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The Seven Pillars of Satling

(Back cover and Plates 3 and 4)

Sometimes it is hard to find logic in the footsteps of mountaineers. The Khatling Glacier and Bhilangna River drain one of the largest valley systems of the Garhwal Himalaya. At their head is the magnificent south wall of Thalay Sagar (6904m), ringed by peaks between 5500m and 6500m in altitude and just a few miles from the honeypots of Shivaling and the Gangotri Glacier, visited by thousands of trekkers, pilgrims and climbers each year. Yet nobody seems bothered to climb up in the Khatling and only a few trekking parties visit en route to the Shastra Tal or the Maiali Pass and Kedarnath. What the masses miss is a valley of exquisite sylvan beauty and mountaineering potential that has barely been tapped.

The last official climbing party to visit the valley was the British Thalay Sagar expedition of 1992. All of this is bad news for the local people who have missed out on the trekking and climbing boom. It is small wonder then that we were fêted as special visitors when our team of seven climbers arrived at Ghuttu, the Bhilangna roadhead, in late April 2002.

We were enticed by photographs, taken by the 1992 team, showing a range of striking granite spires and towers ringing a side glacier on the eastern rim of the basin. Their local name is 'Sat-ling', which means seven phalluses or pillars. The 1992 team gave some of them individual names appropriate to their shape and features, for example The Cathedral and Rabbit's Ears. To our knowledge the peaks were entirely untouched. The pictures showed the highest of the summits to be capped by two hammerheads of granite, around 5850m in altitude and defended by steep walls and ridges. This was provisionally named 'Double-Headed Peak'.

The range promised a feast of technical rock and ice climbing at modest altitude. How could such gems have been untouched when Ghuttu is only 12 hours' driving from Delhi?

We left Delhi at 1.30am on 27 April. The night ride to Rishikesh was swift and peaceful, the silent plains of Uttar Pradesh acquiring a ghostly beauty under a waning moon. The springtime heat became intense as our bus wound its way over the foothills through Chamba and then down to Tehri, where the largest dam project in the subcontinent is in an advanced state of construction. The massive dam plugs a narrowing in the Bhagirathi valley, just downstream from old Tehri town, already partially submerged. New settlements have been built on the west side of the valley. The scale of the earthworks, concrete spillway, overflow tunnels and labour camps was awesome, almost threatening. Yet 20km beyond, in the lower Bhilangna

valley, the timeless tranquillity of rural life was regained. We reached the roadhead at Ghuttu (1524m) at 6.15pm and took quarters in a large but otherwise empty resthouse.

