
Unknown Spiti: The Middle Country

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(Plates 17-19)

Most of us have heard of Heinrich Harrer and Peter Aufschnaiter. Their escape, followed by their seven years in Tibet, is a legend. Like them, H Paidar and Ludwig Schmaderer had also escaped from a British internment camp during the war. They followed a year after Harrer, using much the same route to the frontier and into Tibet, but they returned to Spiti with tragic consequences:

In July 1945 when still wandering aimlessly and not knowing that the war is over, L Schmaderer was brutally robbed and murdered at or near the little village of Tabo in Spiti. H Paidar returned to Poo on the Sutlej, and followed the river down to Sarahan where he gave himself up and made a full report to the police. The murderers were arrested.¹

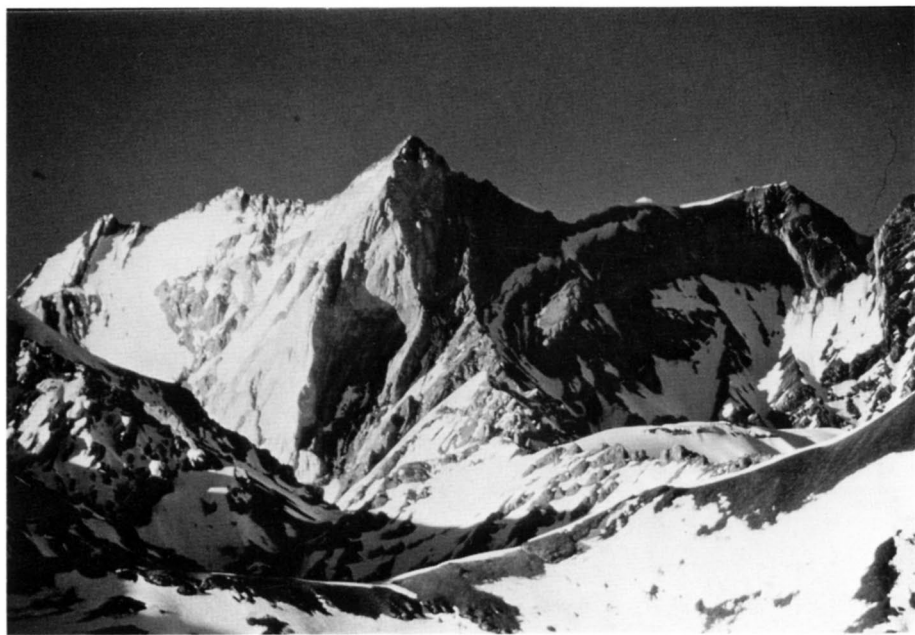
It was the first such crime reported in Spiti for over 40 years.² Perhaps this was the first time that the area was reported in such a bad light.

The earliest travellers here were the famous Gerard brothers, who explored 'Bashahr, Spiti and Kanawar' (Kinnaur) in 1817.³ Since then, except for a mountaineering party, it has been cocooned in its own fold.

Spiti, which literally means 'middle country', lies between India and Tibet, across the main chain of the Himalaya. One of the routes from Kinnaur allows an easy route into Spiti; it is now motorable and is kept open for most of the year. The original six-week journey on foot is reduced to 24 hours, but is equally tiring with crowded buses, road-blocks and unmetalled roads. About 10km ahead of Puh, the Satluj river enters India, cutting through the Himalaya near the Shipki La. The Spiti river flows into the Satluj after its turbulent journey at Khab. The road climbs up a series of loops (the Kah loops) in 10km to enter the barren lands of the Hangrang valley. About 30km ahead of Chango one enters Spiti at Sumdo. A road branches east to Kaurik, at the bottom of which the Pare Chu river re-enters India. The Spiti river cuts the valley almost in the centre, with side-valleys joining it broadly from the east and west.

