

Over the Kangla Jot

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During the Summer of 1982 a group of 5 trekking climbers went on an expedition to the N Himalaya. To find a suitable area we had read past Alpine Journals, looked up articles in the Alpine Club Library and talked to people who had already been. We finally decided to go to a valley called the Miyar Nullah, on the basis that there was first-hand information about it. (D. Challis 1978 *AJ* 85, and the Pinnacle Club Expedition 1980.) It seemed to fulfil all our requirements: it was beyond the Monsoon which was important as 3 of us were teachers and confined to the summer holidays, it was easily accessible (a mere 17 hours and 12 hours in 2 buses from Delhi to Udiapur) and we could combine some climbing (peaks of up to 6000m) with exploration. The crossing of the Kangla Jot (5468m) was the main objective. It is a little-known glacier pass at the end of the Miyar Nullah and would take us out of Himachal Pradesh and into the remote and magically named province of Zaskar. We would go up a 20km glacier and down an icefall on the other side of the pass.

We had photocopies of old Survey of India maps of the area and took enough gear to climb an alpine PD route. By wearing full climbing regalia on the plane we were able to carry 5kg each of freeze-dried food and dehydrated meat. We had 2 ice-cream boxes full of drugs—but, unfortunately as things transpired, no anti-altitude tablets. The heat of Delhi airport at 4.30 in the morning was quite a shock and we sweltered miserably in our plastic boots and woolly shirts while waiting for our new shiny rucksacks to appear on the conveyor belt!

Leaving Delhi as quickly as possible, we took an overcrowded local bus to Manali (17 hours). Manali is at the head of the Kulu Valley, in the heart of 'Little Switzerland'. It proved to be an excellent place to get supplies because it is a major trekking centre. We stocked up on food and invested 4 rupees on a chappati pan. We bought spices to disguise our plastic meat. An agent provided us with 8 porters to take us as far as Base Camp at the snout of the glacier. The charge was about £2 a day plus half rate for their return trip and there was a small sum for their food and the hire of porters' gear. It was decided that the hire of high altitude porters, to go over the pass with us, would have been too costly. We were intending to have 10 days of climbing before going into Zaskar and felt that they would be kicking their heels with nothing to do during this time.

Early in the morning of 30 July we woke our driver, who was asleep in his taxi, and he coasted us (owing to shortage of petrol in Manali) down



the hill from our hotel to the bus station. The porters met us there and travelled on the bus with us, their sacks balanced precariously on the roof. We climbed over the Rhotang Pass (3955m), travelling slowly. It took nearly 4 hours to reach the top! The bus lurched and heaved, and even the locals were suffering terribly. On arrival at Udiapur at the end of the road, after 12 hours of discomfort.

The Miyar Nullah begins with a steep gorge. Almost immediately there was a small setback. We had been travelling about half an hour up the valley when we came upon a road gang clearing debris and trying to bring down an overhang of rock under which we were supposed to pass. A crowd of people, including our porters, stood looking on expectantly. We suggested to the porters that we retrace our steps and try going over a small mountain on the other side of the valley instead. They indicated that we should wait, and shortly after there was a blast, and for some reason the cracked and precariously overhanging rockface was now considered to be safe. We scabbled beneath it with all possible speed!

The lower section of the Miyar Nullah is gentle and verdant. It is one of the prime areas in India for seed-potato-growing. There are several attractive villages with sturdily built houses complete with window-frames and glass. Each village had its shrine of Buddhist relics. The villagers found us most entertaining and came in force to watch us set up camp. Several times we were approached by women with babies suffering from conjunctivitis. We felt fairly inadequate as we could not help.

A few of our porters were from the valley—they were the youngsters, and formed quite an élite. They wore Western clothes and gym shoes, and were eager to learn English. The older porters wore Kulu caps and were from the Kulu valley. They often walked barefooted as their rubber shoes cut them, and they were bowed over beneath their sacks. They were treated rather badly by the élite, who boarded out while we were passing through the inhabited part of the valley, and then took over the only operational tent when we went beyond civilisation. The old men slept under boulders wrapped in their blankets and an old fly sheet. They were not fed adequately and were eventually forced to come and ask us if they could buy food from our supplies. Unfortunately we did not understand at the time, and they must have been quite hungry by the time we reached Base Camp.

The only other foreigners we saw beyond civilisation were first a couple of English botanists, and then 2 Indian geologists with their immense entourage. They were making a new geological survey of the area, and assured us that our tourist map was quite accurate. We met a few herders in their frilly skirts and rope lasso belts. They were at Kai Got, a giant boulder forming a palace of a bothy, with the usual Buddhist relics, ibex horns, bones and juniper, perched on top. They had fine mixed herds of silky goats and sturdy sheep. Much to our relief their dogs were docile, rather like cuddly teddy bears. The younger

porters showed off their prowess at bouldering—our style was laborious in comparison.

