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# Bhutan – A Summary of Climbing and the Anglo-Indian Ascent of Jitchu Drake

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(Plates 15, 16, 59)

A visit to Bhutan had been on the agenda since the mid-1960s when that great Himalayan explorer Augusto Gansser published photographs of unclimbed 7000m peaks in *Mountain World* (1964/65). The seed sown then lay dormant for 20 years, until news percolated through in 1983 of Japanese and Austrian visits to the mountains of Bhutan. My interest grew further as a result of a chance visit to the Darjeeling trekking conference in 1985. Nedup Dorje, representing the Bhutanese Tourism Corporation (BTC), gave a memorable discourse upon the underlying philosophy governing the future of tourism and mountaineering in Bhutan – the message was controlled development.

The Bhutanese government was in the advantageous position of being able to scrutinize closely the mass tourism which had taken place in Nepal, where the cultural heritage had been seriously eroded by an estimated 200,000 tourists visiting that country each year.

Bhutan had been virtually barred to foreigners until the Coronation of the present King, Jigme Singye Wangchuk, in 1974. During that year 287 foreign visitors were allowed into the country. That allocation has increased to 2500 per annum, but not all the places are taken up because of the high costs imposed by BTC – between \$85 and \$200 a day, depending upon whether the visitor is on a mountaineering expedition or a ‘cultural’ visit to the towns and temples.

The temptation to increase the Gross National Product was being resisted, for as the King once told the World Bank experts, he is not so interested in the GNP as in the Gross National Happiness of his people. Nedup Dorje managed to rekindle my interest in his country, but at the same time it seemed even less likely that I could ever raise the funds to become one of the fortunate two and a half thousand.

After the conference I and Mike Westmacott, the other Alpine Club representative, went on a short visit into Sikkim. Also on that visit was Maggie Payne, a Canadian who was running the Tiger Tops trekking operation in the Middle East. She too had been fired with curiosity to visit Bhutan and we discussed the idea of her arranging a ‘support trek’ to help fund an expedition to the highest mountain in Bhutan – Kankar Pünzum, one of the highest unclimbed mountains in the world. In fact I was already scheduled to go to that mountain with a group from Bristol. In the end Maggie took her support

trekkers, but unfortunately I was not able to go on that expedition. She continued to visit the country, either as Trek Leader or as a guest of the government. During her sixth visit to Bhutan she told me that she had secured permission in the summer of 1987 for me to climb on Jitchu Drake and also to take in a trek (subsequently the Royal Geographical Society trek), and that she herself could take in a support trek on the actual expedition.

A month before my departure in March, our expedition had received generous donations of food and equipment necessary for the climb, but very little in the way of funds. I was on the point of cancelling the expedition when the *Guardian* newspaper let it be known that they would like to follow up their part sponsorship of our attempt on the NE ridge of Everest the previous autumn with full sponsorship of another climb. This gave us all the financial support we needed for Jitchu Drake.

In the meantime, I had been collecting information on all the climbing which had been achieved in Bhutan.

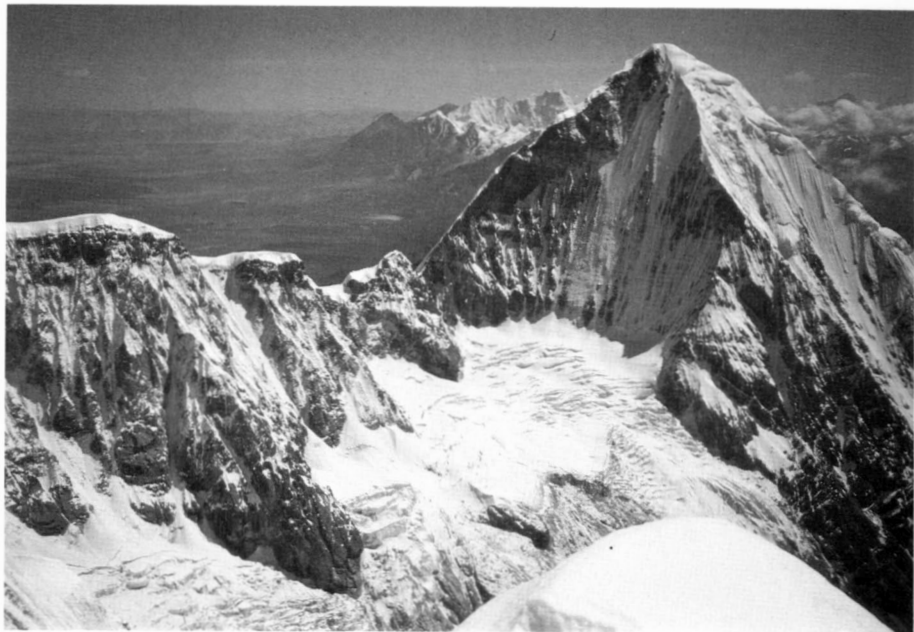
Chomolhari (7315m) was thought to be the highest peak in Bhutan at the time of its first ascent in 1937. The Himalayan chain east of Chomolhari was left a blank on the map, but penetration of this area had in fact been achieved by Claude White, the Political Officer for Sikkim, Tibet and Bhutan during 1905–07. (See Claude White, *Sikkim and Bhutan: twenty-one years on the NW Frontier.*) In 1933 the Political Officer for Sikkim at the time, Mr F Williamson, journeyed from Paro east to Bumtang, before striking north to cross the main Himalaya Divide near Kunla Kangri by way of the difficult glacier pass, Monlakarchung La, into Tibet. The naturalists Frank Ludlow, George Sherriff and Frank Kingdon-Ward added further to our knowledge of the area as a result of their various journeys in the 1930s.

