

# The Sosbun Glacier Region

Lindsay Griffin

*Plates 18–19*

The only disappointment on our trip to the Sumaiyer valley in 1984 lay in the discovery that the superb granite ridge on our only black and white photograph was, in the event, a heap of broken rubble. The sun shone, for over a month, from a deep azure sky; yet the excellent ice faces and snow ridges of the Silkiang peaks remained in an eminently climbable condition.

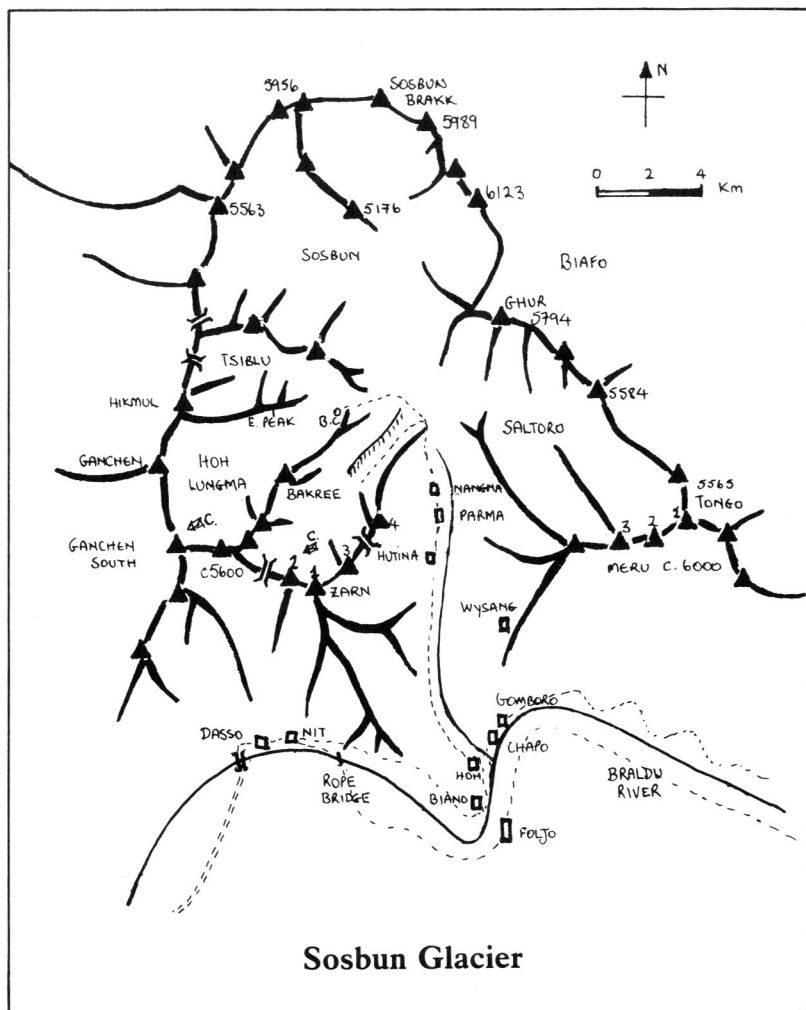
Those mouth-watering photographs of Karakoram granite give the impression that it outcrops everywhere. Alas it is confined to small and distinct areas, notably the lower Baltoro and Biafo peaks. Closer research led to photographs of the Sosbun glacier and eureka! — a vast array of unclimbed granite walls and pillars. But at the time, and further east, the unclimbed giants of the Siachen proved a far greater attraction. Only later when the dates of a proposed trip were confirmed unfortunately outside my holiday period, did I begin to investigate the Sosbun more fully. It was certainly off the beaten track — but what of its history?

Perhaps the first exploration of the area occurred in 1908 when an indefatigable husband and wife team, so dominant during that decade in the Karakoram, reached two cols at the head of the upper arms of the Sosbun and peered northwards onto the Sokha glacier. The Bullock-Workmans pronounced this a glacier with no outlet — one entirely surrounded by mountains — a scientific enigma? Of more importance was their identification and nomenclature of the two big peaks in the area, Ganchen (6462m) and its immediate neighbour Hikmul (untabulated but felt to be at least c.6300m).

Members of Shipton's 1939 survey expedition were next to examine these glacier basins. Tilman, after some deliberation and various 'tentatives' on a feasible approach to both Ganchen and Hikmul from the Basha valley, crossed the main divide north of the Hikmul la to gain the western branch of the Sosbun glacier. In order to clarify the somewhat confusing topography he ascended to the 'Workmans' Col' west of Sosbun Brakk before descending the Hoh Bluk to the Braldu valley.

