

The Anglo/Indian Gangotri sanctuary expedition

Doug Scott and Mervyn English

On 7 May 1981 10 of us, from various parts of the World, met up in Delhi en route for the Gangotri Mountains. We were Georges Bettembourg (France), Greg Child (Australia), Merv English (N.Z.), Rick White (Australia), Stephen Sustad (U.S.A.) and Colin Downer, Doug Scott, Don Whillans, all from Britain. We stayed at the imposing Indian Mountaineering Foundation complex conveniently situated near the airport where we met up with Balwant Sandhu and Ratan Singh, who would join in the climbing.

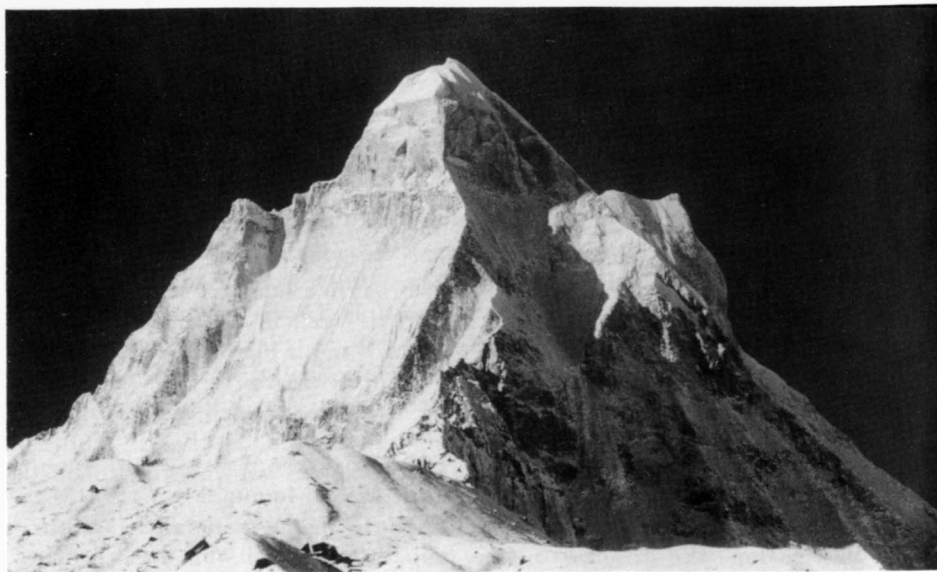
We took a bus to Uttarkashi, where Balwant is the Principal and Ratan the Chief Instructor at the Nehru Institute of Mountaineering (NIM). They would be organizing a camp of 20 young Indian mountaineers at our Base Camp. We planned to share some of our time with these people imparting concepts of Alpine climbing and techniques to them. Because this would be a joint venture, the President of the IMF, Mr. H. C. Sarin, and his committee had arranged for us to climb any peak in the Gangotri Mountains not 'booked' by other expeditions.

From Uttarkashi we travelled by various buses and used local porters to bridge the gaps in the bus route where the road had been washed away, to reach the holy settlement of Gangotri. In one day we walked to the ice cave known as Gaumukh, the Cow's mouth, where the Ganges begins its 2680km journey to the Bay of Bengal. The path is well made, being of strategic importance to the Indian Army and offering us and the numerous pilgrims of all shapes and sizes, all ages, of both sexes and from many parts of the World and from all over India, an easy walk to the snout of the Gangotri Glacier. From there an easy day's walk brought us and our 45 porters and their loads to Base Camp at Tapovan (4500m). From the flat, grassy Base Camp site we had views of the remarkable buttresses and faces of the Bhagirathi Peaks and others surrounding the Gangotri Glacier. The highest peak in the area, Satopanth (7075m), was hidden away behind Bhagirathi I. Shivaling was in our back garden, rising nearly 2100m above us with its fluted ice faces, steep granite buttresses and ice cap at 6543 metres.

The acclimatization period (18—31 May) was spent bouldering and crag climbing on the excellent granite within 2 miles of base camp. Several routes of 2 to 3 pitches up 5.9 cracks were ascended with members of the NIM course who arrived at base camp 3 days after ourselves. The whole camp split up into 3 groups to trek up the Chaturangi, Gangotri and Meru Glaciers during this time of melting Spring snow and the greening of base camp.

