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PAUL NUNN

## Manirang, 6593m

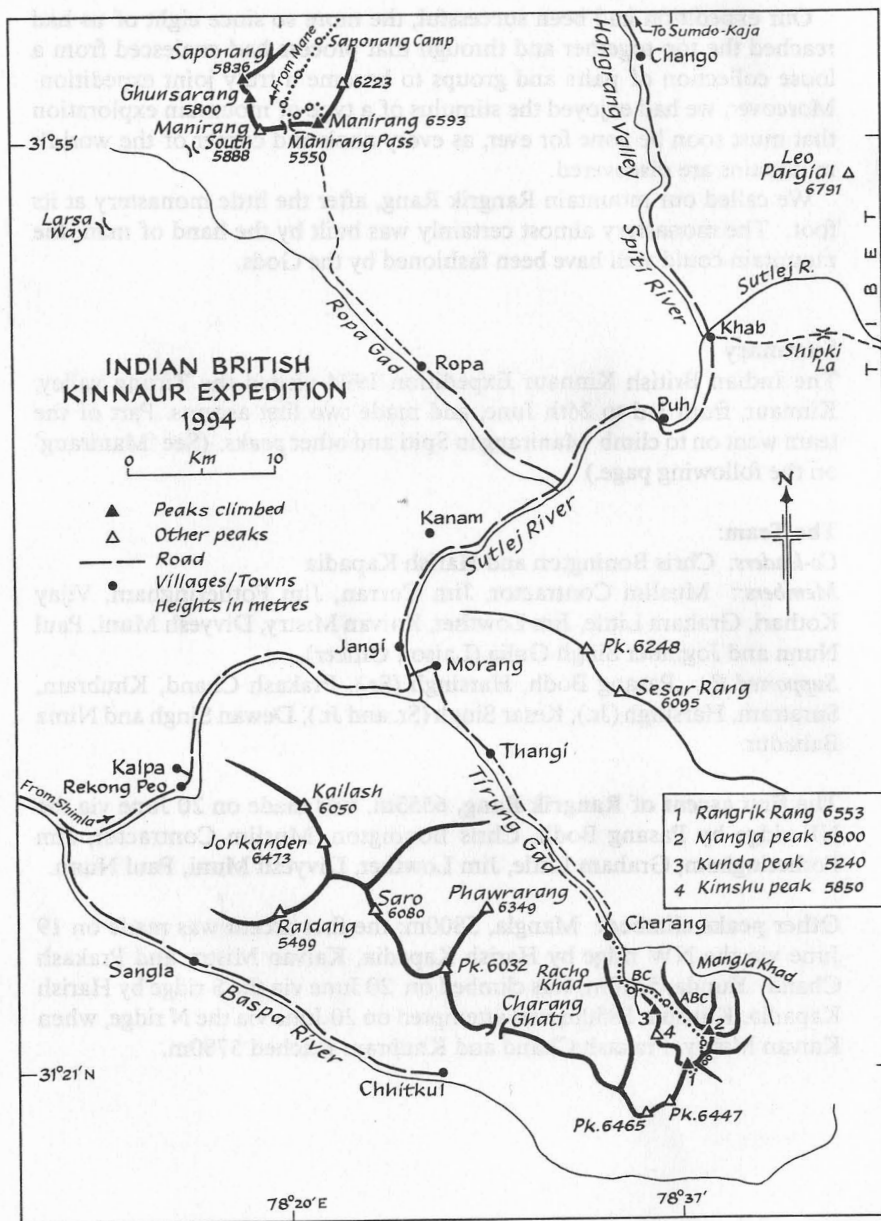
(Plates 25, 26)

The exploration in East Kinnaur was the first stage of the Indian–British expedition in June–July 1994. As the monsoon advanced, a second foray, planned for a ‘rump’ of climbers in rain-shadowed trans-Himalayan Spiti, had Manirang as its main objective. Manirang peak (6593m) had been climbed twice before, first by South Africans Dr and Mrs J de V Graaf with Pasang Dawa Lama and Tashi Sherpa in 1952, and secondly, in September 1988, by an Indian Parachute Regiment expedition led by Lt Col Balwant Sandhu who made the first ascent of Changabang with Chris Bonington in 1974.

On 29 June 1994, when Chris and the rest of the British team trundled off in a pick-up through the deodars towards Shimla and home, Jim Curran and I stayed behind at the ‘Director’s rest-house’, perched above the remains of the old Hindustan–Tibet road at Kalpa. We were all tired and monsoon clouds rolled up from the south-east behind the Jorkanden range across the Sutlej river. The dampening air weighed down our spirits but our hopes resided in the legendary aridity of Spiti.