Shortly afterwards, Mott surveyed the area from a rocky ridge just west of the main valley and above the terminal moraines. He then moved camp to below the 'Peninsula' ridge that splits the upper arms of the Sosbun and from atop this took yet more readings before descending to Nangma where he encountered Fountaine. The latter moved swiftly up the Tsiblu glacier, crossed the Hikmul la and descended steeply to the Basha valley. All parties seem to agree on almost continual disturbance due to avalanches down the faces of Hikmul and Ganchen.

Thirty seven years elapsed before the next expedition visited the valley. A 14 man German party under the overall leadership of Robert Wagner reached the Sosbun glacier in August after considerable delay due to bureaucratic and



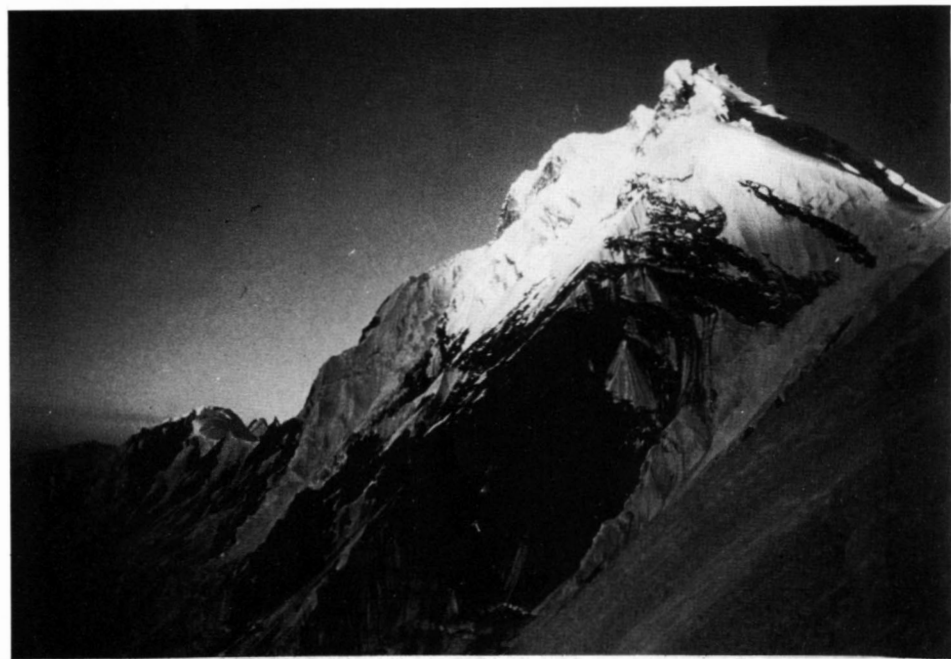
portage problems. Splitting into two parties they reconnoitred Ganchen from the Hihmul la (this seems a very unlikely point of attack; were they perhaps confusing Hihmul with Ganchen?) and reached a height of about 5450m on Sosbun Brakk.

In 1978 an eight man Japanese team under Tohru Shibazaki made the first ascent of Ganchen from the Hoh Lungma glacier. From an advance base at 4850m they sieged the rock spur leading up to the Ganchen-Hihmul col. The ice slopes on either side are obviously too dangerous and although the spur looks of reasonable angle, the rock is decidedly rotten. Three weeks and 1000m of fixed rope were required before a camp was placed on the col at 5930m (29 July). Amazingly, three members climbed to the top the following day via the



18 *The central section of Hikmul's E ridge.*

*Photo: Lindsay Griffin*



19 *Ganchen seen from Hikmul E ridge.*

*Photo: Lindsay Griffin*

long N ridge and over four subsidiary summits. This rather suggests that the final section must be somewhat easier than it appears! This expedition also reconnoitred Sosbun Brakk and in 1981 another Japanese expedition from the Shigakukai Club, comprising ten climbers and led by Seichi Kawauchi, reached the summit via the S face on 4 July. Dangerous stone-fall was reported throughout the climb.

