
ARUN SAMANT

Num Themga and Six Other Peaks

(Plates 34–37)

He was short and bow-legged but broad-shouldered and strong. His long hair was tied back in a pony-tail. His round tanned face was creased with lines which ran down from the corners of his mouth, as if in a perpetual smile. His unwashed body and clothes smelt of butter, yaks and hard labour. What created maximum impact, however, were his dark penetrating eyes. They had a mesmerising effect. Local porter leaders, with whom we were having protracted negotiations, suddenly vanished into thin air when he appeared. He announced himself as a Buddhist 'Pandit'. A mutually satisfactory deal was concluded with him in just a few minutes.

Atisa, the great reformer and conciliator of divergent schools of thought within Buddhism, who travelled extensively in Tibet in the tenth century, was responsible for the development of the Vajrayana School which adopted tantric elements from Hinduism. I had met many lamas, visited many monasteries in Sikkim, Spiti and Ladakh but had yet to come across a tantric from the Buddhist cult. Though 'Pandit' had not gone through the full formal and rigorous educational treadmill of a monastery, he appeared to be knowledgeable. He was highly respected by locals and had a religious sanction to perform some of the functions of a lama. His main forte, however, was dealing with spirits, both good and bad. During our expedition he spent a lot of time bringing up our loads, post and sundries from Losar and, even more important, delicious fresh green peas from his own fields. Luckily we had no use for his tantric powers, but we always watched him in anticipation of a miracle, hoping to see him suddenly vanish or fly over a peak or perform an Indian rope trick. He, for his part, had evidently decided not to demonstrate his 'skills' on these occasions.

The Spiti Valley

We had first visited Spiti in 1983 and had been fascinated by its beauty. With the passage of the years, our memory of its landscapes, with their rich hues of red, brown, grey and black, had never faded; its lure became irresistible and we decided to return.

The local people call their valley 'Piti', which literally means 'middle country', since it lies beyond the main crest of the Himalaya on a high plateau between Tibet and the plains of Himachal. This is the highest

inhabited valley in the world, with none of its narrow gorges dipping below 3350m. The snow-line is very high, the snowfall meagre and the rainfall negligible. The valley is barren, rocky and formidable in appearance, with only a few green oases, seen during the summer months, near villages and on some high grazing grounds.

The main river of this valley, which originates NE of the Kunzum La, is also called Spiti. It runs a boisterous journey of 190km at an average elevation of about 4300m, dividing the valley into eastern and western zones before it meets the mighty Sutlej. The Kunzum La is situated at the western gate of the Spiti valley. The road from Manali crosses the Rohtang Pass, descends to the Chandra river, and rises steeply to the Kunzum La before reaching the first village, Losar.

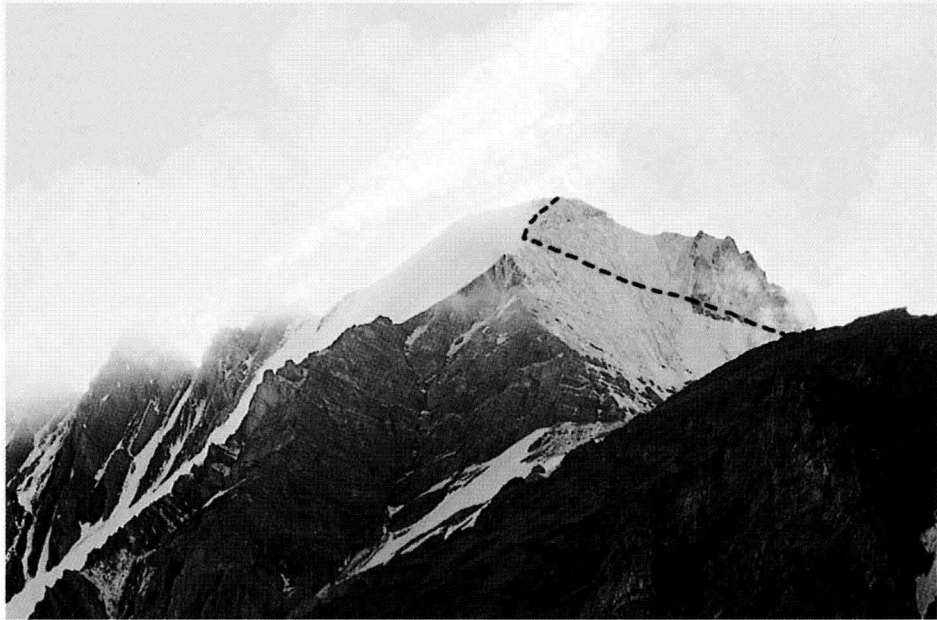
Spiti Adventure 1994

In 1994 we spent nearly the whole of August at and above Losar. We had excellent weather most of the time. Maybe it was 'Pandit', with his magic, who drove away 'the evil clouds and the evil spirits' to adjoining valleys.

