
THE LANGUAGE OF THE MOUNTAINS

First Ascent of Rangrik Rang, Kinnaur

HARISH KAPADIA

ALEXANDER CSOMA DE KOROS, the Hungarian scholar, had stayed for many years at the Kanam monastery in the Kinnaur. He was the first scholar to translate from Tibetan to any European language.¹ Koros spent his days, alone, looking at high peaks across the Satluj river, above the Charang gumpa. These peaks perhaps spoke to him in a language that he understood. It was this group of peaks that we decided to attempt in 1994.

In the days when climbing a mountain means more than exploring a region, we were lucky to find an area which offered us both. I had first known of the Racho group of peaks during a visit to the Baspa valley in 1986. I could not see the peaks, but on the map three high peaks were marked.

My search to locate any photographs of these peaks failed. All I managed to dig out was a distant photo taken by me from the slopes of Kalanag (6387 m) in the western Garhwal. Still it was a matter of conjecture as to which was our peak amongst several seen in the cluster.

'The fact that we do not have any photograph of the peak is a definite advantage. The harder it is, the better it is', Chris Bonington replied spiritedly when informed about the non-availability of any photos or information. With this spirit, we were set for our venture with the British. Kinnaur had

1. See Note at the end.

Colour Plates 3 to 6,

Photos 10 to 14

Fold-out 1, Panoramas D-E

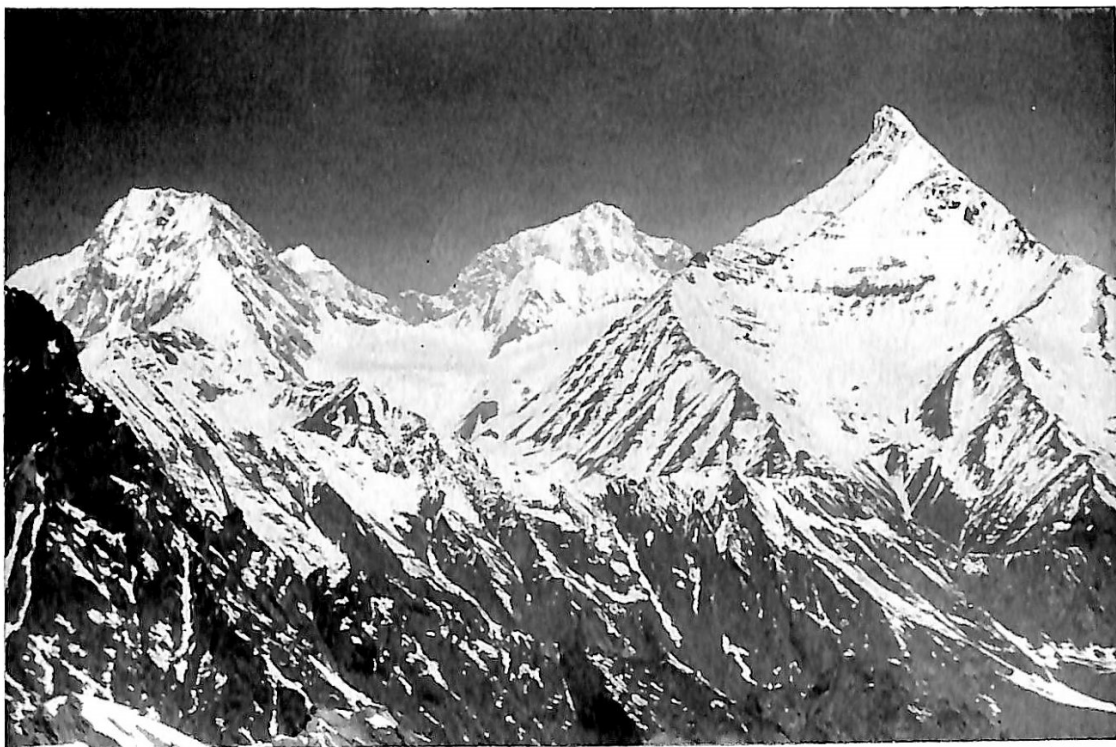
recently been opened to foreign climbers with the inner line being relaxed. The last known expedition involving foreigners here was in 1933 when Marco Pallis passed along the Satluj.

Bonington, pushing sixty, arrived at Bombay in late May. We had known each other since the days of the Panch Chuli expedition, 1992. With him were 5 British climbers, some old friends and some newcomers to the Himalayan scene. We organised a special puja at Bombay in a Hindu tradition of thanksgiving for 60 years of Bonington (*Shashtipurti*). It was a moving affair. We also wanted the British to experience the best of Indian hospitality (a *dosa* party) and tried to recapture some pleasures of the Raj. A comfortable air-conditioned train journey, followed by a ride in the Viceroy's rail car to Shimla brought back the nostalgia. A special bus brought us to the roadhead, Thangi (2645 m), without any hitch. On the way, we stayed a night at Sarhan, the headquarters of the Indo-Tibet Border Police. Mahendra Singh, the local deputy commandant gave us some bad news.

'You cannot go via the Mangla khad, in the east. It is too close to the Tibetan border'. The best route to our peaks was closed! With a wry smile he added, 'You can try the two valleys in the north', pointing out to two steep glaciers and faces marked on the map. He hurriedly rubbed out old 'inner line' demarcations from a rough sketch we had made. Openness of minds takes a long time to follow after opening of an area. Again we were back to; 'the harder it is, the better it is'.

We arranged the required donkeys and a three day walk-in started from Thangi on 3 June. Walking leisurely via Lambar (2875 m — 9 km) and Shurtingting (3410 m — 12 km) we reached Charang (3600 m — 7 km). The village and the surrounding area was once part of the Chewrang province of Tibet. The local population, all bhotias, carried on trade with the Guge district of Tibet over the high passes of the Yamrang la and the Gunirang la till the Indo-China war stopped all access. Ambassadors of the great lama Atisha had reportedly visited Charang and established a centre of learning and worship. The Charang monastery, called the Rangrik Shungma, is considered the most holy one in Kinnaur.

At Charang the old lama was a great source of information. He told us a legend about how the Charang monastery was



14. Phawararang (6349m), right, Jorkanden (6473m)
and Pk. 6032m viewed from Racho khad (east).

Article 10

(Harish Kapadia)



15. Manirang (6593m) southwest face from Ropa gad.
Manirang pass on left.

Article 11

(Harish Kapadia)



16. Alexander Csoma de Koros: his grave and inscription at Darjeeling (top and right), and the memorial stone at Kanam monastery, Kinnaur.

Article 11

(Nawang and Harish Kapadia)

built overnight by God, acting as a yak-herdsman. With ethereal wisdom he added, 'The gompa may have actually been built by men; after all, this is only a legend. But the mountains, they were surely built by Gods.' We decided to call our peak 6553 m 'Rangrik Rang' — the mountain moulded by God.

The old lama was excited to talk to the Britishers, the first white men in the area after a long time.

'Under the Raj, the British officers did not speak our language. To us the Raj made no difference, it was only people speaking a different language. Do you all speak the same language?' We hoped so.

What little we had seen of our mountain was certainly enough to warm us to the challenge. A little before Charang the Racho group had come into view. Maps were out and looking through binoculars every one talked in hushed tones. It was not to be climbed in a hurry. The main party halted at Charang for a day on 6 June. Two recce parties left to investigate the approaches to our peak through the Racho khad west and east glaciers. On the first one where Muslim had joined Chris, Paul and Jim Fotheringham returned with distressing news having found no route to approach the peak. The second party, where Divyesh had joined Little and Lowther, returned with encouraging news. After some discussion it was certain that only one route was feasible and we all would be climbing together, unlike in the past Indian-British ventures where everyone climbed according to their inclination and ability.

