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Jacket photographs:
Front Indian British Kinnaur Expedition: descending from the summit of Rangrik Rang, 6553m. *Chris Bonington*

Back The Diamond Couloir is the fine line dropping from the notch between Batian and Nelion, Mount Kenya's twin summits. The Diamond Glacier is the small patch below the notch. The Darwin Glacier is the larger patch below the couloir. *Paul Clarke*

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The mountain towered over the end of the valley, higher than anything around it, big and complex, with corniced ridges stretching down to outlying peaks. Clouds played hide and seek around the cluster of summits, concealing then revealing. We gazed through binoculars, got out our telephoto lenses, excited and relieved at last to be seeing our objective. Until this moment when we breasted the shoulder, our mountain had just been a spot height on a map – Point 6553 – it didn’t even have a name. But it was the highest peak in the Tirung Gad range in southern Kinnaur, an area that had only recently been opened to climbers and in which only two peaks had been climbed – Jokanden (6473m) and Phawarang (6349m). We had not even been able to obtain a photograph of our objective but to me this was an attraction, for it added to that sense of exploration that is the essence of mountain adventure.

There are very few areas left that are so relatively untouched. The 8000 metre peaks are beginning to resemble the mountains of the Alps, with networks of routes up them and base camps reminiscent of Snell’s Field in Chamonix. The climbs are challenging and the crowded base camps have their social charm, but that delicious sense of surprise engendered by the unknown is lost.

Our expedition numbered eleven climbers from India and Britain with Harish Kapadia and myself as joint leaders. It was a formula that Harish had tried with great success on four previous occasions with various British groups. In 1985 Jim Fotheringham, a Greenland veteran, had been a member of the first joint expedition to Rimo in the East Karakoram, while Paul Nunn had been to Chong Kumdan, in the same area, in 1991. Graham Little and I had been with Harish in 1992 on Panch Chuli, when between us we made six first ascents. That year we had also had our share of narrow escapes, with Stephen Venables falling 80 metres and badly damaging his knee, while I went for an involuntary 150-metre slide down steep snow.

We were following the same well-tried procedure, the British members joining Harish and the Indian team in their home town of Bombay, travelling by train through Delhi to Kalka, and then up the winding rack railway to the old Indian summer capital of Shimla. Harish, a cloth merchant by profession and editor of the Himalayan Journal, has a passion for railways.
and plans his expeditions accordingly. In Bombay we had savoured the local cuisine – another passion – and had sampled his training routine. This consists of a brisk early morning walk round the Bombay race track followed by a series of energetic sun salutes, a stretching yoga exercise. There aren’t many crags near Bombay.

A bus had met us at Shimla and taken us up the Sutlej valley – a deep gash through the Himalaya that now resembles a gigantic building site with a series of huge hydroelectric projects being built, with accompanying new towns and potential industry. We stopped on the way at the headquarters of the Indo-Tibetan Border Police. They were warmly hospitable but the following morning our host, Mahendra Singh, who had led the expedition that made the first ascent of Panch Chuli II, had some bad news. He showed us the map of the area – not even our liaison officer was allowed to carry one – and with a slight smile, pointed to the valley that reached around the northern flank of the mountain and which probably gave the easiest approach.

‘You can’t go up that,’ he told us. ‘It’s too close to the Tibetan border. Anyway there are plenty of ways up this.’ He indicated a tightly contoured wall that seemed to guard the western approach. ‘People of your experience should have no trouble at all.’

Was there a slight edge in his comment? We didn’t take it up. Surely we would find a reasonable route up one of the two valleys that were open to us. Following the Sutlej, with exciting glimpses of snow peaks at the head of side valleys, we swung onto a track that wound its way up to the village of Thangi at the foot of the Tirung Gad. This was the roadhead where we were to collect donkeys to carry our gear up to Base Camp. Kinnaur is both Buddhist and Hindu, the two religions interweaving with Hindu temples and Buddhist Gompas set alongside each other. The attractive villages of stone and timber houses, roofed with huge slates, cluster among terraced orchards of apple and apricot, and huge cedar trees cover the steep slopes of the foothills. Since the area had only just opened up to tourism, the local people still regarded visitors with a friendly curiosity.

We set out from Thangi on 3 June and at the end of our first day camped below some superb 1000m high granite cliffs – pathside cragging to equal anything in the Alps. It took us three leisured days walking up the Tirung Gad to reach the shoulder just short of the village of Charang where we had the first glimpse of our mountain. It looked complex and challenging. That night we stopped at Rangrik Tungma, a little monastery just beyond Charang at the foot of the valley leading up towards our objective.