It was not until Gansser's geological explorations in 1963 and the publication of his notes and topographical map that any accurate, all-embracing information became available. His visit was followed by those of Doctors Michael Ward and Frank Jackson, and then in the 1970s by school-teacher John Tyson. There is still great confusion over names for the peaks, some of them having as many as five alternatives depending on what map or text you happen to read. Jitchu Drake has been variously named Tshereim Kang, Shumkang, Jichu Dakketh or Tseringegang. There is also a great variation between official and actual heights of the peaks.

There is no confusion surrounding the name nor the height of Chomolhari. On the western border of Bhutan with Tibet, the north side of the mountain drops down to the Chumbi valley — a tongue of land jutting south from the Great Plateau of Tibet. Until the occupation of Tibet by the Chinese in the 1950s, this was the traditional route from India to Lhasa. Many travellers, missionaries, traders, surveyors, military personnel and climbing expeditions have journeyed through the valley during the last 250 years, all of them passing by the spectacular 3000m snow, ice and rock cliffs descending from the summit of Chomolhari. As a result of Younghusband's Tibet Mission of 1903–04 the surveyors Captains Ryder, Wood and Cowie — who were attached to this expeditionary force — surveyed the approaches to Lhasa from Sikkim, including the Chumbi valley.



15. *S face of Jitchu Drake. (p 38)*



16. *Looking E over the Himalayan Divide. Tibet L, Bhutan R. (p 38)*

Although many Everest climbers had considered an ascent of Chomolhari, the first to take up the challenge was Freddy Spencer Chapman, who with Charles Crawford and three Sherpas arrived in 1937. Chapman had secured permission from the King of Bhutan to tackle the mountain from the south. After the expedition had crossed into Bhutanese territory from the Chumbi valley, Chapman and Pasang Dawa Lama reached the summit by the SW ridge on 21 May. They had an epic four-day descent through cloud and blizzard, over difficult snow and broken glacier ice. Pasang slipped, pulling Chapman down with him for 100m until Chapman managed to arrest the fall. Unfortunately his camera was damaged in the fall and half his film ruined, which presumably accounts for the fact that he was unable to produce any photographs from the summit area, looking north-east on to such nearby peaks as Jitchu Drake. They were in a very exhausted state by the time they reached the shelter of a yak herder's hut.

This was an amazing effort by Chapman and Pasang Dawa Lama, considering Pasang's limited mountaineering experience. They had reached the summit only eight days out of Phari, in alpine style and without much prior reconnaissance of this 7300m peak.

Chapman, of course, became well-known to the public as an extraordinary adventurer, mainly through the books he wrote, one of them being required reading by every schoolboy of my generation: *The Jungle is Neutral* – an account of his three years' fighting in Burma during the last war.

The joint Indo-Bhutan expedition of 1970 to Chomolhari was only the second officially sponsored expedition to the country (apart from the officially sanctioned trek and climbs achieved by Ward and Jackson). Prem Chand, Dorje Lhatoo, Santosh Arora and Sherpa Thondup reached the summit on 23 April. Sadly, on the following day, Captains S L Kang and Dharam Pal disappeared whilst making the second attempt on the summit. Despite a determined effort by the leader, Colonel Narinder Kumar, to find the missing climbers, a search by helicopter on the Bhutanese side and search parties dispatched by the Chinese from Tibet, no trace of them could be found. This expedition had climbed by way of the 1937 route. It actually stopped a few feet short of the summit in deference to the religious feelings and sensibilities of the local inhabitants.

Chomolhari ('Goddess of the Holy Mountain') is one of the most sacred mountains in this part of the world. After the tragedy and because of pressure from the local villagers – who complained to the authorities that their cattle had suffered as a result of the climb – a complete ban upon climbing Chomolhari has been imposed ever since.

Five miles north-east from Chomolhari, along the main Himalaya Divide, beyond Chomolhari E peak, lies Jitchu Drake (6790m), a name which means either the angry bird or, more specifically, the angry swallow, depending on which local you consult. In 1983 the Bhutanese decided to open up their mountains systematically, albeit in a very limited way, to all comers, and Jitchu Drake was the first peak put out for tender. It was the Japanese (as usual) who had their ears closest to the ground, and the Japanese ladies' expedition – under the leadership of Everest summiter Junko Tabei – was the first in. They tackled the mountain by the E ridge *integrale*. After 10 days they had established three

camps, but they abandoned the route at slightly over 5200m on 14 May, finding the climbing just too difficult and time-consuming. They left the area and trekked around to Shoda from where they climbed Sepchu Kang (5200m). On 20 and 21 May, nine Japanese and four Bhutanese reached the summit.

