

## 8 **Obra Gad**

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### Gerry and Louise Wilson

It started like so many adventures must have done, in Stanford's map and book shop in Long Acre, London. Hot foot from our home in the north of England, we met up with friends, all browsing in the basement of Stanford's. After buying two maps of the Garhwal Himalaya we repaired to a nearby Starbucks and, fortified with Lattes and Cappuccinos, we discussed plans.

Chris Bonington and Harish Kapadia had introduced us to the Indian Himalaya in 2003 and we were now preparing for our fourth exploration of lesser-known areas of the great range. The Obra gad valley in northern Garhwal was the choice and mid - May to mid-June the time. All that remained was to book flights, confirm a few details and meet up in the Delhi YMCA in mid - May.

As people who have loved mountains for most of their lives, it has been a particular joy to us to be able to trek and climb modest peaks in the Indian Himalaya over the past four years as we are both now in our mid-sixties (Gerry 66, Louise 65). Our team this year was to consist of four 'seniors' – Harish Kapadia, Suman Dubey and ourselves. The other six members were all in their thirties but the mixture worked well and the levels of activity meshed perfectly.

We arrived in Delhi on 19 May and after three and a half hours sleep, were up in readiness to meet with everyone at 5.30 a.m. in the foyer. By 5.50 we were beginning to wonder if we'd got the wrong day when a rucksacked figure appeared and introduced himself as Rajesh Gadgil, who was to be one of the three climbers on our team. Suki Seth, a climatologist from Mumbai with whom we'd trekked the previous year in Ladakh, appeared next, followed by Rajal Upadhyaya and his wife, Radha who'd been with us in Kullu in 2003 and Ladakh in 2005. Finally Harish joined us all and we were soon on our way to Delhi railway station.

Here we met up with Suman Dubey, Dow Jones Representative in India. He, too, was an old friend from three previous trips. We fought our way through the usual melee across the bridge to what turned out to be the wrong platform, and back again to board the Shatabdi express to Dehra Dun. A nine-hour Jeep journey followed, which landed us up, at

10.00 p.m. at a Forest Rest House at Netwar, the entrance to the National Park. Here, in the dark, we met the third climber, Vinay Hegde from Mumbai, the eighth member of our party.

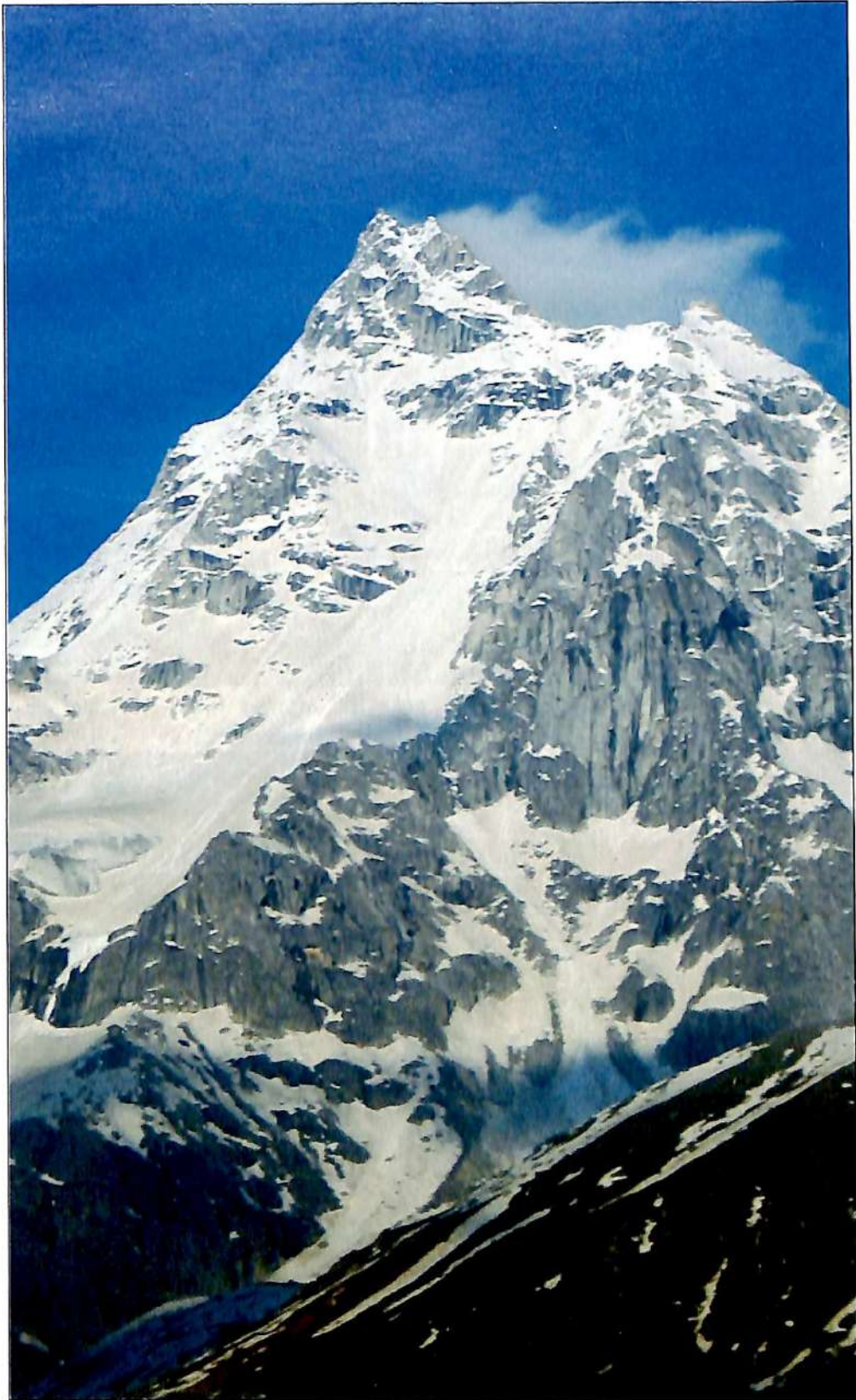
Breakfast next morning was a convivial affair as we were joined by followed by a short drive over very rough roads, being repaired after the winter's damage, took us to Jakhol (2335 m), where we left the Jeeps, and climbed steeply up behind the village to reach the rest house in which we were to stay for the night. During that afternoon Ashish Shah, the final team member, arrived after flying from a holiday in Goa, taking the overnight train from Delhi to Dehra Dun, and a jeep from there to Jakol ! An IT specialist from Mumbai, this was his first trek. Now our adventure could really begin.