Base camp (4170 m — 6 km) was established at the junction of the two Racho khad valleys and a kitchen set up, ably managed by Kumaoni porters. Loads were ferried by porters and members to the advance base camp (4870 m — 6 km) which was on the moraine of the Racho khad east glacier. At these camps the main figures were Vijay Kothari, a regular member on all our trips, and our L. O. Joginder Singh Gulia. They both managed the affairs of the camp so efficiently that the rest of us could concentrate on the jobs at hand. Jogi particularly, was a prominent figure handling all events with maturity.

The expedition was falling into a routine. Jim Curran, with a sense of humour to match his bulk, was busy video taping

the proceedings. We both climbed to an ancient Survey of India cairn to observe our peaks.

'Curran, do you realise that you are walking in the footsteps of history', I said.

Looking down to the steep drop Curran replied cryptically, 'I don't want to take too many steps and become history'.

Paul Nunn who was with me in 1991 in the East Karakoram, made a great team mate. Paul was the diplomat *par excellence*, saving many situations with his tact. Along with them came Geoff Birtles from Sheffield. He is the editor of the *High* magazine, and whenever I talked to him I began with 'Dear Editor' as if writing a letter to the magazine. Our expedition was peppered with cricket matches, bridge sessions, fiddling with Chris's computer and of course puja.

At the ABC we investigated the different approaches to the mountain, but ultimately it was the route to the east col and the northeast ridge that was selected. Accordingly loads were ferried to the foot of the col to Camp 1 (5260m). After an interruption by bad weather we started fixing the ropes to the col. Little and Lowther, supported by Divyesh Muni and Pasang, fixed the first section, before coming down to ABC for rest. The next section was taken over by Paul and Divyesh with Pasang. It was great watching them fixing ropes from one rock island to another. The crux of the climb was overcoming the huge cornice which seemed steep and threatening. That was left to Fotheringham and Bonington. Inching slowly ahead they fixed ropes to finally reach the col. It was this lead that opened the route to the summit.

As we gathered for rest it was evident that all of us would be climbing together on the same route. The six Britishers were raring to go. Muslim Contractor is an old hand at climbing and after a decade of Himalayan expeditioning he was the most dependable climber and trouble shooter. Divyesh Muni had climbed higher than most amongst our joint team, with several technical climbs. They were obvious choices for the summit amongst the Indians, with Pasang Bodh (from Manali) joining them.

As the others moved up, I spent a relaxed day at Camp 1 with Bonington and Fotheringham. Bonington was full of

enthusiasm. Looking at the mountains he jumped like a child. After overcoming a personal illness he was looking forward to pushing ahead. Jim Fotheringham was nicknamed 'Lama Saab' due to his interest in meditation and being a Buddhist. Apart from being a strong climber and an old friend, he delights in discussing anything spiritual. As they left for Camp 2 (5760 m) on the col on the 19th, Kaivan and I started our little forays on the surrounding peaks. This was christened 'roaming on the glacier': Indians are allowed to climb any peak in the area without restrictions.

First we climbed Mangla peak (5880 m) on the watershed with the Mangla khad. It was mainly going over steep scree with exposure at many places. Reaching the ridge we enjoyed spectacular views till the top. All the peaks and passes on the Tibetan borders were visible. It was worth the trouble to distinguish different peaks and valleys never observed before.

Next, on the 20th, we left for Kimshu (5850 m), which was above ABC and divides the Racho valleys. After the north



On the summit of Rangrik Rang. Unclimbed peaks 6447 m (left) and 6465 m of the Racho group seen behind

(Chris Bonington)

col I separated from the rest to climb Kunda (5240 m). Kaivan, with Prakash and Khubram proceeded on the north ridge of Kimshu, reaching within 100 m of the peak. All along, our eyes were fixed on Rangrik Rang on which great things were being done.

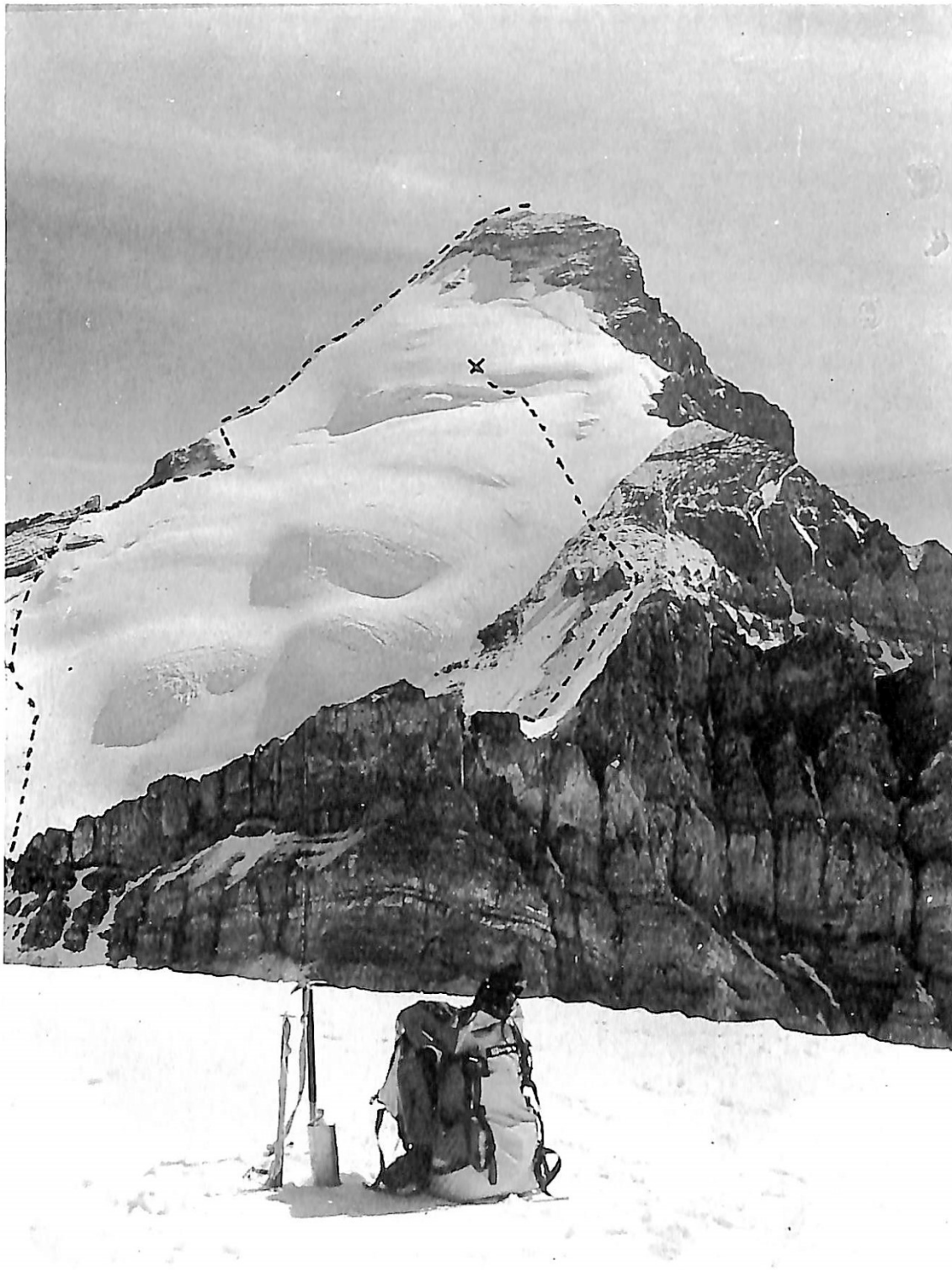
Summit Day

The entire team, 6 Britishers and 3 Indians dug into Camp 2 on the col on 18 June. The next day they moved up in groups to Camp 3 (6000 m) higher up on the ridge. The summit was climbed on the 20th. One by one each group started. Curran dropped out after one rope-length and Paul joined Muslim Contractor. The ridge, facing northeast, got the sun from the very beginning and as a result the snow conditions were poor and at times dangerous with unconsolidated snow lying on ice. At about 6200 m an ice wall on the ridge gave a short stretch of steep ice climbing. A fixed rope was left on this section. Beyond the wall the ridge stretched in a crescent towards the summit which was reached at around 2 p.m.