An Austrian expedition which followed closely on the heels of the Japanese decided to attempt Jitchu Drake by the SW ridge. After difficult rock and ice climbing and eight days above 6000m, Werner Sucher, Albert Egger, Alois Stuckler, Sepp Mayerl and Toni Ponholzer reached the S summit on 17 May. Shortage of time and incessant bad weather, especially in the afternoons, forced the Austrians to abandon an attempt at the higher N summit, but they had achieved a fine varied climb — in fact, one of the best lines on the mountain.

The following year a Himalayan Association of Japan Expedition arrived at the foot of the SE ridge and followed that to the S summit. They bypassed the lower gendarmes of the ridge, which had given the Japanese ladies so much trouble, by traversing around from the south to a col on the E ridge at 5300m. As with most expeditions from Japan to the Himalaya, this expedition fixed ropes, in this case from the scree to the actual S summit; possibly some 3000m of rope were employed before the summiters, Sudo, Hara, Deguchi, Shinmasu and Yagihara, arrived on the S summit on 20 May, three weeks after establishing Base Camp.

During the autumn of 1984 an Italian expedition attempted to repeat this elegant line, establishing Base Camp on 30 August at 4300m. According to their report (*AAJ* 27, 244–246, 1985), they fixed rope from Base Camp to 5900m. On 15 September the crest of the ridge broke away as Giorgio Corradini and Tiziano Nannuzzi were breaking camp and they were hurled down the E face; their bodies were never found despite an extensive search by the Italians, Bhutanese soldiers and a helicopter. There were no further attempts to climb Jitchu Drake.

Approximately 24km due east of Jitchu Drake and well south of the Himalayan Divide lies Kang Bum (c6500m). This was climbed in 1984 by eight Japanese and Bhutanese climbers (23 and 25 October) who approached the mountain from the south. A peak to the north in the Lunana region, called Namshila (5710m), was climbed by another large Japanese party. The summit was reached on 18 August by six Japanese and two Bhutanese, on the 19th by seven Japanese (including three women), and on the 20th by six more Japanese.

In 1985 there were two attempts, both in the autumn, to climb Kankar Pünzum (7541m), the highest mountain in Bhutan. The Himalayan Association of Japan Expedition of 10 arrived at Base Camp on 31 August. They attempted the central (S) ridge of the mountain, but temporarily gave up because of the difficulties and turned their attentions to the W ridge. This proving no easier, they returned to the south and reached a height of 6880m on 30 October. Next day one of the members succumbed to pulmonary oedema. All the others were needed to evacuate the sick climber, and they then decided to give up.

During this period the Explorers' Club of America launched an expedition to the mountain. They had great difficulty in actually reaching the base of Kankar Pünzum, finding it impossible to cross over from the Chamkar Chu approach valley designated by the BTC. The expedition consisted of some

of America's most experienced high-altitude climbers such as John Roskelley, Rick Ridgeway and Phil Trimble, but they had to be content with a number of peaks below 6000m east of the Chamkar Chu glacier, climbed between 30 September and 5 October. It was a very disappointed and disgruntled team which arrived back in Thimpu.

A 16-man Japanese expedition was more successful further west on Massa Kang (c7200m). On 13 October, Yokoyama, Hitomi, Nakayama and Tsukihara climbed to the summit via the NE spur, 4½ weeks after arriving at Base Camp (4900m). On 14 October, four more climbers reached the summit, and another four on the 15th. Their altimeter put the summit at 6800m.

Sepp Mayerl returned to Bhutan in 1986 to lead an Austrian expedition, this time to try Kankar Pünzum. They too attempted the S ridge but failed 200m below the Japanese high point. They reported only two days out of 21 on the mountain when the weather was at all reasonable. Snowfall was at times 50cm.

A British (Bristol) expedition to Kankar Pünzum established Base Camp on 25 September. They found the climbing technically far more difficult than expected. Steve Findlay and Lydia Bradey (NZ) did most of the lead climbing, with the help of old Japanese and Austrian fixed ropes. Steve Monks and Geoff Jackson put in a fine final effort, but by then (20 October), although the skies were clear, the incessant winds which had plagued the expedition were causing frostbite, and so the attempt was abandoned by the leader Stephen Berry some 50m below the Japanese high point. The expedition was evacuated from Base Camp by helicopter. Since 1986 this mountain has been taken off the list of peaks available for climbing.

Last year (1987), Kunla Kangri over in Tibet was climbed by the Japanese and, in Bhutan, Reinhold Messner arrived with one companion, with permission to climb on Jitchu Drake. After a 10-day reconnaissance and an attempt at a peak to the east (Kung Phu, 6532m), he retired. According to our Bhutanese trekking staff, he said that climbing further in the area with the prevailing snow conditions would have been suicidal.

Bhutanese policy towards climbing and tourism in general vacillates. Certainly they are not allowing an increase in climbing activity. In fact for 1988, as far as we know, our expedition to Jitchu Drake was the only one allowed. The fees for 1989 are due for an upward hike at a time when the level of tourism appears to be dropping.