Harish Kapadia, Jim Curran and I spent two days securing foreigner’s entry permits for East Spiti. One could understand stony resistance among officials as we trailed an American Buddhist ranter from one dark administrative corner to another. After years wandering the east seeking enlightenment, he had become a mantra of complaint. Jim and I were allowed just 14 days in the ‘inner line’ area. Anyway, we were booked on the plane from Delhi to London on 18 July.

On 1st July we were off, one jeep with Harish, myself and most of the Indian climbers to see Kanam monastery where, high above the Sutlej, the Hungarian scholar of Tibetan, Csoma de Koros, stayed in his cell for many years in the late 18th century translating Tibetan manuscripts. Far below, in the gorge, Vijay Kothari, Jim and the equipment had gone direct in two jeeps with half a dozen porters. After midday we spiralled down the steep track back to the main road and followed, entombed in the savage rock gorge of the Sutlej, with occasional glimpses from rock galleries into the world above. After a stop at Poo military cantonment for a late lunch, a notable moment was a sighting of the great rock peak Reo Pargial, a close neighbour of Leo Pargial (6791m) climbed by Charles Warren and Marco Pallis in 1933. Theirs appears to have been the last significant foreign



climbing expedition to East Kinnaur, if we forget occasional travellers, like Heinrich Harrer and Peter Aufschnaiter escaping the prisoner-of-war camp at Dehra Dun to 'Seven Years in Tibet' during the Second World War.

Near the Pargials the Sutlej river veers 20km east towards Gartok and sources not far from Mount Kailas in Tibet. The Spiti river turns NW and a new road follows, chiselled and blasted for miles through dizzy rock walls. Some hours after entering Spiti we caught up with the other two jeeps as a fierce sidestream swept the road. One had a holed diesel supply from driving too fast through dangerous water. A bus waited beyond the obstacles. Equipment and porters were transhipped, leaving the crippled jeep and driver with diesel pipe first-aid to get him back. Jim was relieved to escape from this youthful driving maestro. It was 10.30pm when we reached journey's end, sleeping out at a sprawling village by the road below Daudhar monastery. A magical large beer after the exhausting journey brought immediate extinction.

Early next morning Vijay found a lorry to get us to the wire jula crossing the Spiti to Mane village at 3600m. A new bridge was still in construction. Before the heat escalated and within an hour of our arrival we and the baggage crossed the Spiti river, balanced in a hanging box across the flood. A juicy and last mango breakfast was fuel for a steep climb into the idyllic village in search of Muslim Contractor, who had disappeared earlier to forage for transport. Donkeys brayed seductively in the distance all day but failed to materialise.

I explored up the steep dry path towards Manirang. When I got back to Mane, where local dignitary Mr V Kumar accommodated us royally in his fine house, Jim admitted that a nasty bruise on one foot made walking impossible. He was forced to stay in Mane with Mr Kumar, to recuperate and catch up later. There was so little time that the expedition had to keep moving to have any chance. A forlorn Jim was left behind and I set off with his film camera in my load, trying to fathom a two-minute 6am seminar.

We climbed to a milky lake, passed a few yaks and after lunch skirted high slopes above a dismal gorge to Saponang at 4500m. Early on 4 July in poor weather we crossed the river to the true left bank of the rocky nullah leading towards the Manirang La. The path was faint after about a decade of abandonment as a trade route. It crossed scree, nullahs and limestone ribs, and the donkeys only managed two short, steep, half-loaded carries. Heavy rain fell as we reached a barren sloping stony camp at 4840m. Easier ground opened beyond, but the donkeymen went home, leaving us in the rain with a mound of gear and food and as yet no base camp.

On 5 July Muslim Contractor and I found a good site at 5360m, not far below the Manirang pass (5550m). A pleasant if stony place, it had a good glacial water supply and surreal arid peaks around. Meanwhile, to our relief and delight, Jim arrived, his heavy gear carried by a young porter. His foot had improved, cured by huge meals, rest and watching Navratilova's tenth Wimbledon final on satellite TV!