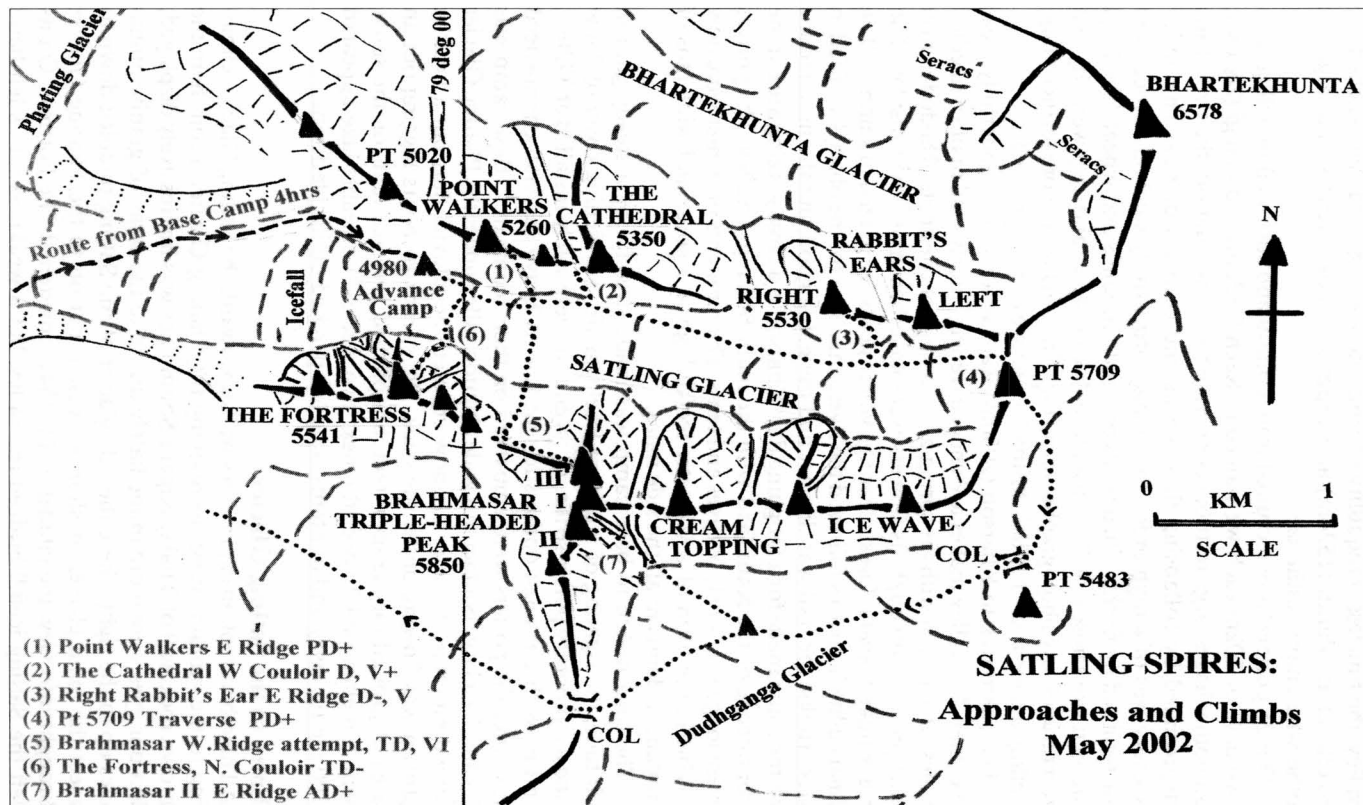
Our 35 porters were recruited from Ghuttu and surrounding villages. In two days of 10km each we walked to Reeh (2132m) and Gangi (2650m). At both villages large resthouses provided accommodation, their comforts depreciated by collapsing floorboards and colonies of rats. The valley scenery was of a high order, the villages attractively sited on terraces and surrounded by freshly tilled fields of potato mounds and wheat. The local women wore nose jewellery, usually a disc pendant, and they were shy and resentful of any photographic intrusion. The kids were more forthcoming, yelling a chorus of 'Mithai, Mithai' – sweets – as we passed.

The 18km trek to Kharsoli (2950m) was favoured by wonderfully clear weather. The valley makes a V-shaped trench, thickly clad in olive-needed pines interspersed with the spring-green foliage of chestnuts. Rhododendron was profuse, although its flowers were past their most vivid display. The track linked several forest clearings where goats are grazed in summer. The final eight kilometres followed the riverbank. Save for the obstacles of fallen tree trunks, the trail was distinct and the going good, but the undulations of the route made for a fatiguing day. Kharsoli is a large grazing area at the confluence of the Kairi Gad with the main Bhilangna valley. The porters were lodged variously in caves and tents. The remnants of winter were now visible in the form of a 60-metre icefall high in a gorge and wide fans of avalanche debris in all the side nalas.

The final march to base camp was made stressful by a steady gain in altitude, the sighting of a bear at Bhelbagi alp, a widening cover of snow and a temporary porter strike. At its end we were safely installed at 3720m, in line with our most optimistic schedule. A heavy snowfall commenced just after the porters were embarked on their return trek. Base camp was located by a large boulder in a wide ablation valley under the Phating Glacier lateral moraine. A metre of snow covered the alluvial flats but a healthy stream was flowing under the pack. We spent two hours digging out an area of ground for the mess tent, but pitched personal tents on the snow, which melted rapidly over the next two weeks. A sizeable lake appeared 100 metres away and our tents were left perched on ice platforms.

Entry to the Satling Glacier

All members took an exploratory walk up towards the Satling Glacier, climbing to the moraine crest overlooking the Phating Glacier. From here the brown rock wall of Thalay Sagar's South Face was impressively displayed, but our eyes were more immediately drawn to the array of granite pinnacles up to the right where the side glacier of the Satling tumbled down to meet the main glacier. A short excursion out on to the Phating Glacier brought into view the citadel of Pt. 5541, christened The Fortress. On its left the Satling icefall bridged the valley, but a weakness on its left-hand



side offered a route to the upper glacier where we hoped to place an advance camp.