The following morning we strolled down through Jakhol and stopped to talk to the headman, who told us that in ten days time their Devta (God) was to be taken up the Obra Gad to where our base camp would be, for a puja. The last time this had been done was about ten years ago, so it was a very special occasion and they were expecting up to five hundred people.

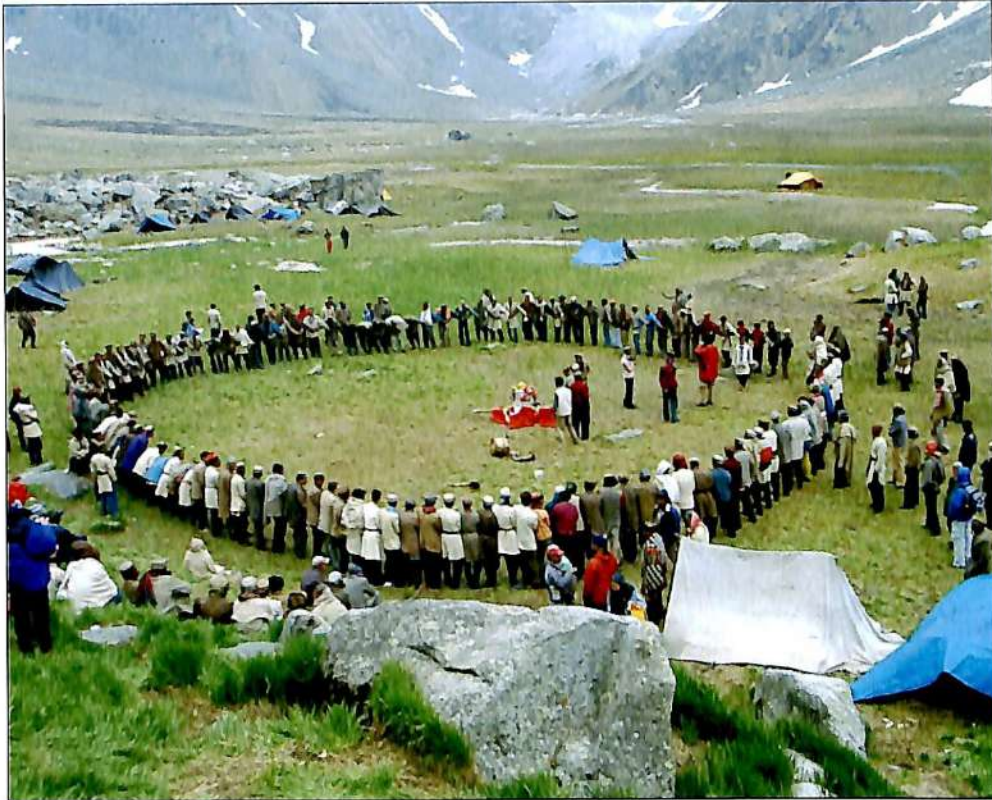
After the village our path descended steeply through mixed forest to a fine bridge over the river Obra, near its confluence with the Supin gad. We began to gain height again through pastures, following the left bank of the river until we reached our first camp site near the small Obra Mandir (temple) (2290 m), which was surrounded by two or three unoccupied wooden dwellings, some small cultivated fields, and a crystal clear spring. A short afternoon storm gave us little hint of what the weather had in store for us.