I was fortunate enough to enter Bhutan 2½ weeks ahead of the rest of our expedition and to come in from the Indian airport at Bagdogra, as leader of the RGS trek. We were met off the plane by Kandu Dorje, a guide from the BTC, who had arrived that morning with a Toyota bus and driver. They took us through the undulating Dooars, tea-growing areas, east to Bhutan. We spent our first night in the country at the frontier town of Phuntsholing before continuing by a good road, well surfaced, taking a fine line through the dense jungle and teak forests up to the conifers around Paro. It was not hard to imagine why Bhutan had remained so isolated all these years. Before the Indian Government began its road projects here and elsewhere in Bhutan, it was a very hard flog up to the central area where most of the inhabitants live, some 1500m or more above the plains of India.

Accommodation at Paro was in comfortable chalets scattered around our government hotel, in surroundings not unlike Uttarkashi in the Garhwal. The food at the hotel was excellent, as was the local whisky, Bhutanese Mist, produced by the Army Welfare Project. After visiting Paro Dzong and the national museum housed in a watchtower standing sentinel over the paddy-fields below, we left for the capital, Thimpu, only an hour away by bus. More sightseeing, archery competitions, the Sunday vegetable market, visits to the Tashichho Dzong — the seat of power in Bhutan, both temple and secular — and after visiting the shops and purchasing beautiful homespun fabrics, we took off for Gortey Gompa on the first of two fairly easy treks in the central part of Bhutan.

This was the first trek I had ever led. It proved to be a very pleasant and interesting experience, especially with this group with ages ranging from 24 to 78, all of them travellers but not all used to camping under canvas nor to trekking over rough terrain. I certainly enjoyed their company and it got me fit, for I had arrived in Bhutan somewhat under par, having completed a series of 70-odd lectures in an attempt to catch up on paying for my mountaineering pleasures over the years.

At the end of April our team began to assemble, just as the RGS group was preparing to depart. They came in with Maggie Payne and three of her support trekkers, Neil Lindsay, John Ryle and Harry Jenson. Maggie had met our team in Calcutta and boarded the Druk Air plane from Calcutta to Paro; then they had gone by road to Thimpu, Paro being the only airport in the country.

It was good to see again Sharu Prabhu, whom I had first met in Darjeeling in 1985, and with whom I had since climbed in Jordan and South India. She had climbed on our Everest NE ridge expedition the year before, up to 7600m. She had also been to 7300m on the Indian Women's Expedition in 1984, and had climbed half a dozen peaks in India. It was also good to see Lindsay Griffin loping around our Thimpu hotel, 1m 95, with one leg shorter than the other from a severe accident some 10 years earlier. Although I had never climbed with Lindsay, I knew of his numerous explorations into remote Himalayan and Karakoram valleys. David Rose had been sent along by the *Guardian* to cover the story; he started climbing four years ago and last year had climbed 17 routes in the Alps, obviously keen and strong, 1m 93, big and very enthusiastic. At the very last minute Robert Schauer from Austria had to turn down his chance to visit Bhutan as his second child had arrived a few months before expected, and now Lindsay told me that Jim Fotheringham's arrival was uncertain as his locum had had a heart attack and Jim might have to remain in his dental surgery.

In the meantime we talked of Bhutan. The newcomers were full of enthusiasm, having arrived on a clear early morning into Paro. From the flight they had fine views of the snow-capped mountains to the north. I bored them with my impressions of the country, which were basically that this country really works; it's bureaucratic like every other country, but not as bureaucratic as Britain, India or Pakistan. Here it's small enough to work, to have a human face to it. You can usually trace the line of decision-making and meet the people

who will make the decisions. They are flexible, which they would need to be now and in the future, especially if Jim did not arrive. Each expedition (with the odd exception) is obliged to have a minimum number of seven members. We would also need flexibility as to which route to climb. In Nepal there is a problem – you have to state your route and stick to it, no matter what the snow conditions, avalanche danger or rock-fall danger; but here Jigme Tshutim, the Managing Director of the BTC, had already indicated that we could attempt any route on the mountain. We would also have some leeway in the numbers of actual climbers as we had Maggie's support trekkers to add on, which would count towards the required total. It is this sort of give-and-take which helps to get expeditions off to a good start.

My overwhelming impression of this country was already one of space. There are only 1.3 million people living in Bhutan, a country the size of Switzerland. I had dropped down through forested slopes to broad, wide valleys with only a few scattered chalets and hamlets dotted about. In Nepal, every square mile would have been terraced and heavily populated, with the forest cut back and the soil eroding. I felt privileged to be in Bhutan. We had not seen any other trekkers on our trails and only a few tourists in the hotels. It felt as if we had this wonderful land to ourselves.