The view was magnificent with the mountains of the Garhwal, Gangotri, Kullu, Spiti and Tibet stretching in a superb panorama. The summit itself was quite flat, with space enough to pitch a few tents, and even more amazing, at the side of some rocks was a small pool of melt water. The team spent a couple of hours on the top before starting down, getting back to the top camp at about seven o'clock.

As Kaivan and I watched from the ABC, small black-dots appeared on the col, slowly inching their way down. Thank God for those fixed ropes, some may have found it extremely dangerous to descend, if not fatal. Soon individual climbers materialised and the celebrations started. We sat around a fire, listening to stories of a most satisfying climb.

It was now time for the last puja at BC, which invited comments from Curran; 'At this rate our film will be screened as a religious programme'. But we had a lot to be thankful for. An unknown area explored, the first ascent of a high mountain, no mishaps — a satisfying experience. And we all spoke the same language, the language of the mountains.

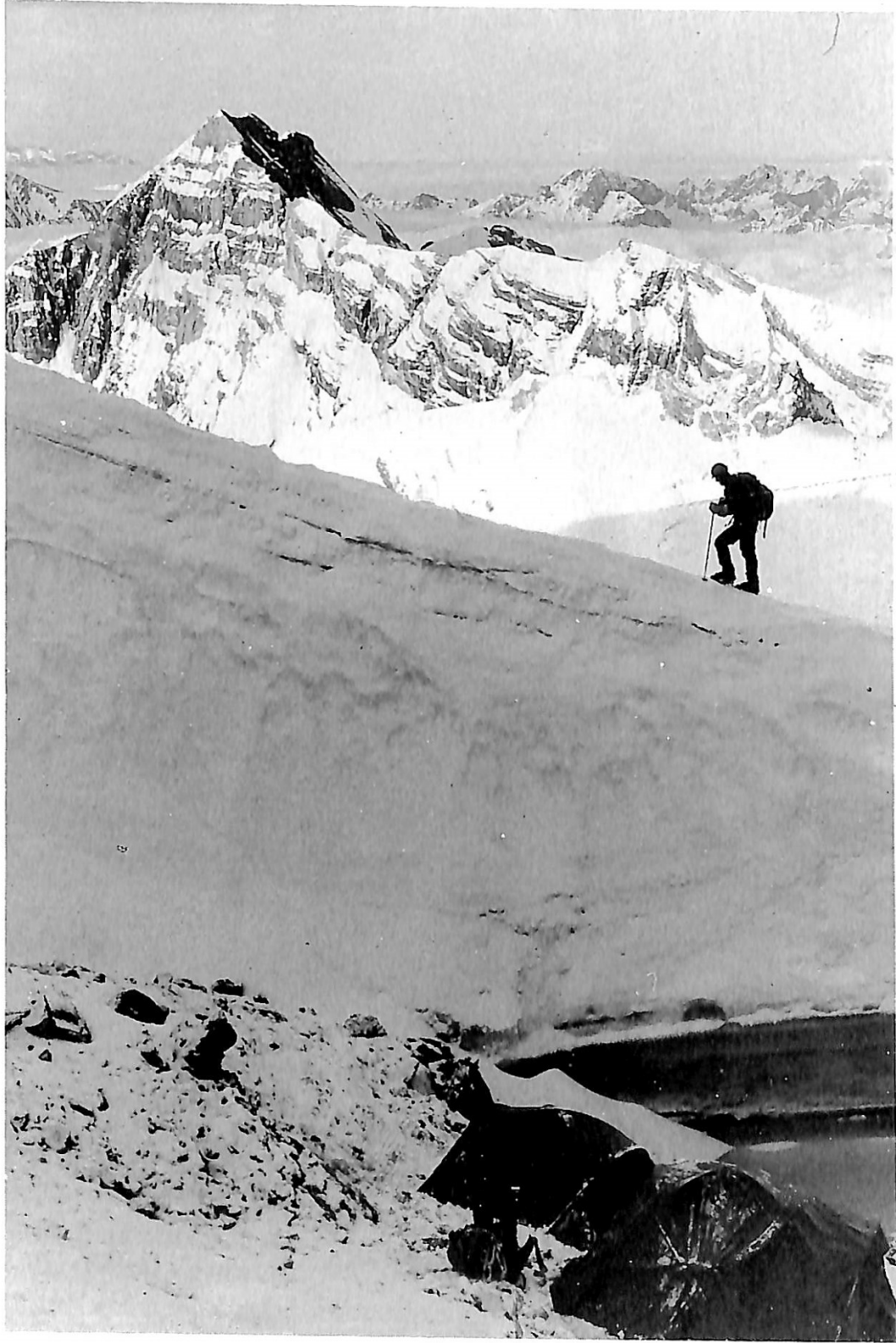


17. Manirang (6593m) from Saponang peak. Left: route of ascent, 1994.

Right: route of direct attempt (1988).

Article 11

(Kaivan Mistry)



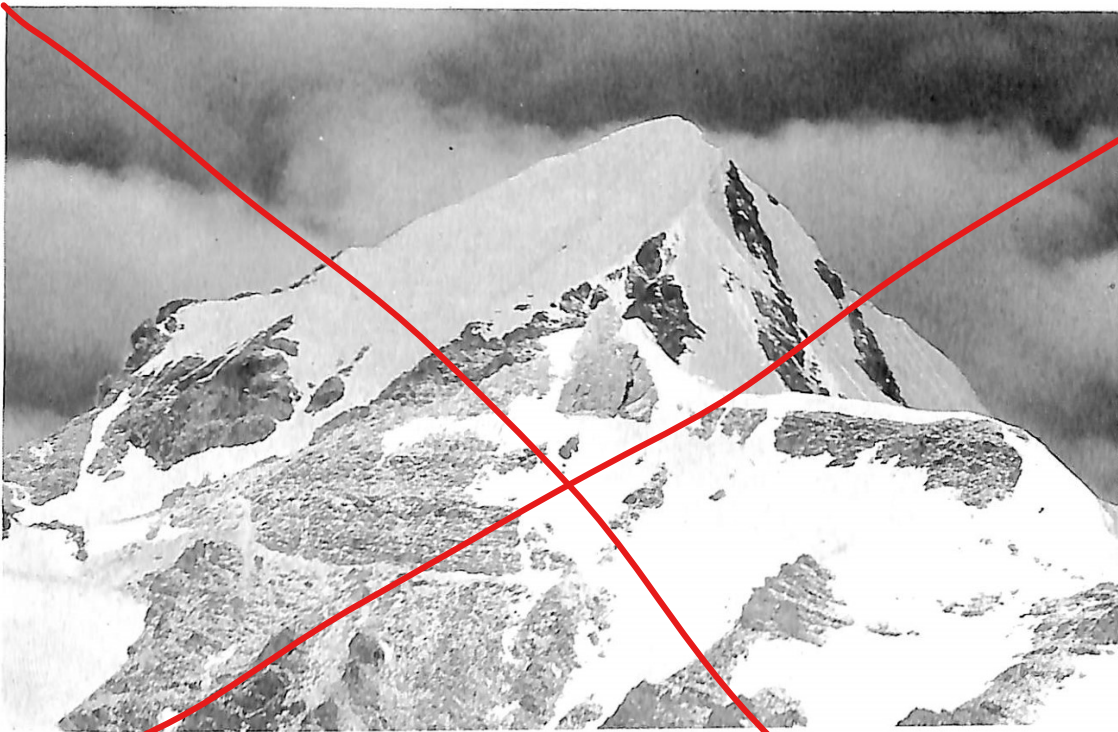
18. Paul Nunn starting for the summit of Manirang from C2.
Pk 6091m above Ghunsarang pass in the background.
Article 11 (Harish Kapadia)



19. View from summit of Manirang.

Article 11

(Divyesh Muni)



20. Karcha Parbat (6271m) from Losar valley.

Article 12

(Arun Samant)

NOTES

Note 1

Alexander Csoma de Koros

A Hungarian scholar who travelled in various parts of the Himalaya. Born in 1784 he started his travels at the age of 34, destined never to return to Hungary. He became the first great scholar to learn the Tibetan language and to relate it to the European dialect. He spent 22 years in travel, longer than any European, besides Marco Polo.

