
HARISH KAPADIA

Exploration in Western Spiti

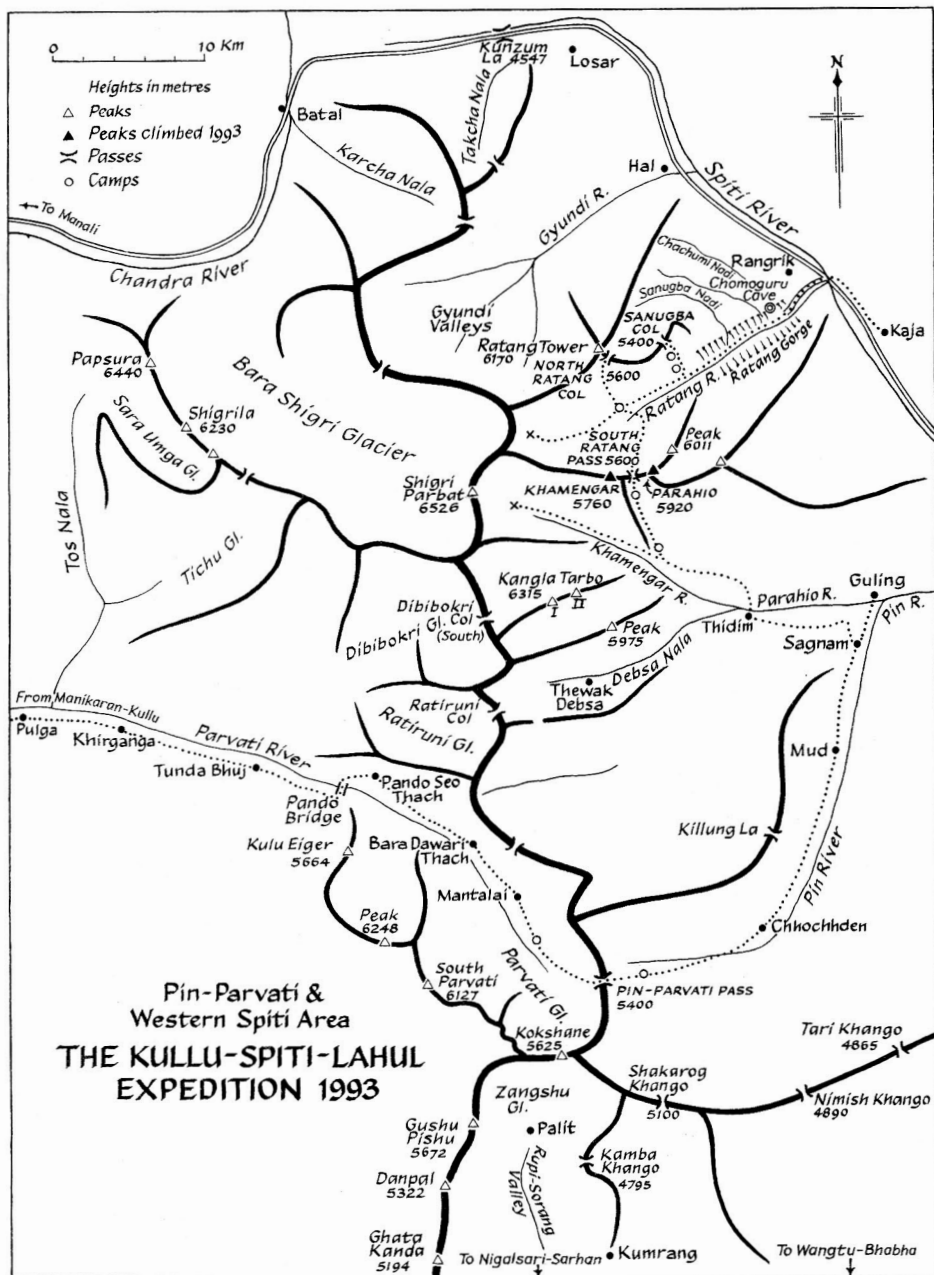
The Kullu-Spiti-Lahul Expedition 1993

(Plates 76, 85, 86)

Spiti has always fascinated me: the stark barrenness, the grey hills with green patches of cultivation and the deep gorges. I had explored the valleys east of the Spiti river – the Lingti and Syarma valleys – in 1983 and 1987. In 1993 I returned to explore the western valleys of Khamengar and Ratang to complete the Spiti experience.