Our team now split. Rupert and Sally Bennett planned an exploratory trip up the Phating Glacier towards Rudugaira (5364m) and Ratangrian (5858m). The Satling candidates formed two teams, the first comprising Mark Davidson, John Venier and myself, and the second Keith Milne and Gordon Scott, who had been on the 1992 trip and had now come back to claim some prizes. On 3 May five of us plus high altitude porter Mangal took substantial loads up the Satling valley to a height of 4500m. The intense midday heat persuaded us to make a temporary dump. The distance to the gentle snowfields of the upper glacier was further than we had at first imagined. Early next morning we left for the decisive push to establish our advance base with help from both porters, Mangal and Hari. Above 4500m, with loads well over 20kg each, our pace slowed to an agonised plod.

For 200 metres the route traversed sloppy snow above a considerable drop into the jaws of the icefall, then climbed diagonally up to the lip of the upper plateau. After a seemingly endless trudge the glacier folded into a flat-bottomed hollow ideal for a camp site. The altitude was around 4950m and the time 12.30pm but what a site! Exhaustion turned to elation as we viewed the scything ridges of 'Double-Headed Peak' across the glacier. We were sited close under 200m walls of pristine granite and had a 180-degree outward panorama ranging from Thalay Sagar round to Jaonli and Bhetiaraka-Danda. In its foreground rose an 80 metre fang of rock, which beckoned to be photographed with a climber perched on its summit in the dramatic fashion of Pierre Tiarraz's pictures of the Chamonix aiguilles. While Mangal and Hari ploughed down the snows back to base camp we lay outside all afternoon enjoying the peerless weather.

On 5 May after retrieving all remaining kit from our dump, we walked up the glacier to view potential objectives. Though not in the top league in terms of scale, in all other respects this is a cirque of superlatives. Every gradation of rock geometry from brown and sunny aiguilles to blank and bulging walls of unweathered granite was displayed. Caps of blue ice and a topping of white spring snow completed the spectacle. At the left end of the glacier twin domes of granite, named 'The Rabbit's Ears' by the 1992 team, looked particularly appealing. Our threesome decided to attempt the nearer of these next day.

The Rabbit's Ear and The Cathedral

At dawn on 6 May we tramped up the glacier until below the east col of the nearer tower. The views en-route demanded a prolonged stop for photography and for examination of possible objectives. Our route itself proved a little more serious than expected. After two long pitches on 50° snow and grade II mixed ground we gained the East Ridge of the tower, which was poised above an impressive drop down to the shaded Bhartekhunta Glacier. The other Rabbit's Ear sported a sheer granite face of some 400m or 500m

vertical height on its north-west side. The hanging séracs of Bhartekhunta's South Face formed an appropriately savage back-cloth. After a varied pitch of III+ up the arête, our way was barred by the bulging summit block. But there was a neat solution in the form of a strenuous grade V hand traverse round its left side, which led to easier shelves and the snow-capped summit. We were on top at 12.30pm, guessing our altitude at c.5530m, and regained the glacier at 2.15pm after three 60-metre abseils. Rumbles of thunder heralded our return and the start of a two-hour snowstorm.

Rising 800m from the upper Phating Glacier is a slender rock steeple, which had been named The Cathedral. From the Satling side this was an accessible objective with its summit just 400 metres above our camp. Here the peak presented us with a pair of fierce rock pillars split by a steep central chimney. We left at 8.30am and soloed a grade I couloir to the col beneath the central gully where we changed into rock shoes and left our plastic boots. Carefully avoiding snow and ice patches, we climbed four varied pitches to the brèche between the two aiguilles, the hardest a strenuous crack of V+ standard. The south top was patently inaccessible in rock shoes and we pinned our hopes on being able to surmount the north top. However, it was impossible to tell whether it was the higher of the two. After some delicate moves up the arête we faced a smooth final five-metre tower. To our joy an exposed but easy traverse went round its right side where a short slab gained the pinpoint summit. Better still, we considered ourselves a metre or so higher than the south top so could make unequivocal claim to the first ascent. Two full 60-metre abseils straight off the summit ridge regained our sacks and we scurried back to our tent as storm-clouds threatened.

A lovely mellow evening allowed us to cook outside. Here was Himalayan living at its most enjoyable. Despite glorious weather we now needed a short rest at base camp.