The only children who had approached us had come to walk with us for a while, out of curiosity and occasionally to practise their English (the second language in all Bhutanese schools). None of them had asked for anything more. 90% of the people work on the land. That they had not lost their integrity as individuals in nature showed in their smiling faces and their general contentment with their lot. The only cloud on the horizon was the fact that in two weeks of trekking I had hardly seen the Himalaya. All through late March the mountains had been covered in cloud. Every evening and most nights we had rain or snow. At least the weather could only get better. I was just content to have had the chance to come to this country, to walk through its dense pine forests and thickets of rhododendron in full spring colour, to have spent time with the local people, supping Tibetan tea while sitting on the floor of their homes.

With two-thirds of the country heavily forested, Bhutan is not short of timber and they certainly use it to good effect in their homes, which resemble (as everyone has noticed) Swiss chalets. I would say that the level of carpentry is far higher and more interesting than in Switzerland.

On 2 May I saw my RGS group through customs and into the departure lounge and met Victor Saunders alighting from the Druk Air plane, fresh from Britain and Calcutta. There he stood on the hot tarmac in double boots and yeti gaiters, video cameras slung across his chest and heavy handbags in both hands. It was good to see him but sad to hear that Jim, unable to find another dentist to cover his absence, had made the decision to stay at home.

That afternoon we packed our loads for the ponies and yaks to take us up to Base Camp, four days due north of our Paro hotel. David was rushing round between typewriter and toilet as he had his first article to dispatch on impressions of the country so far, but he had also picked up a stomach bug *en route* from England.



On 3 May we motored up the Paro Chu valley to the roadhead, passing under the Taktseng (Tigers Nest) Monastery clinging to the granite hillside above us. We had made the visit — mandatory for anyone visiting Bhutan — the day before Victor's arrival. We had gone up with our guide for the expedition, Karma Tenzing, who told us that he expected, some time in the future, to spend three years, three months, three weeks and three days in a little cabin stuck in a gully just below the main monastery. He explained that the self-interned were only visited by relatives once a day, to push food through a trapdoor. Taktseng is really a shrine to the Guru Rimpoche (Padma Sambhava) who first brought Buddhism to Bhutan and Tibet in the eighth century; reputedly he arrived at the monastery on the back of a flying tiger.

It was one of the most spectacular sights I have seen in the Himalaya, the monastery perched on that precipice: actually the only good rock I had seen fit for climbing in the country, but here obviously out of bounds. We could not go inside because, after pressure from the Buddhist monks and lamas, all the occupied monasteries had been put out of bounds to tourists earlier in the year.

At the roadhead village, by the ruined Drugei Dzong which had been set ablaze after an earthquake in the early 1950s, we offloaded the gear from our bus and left Karma and his staff to arrange for the ponymen who were already waiting on us. In fact they had arrived the day before and were now claiming extra pay for waiting time. We took no part in the ensuing negotiations here or anywhere in Bhutan; the BTC staff deal with all such problems. Just below the old monastery there were stone-baths: a feature of many a Bhutanese village. They are filled with water, hot rocks are thrown in sizzling and the locals follow them into the hot water.

We were honoured to have Palden Dorje join us for this part of the trek. Palden is the son of Leni Dorje, who for a time was acting Prime Minister of Bhutan. He was armed with a pistol at his hip, to shoot marmots, he said; but he was on the lookout for blue sheep with the longest horn-span he could find, with a view to hunting them down later. It rained heavily all afternoon and night, and it rained most of the next day as we walked 22km in seven hours. We spent the night at Thangthanka at a yak herders' hut, occupied by a Japanese trekking group, with one lady groaning with mild oedema.

On 5 May we arrived at Thangothang, after a lovely walk through conifers and juniper forest. We could see the tip of Jitchu Drake above the clouds, shining white. We spent the evening bouldering and putting up camp by a stream below a ruined Dzong. Our camp obviously made a good base for exploring the western side of Jitchu Drake. Even though our mountain was only about 6800m we would still have to acclimatize during the next two weeks and that's what we did — first on the west, then on the east and finally on the south sides of the mountain.

Our explorations of the western side were hampered by almost continuous cloud-cover. The weather was usually clear in the mornings, but by the time we had reached any height the cloud was down, and it got thicker towards the evening. On one long day we walked along the true right-hand ablation valley and moraine of the S Jitchu Drake glacier, right up to where it merged with ice-fields coming down from the western side. We could only see two-

thirds of the western ribs reaching up into the cloud. Although this reconnaissance had been inconclusive, we decided to move camp and check out the E side.

The day before departure, Victor managed to severely strain a tendon in his ankle. We were out bouldering; he jumped off only two feet but landed awkwardly and his ankle went over with a resounding snap. He hobbled to his tent with our help, but despite hot and cold water treatment the ankle blew up like a balloon.

This was serious: with the demise of Robert and Jim we were already very depleted on high-altitude climbing experience. Next day we set off following Victor who was riding a horse. Unfortunately Victor has a severe allergy to horses, so he rode with his Gortex salopette and anorak, balaclava, scarf wrapped round his face, yeti gaiters and boots, and also dosed himself with antihistamine. Unfortunately too the horse was more allergic to Victor than he to the horse, and it kept shying away with fits of sneezing.