The area west of the Spiti river is now open to Indians without permits for entry or photography, and with minimum formalities to foreigners. Thus after many years we could roam freely, with cameras. This year, the whole of northern India experienced one of the heaviest monsoons ever. The Kullu valley was flooded, the roads blocked and daily afternoon rain was a common occurrence. The rain had damaged tracks and destroyed large stretches of mountain and we had to cut new tracks over the scree slopes in many places. In the light of the havoc caused by the rains everywhere, we were lucky not to be seriously delayed, though it made things tougher and involved a lot of hard work.

Approaching Spiti from the south, we reached Manikaran in the Kullu valley on 15 July and travelled along the Parvati river. It was one of the most beautiful treks I have ever experienced – first through forest to Pulga and Khirganga and then via open meadows, crossing delicately poised bridges to the lovely Lake Mantalai at 4150m. There were *gaddis* (shepherds) all along the way and solid rocky peaks rising to the south. We turned east to enter a steep nala for our first pass, Pin Parvati (5400m), which was crossed from Spiti in 1884 by Sir Louis Dane and in 1906 by F Skemp; it was crossed from Kullu in 1921 by H Lee Shuttleworth. In 1939 Col J O M Roberts was unable to locate it and crossed to Spiti by another pass. Now the Pin Parvati pass is crossed by many parties and by the shepherds too. It was steep but we climbed it without difficulty on 22 July. Descending to the east, we entered Spiti and camped at the junction of three nalas which join to form the Pin river. We trekked along the Pin for the next three days to reach Sagnam, one of the largest villages in the Pin valley. On the way, the village called Mud was a sight to behold, with its striking situation and green fields. At Sagnam we replenished our supplies. The new openness was evident: foreign groups roamed freely at the Ghungri monastery. Even the villagers were wondering why there was no police post this year at Sagnam. How different from my last two





visits, when a piece of paper – our permit – defined the freedom of the hills. There were many other changes evident too: Spitians now have supplies of cooking gas and electricity, and many have television and other modern gadgets. They have been propelled into the consumer age.

Khamengar valley

After a rest day we turned west, up the Parahio river which joins the Pin river at Sagnam. Ratang valley was first explored by two British expeditions. In 1955 T H Braham and P F Holmes entered the gorge and camped halfway up the valley, climbing some peaks. Holmes returned here in 1956 with G W Walker; they climbed a number of peaks and explored the valley to its head. On their return they crossed the South Ratang Pass to Khamengar valley and reached the Parvati river after struggling through a pass to the Dibibokri nala. These were remarkable explorations and climbs, when maps were non-existent and a walk of many days was needed to reach the Spiti valley. We were the first party to explore these valleys again, after 37 years. The 1956 expedition had climbed both the peaks we climbed, and had walked out through the Ratang valley.

The Debsa nala and the Khamengar river join to form the Parahio river which, after a short run, joins the Pin river. Turning NW from Thidim we entered the Khamengar valley, where we stayed until we had studied its head and all the peaks. Kangla Tarbo (6315m) in the Khamengar valley is a beautiful, sharp peak, worshipped locally. It is the highest peak in Western Spiti (not counting the peaks on the Lahul-Spiti watershed). The Pin, Parahio, Khamengar and Debsa valleys have been declared the 'Pin Valley Ixex National Park'. We turned north up a side nala to reach the South Ratang Pass (5600m). It is situated between peaks Khamengar (5760m) to the west and Parahio (5920m) to the east. We climbed both peaks. The descent into the Ratang valley was steep and exposed. We had to guide the porters through it to the main Ratang river which we reached the same day.