The aim of our expedition was to climb from the Losar valley, where fourteen peaks over 5900m rise above the Suvita nala. The highest is Karcha Parbat (6271m). Joss Lynam and party climbed Fluted Peak (6139m) at the head of the valley in 1958. On 7 August, accompanied by our trekking group and three porters, we left the roadhead at Losar and took a day to reach Base Camp at 4500m. Small glaciers in the Losar valley drain into the Suvita nala. Assisted by our porters, we explored most of the branches, established high camps and climbed in two independent teams. At this stage of the expedition our party consisted of Anil Chavan, Dhananjay Ingalkar, Sunil Chavan, and myself as leader.

Between 19 and 25 August our two teams, between them, climbed the following peaks: Dongrimo (6160m) by the W face, Loushar (6040m) by the W face and the NE ridge, Lagbhor-che (5980m) by the NE ridge, Tarimo (5900m) by the SW ridge and Fluted Peak (6139m). Of these five peaks, all except the last were first ascents and we were elated about the way the expedition had progressed so far. After Joss Lynam's visit in 1958, quite a few parties had entered the valley but, surprisingly, they seem to have done no serious exploration beyond Fluted Peak. We felt grateful to them for leaving this new ground untouched for us to cover, when the number of available virgin peaks in the Himalaya is diminishing so rapidly.

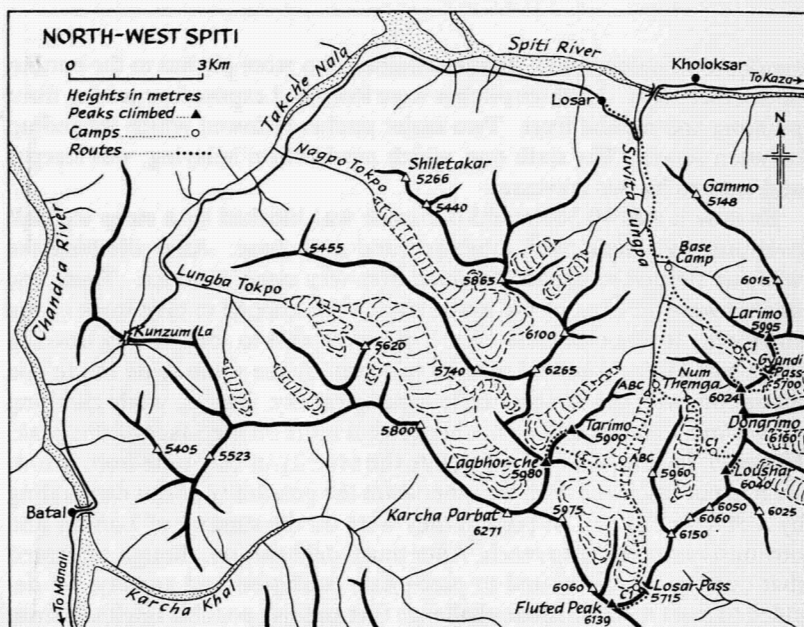
At noon on 27 August Anil and Sunil left the expedition, having used up their holiday period in a most enjoyable manner. A store of five days' food was available and we decided to have a look at two peaks rising above the glacier close to our Base Camp, its approach route having been observed earlier. At the head of the glacier was Gyundi Pass. We decided to christen the peak north of the pass Larimo ('the peak near the la') and the peak south of the pass, Num Themga (or Swargarohini, 'a ladder to heaven').



34. The Spiti Adventure Expedition 1994. Dongrimo, 6160m ('Sickle Mountain'). The first ascent was made via the West Face. (*Arun Samant*) (p97)



35. Lagbhor-che, 5980m, ('Elephant Head'). The first ascent was made via the NE Ridge. (*Arun Samant*) (p97)



Larimo and Num Themga

On 28 August we packed light loads, followed our old tracks up to the nala descending from the snout of the glacier and climbed on its right bank over loose scree slopes. Beyond the snout, about 250m below Gyundi Pass, we selected a spot on flat, scree-covered ground on the edge of the glacier for Camp 1. From here, the route to the pass on consolidated snow looked quite straightforward. Larimo could be approached from the Gyundi Pass quite easily over a rising scree ridge, but the continuation of the ridge to Num Themga was heavily corniced and broken. Its N face, too, was broken with séracs, crevasses and ice fields. So we ruled out the ridge route and opted for the N face, hoping to find a safer route there.