The Gompa, a solid square building with tiny windows, was reputed to have been built by a god in a single night some 700 years ago. The walls of the main chamber, lit by a fluorescent light powered from solar panels, were filled with statues and murals of reincarnate lamas, Buddhas and guardian spirits. It had a feeling of great peace and sanctity. This was a Tantric monastery dedicated to the female embodiment of the Buddha and was
INDIAN BRITISH KINNAUR EXPEDITION 1994

- 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
therefore cared for by nuns. They were a cheerful, down-to-earth lot who gave us plenty of practical advice: to take it steady, to be patient and, on a very specific level, to accept that the best route up the mountain was by the valley that was denied to us. They warned us that the approach from the west was guarded by huge walls swept by avalanche. We decided, therefore, to make a recce before committing ourselves to a base camp.

Graham Little, who works for the Ordnance Survey and has a feeling for maps, opted to look at the Racho Khad, convinced that this was where the route lay. Meanwhile, Jim Fotheringham, Muslim Contractor, Paul Nunn and I decided to try to find a breach in the walls above the Racho Thach glacier and gain access to a high plateau from which we could climb not only Point 6553, but also several other smaller peaks for which we had permission. This would enable us to adopt the same strategy as previous Kapadia expeditions, when, after establishing a common Base Camp, the team had split into small groups tackling various different objectives, and climbing alpine-style in the purest sense.

A 1 1/2 hour walk took us to the proposed site of our Base Camp at the confluence of the Racho Thach and Racho Khad glaciers. It was an idyllic spot - a summer yak pasture nestling among moraine ridges and boulders at a height of 4170m. We walked on up the valley, surprised by just how far the glaciers had receded. The snout was around 4700m, a clear indication of how low is the precipitation of snow in this area. But the view of the wall guarding the way onto the plateau was increasingly worrying. We reached a moraine ridge at approximately 5000m on the south side of the glacier from which we had a clear view of most of the approach. A massive serac broke off from the wall opposite, falling clear for about 500m and then bursting in a huge cloud of particles to sweep across the glacier. There seemed no safe route from this side. We returned despondent, to find a relaxed and happy Graham at Base Camp. With Divyesh Muni and Jim Lowther, he had reached a similar height up the Racho Khad and had confirmed his interpretation of the map. A steep but climbable headwall led to a ridge stretching towards the summit.

We had a feasible route for Point 6553, but this was the only one. The entire team were going to have to concentrate on the one line - a lot of people and different styles of climbing. Harish and the Indians worked a capsule system, moving en masse from Base Camp upwards, using some fixed rope when necessary and taking with them some of their high-altitude porters. The British members of the team were committed to climbing in three pairs. I teamed up with my regular partner Jim Fotheringham. Graham Little, with whom I had climbed on Panch Chuli in 1992 and in Greenland in 1993, teamed with Jim Lowther, another Greenland hand. The final pair were both well-known members of the Sheffield mafia: Jim Curran, who was making a film, and Paul Nunn, President of the British Mountaineering Council. For good measure, Harish's wife Geeta and Geoff Birtles, editor of High magazine, were trekking with us to Base Camp.
Graham and I imagined the expedition would work out in a similar way to our previous trips, with the various pairs doing their own thing; but Fotheringham and Nunn, both of whom had climbed with Harish before, envisaged and welcomed a more communal effort. And that is how it ended up: a varied group going for a single route.

Our expedition was certainly multi-faceted, with a fanatical bridge school (Birtles, Bonington, Contractor, Little and Lowther), a cricket team (all the Indians, most of our porters, Birtles, Curran and Lowther), and a ‘pujah’ group, led by Kapadia and Fotheringham (known as Lama Sahib), but keenly followed by myself and other members of the team. (A ‘pujah’ is a Buddhist or Hindu religious ceremony and we held one at every opportunity.) There was even a computer game team, led by Bonington but supported by Muni and Fotheringham, who fought out a complex game called Strategic Conquest. In between all these activities we found time to climb and were going to have to meld into a cohesive team.

We all moved up to Base Camp on 7 June, our little donkeys following a path carved out of the packed mud and snow patches of the moraine. A very rough cricket pitch was set out and we held a pujah in the warm light of the afternoon sun around a little altar we built above our camp. Smoke from a sweet-smelling fire of juniper swirled in the sunlight, while the less religious (or was it superstitious?) played cricket below. I gazed into the drifting smoke and tried to visualise our team as an harmonious whole.