We marched off and up through the hills, north of the usual track from here to Lingshi, taking a more direct route to a lake close to the E side of our mountain. We eventually set up camp that evening by this beautiful oval lake about one kilometre long and a little less across. We camped amongst willow thickets on the grassy alp and just across from yak herders in two cabins, surrounded by the yaks and guarded by two angry and forever barking dogs. Back in England we had been inspired by the photographs supplied to us by Sir Edward Peck to check out this E side. There seemed to be a rib of steep ice and snow heavily fluted in parts, like some Andean peak. Now our chances of climbing that route with our depleted party seemed very remote.

However, during the next week we went up and camped on the rocky ridge separating the two glaciers which come down from the E face of Jitchu Drake. During this period it snowed every afternoon, but from various vantage points on the rocks we could see the face. It did look steep viewed head-on, and it also looked highly dangerous, with huge mushrooms of snow barring the way at several places. Unless we went back to check out the W side more thoroughly, the only possibility seemed to be up the S face. After some debate we decided to go for that from our lakeside Base Camp, down at 4300m.

By now Maggie had returned home with Harry and John. Neil had decided to stay and help us establish an Advanced Base Camp beneath the S face. With the help of Neil, Karma and his three staff – Sonam Dorje (trekking assistant) and the two cooks Tshering Dorje and Pasang Gayta – we moved our tents, food, fuel and equipment up to a lovely lake nestling in the rocks at 4900m. While the rest of us were bringing up more supplies, Neil and Lindsay carried out a superb recce of the approaches to the S face and reached a point just below the plateau, most of the way through the ice-fall which comes tumbling down towards the S Jitchu Drake glacier. A few days later we established our Camp One at 5500m on the great snow-shelf. Then we retreated back down to Base Camp for a good rest before launching off on the actual climb.

On 24 May we left Base Camp for Advanced Base Camp. I had awoken that morning in the small hours thinking of the S face collapsing, ice cascading down from 800m. I thought of the strength of the party or rather the lack of it:



58. *Menlungtse West from SW. (p 34)*



59. *Bhutan: rice planting in Paro. (p 38)*

Victor hobbling about with his injured ankle, Lindsay with a torn shoulder-muscle, Sharu with stomach troubles, myself trying to combat old age, only David fit but on his first Himalayan expedition. Then there was the weather, the wind, deep snow, what to do about clothing, food, fuel, we were running out of time, children back home. Definitely the darkest hour is just before the dawn. Anyway, I got up at five to write a few more postcards to accompany David's *Guardian* article going down to Thimpu with Karma. Coffee and breakfast over, we were away around the lake with rhododendron in full bloom up here and bright patches of azalea and primrose amongst the grass.

Actually Sharu was now going much better and so was Victor, although he continued to carry a very light load. Neil left for home after leaving a huge load at ABC. After a good night at Advanced Base we set off next morning with Sharu breaking trail first, then myself followed by David.

On the 26th we awoke to an amazing morning of white mist-filled valleys, and the rising sun filling the sky with orange beyond Masang Kang and all the other Kangs to Kankar Pünzum. We were late getting off. At 11 am, just as the mist was rising, we broke trail in the sweltering heat, up to the base of the S face. From there David took over the awful work and traversed for about a mile in dense mist until we were lost — all of us with a different opinion as to which way to go; so we sat there and brewed up. As some of us were carrying huge sacks of 30kg, we could not risk making a false move at this point. From here on we had to have enough food and equipment to climb the mountain. After this attempt there would not be time for another.

As the mist did not clear, we decided to find a camp-site nearby. After a brief recce we picked a site below an ice-cliff with a chasm behind which, we reckoned, would catch any debris falling off the S face. In the middle of the night I was awakened by Victor, discussing the starry sky. The moon was out and I went out to find that we were right on course. We got up at 3 am, but it was four hours before we had had breakfast and packed our gear. David had a bad stomach — all the excitement, he said — and Lindsay had had little sleep.

Victor and I broke trail up to the bergschrund. The important thing, he said, is to take it easy at this stage, so I slowed down and he rushed by! He was definitely on the mend. I climbed around the bergschrund with some difficulty, mainly on account of the very heavy sack. Sharu followed, then the others — Victor, Lindsay, nursing an injured shoulder, and David with a mammoth sack. It was soon obvious to all of us that, despite promising weather, we had left it far too late and that we had no hope of reaching the only likely bivouac sites some 600m higher, so we settled for leading out and leaving our four ropes for the morrow, Lindsay, Victor and myself taking turns at leading. Sure enough at 1 pm, back in the tents, we were hammered by the afternoon storm.

Clearly, in Bhutan you have to reckon that 1 o'clock means the end of the story, just as surely as if night has fallen. The only way to accommodate the ever-present afternoon storm is to go off very, very early in the morning. We could now do this by the light of the moon, getting up at midnight, hopefully away by 2.30am and up to a bivvy site by early afternoon. So we spent the afternoon eating sardines, cheese, biscuits, tomato soup etc and drinking, trying to rehydrate. Victor had already discovered that he had left the tapes for the

video camera back at Base Camp, and now David's tape-recorder had failed, so no film for TV and no tapes for Radio Four. Someone was telling us to keep it simple and to travel light. We spent the rest of the day whittling away at our food and gear, discarding everything superfluous.