The next day we all started together at 6.30am and climbed up to the base of the snow slope leading to the pass. Here we split into two teams. Dhananjay and Pasang quickly climbed up to the pass and ascended the easy scree ridge at leisure to reach the rocky summit by 10.30am. They stayed on the top for two hours watching the other team, Prakash and myself, threading our way around séracs and climbing ice walls on Num Themga to reach the beginning of a slightly easier traverse over a knee-deep snow slope. They then descended to Camp 1 to await our return.

After leaving the other two, Prakash and I climbed a gradual snow ramp to the top of a huge sérac on the right-hand corner of the face. We roped up and put on crampons to reach the bottom of the headwall. Owing to the broken nature of this steep ice wall we decided to climb it in short pitches of 20 to 25 metres. Prakash led the first pitch directly upwards below a

small overhanging sérac. He then climbed two more pitches to the bottom of another sérac. All three pitches were steep and exposed, requiring front pointing and mutual trust. Two easier pitches followed which wound up between séracs. The sixth one, which needed firm belaying, was steeper and crossed by two crevasses.

By now it was 10.30am and our route was blocked by a steep ice wall overhung by a sérac with a bergschrund at its base. After climbing the wall, we needed to bypass the sérac over very steep, hard ice. These few pitches were the crux of the whole route. We stopped to take stock of the situation. It was clear that even if we were able to force a way through these barriers, it would be suicidal to return by the same route in the late afternoon, with the sun blazing in a cloudless sky. Earlier, while climbing Dongrimo, I had spotted a possible descent route on the S face of this peak. However, having failed to appreciate the severity of the route from below, we had not discussed with the other team the possibility of our descending by a different route. At present they were on the summit of Larimo and obviously impossible to reach. After much deliberation, though we feared that our choice was bound to precipitate confusion and anxiety, we decided to meet the immediate challenge first and risk possible brickbats from the support team later.

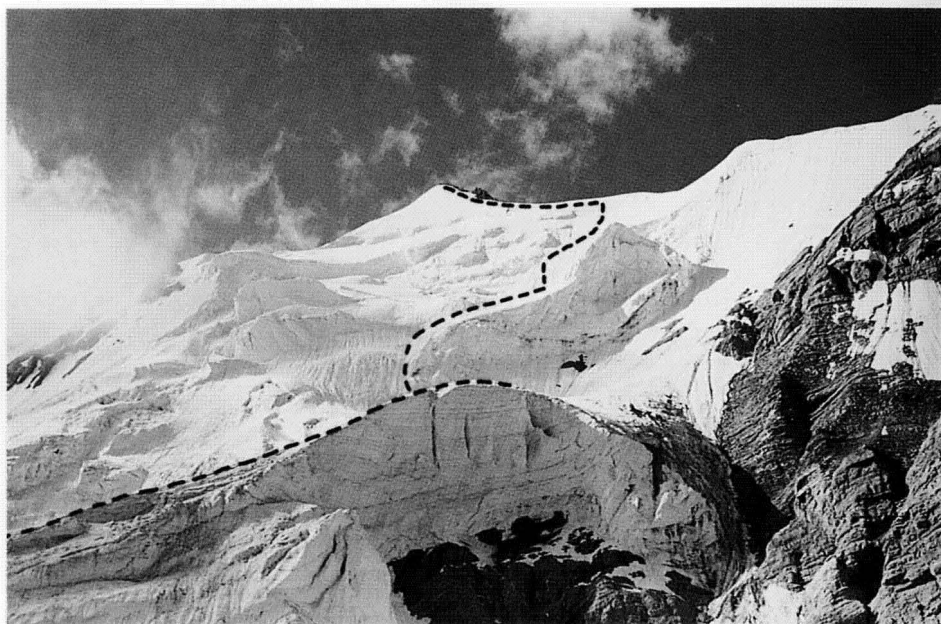
The snow bridge over the bergschrund was of sugarloaf consistency, but it was our only hope of crossing a deep crevasse extending in both directions. After two false attempts by Prakash, I tried a slightly different angle and succeeded in tiptoeing over the delicate bridge and, there being no landing space beyond the bergschrund, securing some purchase directly onto the wall. I continued up the ice wall to the bottom of the sérac and brought up Prakash. Two rising, highly exposed traverses on 60° to 70° steep ice set our adrenalin flowing. Prakash then led two near-vertical pitches. On the second pitch he had to negotiate an ice bulge which took some time, causing anxious moments for me belaying from a precarious stance below. The twelfth pitch, a leftward traverse, landed us on a snowfield. The snow was knee deep, the face leaned back and we waded through mushy snow to reach the base of the summit pyramid at 1pm. After roping up, we knew that lapses in concentration now would be of little consequence and we could breath normally. We slumped down to relax and uncoil our tensed nerves and muscles.