The Fortress North Couloir

While we engaged the Rabbit's Ear Keith and Gordon made an abortive attempt to climb the attractive West Ridge of Pt. 5260m immediately behind our camp. Foiled by the snowstorm, they planned instead to attempt the first ascent of The Fortress (5541m), which sported an attractive north couloir, gleaming with ice in its lower part, then zigzagging to the summit.

Leaving at 6am Gordon and Keith completed the climb in 10 hours, enjoying two pitches of Scottish grade IV and V in standard, several of III/IV and long sections of steep snow. They were shielded from sight of storm-clouds gathering from the south, and continued to the summit notch in ignorance of the threat. Luckily, the promised thunderstorm did not materialise and they reached the top at 4pm. The descent was made part by abseil and part by down-climbing. They regained camp at around 10pm after an excellent climb.

Discussion during our rest day at base camp centred on the topography of our main objective. A third hammer-headed summit had been spotted on our Double-Headed Peak rendering its name obsolete. Triple-Headed Peak seemed dull and prosaic so with respect for our Hindu hosts we settled on Brahmasar or Brahma's Head, the God Brahma being depicted with three heads. Climbing the thing would be rather more difficult. We guessed that the south side of the peak might be rather shorter of approach and easier in angle, but with our camp and all kit on the Satling Glacier to its north, we were bound to go back that way. Mark, John and I decided to try the West Ridge. Meanwhile Keith and Gordon would go over a col at the head of the Satling and try to access the south face for a lightweight attempt. Early on 10 May we climbed back to our Satling camp.

Brahmasar West Ridge

At the ungodly hour of 2.10am we set out into a perfect clear night, progressing in relaxed fashion to the bergschrund, then plugging steadily up compact dry snow at 55°. When the snow petered out we had to traverse right into a runnel of glassy ice which led direct to the west col in three pitches of Scottish grade III. A short grade IV rock chimney brought us to the ridge crest and a welcome burst of sunshine at 8.30am. We changed into rock shoes, and packed boots, axes and crampons in the sacks. Our fatigue was eased by the delightful climbing that followed. A fierce gendarme could be by-passed with ease on its right-hand side. We ambled along a veritable *vire aux bicyclettes* with a beautiful backdrop of snow peaks and glaciers to the south. The triple heads of Brahmasar soared above us. From the next notch the rock progressively steepened. An excellent 50-metre pitch of IV+/V led up the crest to a sizeable terrace.

Confidence was rising and our altimeter showed us only 150 metres from the top. It was still only 11am so we decided to dump all bivouac kit here in expectation of completing the climb and returning by abseil that evening.

Almost immediately we made the first big route-finding mistake. I climbed a delicate unprotected arête to find myself on top of a pinnacle with no onward connection. Luckily, I could fix a five-metre sling round the top and lowered off. The episode wasted 30 minutes and significant energy. Awkward grade IV and V climbing on the left flank of the crest brought us to a levelling in the ridge before it swept up to an obvious crux section of smooth vertical rock. Two grade IV pitches brought us to its base.

At a six-metre bulge I left my sack to be hauled. Happily a good jam crack cut diagonally left through this, giving a few strenuous moves. Two delicate sections of similar standard gained easier ground. Clever manoeuvres were needed to haul my sack up the arête and this grade VI pitch consumed much energy. Already the time was 4.30pm.

There was no sign of the easy ground we anticipated beneath the first summit. A frustrating diagonal pitch of mixed snow and rock produced dilemmas of route choice. We now reached a level shoulder just 15 metres

below the first summit. We had to traverse leftwards under this but the terrain remained stubborn, in the grade IV/V range, with much loose rock. After 15 metres of this traverse the alarm bells sounded. Retreat, especially at night, was looking increasingly problematic. The traverses would be especially difficult to reverse and, had we continued, two hours of daylight looked insufficient to tackle the smooth summit tower. You accept a disappointment and frustration that will last for months to come when turning back so close. After 15 pitches of TD climbing we were less than 60 metres below the top.

The difficulty of retreat down the arête soon confirmed the wisdom of our decision. To keep the ropes centred on the ridge I had to clip the ropes into intermediate runners on my way down. A rope jam would have been disastrous especially on the grade VI pitch. Horizontal sections of ridge had to be down-climbed to find new abseil points. Evening cloud licked our ridge and the rock glowed orange in the lowering light. When darkness came, John discovered his torch wasn't working and Mark and I had to guide him down with our torch beams.

