

Indrasan West ridge Expedition 1971

A. Johnson

Snow-bound in the C.I.C. hut on Ben Nevis, we sat talking round the gas fire, Roger Brook, Jim Duff, John Brazinton and myself. The subject inevitably turned to expeditions and the fact that a friend of ours from Yorkshire was going to the Himalaya in 1971. The expedition was born there and then.

The search for an objective then began and a copy of *Mountain* with a photograph of a soaring rock peak in the Kulu Himalaya sent Roger Brook and myself on a drive up to Aviemore to see Fred Harper who had just returned from Kulu (*A.J.* 75 9). He told us that Indrasan was the best objective in the area and that the West ridge, some 7000 ft long, was as yet unclimbed. The more we heard about the ridge, the more excited we became; at last we saw a photograph of it and our plans were settled.

The mountain (6221 m) was climbed on 13 October 1962 by a Japanese group who cried off the West ridge saying it was too long and too difficult. They climbed it by the South-west face, by means of a rock ramp and then a snow ridge. The summit party was overtaken by darkness on the way down and had to bivouac, losing fingers and toes by frost-bite in the process.

More information was obtained from Bob Pettigrew who, with the Derbyshire Himalayan Expedition, had failed on the West ridge and reported that it was extremely difficult (*A.J.* 68 52). What sold us heart and soul on the mountain was that it combined a traditional Himalayan approach with an alpine-style ridge. Altogether, it had technical difficulty and not too much of the slow snow plodding which saps the morale.

At this stage, Jim Duff had to drop out and the final team consisted of three of the original members with Geoff Tabbner, Geoff Arkness, Bryan Pooley and a late addition, a non-climbing doctor, John Winter, making up the rest of our expedition. The average age of the expedition was only twenty-four.

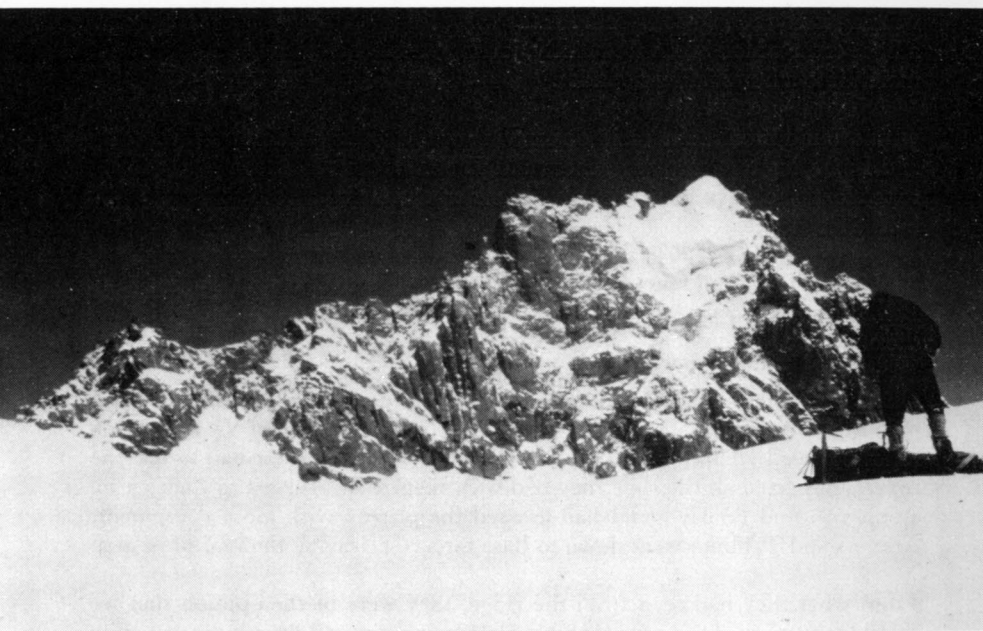
On 10 May, when we arrived in the Kulu valley after an overland journey of twenty-four days, we were greeted by heavy black clouds, lightning and thunder. Four days were spent in repacking all the equipment loads and obtaining high-altitude porters, and porters for the approach march. We were lucky to have the services of Wongdhi of Jannu fame, who arranged all our porters for a service charge. A Japanese expedition had arranged porters and then departed for Bombay to collect equipment, we ended up with their porters and quickly departed from the valley on 15 May.