24. Rangrik Rang, 6553m. Jim Fotheringham on the fixed ropes between Camps 1 and 2. (*Chris Bonington*) (p57)



25. Reo Pargial (Purgiyil), 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)

On 6 July Muslim, Divyesh and Harish, supported by Khubram and Suratram, found a camp site used by the 1988 party at 5700m and fixed rope on a short bare ice section that barred the route above. A wholesale move to Camp 1 followed, and on the 8th Contractor, Curran, Kapadia, Muni and I, with Kaivan and Khubram in support, climbed a couloir to the NW ridge of the mountain and set up Camp 2 in a sheltered hollow behind a looming limestone tower at about 6050m. The short stages allowed us to move when the snow was firm, and to shelter during the afternoon storms. The camp provided spectacular views north into Spiti, across the grim expanse of the NW face of Manirang, and south into Kinnaur.

Monsoon influences had now strengthened. Each afternoon brought snow, hail and rain, accompanied by pyrotechnics. Despite Spiti's dry weather, Manirang, poised above the Ropa valley in Kinnaur to the south-east and, at 6593m, the highest peak in its range, was an attraction to unwelcome meteorological intrusions. This explains the lushness of Mane village to the north-west, fed fresh water from the divide amidst a desert environment. Fortunately for us, the skies cleared and frost returned at night, so mornings favoured climbing and urgency where thunder had roared the night before.

Two possible climbing days remained on July 9th and 10th. Our Inner Line passes expired on the 14th, the expedition was due in Delhi soon after, and Vijay was already primed to summon the donkeys.

On 9 July Jim set off first up the ridge at about 5.30am, followed by me, with Contractor, Kapadia and Muni not far behind. Above a slabby tower the medium-angled snow ridge concealed a sting. A 350m section comprised hard, brittle ice. Five people, with two ropes between them, were not going to succeed. It had been supposed an easy peak, though quite why we were never sure.

First, Harish and Muslim saw the inevitable. After three rope lengths scratching precariously at merciless hard ice surfaces, so did we. Much disappointed, we retreated to the haven of Camp 2, repeating the experience of Colonel Sandhu's parachutists. In September 1988 they retreated hereabouts on their first attempt after fixing five ropes. Next day they fixed two more and got seven climbers of their 30-strong party to the top in fiercely cold conditions.

A council of war reached hard decisions. Muslim, Harish and Jim volunteered to descend, leaving Divyesh and me to try again, with seven ice screws, five rock pegs, two ropes, one day's food, and one day of expedition left. To encourage us, it began to snow at about 2pm and went on until evening, followed by lightning flashing from dusk to dawn. Full of doubts, we brewed tea from 3am and left at 4.30 on a suddenly glorious bright morning.

Good fortune indeed! The thinnest of new snow layers had frozen onto the bare ice slope. Divyesh went first, planting his crampons edge-on in a series of steep diagonals. The ferrule of the ice axe barely penetrated

A slip would be lethal as we soloed, but speed was essential for success. Well acclimatised, there were only brief pauses as we proceeded in steady rhythm, taking care especially at each turn of the diagonal when a slip would have been easiest. Before 8am we were at the base of the summit rocks.

Divyesh now led two full rope lengths up steep insecure snow and ice, on the very edge of a north face plunging a few thousand feet into Spiti, and belayed on two rock pitons barely penetrating the bad rock. Sun touched us from the right and the final mixed ground began to unfreeze. I led the last 100m of steep, loose boulders and snow, trying to hold the mountain together with hands, knees and feet, and fearful of dislodging stones on Divyesh below. One pitch had no belay; another finished with a perfect piton, a landmark for return. Then the angle eased, a few steps, and I was on the long narrow snow summit at 9.45am.

Within a few minutes Divyesh's grin bisected his face and said it all. An accountant from Bombay, at 29 he had already been on many Himalayan expeditions, climbed Kamet, survived an accident with his climbing wife, and now had added two more summits to his tally. The panorama was perfect through 360 degrees. We tried to look everywhere at once. As J de V Graaf recorded after his first ascent:

ManiKang [*sic*] dominates all this region ... This is the only peak that I have climbed where the views of Tibet are truly uninterrupted and so spectacular. The vast plains, separated by isolated mountain chains, contrast sharply with the crowds of snowy peaks which I have generally been used to.

While the view of Tibet from the north side of Everest may be more spectacular, the pivotal view which Manirang provides is outstanding, from Rangrik Rang and its neighbours to the east, distant Garhwal, then up past Reo and Leo Pargial and Tibetan borders in the north, to the Spiti valley, Lahul and the 'rear' of Kulu, finishing with Jorkanden and Kalpa in the south. We photographed, tried to make the self-timer work, did modest flag waving, ate a little, drank water bottles near dry. A walnut, gift from a Lama, stayed on the summit, and crumbs for the birds.