We regained the ledge at 9.15pm. Luckily all breezes had subsided and a clear moonless night was established. After prolonged operations to arrange belays and get into extra clothing we crawled into bivouac bags at 11pm. There was just enough ice on the terrace to make a couple of brews. We had no sleeping bags but survived well enough. I awoke shivering several times but quickly dropped back to a deep sleep. Only when the dawn sun touched Jaonli's summit at 6am did we fully rouse ourselves.

We made two abseils down to the notch before the gendarme, and rappelled four more rope lengths directly down austere chimneys towards the snowfield of our approach. We down-climbed the final 200 metres to meet the sunshine just as we crossed the bergschrund. In baking heat we dragged our bodies over the glacier and crashed out at camp at 11am. Despite ultimate failure we had enjoyed a magnificent climb.

We quit the Satling Glacier at 8.15am on 13 May, somehow strapping all remaining kit into loads of 30kg with which we staggered down to a safe dumping spot at 4700m. Leaving some 20kg to be collected the next day by Mangal, we continued down to reach base camp at 10.30am.

The Satling Circuit and Brahmasar II

On their return to the Satling camp Gordon and Keith planned a busy three-day schedule with the aim of getting round to the south-east side of Brahmasar, from where the summit might be more easily tackled. First they made the first ascent of Pt.5260m – named Point Walkers in respect to our biscuit sponsors! – by its snowy east ridge, a short and pleasant climb of PD+ standard. Then came the hard work of moving camp and 20kg loads to the head of the Satling Glacier.

The watershed was crossed to the Dudhganga basin via a snow arête and summit close to Pt 5709m. After a delicate descent of the east side they

crossed a subsidiary col to make camp in the basin under Brahmasar's South-east Face. A steep narrow couloir led up to a col between the central and highest top, Brahmasar I, and the southern summit, Brahmasar II. A shorter grade I couloir led up to the col between Brahmasar I and Cream Topping at the foot of B I's East Ridge. However, this East Ridge looked hard. The intense daytime sun could create conditions ripe for rockfall or avalanche in either gully by mid-morning. Gordon and Keith chose the longer left-hand couloir, on the logic that it would allow them access to either B I or B II.

With a night start the left couloir was climbed quickly to the notch, giving one pitch of grade IV standard. On viewing the 60-metre summit block of B I from the notch, they could see no direct way up without hard aid climbing or even drilling. Gordon and Keith decided instead to bag B II, which was both accessible and technically feasible. A grade IV chimney-crack led to the summit, from which B I looked between 10 and 20 metres higher, a worthy 'inaccessible pinnacle'. The descent was made in three hours.

In the afternoon they packed and crossed another col south of Brahmasar to gain the névé leading under the east side of the Fortress and back to the Phating Glacier. They reached base camp just in time for dinner at 6.30pm.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Weather

The weather was impeccable throughout the trip. Late April and early May seem an ideal time to climb on peaks in the 5000m to 6000m range. By mid-May unstable rising air from the hot plains makes inroads to the Himalayan chain.

Snow Conditions

Given good weather the snow was stable and well-packed giving ideal climbing conditions. Approach gullies were largely filled with snow yet the ridges were sufficiently clear that rock shoes could be worn on more technical routes. At the end of April the snow cover was continuous down to 3700m; there is potential for ski-touring at this time of year and ski-ascents of many peaks around 5500m could be attempted.