In 1825-1826 he lived in Subathu and later at the Kanam monastery (1827-1830) near Kalpa, Kinnaur, watching the Racho group of peaks. (He called them the Shurang peaks, after the camping ground Shurtingting). In his later years he lived at the Phuktal gumpa and finally at the Ringdom gumpa. In the latter part of his life he travelled in Sikkim reaching Darjeeling in April 1842. He met Dr. Campbell, the famous leader of the early Everest expeditions at Darjeeling on 24 March 1842. However, Koros contracted a fever in early April and died on 11 April 1842 at Darjeeling at the age of 58 years. He was buried in the Darjeeling graveyard in the presence of Dr Campbell and many other mountaineers. (See book on his life: *The Great Tibetologist Alexander Csoma de Koros*, by Hirendra Nath Mukherjee).

Note 2

Nomenclature in Kinnaur and Around Tirung Valley*Peaks:*

Rang: mountain

Rangrik: made by god

Kimshu: household deity

Kunda: an idol

Phawra: Phowar: place of big animals

Sesar: sacrifice of man

Zangshu: Zang: gold. Shu: place.

A golden peak (in the Rupi valley)

Passes:

Khimokoul: Khim: dog. Koul: crossed in winter. This is name of a pass to Tibet. A Tibetan dog left behind by a caravan crossed over this pass in winter.

Yamrang la: a regular pass.

Gunirang la: Guni: winter. rang: mountain. A winter mountain pass.

Mangshu la: Mangshu: hidden. A hidden pass.

Lamkhaga: Lam: many routes. khaga: pass. A pass with many routes.

Chhotkhaga: Chhot: smaller. A smaller pass.

Rivers — nalas — valleys:

Tirung: Ti: running water. rung: group of stones. Water running over group of stones.

Tidong: Ti: running water. dong: where it falls.

Nisang: hidden

Mangla: Marla: a fertile valley

Bayulkhona: Bayul: hidden. khona: place

Shakchang: Shak: birch. chang: grass. A nala with tree and grass.

Holdo: a nala with a mud avalanche.

Racho: a fork like two horns of an animal. A nala forking in two.

Brati: the meeting of three nalas

Villages — Others:

Shurtingting: Shurting: type of grass. ting: place of

Lambar: Lam: on the way. bar: to stay. Place to stay on the way.

Thangi: Thanen: upper place

Kuno: in corner. Village in corner of a nala.

Shipki: a village

Charang: related to Chewrang province of Tibet.

Kanam: After a legend of a lama who was given a stone which was shaped like क letter in Hindi. (K in English). Hence the name.

Note 3

Select Bibliography

1. *Account of Koonawur in the Himalaya*, by Capt. Alexander Gerard (1841).
2. *The Abode of Snow*, by Andrew Wilson (1855).
3. *Kinnaur*, by S. C. Bajpai (1992).

4. *The Great Tibetologist Alexander Csoma de Koros*, by Hirendra Nath Mukherjee (1981).
5. *High Himalaya Unknown Valleys*, by Harish Kapadia (1993).
6. *Expedition Kinner Kailash*, by Major Kiran Kumar (1979).

SUMMARY

THE INDIAN BRITISH KINNAUR EXPEDITION, 1994

Phase I

- | | | |
|--------------------------------|--|--|
| 1. RANGRIK
RANG
(6553 m) | first ascent
via NE ridge
on 20 June 1994 | Chris Bonington
Jim Fotheringham
Muslim Contractor
Graham Little
Divyesh Muni
Jim Lowther
Paul Nunn
Pasang Bodh |
| 2. MANGLA
(5800 m) | first ascent
via NW ridge
on 19 June 1994 | Harish Kapadia
Kaivan Mistry
Prakash Chand |
| 3. KUNDA
(5240 m) | climbed via
south ridge
on 20 June 1994 | Harish Kapadia |
| 4. KIMSHU
(5850 m) | attempted via
north ridge.
Reached 5750 m
on 20 June 1994 | Kaivan Mistry
Prakash Chand
Khubram |

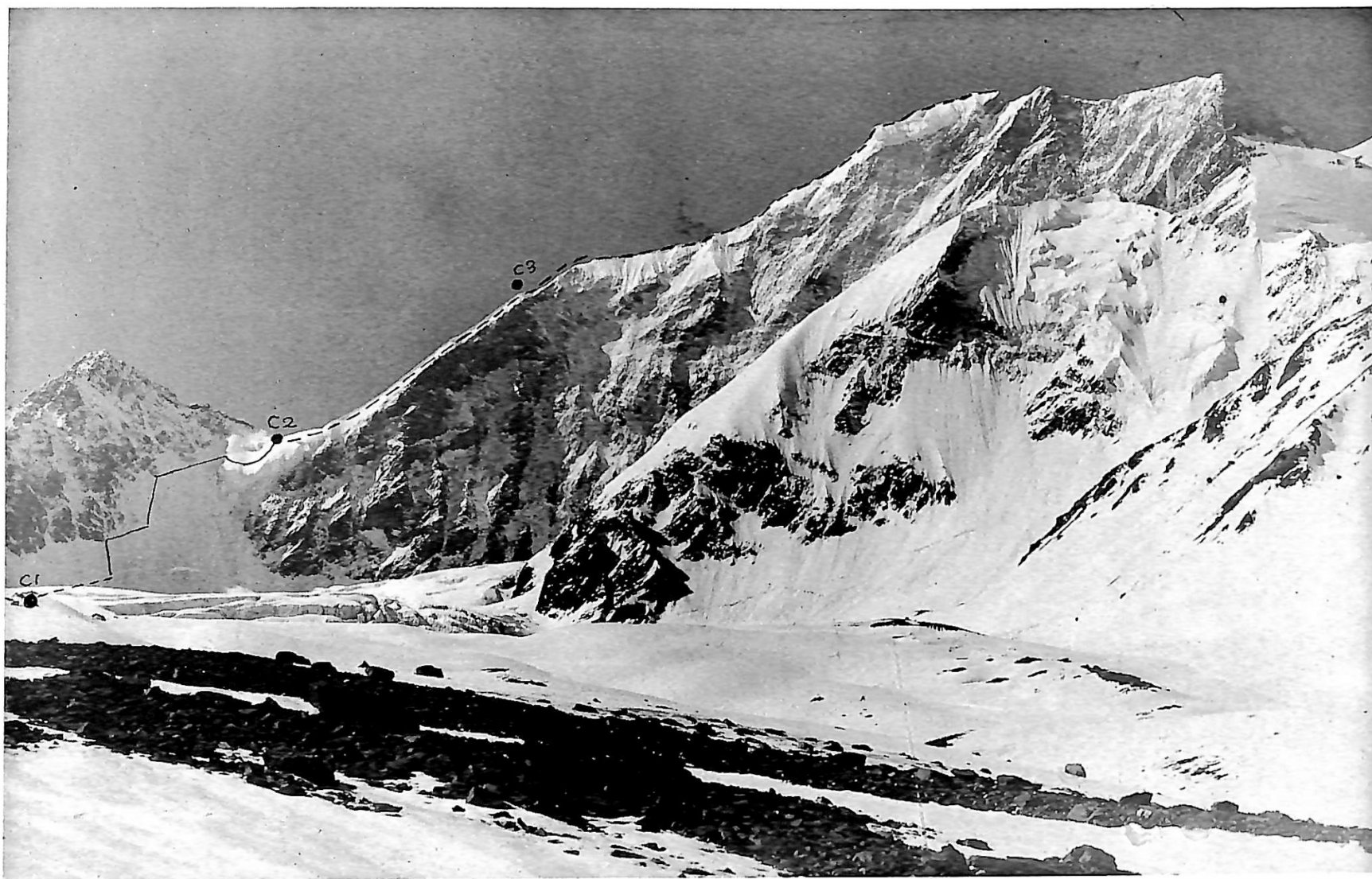
Co-leaders: Chris Bonington and Harish Kapadia