The route next day traversed a very narrow part of the valley which resulted in numerous ascents and descents before we broke out of the forest onto pasture land, thickly vegetated, especially with dock, and covered with the wild strawberries, for which the Garhwal is renowned. By now it was raining heavily and a rather bedraggled team settled in for their second night but we had gained just over 500 m in height and estimated we were at 2810 m.

On the third day the weather was cool and overcast and the route left the forest behind. Soon after lunch we reached a beautiful meadow camp site, ringed with marsh marigolds and rather faded *primula denticulata*, with *rhododendron campanulatum* on the slopes across the river. Gradually the sun came out and we had our first glimpse of the high peaks at the head of the valley. Again another satisfactory height gain as we were at 3420 m.



51. Ranglana (5554 m) on eastern ridge of Obra gad. (Harish Kapadia)



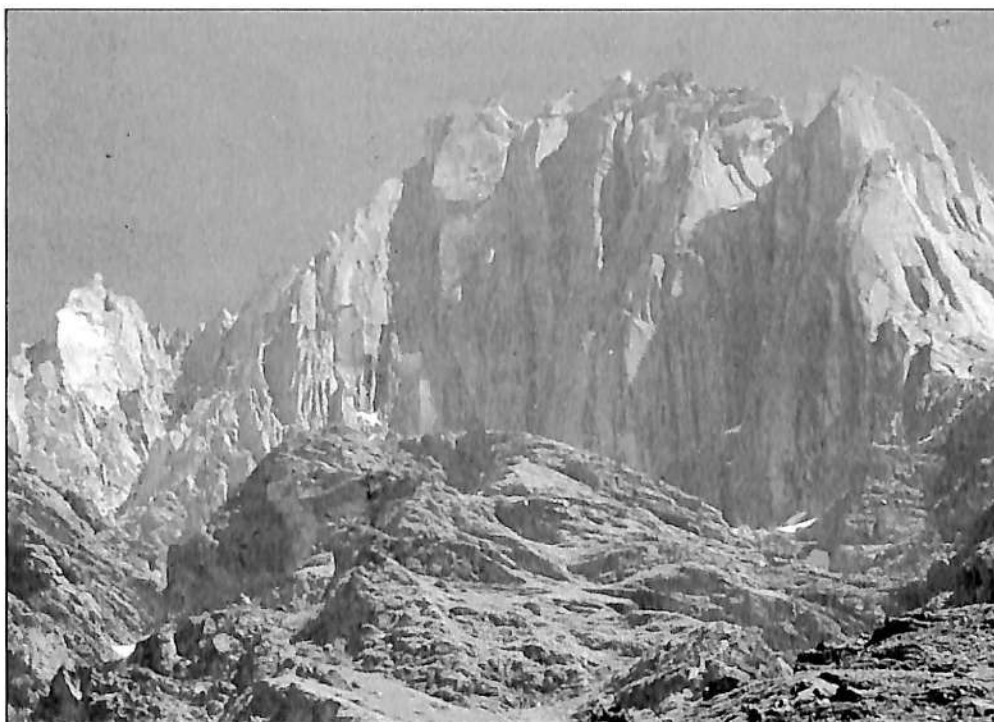
52. Celebrations for Jakhand Devta at Devkyari, Obra gad. (Louise Wilson)



53. Priest invoking Jakhand Devta at Devkyari, Obra gad. (Louise Wilson)

The following day was both short and sweet as we soon arrived at an emerald green meadow split by a sparkling clear stream, fringed with marsh marigolds, primula involucrata and a few emerging orchids, interspersed with tiny, startlingly blue gentians. To our delight we found ourselves camping only a few metres beyond this idyllic spot. For once the sun was shining and we soon established ourselves amongst carpets of anemone obtusiloba, whilst the pure white flowers of the wild onion covered the ground like a dusting of snow high up the hillsides. In the late afternoon the high peaks cleared totally from the wispy clouds in which they had been wreathed and there was much photography and speculating on routes by the Vinay, Rajesh and Rajal.

