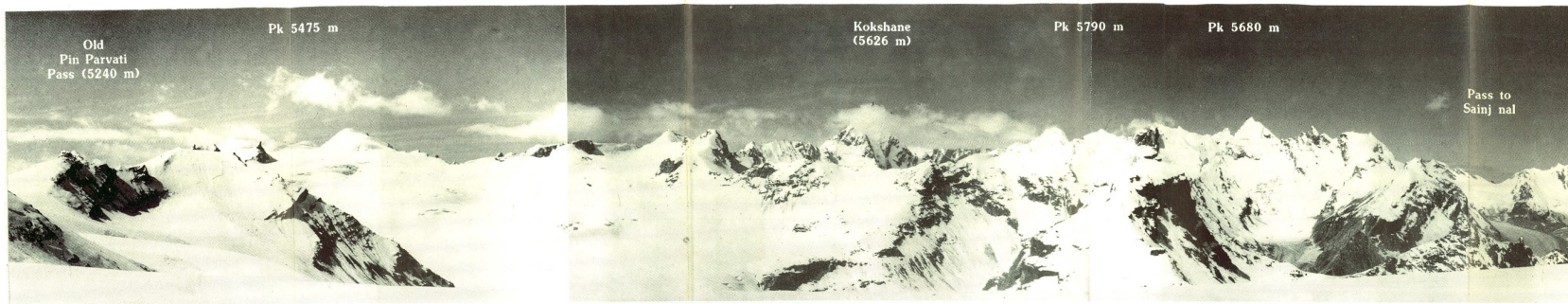
PANORAMA A: Ratang valley, West Spiti. Peaks on the northern rim (view from below South Ratang pass, 5600 m, looking north).

(Photos: Harish Kapadia) Article 16

PANORAMA B: View of Ratang valley peaks, West Spiti, looking north. Gyundi-Sanugba valley divide on the right.







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PANORAMA C: View of South Parvati valley peaks from Pin Parvati pass. The old Pin Parvati pass is on extreme left.

(Photos : Harish Kapadia) Article 16

PANORAMA D: Approaching Pin Parvati pass.



PANORAMA E:  
Peak 6248 m, South Parvati valley.