Members: Muslim Contractor, Jim Curran, Jim Fotheringham, Vijay Kothari, Graham Little, Jim Lowther, Kaivan Mistry, Divyesh Muni, Paul Nunn and Joginder Singh Gulia (L.O.).

Supported by: Pasang Bodh, Harsingh (Sr.), Prakash Chand, Khubram, Suratram, Harsingh (Jr.), Kesar Singh (Sr. and Jr.), Dewan Singh and Nima Bahadur.

Period: 29 May 1994 to 30 June 1994 (1st Phase), 1 July 1994 to 17 July 1994 (2nd Phase).

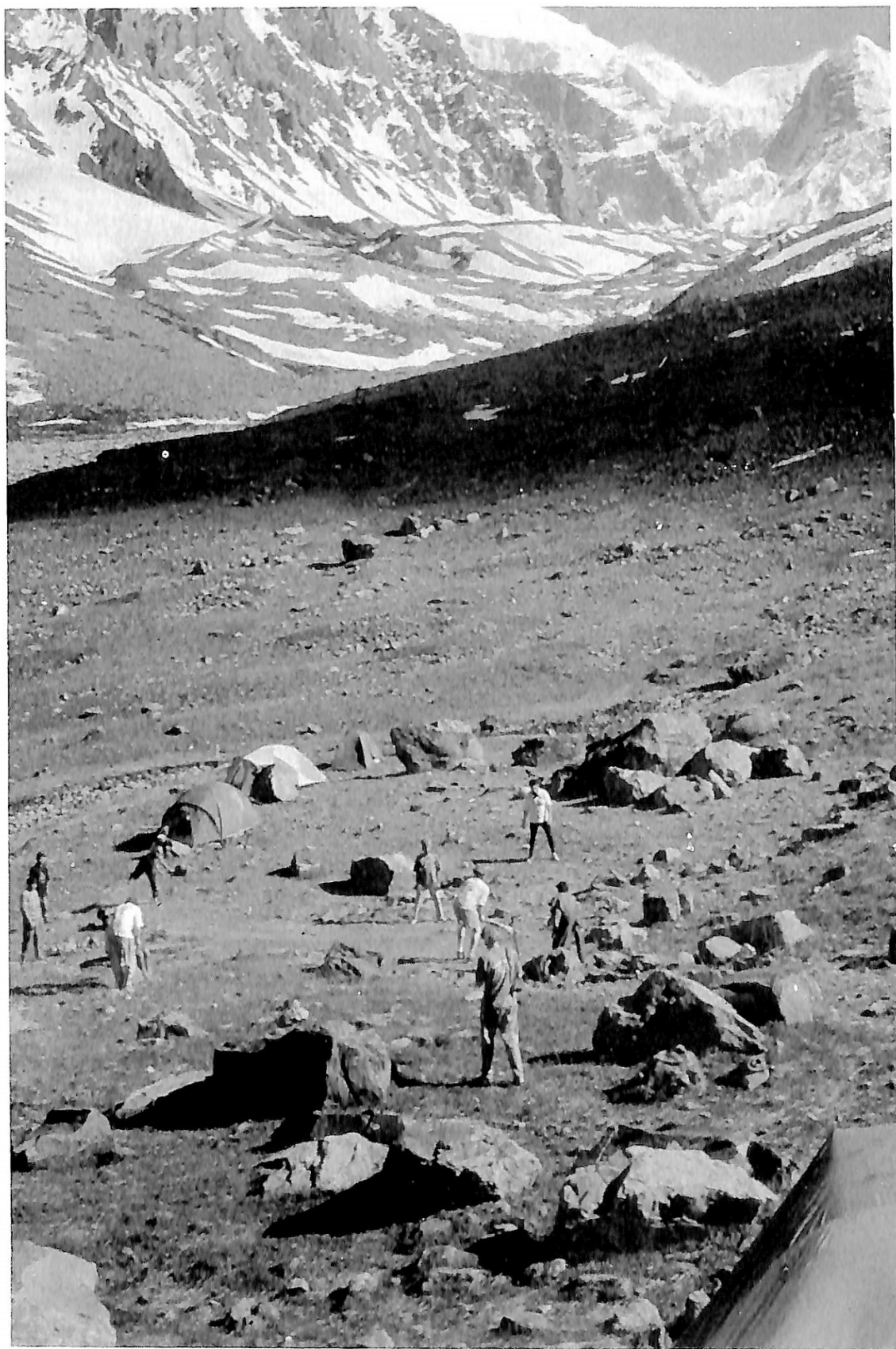
Co-sponsored by: Veriphone Ltd., (U.K.), Godrej, (Bombay) and The Indian Card Clothing Co. Ltd., (Bombay).



10. Rangrik Rang (6553m). Route of first ascent.
(Solid line for fixed-rope section).

Article 10

(Harish Kapadia)



11. Cricket at Racho khad base camp.

Article 10

(Harish Kapadia)