After resting and eating for half an hour, we quickly ascended to the summit of Num Themga at 2.30pm, initially over a steep, hard snow slope and later over a rocky summit ridge. We were rewarded with clear but distant views of the peaks of eastern Spiti, part of the Gyundi valley and, of course, most of the peaks above the Losar valley.

We looked for alternative routes of descent. On the S face a possible route passed over steep scree slopes. But that way led to the floor of another glacier and would involve following the Suvita nala to the tents at



36. Tarimo, 5900m, ('Horse Head'). The first ascent was made via the SW Ridge.
(*Arun Samant*) (p97)



37. Num Themga, 6024m, ('Staircase to Heaven'), seen from Camp 1. The first ascent was made via the North Face (descent via the East Face). (*Arun Samant*) (p97)

Base Camp and totally bypassing our present summit camp. On the E face of the peak we were delighted to see a steep but not too difficult route, initially over rocks and scree slopes. This route would land us on a snow plateau in the Gyundi basin and we would then have to find a way up to the Gyundi Pass between Larimo and Num Themga from the east, cross the pass and then descend to the summit camp, probably in darkness.

We opted for the second alternative. Descending over rocks, scree slopes and gullies, it took us three hours to reach the snow plateau. Twice we had to switch over to an adjoining gully, having reached dead ends over the top of precipices. We were lucky to find a narrow passage, which led us to a point about 200m below the Gyundi Pass. Soon we were overtaken by total darkness as our batteries slowly faded. There were no stars to brighten the sky and we stumbled up to the pass like blind men, reaching it at 9pm. We reckoned that our camp was about one kilometre away, beyond a small scree ridge, but our shouting and whistling produced absolutely no response. Probably the noise we were making was too low to reach our comrades, or maybe they were all out looking for us. Slowly we descended the snow slope on the W face of the pass and walked into the summit camp at 10.30pm after 16 hours of epic struggle. At the camp Dhananjay took good care of us. Pasang and Tashi had descended to Suvita nala in the late evening to look for us, hoping that we were descending via the S face of the mountain. After a long and fruitless search, they were benighted on the bank of the nala. In the morning, in desperation, the search party went to Base Camp and later climbed up to Camp 1 with heavy hearts, anticipating the worst. Our unexpected reunion was naturally full of extreme emotions: relief, happiness, anger – and happiness once again. We cleared the camp, descended to Base Camp in 3½ hours, had a quick lunch and ran down to Losar.

'Pandit' invited us and a distinguished visiting lama from Tabo monastery for dinner at his place – an offer none of us could resist. In the late evening we gathered around his warm hearth. The dinner began with the service of traditional salty butter tea in Tibetan decorative bowls and was followed by endless rounds of different varieties of tea. Delicious green peas, boiled potatoes and eggs followed. Courses of simple but tasty food continued to arrive and were promptly devoured. Success stories were exchanged and celebrations continued late into the night. The expedition had a happy and successful end. To what extent was the magic touch of 'Pandit' responsible for it? None of us was prepared to explore his tantric domain, if it existed. We were content with a happy ending and wanted the fairies, the spirits and 'Pandit' to play their own games without us.

Summary: The Spiti Adventure 1994 Expedition explored the Losar valley in Spiti between 31 July and 8 September 1994. Seven peaks were climbed, six of them being first ascents.

Climbing Team: Arun Samant (leader), Anil Chavan (deputy leader),
Dhananjay Ingalkar, Sunil Chavan.
Supported by: Pasang Bodh, Prakash Chand, Tashi Chhopal.
Sponsored by: Holiday Hikers' Club, Bombay.

Peaks climbed	Height	Date	Summiters
Dongrimo (‘Sickle Mountain’) 1st ascent via W face	6160m	19.8.94	Arun Samant Sunil Chavan
Loushar (‘Eastern Light’) 1st ascent via NE ridge	6040m	20.8.94	Pasang Bodh Dhananjay Ingalkar Prakash Chand Anil Chavan
Lagbhor-che (‘Elephant Head’) 1st ascent via NE ridge	5980m	23.8.94	Arun Samant Prakash Chand
Tarimo (‘Horse Head’) 1st ascent via SW ridge	5900m	23.8.94	Arun Samant Prakash Chand
Fluted Peak via NE ridge	6139m	25.8.94	Pasang Bodh Dhananjay Ingalkar Sunil Chavan Anil Chavan Tashi Chhopal
Larimo (‘Mountain near Pass’) 1st ascent via SW ridge	5995m	29.8.94	Dhananjay Ingalkar Pasang Bodh
Num Themga (Swargarohini: ‘Staircase to Heaven’) A traverse of the peak: 1st ascent via N face, descent via E face	6024m	29.8.94	Prakash Chand Arun Samant