It is possible that this area was Himri Thach (3685 m) though the map showed three thaches in the upper reaches of the Obra gad, the top one of which was sited high on the Devkyari glacier, so we speculated that perhaps all three names had been transposed higher on the map than on the ground.



47. 'Jairai Rocks', above Himri Thach in center of the Obra gad valley.  
(Harish Kapadia)

We were now in dramatic mountain scenery with great views of the north west face of Ranglana (5554 m) which was the climbers' first objective. They went off on a recce the next morning (25 May) and returned just

before lunch with the news that they thought there was a feasible route up this imposing wall. There was a cirque of three peaks: Ranglana (5554 m), Dhodu (5418 m) and Gunchha (5130 m). During the afternoon the weather broke with torrential rain, hail, thunder and lightning, which drove us into the dining tent where we established what was to become a regular routine of reading, playing Scrabble and listening to iPods.

26 May was a beautiful morning with clear skies, although there was still heavy cloud down the valley towards Jakhol. The porters had told us there were four small lakes on the opposite side of the Obra, under the slopes of Dhodu (5418 m), so, taking advantage of the sunny morning, we joined Suki, Suman, and Ashish, on a trip to the lakes. To reach them we had to walk up the valley beside the river until it was possible to cross where it disappeared under a huge boulder field. As we gained height, more big snow-clad mountains and huge granite spires surrounding the head of the valley began to be visible.

27 May dawned fine again, but still the clouds were massed lower down. However, the climbers set off to establish two higher camps in preparation for an attempt, as an acclimatisation climb, on Gunchha and Harish went off to recce what would be our advance base at Devkyari Thach. Between intermittent bad weather we explored the area around Himri Thach. On 28th May the climbers established their high camp on a moraine rib in readiness for a summit bid the next day.

On 29 May (Gerry's 67th birthday), Suman, Suki and the two of us set off up a steep, narrow side valley to get some views across to Dhodu ka Gunchha (5130 m), a subsidiary summit of Dhodu, where the climbers should be. Around 9.00 a.m. we spotted three tiny matchstick figures on the summit snowfield. Suman managed to video them and we later saw them start their descent. After that Gerry and I continued up the gully to get some views of the impressive granite ridge on the northern side of the Obra gad.

We were now acclimatised and fit for the move to our advance base at 4030 m, beneath the tongue of the Devkyari glacier. On the morning of the 30th it was raining but after a short delay waiting for it to clear, we set off on the three and a half hour walk to advance base. Even though Harish and Suman had told us about it, we were amazed at our first glimpse of the enormously wide, perfectly flat-bottomed valley, about three kilometres in length, leading up to the moraine plug descending from the snout of the glacier, which formed Devkyari Thach. In addition it was

dominated by the impressive north face of Ranglana with its snowfields, hanging glaciers and tumbling seracs, all swept by regular snow slides. It was quite a magnificent situation. Just after lunch the climbers re-joined us, pleased with their climb, although disappointed that nothing else in that area had been in condition. However, their next plan was to attempt something above the Devkyari glacier.