5. The final slopes of Rangrik Rang.

Article 10

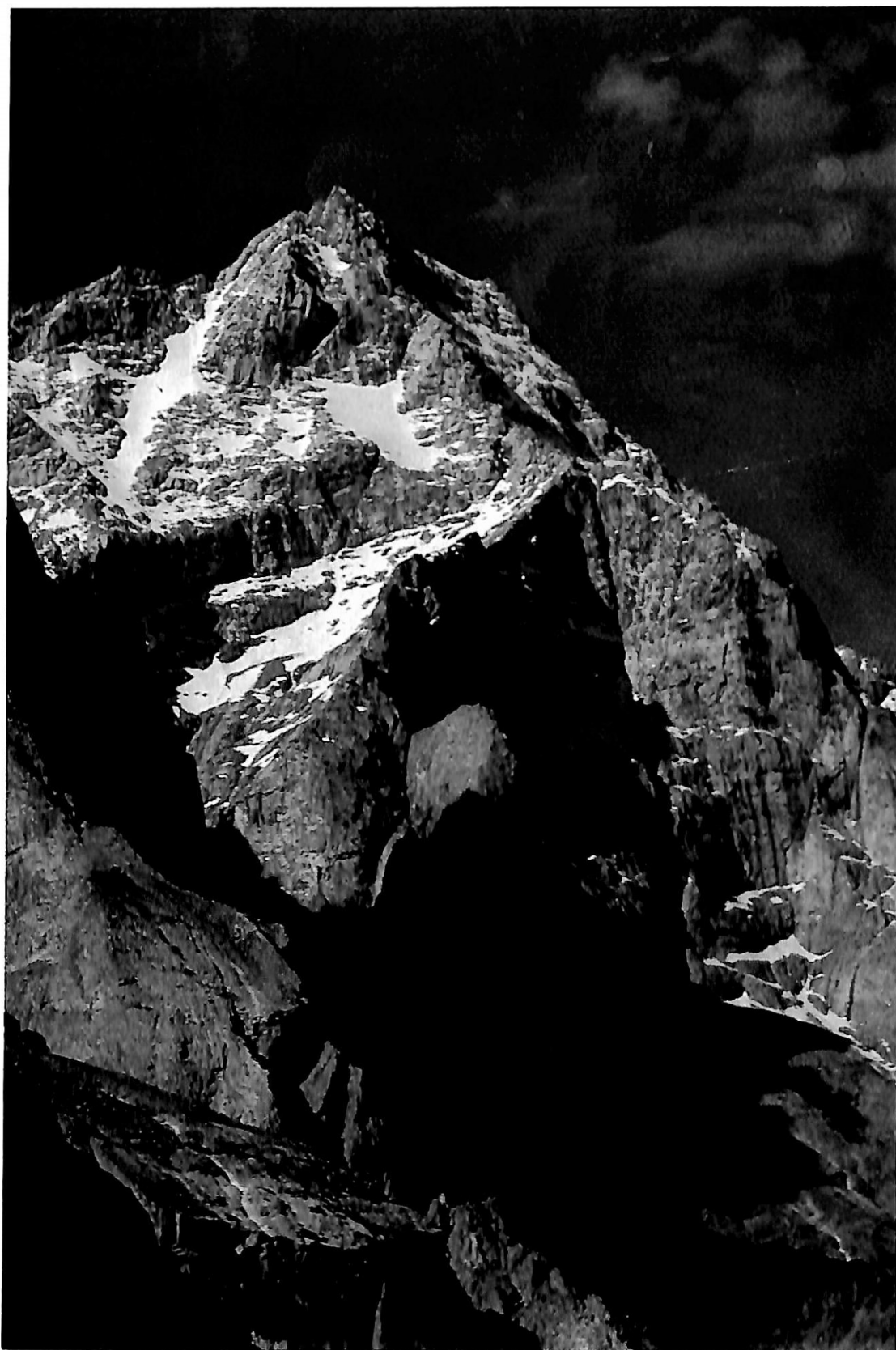
(Graham Little)



6. North face of Rangrik Rang.

Article 10

(Harish Kapadia)



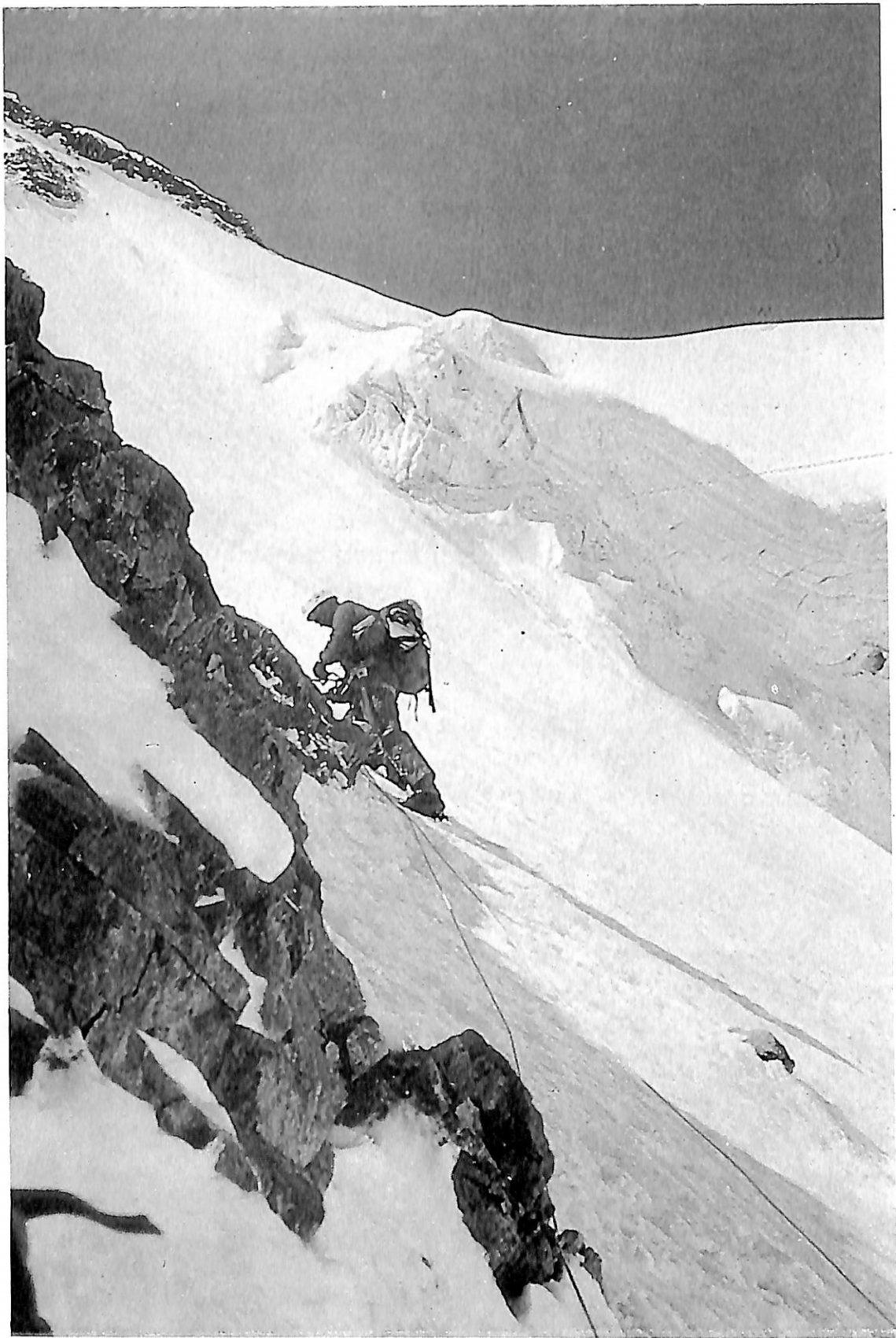
3. Reo Purgyl (6816m), rising above the Satluj river.
Article 10 (Harish Kapadia)



