



71 Above Camp 3 on Swargarobini. Photo: C. Clarke

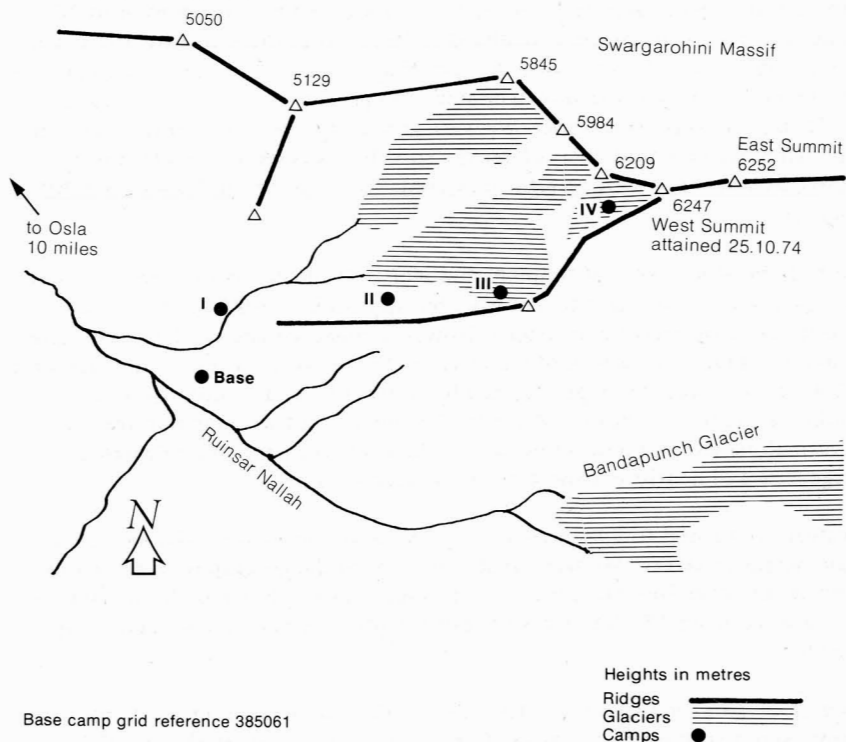
The first ascent of Swargarohini (6247 m)

Charles Clarke

The changes in the Restricted Areas of the Indian Himalaya have now opened up a vast mountain area to those who do not mind climbing within the law and we were lucky to have discovered this early during the preparations to climb at the head of the river Tons in Uttar Pradesh in the autumn of 1974.

I first heard of Swargarohini—or Surngalin of older maps—during my first visit to India in 1962 when Jack Gibson showed me photographs of his visits to the Harki Doon and Ruinsara valleys with parties from the Doon School. They had climbed several peaks on these trips and made a notable attempt (and later ascent) of Black Peak (6387 m) in 1953 when a school party climbed in one day from 4450 m to 6350 m. Between the two valleys lies the Swargarohini massif, a magnificent group of ice and rock peaks, all unclimbed; attempts in

Sketch map of Swargarohini



1958 (Allan Berry) and later (Hari Dang) had been unsuccessful. There was one piece of mythological information: the Vedic characters Draupadi and Pandavas had ascended Swargarohini with a dog, leaving no doubt that this was The Pathway to Heaven. We hoped not only to repeat their ascent, dogless, but to return.

My plans to visit Nepal in the autumn of 1974 were foiled by the Khamba troubles and it was almost by chance that I joined the Swargarohini team this year—the only Englishman. A Canadian friend, Dilsher Singh Virk, was planning a small expedition to the mountain and had invited Peter Fuhrman and Bruce MacKinnon from the Canadian National Parks. We took 2 excellent Indian climbers from The Nehru Institute of Mountaineering, Uttarkarshi, Mohan Singh and Rattan Singh (who had been with Chris Bonington on Changabang earlier this year) and although we paid them we made every effort to welcome them as full expedition members. Shri P. Pathak, a liaison officer chosen by the Indian Mountaineering Foundation was unable to complete the approach march because of illness. Nancy Gordon and Beverley Fuhrman walked with us as far as Base Camp.

The approach to the Ruinsara from Dehra Dun is one of the easier journeys to the hills. A bus runs to Purola climbing along the Jumna and Aglar rivers where Harrer had such trials during his escape to Tibet; a truck took us 20 miles further to the present roadhead at Mori. From there an easy 3 day march with mules brought us to Osla, the last village, and one day more, with porters, to the idyllic alluvial meadow where we camped on the shores of a clear lake at 3600 m. It was 10 October. We were greeted by 60 hours continuous rain and when we emerged 3 days later the snowline was several hundred feet above us and every peak in sight plastered. So much for our hopes for a dry October.

During the storm we had frequent and largely futile discussions over the map but gathered there might be a reasonable approach to P6252 m from the snout of the Banderpunch Glacier. However, what we saw on the murky afternoon of 14 October was hardly attractive, for between us and the E ridge were 7000 feet of steep snow punctuated by 2 tiers of ice-falls: doubtless the route looked at its worst because of the fresh snow-fall but we were not keen to return along the steep meadows above the Ruinsara after an unpleasantly large rock-fall nearly cut short our walk back to Base.

Instead we turned to a high cwm N of Base and immediately saw we could gain height in safety. We were unable to fathom the geography of the mountain at this stage but gathered that a S ridge led to a glacier at about 5800 m. For a week from 18 October we began a happy, interesting and rarely easy climb.

A guja cave in the moraine at 4000 m became Camp 1 and on a still night we could shout to Base a mile away; Camp 2 was on the glacier about 2000 ft higher. The ridge began easily as a broad shoulder and we walked up to place Camp 3 at 4900 m in a snow bay below a gendarme.

Thereafter the ridge became steeper and gave fine climbing on knife-edged snow, often heavily corniced and on rock gendarmes, with 2 short traverses on to the E face. The summit of P6247 m was out of sight until the ridge ended in the 'Upper Swargarohini Glacier' at 5400 m: here we put Camp 4 and saw above the route leading to a col between P6209 m and P6247 m. October 25th dawned clear after a cold night (the temperature inside the tent was -15°C) and we set off through a honeycomb of crevasses towards the col arriving at 11.30am. A corniced ridge led to P6209 m while a steep snow-face lay to the E. We toyed with the idea of both summits but were content with the higher; by 12.45pm we stood on the dome of P6247 m and glimpsed for a few seconds the peaks of Kinnaur, Tibet and Garwhal before the cumulus swept over us. We saw too the fifth summit of Swargarohini and did not feel ashamed that the map said it was 5 m higher.

Our return was marred only by my extraordinary carelessness for on the evening of the 25th, almost by chance, I examined my feet to find them frozen way above the toes. So much for the expedition doctor; after climbing down I was carried by porters and later by a docile horse, eventually reaching London on Guy Fawkes' Day.

So ended a happy trip to a fine mountain and, I understand, the first Canadian first ascent in the Himalayas.

Reference

Gibson, J. T. M. (1954) 'Himalayan Journal' XVIII, 93