Ratang valley

On 4 August we moved to the Upper Ratang valley to camp at the foot of the Ratang Tower. I went ahead to explore the head of the valley and saw the snow and ice pass leading to the Bara Shigri. We also saw a large herd of ibex. In the meantime, a party had climbed up to the North Ratang Col (5600m) at the western shoulder of Ratang Tower (6170m). No route was available to descend to the Gyundi valley. We returned to the Ratang valley and despite a further search could not find a suitable pass by which to cross over to the Gyundi valley with our laden and ill-equipped porters. By 5 August we had returned down the Ratang valley. On the 6th we moved up the unvisited Sanugba valley formed by a tributary of the Ratang river. We climbed up for two days and finally reached the Sanugba Col (5400m). We could observe and photograph many unclimbed peaks on the Gyundi divide, but no crossing was possible.

Ratang Gorge

We decided to return along the Ratang river. It took us three days and several river crossings. For two days we passed over a stupendous, high wall which was frightening and perhaps geologically and geographically significant. It was tiring but a great walk and we saw many *bharals* scrambling fearlessly on the rock walls. Finally, we reached a maidan at the foot of the ancient Chomoguru cave (named after a legend) on 11 August. After more river crossings we suddenly came upon a pukka metalled road *inside the gorge*. The road was built to go along the 5km-long water-tunnel of the hydroelectric project on the Ratang river, which supplies most of the electricity to Spiti. Soon we were in the broad Spiti river valley and at Kaja.

Thus ended our 222km trek in 28 days. From Kaja we travelled by the daily bus to Manali (via Kunzum la, Chandra valley and the Rohtang Pass), a 12-hour journey, and proceeded to Bombay.

Summary: The Kullu-Spiti-Lahul Expedition 1993. The expedition was sponsored by The Mountaineers, Bombay. The Khamengar and Ratang valleys were explored from 11 July to 15 August, 37 years after they had first been visited.

Peaks climbed:

2 August	Khamengar (5760m) 2nd ascent	Harish Kapadia Kesarsinh
2 August	Parahio (5920m) 2nd ascent	Kaivan Mistry Yog Raj Thakur Surat Ram

Passes crossed:

25 July	Pin Parvati Pass (5400m)
3 August	South Ratang Pass (5600m)

Cols reached:

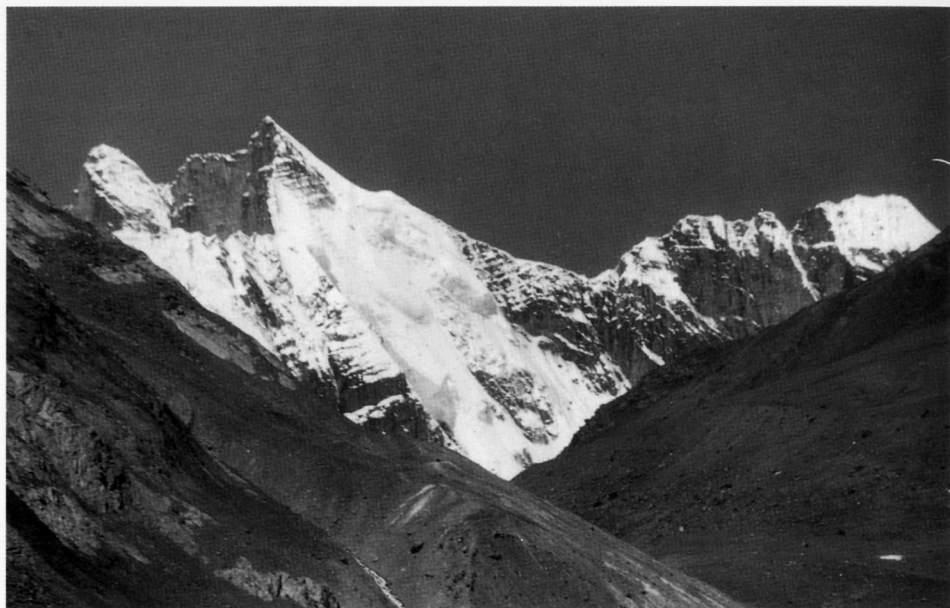
5 August	North Ratang Col (5600m)
8 August	Sanugba Col (5400m)