4. The ancient Charang gompa, Kinnaur.

Article 10

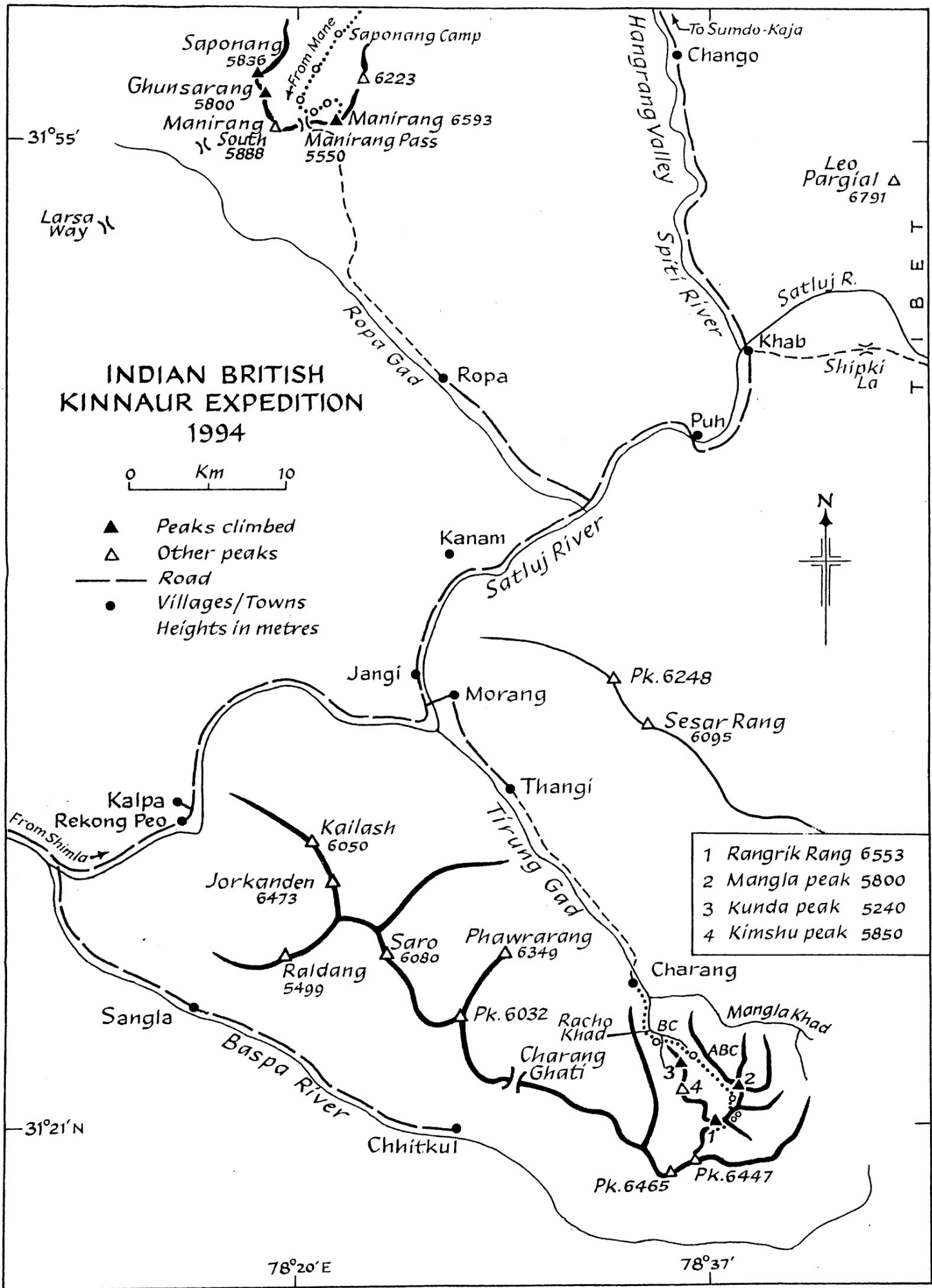
(Harish Kapadia)



12. Climbing to the northeast col of Rangrik Rang.
Article 10 (Divyesh Muni)



13. Camp 2 on the northeast ridge of Rangrik Rang.
Article 10 (Divyesh Muni)



**INDIAN BRITISH
KINNAUR EXPEDITION
1994**

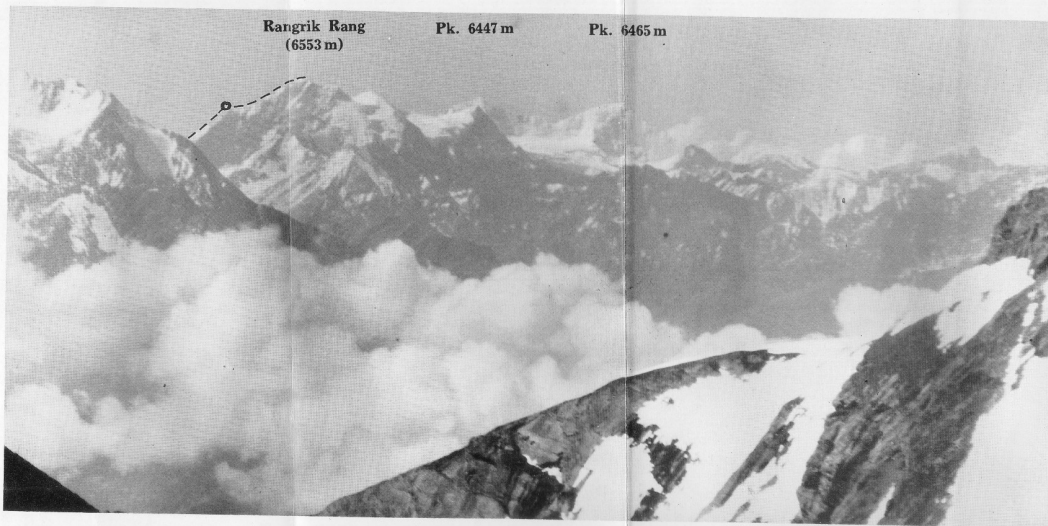
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- ▲ Peaks climbed
- △ Other peaks
- Road
- Villages/Towns
- Heights in metres

- 1 Rangrik Rang 6553
- 2 Mangla peak 5800
- 3 Kunda peak 5240
- 4 Kimshu peak 5850

SE

Rangrik Rang
(6553 m) Pk. 6447 m Pk. 6465 m



↑
PANORAMA B: Racho group of peaks (Tirung gad, Kinnaur)
seen from the Manirang pass.

Article 11

(Kaivan Mistry)

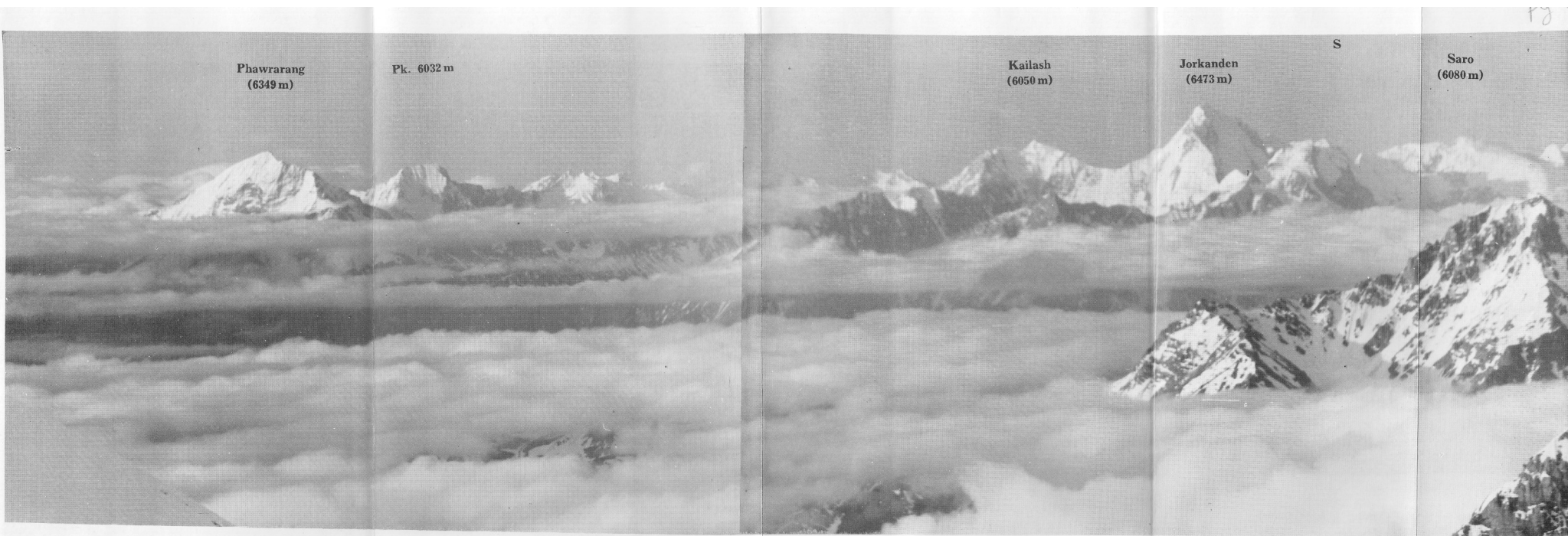
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PANORAMA C: Racho group and Kinnaur peaks, looking north
from summit of Kalanag (6387 m).