The Eastern Valleys

The road goes along the Spiti river, the valley-floor itself now above 3700m all along. Valleys open up on the east. The first eastern valley is the Giu nala, a short valley which leads to the Lingti valley in the north and also has an exit to Tibet. Ahead at the Lingti village, the river with the same name meets the Spiti



17. Gya (6794m), the highest peak in Himachal Pradesh (Spiti) SW face. (p 52)



18. Legendary Shilla (6132m) in Spiti. The true peak is L. (p 52)

river. Lingti is one of the largest and longest valleys of Spiti; it is 60km long, and at its north-eastern head, on the Tibetan border, stands Gya (6794m), the highest peak in Himachal. (It is 3m higher than Leo Pargial.)

Further ahead one reaches Kaja (412km from Shimla), the administrative headquarter of Spiti. A small place with few locals but many government employees, it has electricity, supplied through a hydro-electric plant from the Ratang valley. Complete with video-parlours, eating houses and rest-houses, it is a far cry from earlier days and from other parts of Spiti.

Ahead of Kaja the main road crosses the Spiti river on to its western bank. But to the east are the valleys of Shilla nala (though the road does not lead to this legendary peak) and Parilungbi nala. This latter nala leads to the famous Parang La (5600m) which in turn leads to Chumar in the Rupshu district of Ladakh. Some early crossings of this pass by Europeans have been recorded.⁴ An alternate pass, the Takling La (5500m) is easier and completes the picture of eastern Spiti.

All these valleys are small in size except the Lingti which goes deep into the mountains, taking a north-westerly turn at its junction with the Chaksachan Lungpa nala. At its head lies the pass of Yangzi Diwan (5890m) and across lies the peak Parilungbi (6166m). Descending from the pass on the other side one joins the Parang La route, the relay completing the circle. At the head of the Chaksachan Lungpa valley stands the majestic Gya, a stupendous rock monolith which offers one of the finest challenges. This peak is circumvented by the Pare Chu river. The Pare Chu starts at the foot of the Parang La and flows to the north-east. After about 30km it takes a huge turn to the south to enter Tibet for an 85km journey. It again takes a sharp westerly turn to re-enter India at Kaurik and meets the Spiti river at Sumdo. This peculiar course, with a fast flow of water at a very high elevation, is unique.

The Western Valleys

Whilst the eastern valleys have relations with Ladakh and Tibet, the western valleys are joined to Kinnaur and Kulu. After entering Spiti from Sumdo, the large Pin river flows from the south-west, exactly opposite to the Lingti river. This long valley gives major routes of access to Spiti. The Teri Khango (4865m) leads to the Pin valley from the Bhabha valley of Kinnaur. The Manirang La (5888m) allows access from the Ropa valley of Kinnaur to Pin. A little further to the west, the Pin-Parbati pass (5319m) leads to the Parbati valley and Kulu.

North of the Pin valley there lie three still relatively unknown valleys: Parahio, Ratang and Gyundi. Each is a narrow gorge, difficult of approach; each has a host of peaks, side-valleys and no easy passes on the Kulu side. Parahio bifurcates from the Pin valley. Gyundi has three major branches, each a valley by itself. It is proposed to declare the Gyundi valley a National Park; this will forbid all entry into the valley by locals, in order to preserve the flora and fauna. The difficult Ratang gorge now boasts a hydro-electric station right near the glacier. A 10km road has been blasted out in this gorge. Finally, at the northern end the road climbs up to the Kunzum La (4550m), the traditional western exit into Lahul (and Kulu over the Rohthang pass). This road leads to

Manali (201km from Kaja) and is daily traversed by buses (in 10 hours) and trucks, for six months in the year.