The approach is short and on 17 May, we were at the site of our Base Camp at the head of the Jagat Sukh Nullah. The snow had not yet gone so Base Camp was sited on snow-covered moraine, well protected from avalanches. So far we

could not see Indrasan, hidden as it was by the huge Deo Tibba glacier. For the next few days we all ferried loads up to the site of our Advanced Base Camp, which we established at 4175 m. The weather was perfect, we had timed it just right, the result, we hoped, of asking advice and taking it.

By the 13th, Advanced Base was well established and Camp 1, 5030 m, a mountain tent on a small rock ledge under a miniature Grand Capucin on the Dunhagen Pass, was in the process of being supplied. Brook and Brazinton found an alternative route to that used in previous years up a couloir to the plateau. Thus we were saved one camp and were the first of the expedition to see Indrasan; we came back very impressed with the size and length of the ridge.

Camp 2 at 5480 m was sited at the top of the couloir on the plateau; two and a half miles across this 'white Sahara', Indrasan stood out from the plateau like a slumbering pre-historic monster—with the West ridge its multi-horned spine, that we had to climb to get to the head.



13 'Indrasan stood out from the plateau like a slumbering monster'. Photo: A. Johnson

On 30 May, Pooley and I set off to cross the plateau carrying large packs and pulling a sledge with a further 70 lb. It was hard work in the 'desert' with no shade from the sun.

We were aiming for a broad snow-bridge across a line of crevasses which barred the way to Indrasan. We crossed the snow-bridge pulling the sledge across on a long rope hoping the load would not be lost.

Camp 3 was pitched under a ridge well out of reach of any falling debris. By late afternoon we understood why Indrasan is called the 'Throne of the Thunder God', because large cumulo-nimbus clouds rolled in and it started snowing.

Up and out by 5.00am and aiming at a snow fan at the bottom of the ridge, we stopped and watched Deo Tibba bathed in orange light and talked of doing the sharp arête on the north-west if possible. Pooley led up a snow-slope to the foot of some ice chimneys with overhanging ice, pulling up an axe; memories of Scotland flooded back, more chimneys and then snow up to the crest of the ridge.

The ridge looked hard, and seemed to go on forever, pinnacles of red granite like miniature aiguilles seamed with ice-filled gullies, all strung together by steep snow and ice ridges.

We had run out of rope and only one food box was left at Camp 3, so we started down to Base for a rest. The way back across the plateau was arduous and exhausting, with mist surrounding us and making it seem as though we were walking inside a ping-pong ball. All the way back to Camp 1 the going was bad, a light crust which broke frequently, jarring knees and reducing a purposeful march into a humiliating flounder.

3 June found Brook and Brazinton carrying up the couloir to Camp 2 and Pooley and I carrying to Camp 1. Arkness and Tabbner, the other team, were fixing rope along the ridge, which involved tension traversing across very steep and brittle ice-slopes.

The following day all four of us at Camp 1 carried up to Camp 2 and Brook and Brazinton joined forces with Arkness and Tabbner and carried and pulled all the stockpiled equipment across to Camp 3.

On the 5th, these four carried loads up to the ridge and reached the previous highest point at 10.30am. Brazinton led a superb arête at about V+ and Brook followed this by climbing a Grade 6 chimney, where the rest had to use the rope. They fixed all the rope they had with them and returned to Camp 3 by 4.00pm to find Pooley and I had crossed the plateau with more equipment. Arkness and Tabbner went down to Base for a rest, leaving the four of us at 3.

From what they had seen from the ridge, they were of the opinion that we should take up the fixed rope that was already in place and drop it down a gully which would lead us to the previous day's high point, thus missing out all the hard work of the diagonal fixed ropes. We did so the following day and Brook and Brazinton went into the lead whilst Pooley and I carried loads behind them following on the fixed ropes.

By 3.00pm they came to a col in the ridge; they abseiled down and dumped all the food and equipment in readiness for the following day. We fixed some 900 ft of rope down a gully but were unable to fix it correctly due to lack of hardware, and so reached Camp 3 by 5.30pm in mist.