The following day we made a reconnaissance, carrying loads up to the site of our proposed Advanced Base at 4870m in the Racho Khad. I had a severe attack of bronchitis and therefore stayed, sick and frustrated, down at base. Everyone returned that night enthusing about the view and the route. Harish was still thinking in terms of an alternative line the Indians might take, finding a way onto the SW ridge of our objective.

Two days later the entire team moved up to Advanced Base. I was still feeling ill and wondering if I would ever catch up with them when the weather broke. It reminded me of my experience on Kongur, when a combination of powerful antibiotics and a spell of bad weather had enabled me to overcome an attack of pneumonia and get back in synch with the team. The same thing happened now. The entire team, less Graham and Jim Lowther, came back down the next day. Three days of bad weather let me throw off the infection and we all returned to Advanced Base to find Graham and Jim still there, although they had carried their tent and food to the foot of the face between snow showers.

We were still very much separate groups with separate ideas. The days spent up at Advanced Base had inevitably meant that Graham and Jim had formed their own plans and perhaps had a feeling of slight self-righteousness that they were sticking it out at the sharp end while everyone else had fled the mountain. We, on the other hand, thought they were eating into rations to no great avail. It was the classic division of an expedition into groups, each convinced of its own virtue.
22. The Indian British Kinnaur Expedition. Advanced Base Camp below Rangrik Rang, 6553m. The summit route followed the L skyline. (Chris Bonington) (p57)

23. The climbing team. *Clockwise from R:* Jim Lowther, Muslim Contractor, Jim Curran, Chris Bonington, Harish Kapadia, Vijay Kothari, Paul Nunn, Graham Little, Kaivan Mistry, Joginder Singh Golia (liaison officer), Jim Fotheringham, Divyesh Muni. (Chris Bonington) (p57)
Graham and Jim were planning to move up to a camp below the headwall that afternoon. To me it seemed high time we tried to integrate their effort with the rest of the expedition. At the same time, Harish had sent out a recce comprising Pasang Bodh and Prakash, his two very accomplished Manali porters, to investigate the alternative SW ridge approach. They had drawn a blank, so it was now obvious that we were all going to be on the same route.

With a large group going for the same climb it made sense to fix-rope the steep headwall leading to the col. The following morning, Lowther, Little, Divyesh and Pasang set out from Advanced Base Camp to start work on the headwall. We ended up spending three days fixing it, each day with a different group. Graham Little started it off with a tensed single run-out of some 75m up frighteningly unconsolidated snow, while Jim Fotheringham and I had a superb morning finishing the route off and reaching the col on 17 June. The route to the headwall was complicated by a combination of steep unconsolidated snow and shattered rock. The latter provided the only remotely secure anchors and therefore the line picked its way from rock island to island in a convoluted diagonal.

The view from the col was both magnificent and daunting. The NE ridge started in a steep triangular face of snow leading up to what appeared to be a pinnacle, although we knew from what we had seen from below that this was just a bend and flattening in the angle. From there it curled round into a corniced sweep towards what we hoped was the summit. We would need at least one more camp before making a bid for the top. Looking to the north, we could gaze over the mountains of Tibet stretching into the far distance, while to the east was the Garhwal with a dramatic pointed peak dominating all around it — surely it must be Kamet (7755m), first climbed by Frank Smythe and party in 1931.

Fothers and I were in a state of excited elation when we got back to camp, to find most of the team waiting for us. Little and Lowther had slipped back to Advanced Base for a rest but had returned that morning and were packed ready to move up to the col that night and go for the top the following night. Fothers and I certainly couldn’t have done this; it had been a long day and we needed a rest. I had mixed feelings, partly wanting to be in on the first summit bid, and partly surprised and disappointed that we were still operating as separate pairs rather than merging into a single team. After some discussion we reached a reasonable compromise. Harish had already decided that Divyesh, Muslim Contractor and Pasang Bodh would represent the Indian part of the team, whilst all six Britons wanted to go. Graham agreed to delay his departure until early next morning and just move up to the col, followed by the others. They would spend the night on the col and then the next day move up to a camp on the ridge. Fothers and I could have a rest day and then in a single push catch them up at the ridge camp and the entire team, in the best Russian style, could go for the summit together.
Harish came up to Advanced Base that night, and the following day the three of us lazed in the sun, cooked and ate and watched the rest of the team slowly climbing the fixed ropes to the col. Next morning, feeling fit and rested after our lazy day, Fothers and I quickly followed up the fixed ropes in the shade of early dawn, had breakfast on the col and caught up with the others about halfway up the steep wall leading to the crest of the ridge. Little and Lowther had opted to climb through the previous night, and we could just see their tent, a little blue patch dug into the cornice.