The Climbing

Shivling via the East Pillar (New Route): A camp was established at the



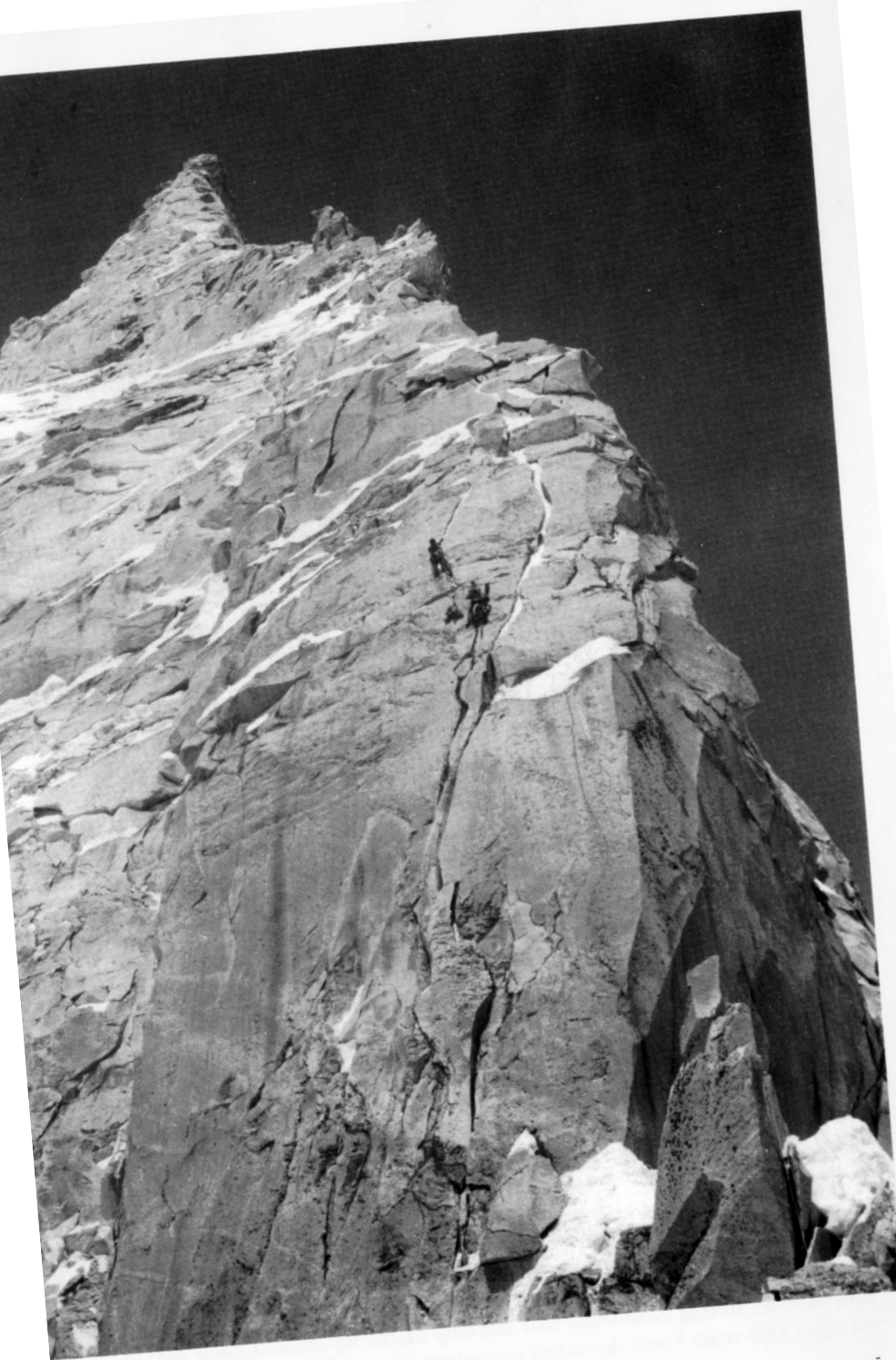
1 Shivling—E Pillar is the left skyline (This and next photo: D. Scott)

foot of the Pillar (5350m) on 31 May. However, 4 inches of snow fell and the camp was left for base—an easy 2 hours down snow and grass.