Climbs and Explorations

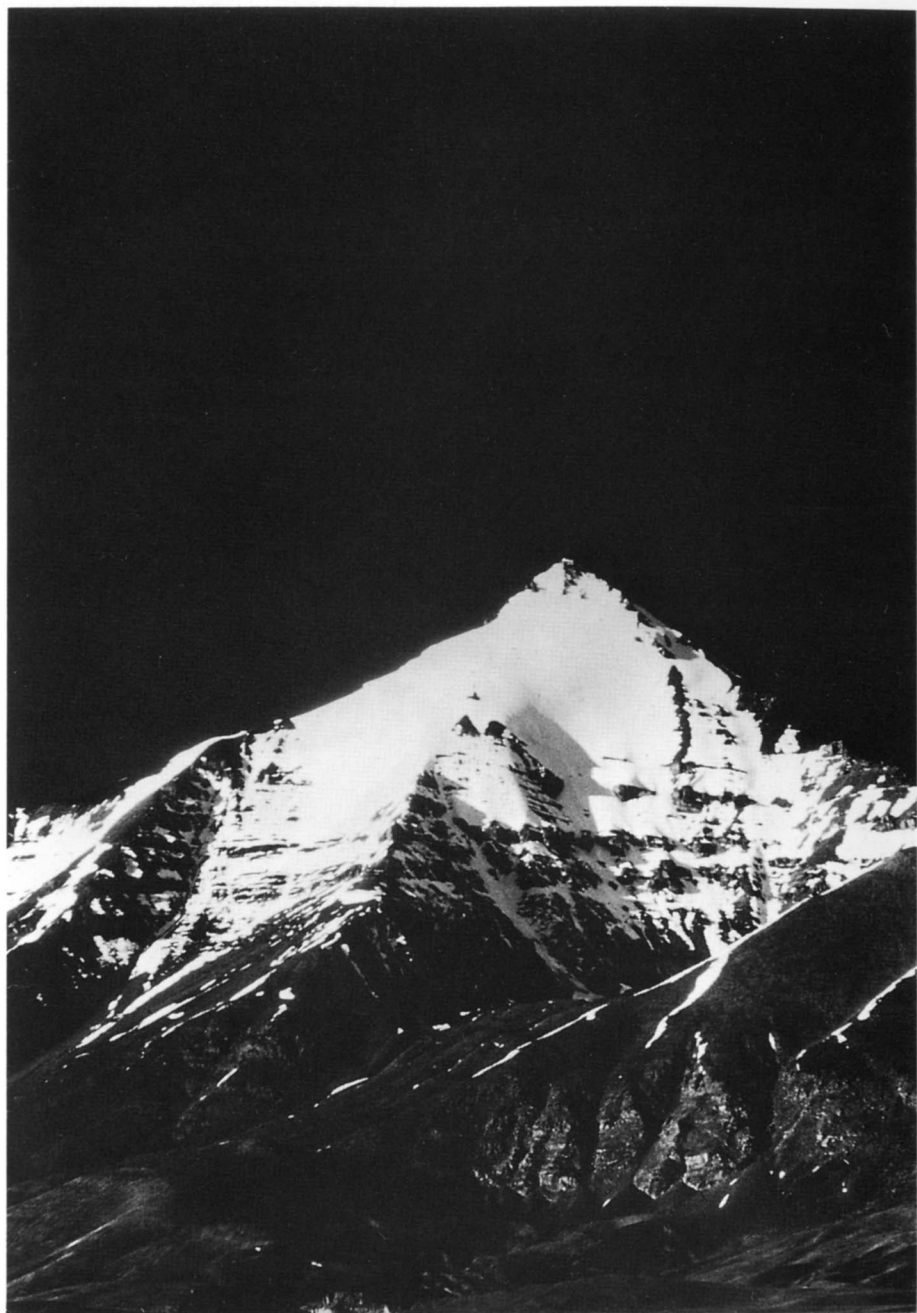
Mountaineers have visited Spiti sporadically. The first climber in the area was J O M Roberts in 1939, who made the first ascent of Chau Chau Kang Nilda (CCKN) (6303m) (then known as Guan Nelda).⁵ J de V Graaff and K Snelson reced the area in 1952. But some of the most admirable exploration was done by P F Holmes in 1955 and 1956. In the first trip, he entered the Ratang valley with T H Braham and made fine ascents. They briefly entered the Gyundi valley and made some detailed observations. CCKN was also climbed and the true height of Shilla clearly established.⁶ On his return visit in 1956, Holmes was most energetic in climbing and exploring the Ratang and Parahio systems. He ultimately crossed two interesting passes, first from Ratang to Parahio and then into the Dibibokri nala to Kulu. It is to his credit that such a difficult and unknown area was so well recorded. To date no other party has ventured into these gorges, which remain a most inviting area.