By late July 1985 we were sitting in the garden of the Dasso rest house, the roar of the Braldu river only occasionally drowned by the raucous whirring of helicopters carrying supplies to the troops fighting at the head of the Siachen glacier. Our five porters, organised by the resident Pakistani Intelligence Officer, were as friendly, honest and hospitable as one could imagine. Three mornings later we left the deserted grazing village of Nangma, a relaxed and happy team. Slopes of lush elephant grass led up towards the terminal moraine.

Chris Forrest and I had hoped originally to attempt the fine spires and rocky peaks that form the W Biafo wall. However, on reaching the lower reaches of the Sosbun glacier it became immediately obvious that, on this side of the range at least, the rock was universally appalling. Rather disheartened we transferred our base to the lateral moraine of the Hoh Lungma glacier whereupon it began to rain. At the time I was almost relieved as I felt one or two days acclimatization lying in the tent and eating would not go amiss. My only problem was how to deal with Chris's insuppressible urge to get on with the job. Unfortunately it rained most of the time and the only real fine spell developed on the outward march to Dasso! Chris is, by qualification, a chef and consequently we achieved, if nothing else, the highest standard of campsite cuisine!

An ascent of a nearby summit, Bakree Peak, was achieved in dubious weather and on awful snow, but the most compelling objective was the unclimbed Hikmul. Its E ridge looked long but objectively safe. Avalanches poured at very regular intervals from the flanks of Ganchen. First we needed some practice and a group of spiky alpine peaks around the head of the Chonga Hanmung glacier appeared to offer a suitable venue.

The ascent of this delightful valley and miserable moraine was memorable for the discovery of alarmingly huge 'Yeti' tracks in the mud — presumably huge belonging to a very large species of bear. An excellent pair of ibex or 'Bakree' horns protruding from the ice were dug up in order to export home — a decision quickly abandoned on account of their weight and stench. We pitched camp at about 4700m on the upper reaches of the glacier and after an initial sortie ended in a violent electrical storm, we spent four unpleasant days in sodden clothing and sleeping bags before a break in the weather allowed a retreat to base. Next day the bright sunshine leered at us and we retraced our steps to our high camp. Over the following days we climbed Zarn I, II and Hoh Lungma Peak, all giving relatively easy climbing although the ridge north from Zarn II gave entertaining mixed work.

The weather remained unsettled but time, as always, is a limited commodity. We loaded five days food and set off in diminishing drizzle on 14 August for Hikmul's E ridge, a fine route given the right conditions. In three days of climbing up, down and along cornices of every shape and size we were stopped about 500m short of the summit by a slope of bottomless, rotten snow. By now

we had reverted to climbing at night due to the atrocious conditions encountered along the ridge, conditions that seemed to become more worrying the higher we rose. It was actually an hour before dawn and quite cold when the slope cracked and groaned — a crack which Chris both heard and felt.

'I'm not very happy!' I shouted down into the night but inwardly thought, 'You coward.'

'Do whatever you think best!' came the reply. Ironically our descent coincided with the most perfect of clear skies and we were consoled by splendid views of the Baltoro giants. It was somewhat gratifying to observe, two days later, the slopes below Point 5400m had avalanched — the fracture line neatly coinciding with our tracks.

Ever optimistic, we threw our last few days into an attempt on Ganchen South. A variation on the theme — we spent two depressing days camped above 5000m in a steady drizzle. Frostbite had been the least of our concerns during this mild month.

With sacks that were later found to weigh 38kg, largely composed of warm clothes we never wore and climbing gear we never used, we left the Hoh Lungma on 21 August, reaching Dasso via the intense furnace of the Braldu Gorge two days later.

Perhaps a little should be said of the other peaks in the area. The fine SW spur of Ghur rises from between two glacial basins at over 5000m, looks reasonably straightforward and leads directly to the summit. Access, unfortunately, is well guarded by steep ice-falls and narrow rotten rocky ridges. Perhaps when the peak is finally climbed it will be from the Biafo. The sharp spires flanking the upper arms of the Sosbun are composed entirely of very rotten rock and look rather unattractive. South of Ganchen a number of large snow peaks rise above the lower Basha valley and might be best attempted from that side, as the southern approach from Dasso is steep with complex ice-falls in the upper reaches. To gain the grassy lower section of the Saltoro valley would necessitate crossing the extensive and rugged moraine-covered confluence of the Sosbun and Hoh Lungma glaciers. A dry glacier appears to lead gently upwards to the enticing peaks of the 6000m Meru group. Were it not for these and the unclimbed Hikmul, both very worthwhile projects, one could not recommend the area to future parties.