On 3 June, Greg, Georges, Rick and Doug returned to the camp with 10 days' food. Thirteen days later, on 15 June, we came up over the summit and traversed down the original N side route. The beautiful dawn and our elation were rewards of sorts for the hard climbing and much hauling of food and gear up steep walls of granite, broken mixed rock and snow and traversing around and over gendarmes on long exposed ridges. Although vertical height was only 1200m, we climbed 60 rope lengths in all. A third of these were along very exposed and sometimes dangerous arêtes of snowed-up rock linking the steep buttresses of this varied route. The nature of the ground called for big wall tackle (including two pairs of E.B.'s), alpine gear and full Himalayan clothing—in other words, a lot of weight which slowed down our progress, as did considerable falls of snow on most days of the climb. It is debatable whether or not this type of route is worth all the pack hauling involved, as only 4 or 5 pitches of climbing could be achieved each day. There were, in our favour, reasonable bivouac sites for our two Salewa bivvy tents, though we rarely managed to find a platform where both could fit and in fact they were always in part drooping down where the ground sheets overhung the drops below.

Our route of descent was speeded up by finding fixed rope left by previous Indian and Japanese parties and by more recent additions placed by a party from our own camp. We used seven 150-foot ropes on the pillar, 4 for climbing, 2 for hauling and one spare—all of which were brought off.

On returning to base camp, we were too emaciated to do any more climbing, so we walked out in bad weather on 19 June, mistaking this for the onset of the Monsoon, which arrived a week later.



2 *Climbing on Shivling*

Shivling North Side (Original Route): On 1 June, Downer, Sustad, Whillans, Sandhu and Singh left base camp for the Meru Glacier. On the 2nd, a camp was established at 5730m. It had been intended to push, lightweight, for the summit from this point, but sickness and fresh snow prevented this. A small amount of rope was fixed and further snowfalls dictated a retreat to base camp, where the team heard of an accident to a party of Indian climbers on Bhagirathi II. English, Sustad and Singh set off immediately and were involved in the rescue and recovery of 2 dead climbers. Several days later the team went back to their camp at 5730m on Shivling. The remainder of the rock ridge on the N side was climbed and the next day it was intended to attempt the ice cliff about 150m below the col between the main summit and the unclimbed W summit of Shivling.

Unfortunately, extremely high winds blew in during the night which destroyed the tent Downer and English were in. They all returned to 5730m. Two days later, on the 14th, the ice cliff was climbed to a point about 90m below the summit. Due to high winds, these last few feet were not taken.

For how much longer?

W. Kirstein

The ski-ing in California during December 1980 was not as good as usual. For the first time since I went ski-ing in the Sierra Nevada, about 20 years ago, there was not enough snow. No snow had fallen for 6 weeks and shortly before I arrived in Los Angeles a flu epidemic had broken out, consequently a few days later I had to spend 3 days indoors in Mammoth out of the 6 days I had planned to ski.

Strange to find exactly the same conditions 4 months later in the Engadine. Again there had been no new snow for several weeks and the warm weather looked like spoiling the Ski Marathon which always takes place in March. At least that was what I thought. However, when I asked the Swiss experts if the run really would take place, I was told that this kind of weather condition had happened before, not in Switzerland but in Scandinavia. There the skiers had used high boots. I saw the water 20cm deep covering the ice of the upper Engadine lakes and I just could not believe that the Marathon would take place.

The run was due to start 3 days after my arrival. Fortunately there was a heavy fall of snow during the night prior to the start of the Marathon—a wonderful ice-cold, fine powder snow brought by a very cold wind. A Swiss sports' shop provided me with some langlauf skis, which had a kind of fish-skin surface, sliding beautifully fast and easy on the icy snow. I knew that at the age of 84 years I was the oldest runner amongst the 12,000 participants