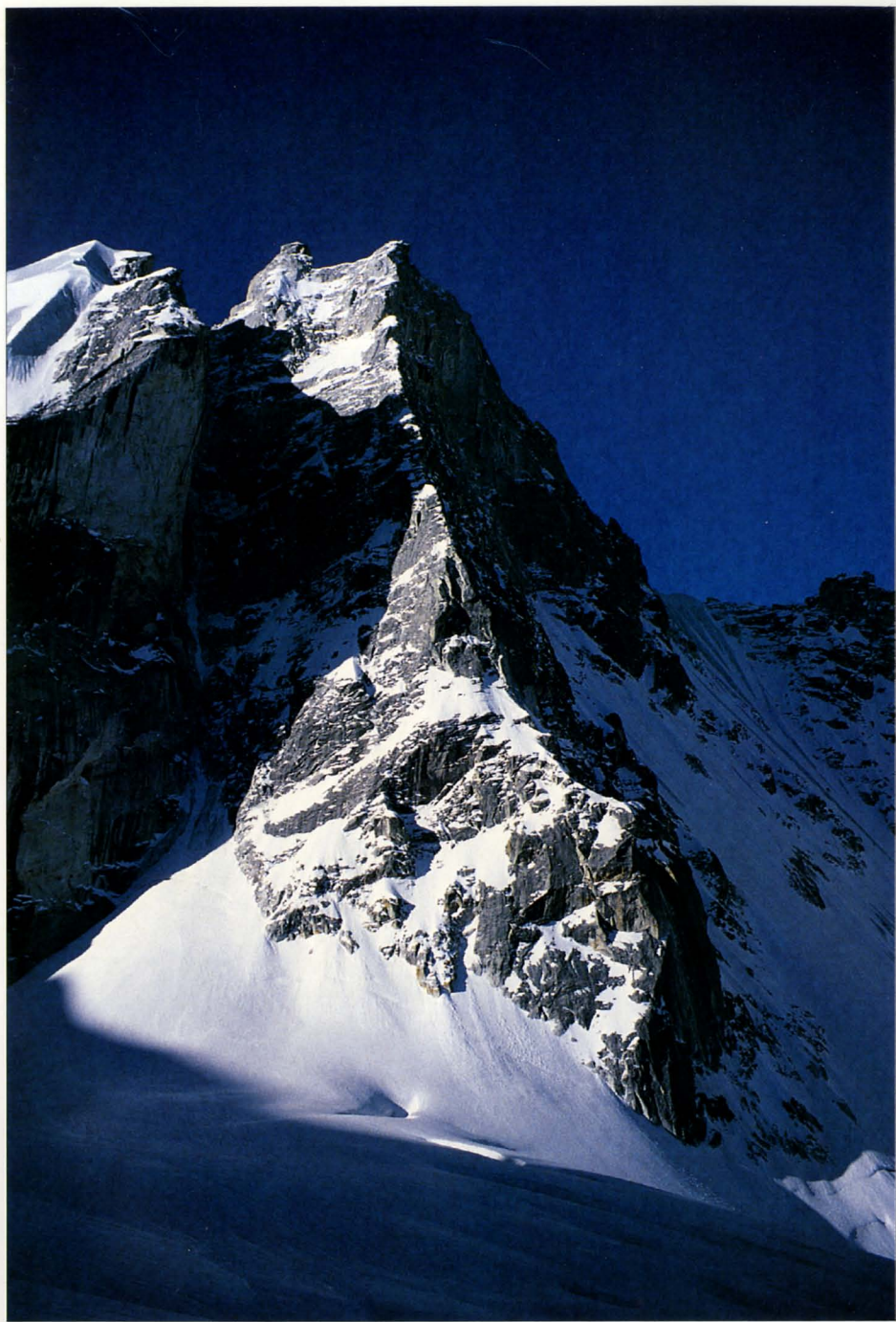
Trekking Route and Porters

The Bhilangna valley is not often visited but local porters were well organised and easily available despite competing demands of ploughing and sowing in the village fields at this time of year. Beyond Ghuttu it is difficult or impossible to purchase basic foodstuffs, so the party and porters must be self-sufficient. The high-level trekking routes are not clear of snow until mid-May.

Other Climbing Objectives

Our team only scratched the surface of the potential of the Satling range. Future objectives include the first ascents of the remaining pinnacles and the first ascent of the crowning peak of Brahmasar. The North Ridge and North-West Buttress of Brahmasar would give hard challenges. There are also ice goulottes some 500m in length between Brahmasar and its neighbouring tops. The West Face of The Fortress offers several mixed rock and ice lines. Finally, there are some compact big walls of 500m height on The Rabbit's Ears and the buttresses east of Brahmasar.

Any teams wishing to climb on the Satling should book the peak Brahmasar with the Indian Mountaineering Foundation. Brahmasar is now an officially recognised peak. Whatever your objectives some delectable climbing awaits.



3. The 700m North Ridge of Brahmasar (5850m) above the Satling Glacier. The West Ridge is on the right-hand skyline in shadow. (*Martin Moran*) (p33)



4. The difficult pitch of VI on the North Ridge of Brahmasar. (*Martin Moran*) (p33)