By 11am clouds massed in the south and capped the highest peaks, creeping in sinister shrouds over the Pargials. A teeter down unstable steepening slopes to a solid piton began the descent. But abseils were irritatingly slow. Each one involved getting the ropes straight down totally loose rock, descending without kicking off rockfalls, and teasing the ropes free through suspended masonry without unleashing a bombardment. Once, too optimistic, the rope would not reach a piton left in place. Divyesh fixed one of our two remaining pitons at foot level. As he picked his way down on the abseil, I knew he did not trust it. Nor did I, but there was no better placement, and I was glad to reach the next anchor and see the rope sliding

freely down the ice towards me. Lower still, a last old 'Cassin' piton, two inches in, just allowed our rope to reach the top of the ice field by 2pm.

The névé snow surface layer had been transformed. A brief experiment proved that to reverse the next 350m of climbing would be too dangerous – at every step our crampons balled up and threatened to trip us. So we abseiled straight down 300m, sacrificing six ice-screws, while a stiff SE wind blew clouds of new snow across the slope; but we did not pause to get out our jackets. Divyesh went first and fixed the screw while I pulled the ropes and fed them down, in a steady, well-ordered operation. A few football-sized stones crashed past. The snow slopes below, at a slightly easier angle, still crampon-balled and tripped. We finally reached camp at 4.15pm, quickly abandoning our intention of descending further that evening – the snow was too horrible, the likelihood of a slip too great.

The late-day storm was slight on 10 July, the night cold and starry. Rising before dawn, we were met by Kaivan and Suratram at the camp below and were back at base by 9am. Furious packing was under way, and the porters had already ferried equipment down to the donkey pick-up point. After breakfast Divyesh, Jim and I followed to the point where the donkeys were expected. When they did not come, Jim continued towards Mane village. Divyesh, Suratram and I baked on the scree for several hours, waiting. By afternoon we decided to descend to Saponang, leaving Suratram in charge of the gear, to meet the donkey train wading the stream an hour below. The two herders were driving the donkeys while riding two huge yaks, having been dislodged from sleep a few hours earlier by a warlike Curran. Towards 6pm the loaded mules returned to Saponang and with no further delay set off towards Mane. This was going to be some day!

It was a strange journey, mostly done in pitch darkness, crossing rivers, traversing rocky slopes and eventually descending the steepest direct path to Mane village towards 11pm. Suratram almost walked off into space and everybody was stumbling tired following the donkeys into the blackness. At last Vijay flashed a torch anxiously from the village, guiding us into Mr Kumar's house and a huge meal. Lullabies proved unnecessary.

Meanwhile, starting the same day, Harish, Kaivan, Muslim and the three Harsinghs crossed the little-used Manirang col and began a final adventure descending the Ropa valley. Kaivan had already made first ascents of Saponang (5836m) by the N ridge with Khubram and Suratram on 9 July, and of Ghunsarang (5800m) by its E ridge (with Suratram) on the 10th. This followed earlier investigations with Vijay Kothari.

On 13 July we all reassembled at the rest-house at Kalpa and repacked for the long return journey. Harish and Co had suffered a difficult journey down the Ropa valley, a nightmare drive with a drunken driver and the dire loss of Harish's rucksack when equipment tumbled off a taxi in the dark near Rekong Peo. We were so tired, the expedition so successful, that it was hard to find adequate things to say, though we had a long journey to Delhi in which to say them.

The expedition had other causes for satisfaction. All rubbish had been burned or removed, waste glass was pulverised and disposed of. Few tins were taken in the first place and none were left. Tins left by others were cleared where possible, as at Saponang. Jim Curran's filming went well. What more could we expect?

**Summary:** During the second stage of the Indian British Kinnaur Expedition, Paul Nunn and Divyesh Muni made the third ascent of Manirang (6593m) on 10 July 1994, supported by Muslim Contractor, Jim Curran and Harish Kapadia who reached 6300m on 9 July.

Other peaks climbed were Saponang (5836m) by Kaivan Mistry, Khubram and Suratram via the N ridge on 9 July, and Ghunsarang (5800m) by Kaivan Mistry and Suratram via the E ridge on 10 July. Both climbs were first ascents. In addition, the Manirang Pass (5550m) was crossed on 11 July to Ropa in three days by Harish Kapadia, Muslim Contractor and Kaivan Mistry.

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