We were able to sort out, take stock and contemplate the next day's 750m ice climb. This would be the first time Sharu had been on anything so continuously steep and icy. We discussed ways to conserve energy, not to hammer picks in too deep and to get into a rhythm of fast movement between natural ice-ledges.

On 28 May, I heard Victor's voice announcing that we had overslept; we had meant to wake at midnight, and it was now 2am. Never mind, we would just have to cope with the inevitable storm. We packed up in double time and were away by 4.30, moving rapidly up to the bergschrund. Sharu pulled up the rope hanging free over it; this took her some time with a heavy sack and Victor went up to offer advice and a foot-sling. She was soon up and over, and off we went in a rhythm of sorts up the four pitches we had completed the day before. The next pitch was steep and had me gasping and feeling a little sick, picking my way over a vertical step of hard green glacier ice. Victor, the smallest member, was carrying the lightest sack. It did not matter whether he was seconding or leading, his ankle still hurt, so he went into the lead and led off just as the afternoon storm came in. I placed myself in the centre to encourage the rearguard and to keep Victor supplied with rope and gear. He chose a good line in dense mist and swirling snow, and pitch followed pitch as the storm gathered momentum and strength.

At 1pm Victor expressed his doubts about continuing. I told him that we should take a diagonal line rightwards towards the SE ridge, for there we would be more likely to find a bivvy site. I suggested to Victor that we take stock at 2.30pm, when we would have our last chance to abseil off in the light. I knew that, if we did that, we would lose most of our ice-screws and thus the means to make another attempt. For once I felt remarkably confident that we should continue; I don't know where the feeling came from, but I had no hesitation in countering David's concern when he came up to me later. By the eighth pitch the storm was very violent and snow was pouring down the face in waves. It was hard for us to communicate or to see each other, 50m away. Tiny ice-ledges soon filled with soft snow and piled up on the hanging rucksacks attached to the ice-screws. The situation was getting serious and I asked Sharu what she thought of continuing. She had no hesitation in saying that, having come so far, we should keep going; she, too, could see that this was our last chance.

Lindsay at the rear was moving very slowly because of his shoulder. He and David were a long time passing up the ropes, the light was fading, we were still two pitches below the SE ridge and the storm was at its height. Even here, with only some 100m of face above us, the snow was cascading down. We thanked our lucky stars that we were not in the middle of the face, when in such conditions we might well have suffocated. Just as the sun was setting Victor reached the ridge, there were brief gaps in the cloud and we could look across to Chung Kang, covered in fresh snow.

I led off up the heavily corniced ridge for about 100m and stopped at a flat

part of the cornice. I tied off the rope and began to hack the top off, hoping to produce a site for our two bivvy tents. First Sharu, then Victor came up to help and, much later, David and Lindsay. By then we had one tent erected.

Sharu, somewhat exhausted, was inside warming up and brewing cups of tea. We were all set to carry on, hacking at the snow and (now) ice to provide a platform for the second tent, when Lindsay found a huge grotto under the cornice, 3m above our tent. He, David and Victor settled down for the night in that icy cave. Next morning the sun shone wanly through the thin grey clouds. I woke Victor at 6am, and at 8am we both set off to find a better camp-site. We went up some 150m and found a snow-slope, protected by a steep bulge in the ridge above. Later that day we all moved up to occupy what was probably the site of the final Japanese camp.

On 30 May, I woke Victor for a timecheck at 0.30am. Both tents were creaking under the weight of spindrift. He came down to my tent at 1am and said that the other two were not very well and definitely did not want to go up that day. He himself had not slept so well in the storm because of the angle of their platform. We had brews and noodles and eventually Sharu and I set off at 6am to fix two ropes. It was a glorious morning with a sprinkling of light snow like icing sugar on all the lower hills. Rivers were shining silver threads, small lakes glinted in the sun, not a bad place to be! May as well be here as anywhere, I thought.

Eventually Victor arrived with a third rope. After fixing that, we descended back to the camp and rearranged it, hoping to provide for a better night's sleep. Lindsay was flat out in his tent; a 1m 95 man trying to fit into a 1m 83 tent hadn't helped, and he was very groggy. He said he had no symptoms other than sleeplessness, but why? I think that it was probably due to his severe accident the year before, when his partner had pulled him off a pitch in the Alps and he had damaged again the side injured 10 years before; perhaps his body was still recovering from that.

We sat by the tents in the calm afternoon; such a pity that we were not able to make the best of this weather. A huge black-and-yellow butterfly fluttered around Sharu's yellow javlin salopette.

Later that evening David signalled his dilemma. If he continued, he reasoned, we would have less chance of getting up, as four would be slower than three — it being assumed that Lindsay would not be going. From a journalistic point of view it was important that some of us reach the summit, and he would be satisfied with that even if he did not himself make it. After all, we had accomplished a new route up the S side of the mountain, as far as the ridge. He added that he knew that he was basically being guided, and he found it more satisfying to be out leading with his friends in the Alps, learning from his own mistakes.