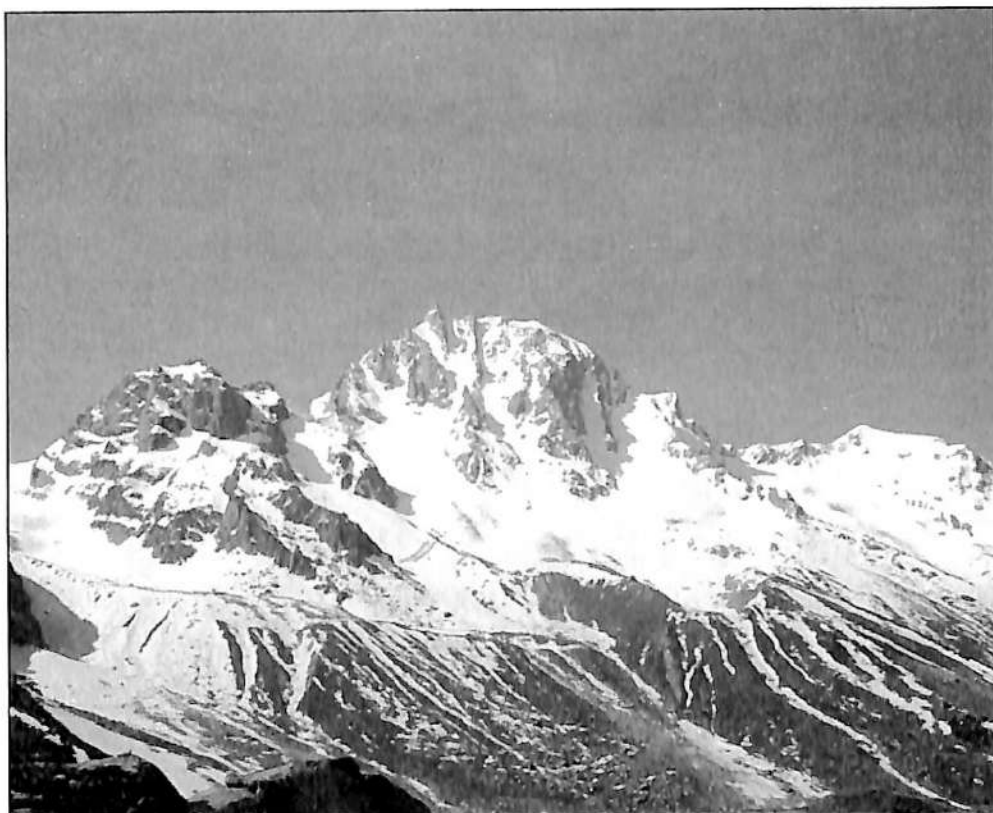
Apart from meeting the occasional shepherd or goatherd on our approach to or descent from higher ground, our explorations with Harish had always been to wild and remote, places devoid of people or even signs of people. However, at 7.00 a.m. on 31 May all that changed as our peaceful morning erupted to the sound of drums, music and cheering men escorting their *Devta*. They processed through our camp site to a cave some 250 m away where they paused before continuing to the toe of the glacial moraine which was the birthplace of their god, Someshwar Devta (another name for Shiva).

After a short ceremony there the headman chose several strong men for the honour of carrying the *Devta* up to the glacier to bathe him. Whilst they were doing this the remaining men gathered rocks and built a perfect small shrine, presumably, we thought, to mark the *Devta's* birthplace.

In the afternoon a puja was held at the cave near our camp and we all went to join in and watch the dancing which followed. We could hear the sounds of celebration continuing far into the night but that did not prevent the procession setting off at 5.00 a.m. the following day, to return to Jakhol and further festivities there, in which the women and children would join.

For once it was a fine morning the two of us set off for an exploration of one of the side valleys. Gerry and I continued on up a snow - filled gully, intent on reaching the horizon to get views into the Supin gad. With one eye firmly on the gathering clouds we turned back from our high point of 4600 m, and descended quickly on the snow to the main valley, making it back to our tents just before the rain started and set in for the night.

2 June was totally overcast, as was the 3rd, but Radha, Ashish and Gerry and I toiled up the moraine beside the Devkyari glacier to see if we could catch a glimpse of the climbers' camp. We did locate them perched high on the moraine ahead of us, but there seemed to be little activity. Conditions on the mountains presented no opportunities for them to progress to their next objective.



48. Peaks on the eastern ridge Obra gad: L to r: Unnamed point, Dhodu (5418 m) and Gunchha (5125 m). Last peak was climbed by our team. (Louise Wilson)

As the weather was deteriorating fast we started our descent. The rain came on and the mist reduced our visibility to a few metres, which made things quite interesting as Harish had moved the camp down to a less exposed site, whose location we weren't absolutely sure of. But using our memories of the approach, supported by careful compass bearings, we were relieved when at last we saw our tents looming up out of the mist.

The climbers followed the day after having decided it wasn't worth sitting out yet more bad weather, and we all agreed on an earlier-than-planned return to Jakhol. This was completed in one long day, to the Obra temple, then the final haul next morning up to the jeeps waiting near the village, ironically in warm sunshine.

We had enjoyed yet another wonderful trip to a beautiful unspoilt area, which held something for each of us; impressive peaks, superb flowers and outstanding scenery. Only the weather had let us down. Despite this our love affair with the Indian Himalaya remains undiminished.



**Members:** Gerry and Louise Wilson, Radha and Rajal Upadhyaya, Rajesh Gadgil, Vinay Hegde, Harish Kapadia, Ashish Shah, Sukeshi Seth and Suman Dubey.

**Summary:**

A trek to the Obra gad in Garhwal. The trek was undertaken in May-June 2006.