Team members:

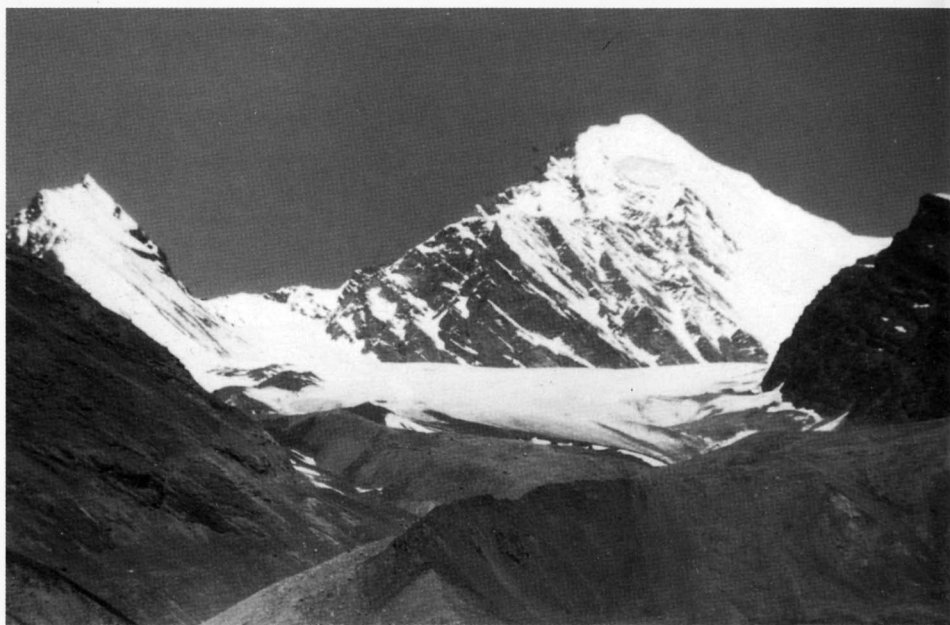
Harish Kapadia and Kaivan Mistry. (Vijay Kothari, Kekoo Cola and Saif Bijliwala joined for the first part.)

Supported by:

Harsinh Sr, Harsinh Jr, Kesarsinh (Kumaoni), Yog Raj Thakur and Surat Ram (Manali).



85. Peaks on the SW branch of Khamengar valley:
Left Peak 6507m, Right Peak 6410m. (Harish Kapadia) (p71)



86. View from the Upper Khamengar valley. *L to R: Peak 6360m, Parahio Col, Shigri Parbat, 6526m. (Harish Kapadia) (p71)*

NOTES

Naming of peaks and passes

Many passes and peaks in these areas are named after their explorers: for example, Gunther's Col, Abinger Col, Snelson Col and Holmes' Col. The Survey of India, and some later maps, would not accept individual nomenclature. Sometimes such names have scanty links with the area: for example, A E Gunther never reached 'Gunther's Col', but only mentioned the possibility of its existence. It is suggested that these passes should now be named after the terrain or area, so that one day they will be incorporated on the maps and any confusion about the area will be dispelled. No disrespect is meant towards the early explorers.

Gyundi valleys

Though we could not cross over into the Gyundi valley north of Ratang, we were able to gather some first-hand information about it. The energetic *gaddis* of Kangra have penetrated deep into the valleys and they stay there for the summer. The popular routes which they take with their horses and supplies are from Batal up the Karcha nala and across a pass into the Gyundi, or from Losar up the Takcha nala across a different pass into the Gyundi, or from Hal in the main Spiti valley along the Gyundi gorge. All these routes are in regular use. There are high passes leading to the Bara Shigri from the Gyundi valleys. The riddle of the Gyundi gorges has been solved by the energetic *gaddis*.

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