Sharu's position came into the discussion. Although she was going to be slower than Victor or myself, I pointed out to David that it was thanks to her determination lower down that we were up here now. In the end it was decided that Victor, Sharu and I would head off early next morning with light daysacks for the summit. So ended my dream of all five of us reaching the summit. I knew that David was disappointed with this turn of events. He had set his heart on

reaching his first Himalayan summit on this trip, but he could take comfort in the knowledge that he had contributed greatly to the expedition, taking on the burden of writing articles at high altitude, usually carrying the heaviest sack and doing a great deal of trail-breaking through the lower ice walks. His wit and repartee were always light-hearted and amusing, but the bottom line was really Lindsay. None of us wanted to leave him on his own, so David offered to stay and supply him with cups of tea while we climbed.

Sharu and Victor set about making breakfast at 0.30am. It was miserable up there, with the wind shaking the tent and blowing powder snow over frosty gear every time we opened the entrance. After three brews and a pan full of noodles, we were off by 2.30am, pulling the hanging ropes as we went and on up the ridge, in the bitter cold. Gradually the dawn colours appeared on the eastern horizon, but it was still very, very cold. We moved fast, with the second and third climbers climbing together as the leader took in both ropes. By the time the sun was up, it was time to stop. Occasionally our ice-axes poked through the cornice and we could look right down the E face. Between the E face and Chung Kang we could look across and down on to the Tibetan plateau which, in complete contrast, stretched brown and mauve north as far as the eye could see. From time to time we came across Japanese rope. It would have been churlish to ignore it, and occasionally we clipped on for protection, or as a belay additional to our ice-axes and deadmen. There was very little chance of getting in ice-screws, as the snow and ice were of a lacy texture for some 60cm down towards more solid ice.

Victor's lead took us to the S summit, and right on the summit we found the end of the Japanese fixed rope. It was good to be there, to sit on our sacks and to look around on that wonderful morning. Victor had done well to lead half the climb, considering his ankle, and so had Sharu. She had pulled out all the stops and had moved as fast as any of us. If Sharu had been tired she would have waited here at the S summit whilst Victor and I made the crossing down and up to the higher N summit, about 300m away. But she was raring to go and off we went, down 30m along the intervening cornice ridge, and up the steep but easy snow-slopes on the W side of Jitchu Drake's main summit.

By midday we were on the summit. We stayed for an hour, a couple of feet below the actual crest, not wanting to upset the gods that may reside up there. There can be few pastimes more satisfying than climbing mountains and seeing it through to the end. The summit not only marks the end of the route and the effort of getting there, but is also the place for immense satisfaction and elation. We all know that it's the journey and not the arrival that matters, but from the summit of Jitchu Drake we had that 360-degree panorama to which I for one always look forward.

We could see all the Tibetan plateau in this part of the world, a high-altitude desert stretching out northwards from the main Himalaya Divide. What a dramatic division of countries it is. The whole of the Tibetan plateau is higher than the forests of Bhutan.

Below us we could see the remarkable triangular peak of Chung Kang and the even more remarkable S face, and beyond that Kang Cheda, Massang Kang, Tsendakang, Table Mountain, Kankar Pünzum, Künlar Kangri and even the mountains of Arunachal Pradesh, about 300km away.

In the opposite direction we could clearly see Kangchenjunga, Jannu and Kabru on the borders of Nepal and Sikkim. We could also see Pauhunri and many smaller peaks on which Kellas had been active in the early part of the century. To the south-west, immediately below us, were Chomolhari II and Chomolhari itself. We could make out the long easy-angled SW ridge which Spencer Chapman and Pasang had taken in 1937 — easy-angled, but a long way and taking them to a point about 500m higher than ourselves — what an effort that must have been.

Not all the mountains of Bhutan lie on the edges. There are considerable peaks to the south and in the central part, poking up into the clouds which were now gathering. These clouds never looked threatening, they didn't strike fear into our hearts and so we were in no rush to leave the summit. There was time for a panorama of photographs and also photographs of ourselves, and then we were off back down to share the good news with the others, but we knew that we had to take care for this is when most accidents seem to happen. We made one awkward, often diagonal, abseil after another to arrive in Camp 4 just before dark.

The next day, after down-climbing two pitches and abseiling 12 full rope-lengths, we were back on the glacier to pack up our tent and the supplies left there, and then to carry our huge sacks down through the ice to the grass and flowers. The climb was over, and we had survived it.

In my tent at Advanced Base Camp, there was a message from Karma which told us that he had come up on the day of the storm and had prayed for better weather. The message read, 'I pray for the victory I want to see in your smiling faces. May God be victorious. Love and regards. Karma.'

After another beautiful morning the winds came in with a vengeance, and from then on there was always a mist and snow-plume blowing off our mountain as we walked out via Lingchi Dzong. We had climbed the mountain on the only day when there was no snow and cloud hanging over it. This is not to say that any of us are deterred from making another visit to the mountains and people of Bhutan. Whether or not we ever get that chance, we are grateful to have been there in 1988.