1. Rangrik Rang (6553 m), 2. Pk. 6447 m, 3. Pk. 6465 m, 4. Jorkanden
(6473 m).

Article 11

(Harish Kapadia)

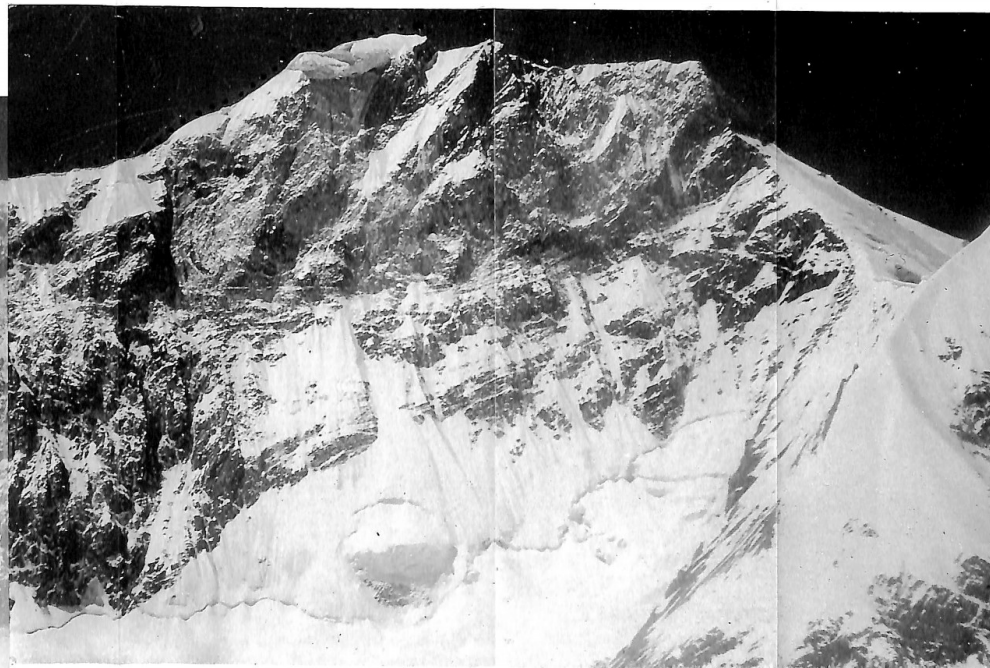
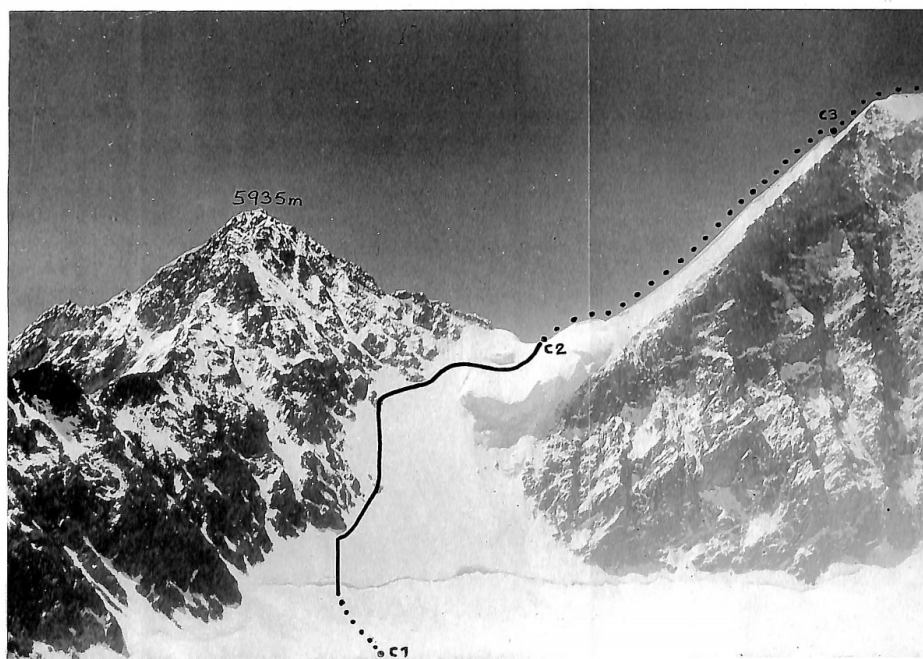




PANORAMA A: View from slopes of Manirang (6593 m). Looking south to Kinnaur peaks.

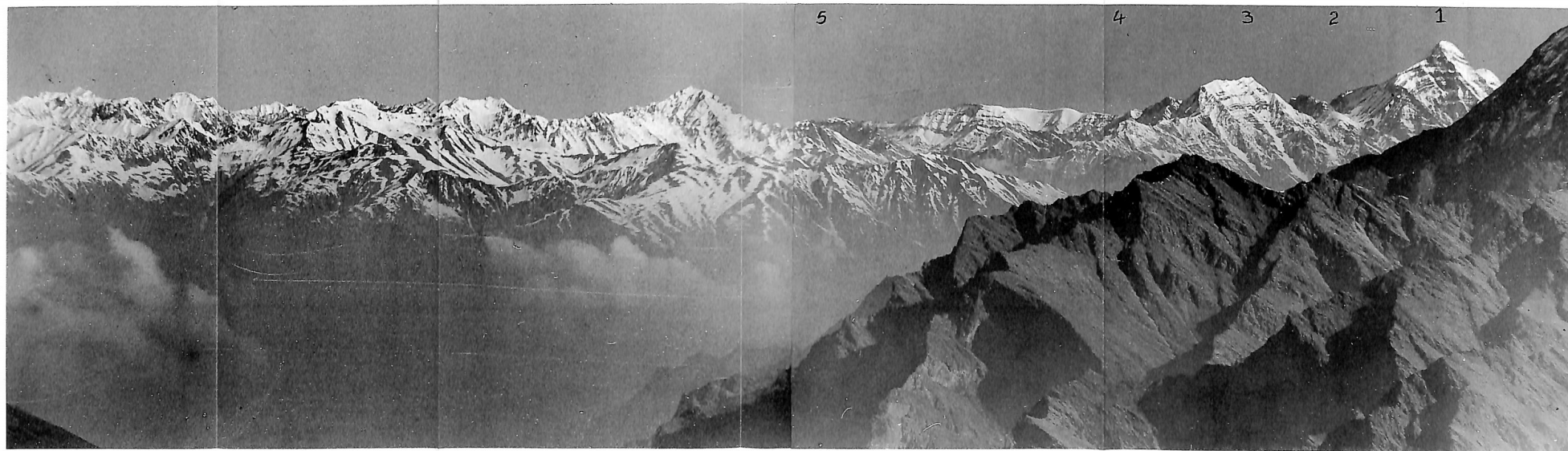
Article 11

*(Harish Kapadia)



PANORAMA D: Rangrik Rang (6553m) north face viewed from Mangla peak (5800m). Route of first ascent.

(Harish Kapadia)



PANORAMA E: View from Mangla peak (5800 m). Peaks of Spiti-Kinnaur divide. 1. Manirang (6593 m), 2. Manirang pass (5550 m), 3. Pk. 6091 m, 4. Ghunsarang pass, 5. Larsa Way pass.

Article 10

(Harish Kapadia)