7 June dawned with Brook and Brazinton again in the lead, the first lead of the day going to Brazinton who hand-traversed across the col with his hands on a razor-sharp flake, on one side a drop of 10,000 ft and on the other 3000 ft to the plateau below, followed by difficult hand jamming on the other side to a loose block. By this time we had a large stockpile of gear at the col dump and as no one had arrived at Camp 3 with food for some time, we were running low on some items.

The next day all four of us went out on the ridge. We all carried heavy loads from the dump to the previous high point, which involved crawling along an ice ledge on hands and knees at one point and prusiking up overhanging rock at another. Brazinton led off in a system of ice gullies and rock chimneys until he found a site for a camp under the large rock tower. Pooley and I followed, somewhat perturbed by the way we hung over drops on the fixed rope. The only possible site was a small rock ledge, not really big enough but it had to be done, so Brook started to enlarge it and Brazinton went back for more gear.

I led out, going on to the north side of the tower on superb red granite, tensioning off pegs, I worked my way round to a small snow-field and shouted for Pooley to follow because the rope was dragging due to the pegs. Off again, and I made my way to the bottom of a snow arête leading to some rocks which looked as if they would lead to the ridge. Pooley ploughed his way up this with mutterings that it was like New Zealand and that he did not like climbing up porridge and so on, and then ran out of rope. Fixing it to a peg we made our way back to the tent to find that the platform was still not big enough for the four of us.

There followed a long night, fighting for comfort and sleep after dosing ourselves with Ronicon and sleeping pills; sleep came, but comfort did not. Four of us crammed into the small tent with no flysheet—outside it was snowing, inside just as wet from condensation. Pooley hung over the edge of the ledge, thanking God for sewn-in groundsheets.

On 9 June, we were away by 6.00am, after a very small brew and no food. Pooley led out from the top of the already fixed rope. The night before we had taken off some fixed rope from behind us and so we only had 150 ft of fixed rope and two 150 ft ropes to climb on. A hard ice traverse with only front points in felt very insecure. Then up a gully over large blocks to the top of the buttress and at last the way to the summit was clear. By 11.00am we were all climbing along the ridge, some hard pitches broken up by snow-slopes and arêtes.

Brazinton led a 70° ice pitch on the North face on which we were all glad of the rope. By 3.00pm we could see the summit but the weather was closing in. We fixed our ropes down the final tower and climbed to the summit. Pooley slipped, but managed to stop himself which made all of us more careful as a lapse of concentration would have been idiotic at this stage. Brook was on the summit first and then started down. After we had all reached the top it started to snow and the wind increased. By 4.00pm we started down, very cold by now. We could not see much but we were all going carefully now we had reached the top.

In the gathering darkness amid snow and sleet, we climbed back along the ridge, only one torch between the four of us. Anything black was treated as a foothold and sometimes the only light was the sparks off the crampons. Nearing the tent on the fixed rope a peg came out and Roger dropped 20 ft. He took the gear off but left the knot which I found in the dark and spent what seemed like hours changing over the clogger and hanging on by my arms, cursing at the others and everything and everyone. At the tent, the time was 10.45pm, and a brew and Mars bar, soup, but very little sleep.

The next day we stayed in our pits until noon, making gallons of porridge and eating syrup out of the tin, and then made our way to Camp 3 in a snow-storm to meet the others. More brews and 'real' tinned meat.

The expedition was not over. On 13 June, Arkness and Tabbner made the second ascent of the West ridge.

Brook, Pooley and John Winter made the first ascent of the North-west arête of Deo Tibba, and in doing so made the first complete traverse of the mountain.

On 13 June two virgin rock peaks of 5711 m and 5692 m were climbed giving 700 ft of Grade 5 climbing on good granite. These were nick-named Tweedle-dee and Tweedledum.

SUMMARY Kulu Himalaya-Indrasan West ridge Expedition 1971. Geoff Arkness, John H. Brazinton, Roger Brook, Geoff Tabbner, Tony Johnson (Leader), Bryan Pooley. Sherpas: Dharm Chard, Chamba Ladakh.

Indrasan, 6221 m, second ascent, first by West ridge. 9 June 1971—R. Brook, T. Johnson, B. Pooley, J. H. Brazinton. 13 June 1971—third ascent, second by West ridge. G. Tabbner and G. Arkness.

Deo Tibba 6001 m, first ascent by North-west ridge. First complete traverse of mountain.

Also on 13 June two rock peaks of 5711 m and 5692 m.