It was late afternoon by the time we joined them and had dug out platforms for our tents in the steep snow. At 6000m it was a superb camp site with views that stretched in the west to the mountains of Kulu, through Spiti and Tibet to the peaks of Gangotri in the east. We could identify Thalay Sagar and Kedarnath Dome. We settled down for the night and I woke up at two, called out to the others and started brewing. The Little and Lowther team were away first, closely followed by Fothers and myself. Jim Curran had been agonising about whether he should go with us or not, worried not so much for himself but that he might slow us up. He set out but after one rope length decided to return to the camp. Paul Nunn hitched onto Muslim Contractor and continued up the tracks.

It was snow all the way — not very steep, but nerve racking — with a few inches of unconsolidated snow on ice threatening a constant risk of avalanche. There was an ice step halfway up — only grade 3, perhaps not even that, yet it felt serious at that altitude. Lowther and Little broke trail practically all the way. At one stage Fothers and I caught up while the lead team was resting; we offered to do our bit in front, but Lowther was soon on Fothers’s heels, like a keen young Labrador pup, and Fothers gracefully waved him past. At that point we decided we might as well have a really good rest and let Divyesh and Pasang Bodh move through as well. The summit seemed a long way off, and yet the peaks around us were slowly dropping away. Point 6447, for which we had permission, was now level with us although the only way we could have reached it was by crossing our present objective. Suddenly, from what seemed far above, Jim Lowther let out a shout. He was there, on the very top of our mountain. About half an hour later Fothers and I had caught up and pulled over the brow. It was an improbable summit. There hadn’t been a single ledge or flat space all the way from the col and yet here on top there was a level space twenty metres across — a perfect camp site. Not only that, by a little rock outcrop to one side there was even a pool of melt water. Graham, the resourceful, had brought up a gas stove and the makings for tea. It was already purring away. Fothers and I, totally improvident, had only a bar of chocolate left between us, and were really grateful for that mug of hot tea.

To the south big thunderheads were massing over the foothills, a tidal wave of cloud was engulfing the Gangotri, but we were in the warm afternoon sun. It was as magnificent a panorama as any I have seen from the summit of a mountain, even from those that were very much higher.
24. Rangrik Rang, 6553m. Jim Fotheringham on the fixed ropes between Camps 1 and 2. *(Chris Bonington)* (p57)

25. Reo Pargial (Purgyil), 6816m, the southern of the Pargials climbed in 1991. The highest peak of Himachal Pradesh, it rises above the Sutlej river at Shipkila. *(Paul Nunn)* (p65)

26. Paul Nunn on the summit of Manirang, 6593m. *(Paul Nunn)* (p65)
Our expedition had been successful, the more so since eight of us had reached the top together and through that process had coalesced from a loose collection of pairs and groups to become a truly joint expedition. Moreover, we had enjoyed the stimulus of a type of mountain exploration that must soon be gone for ever, as every nook and corner of the world's mountains are discovered.

We called our mountain Rangrik Rang, after the little monastery at its foot. The monastery almost certainly was built by the hand of man; the mountain could well have been fashioned by the Gods.

Summary
The Indian British Kinnaur Expedition 1994 visited the Tirung valley, Kinnaur, from 3rd to 26th June, and made two first ascents. Part of the team went on to climb Manirang in Spiti and other peaks. (See ‘Manirang’ on the following page.)

The Team:
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 (Laison Officer).
Supported By: Pasang Bodh, Harsingh (Sr.), Prakash Chand, Khubram, Suratram, Harsingh (Jr.), Kesar Singh (Sr. and Jr.), Dewan Singh and Nima Bahadur.

The first ascent of Rangrik Rang, 6553m, was made on 20 June via the NE ridge by Pasang Bodh, Chris Bonington, Muslim Contractor, Jim Fotheringham, Graham Little, Jim Lowther, Divyesh Muni, Paul Nunn.

Other peaks climbed: Mangla, 5800m: the first ascent was made on 19 June via the NW ridge by Harish Kapadia, Kaivan Mistry and Prakash Chand. Kunda, 5240m, was climbed on 20 June via the S ridge by Harish Kapadia. Kimshu, 5850m, was attempted on 20 June via the N ridge, when Kaivan Mistry, Prakash Chand and Khubram reached 5780m.