Similarly, the Lingti valley had no visitors until 1983, when an Indian team led by Harish Kapadia went up the valley until stopped by the Tangmor gorge. They returned to Kaja and explored the approaches from Shilla jot, further to the north. In the outcome five peaks were climbed, but a full exploration of upper Lingti eluded them.⁷ In 1987 they returned again, fortified by their earlier experience. The Lingti valley was penetrated to its head, the problem of locating Gya was solved and the peak was photographed. Crossing over the Yangzi Diwan pass (5890m), they crossed the watershed to Ladakh and climbed Parilungbi (6166m). Shilla was attempted from the north for the first time, and also from its eastern col. They returned via the Shilla jot, completing the full exploration and climbing various other peaks in the different side-valleys.

Other climbers visiting Spiti have mostly repeated the ascents of CCKN, Shilla and Kanamo, all near Langja village.

No account of Spiti would be complete without mention of many other facets. It has a unique store-house of shales and a unique geological collection. The positions of the Gompas (monasteries) are a sight to behold; religion here is a real guiding force. In the last few years Spiti has witnessed much better administration and has made progress by way of road-building, bus services and canals. The average Spitian is better off, even in the worst of winters. Of course some loss of cultural values is evident, but then all progress has its price.

In spite of the better access and means of communication, there has luckily been no excess of climbing activity. To a mountain-lover it is still an unknown and inviting proposition, with several trekking routes and hundreds of unclimbed peaks. To an outsider, even the area and the name Spiti, let alone the mountains, inspire awe. It is as forbidden as ever. After Schmaderer's murder, Paidar went back to the internment camp. Thank God he did not stay seven years and write about it!



19. *Chau Chau Kang Nilda (The Blue Moon in the Sky), rising above Langja.*
(p 52)

A Note on Shilla

This small peak on the divide between Lingti and the Shilla nala became so famous that any mention of Spiti leads to the memory of Shilla and vice versa.

It was first reported to have been climbed in 1860 by an unnamed *khalasi* of the Survey of India, who erected a pole on the top. The peak appears as 'Parang La No 2 S' with a height of 23,064ft on SOI Sheet 64SW, published August 1874 (Gya is mentioned as 'GUA Snowy Peak', 22,309ft on the same sheet). Thus Shilla retained a dubious altitude record for 47 years, until Dr Longstaff climbed Trisul (23,360ft) in 1907.

The first visitors to Spiti had doubts about its height. In 1952 Snelson and de Graaff felt that it was a much smaller peak, and a high peak was observed to its NE (see a letter by de Graaff in *HJ*40). Holmes and Braham felt the same. A letter in *HJ*26 p169 established its height as 20,050ft. Now on the latest maps, with modern methods of surveying, the height of Shilla is firmly established as 6132m (20,120ft) and that of Gya as 6794m (22,291ft). Thus Shilla has lost 2944ft while Gya has lost only 18ft!

In Spiti we found that Shilla is better known to the locals than any other peak. Almost every lama and villager, however far away, seems to know of it. They associate it with a place for the dead leading to heaven, and they still believe that it is the highest point in Spiti and Ladakh from which one can see heaven. It has a legendary air built around it. No one – the most elderly lama included – seems to be aware of the ascent by a *khalasi*, either to confirm or to deny it. And very few villagers in Langja knew about the route leading to it. Anyway, according to them it is still the highest and is virgin. The Shilla legend is here to stay.

REFERENCES

- 1 K Mason, *Abode of Snow*. Diadem Books, 1987, p286.
- 2 See *HJ*15, 69–74, 1949, for a full account by H Paidar.
- 3 K Mason, *loc cit*, p69.
- 4 *HJ*1, 79, 1929; *HJ*8, 118, 1936.
- 5 *HJ*12, 129, 1940.
- 6 P F Holmes, *Mountains and a Monastery*. London, 1958. Also *HJ*20, 78–86, 1957.
- 7 *HJ*40, 96–108, 1982–83.