A Himalayan blue poppy was discovered in a rather inaccessible position and we went to great lengths to photograph it. Once we reached the moraine tip which forms the first 8km of the glacier, blue poppies were abundant and far more photogenic than this first one!

Base camp at 4000m proved to be in a rather melancholy spot. It was dominated by a magnificent citadel which we dreamed of climbing. All around were unwelcoming toothy black peaks, very different from the snowy domes we had passed on our way up the valley. Glacier moraine stretched as far as the eye could see. The porters, relieved of their loads, received their tips and, after posing for a final base camp photo, sped off in a gaggle down the valley. We had a brew to restore morale. The tents—2 Phazor Domes and a doctored Mountain Tent—were erected on a little sandy platform. Two lakes were discovered behind the immediate boulders which were warm enough for swimming so there was a general purging of dirt. I feel quite smug at having swum at over 4000m.

The late monsoon of 1982 was our undoing. We were able to carry out some preliminary exploration, enough to ascertain that a side valley which had tempted us, higher up the glacier, was not easily accessible but were worried by the barrier of moraine ahead, fearing that our attempt on the pass might be in jeopardy. The rain brought by the monsoon twice prevented us from setting out on climbing expeditions. After 5 days of eating we had managed to lighten our loads enough to make them portable. We decided to leave base camp early and perhaps climb at the Pass instead. We left a stash of food and kerosene in case we had to retreat. With mixed feelings of relief at moving, and trepidation at the size of our 25kg packs, we staggered onto the moraine. It was still raining.

It took 8 hours to cross the unstable, slippery wet boulder field. Desolation Camp was a snowpatch at the end of the boulders just before the start of the ice. We stayed there 2 nights in the rain. Here we discovered that Indian matches are hopeless, that optimus stoves work very badly on Indian kerosene, especially at altitude, and that liquid fuel is essential for the priming of the stoves. We only had one squeeze-lemon of meths with us. Once on the ice the walking improved as the glacier was dry and of easy gradient. At our second camp on the glacier we were surrounded by mushroom-like bollards and rock tables. The clouds lifted to reveal beautiful white peaks which would be of considerable interest to a better equipped expedition. During the 2 days we progressed up the glacier we were tantalised by the thought that at the pass we would only have 1000m of ascent in order to reach a 6000m summit. Unfortunately I was now suffering from an altitude headache and nausea brought on by carrying an excessively heavy pack. I combated this as best I could with painkillers, anti-nausea tablets and

a scarf tied over one eye. My breathing was not affected, and I was able to keep on going at a reasonable pace. My companions could have climbed something but most were exhausted, and the general feeling was that we should give up any thought of climbing, cross the pass as quickly as possible and so get down to a lower altitude. They considered giving me a syringe of something to check the nausea as I hadn't eaten for 3 nights. (They had been practising on an orange back in the U.K. and were very keen.) Happily I avoided this fate by stopping the sickness with warm water and Dextrosol. We spent a final night camped on boulders on the Kangla Jot itself. It was remarkably warm and comfortable after 4 nights on ice. We were amazed to find the skeleton of a yak at this altitude. There was also evidence of bothies, flat platforms and little walls.

The descent down the icefall was interesting. The clouds closed in and it was snowing. The way had looked straightforward from above but we soon found ourselves stuck on a ramp of ice with retreat back up as the only possible course of action. Finally a tortuous route was found down to the left of the icefall. After a further night on the moraine we dropped down into Zanskar.

The packs were much easier to carry at lower altitude. Some of the party jettisoned their iceaxes, rope and breeches as soon as it was safe to do so. They had brought old equipment and were eager to be rid of it.

The colourful sandy mountains of Zanskar were a marked contrast to the black and white world we had left behind, and we soon joined the main trekking route from Manali to Padam. Here we met our first Zanskaris, 2 exotic men in dressing gowns and top hats, riding diminutive ponies, bedecked with bells and colourful saddle cloths. We saw our first Buddhist monastery, the spectacular Bardun Gompa perched high above the river on a rocky tower. As we walked the final 3 hours towards Padam we met a young man called Omar Quayam who spoke English. He was the son of a Padam hotelier and was leading a ram back home where it was to be supper for the guests of the Greenlands Hotel. He suggested that we might stay there and, though we were sorry for the ram, we were also very hungry. We accompanied him to his hotel, a cosy mud daubed cottage in the middle of barley fields.

The trek finished in Padam where we became tourists. The ram never did materialise in the cotton dining tent of the Greenlands Hotel, but curried potatoes, greens, rice and Tibetan bread reminded us that we were back in some form of civilisation and that life was going to be a great deal easier from now on. We watched other tourists sauntering out along the main trekking routes followed by armies of porters and ponies and wondered whether our expedition had in fact qualified for the term 'trek'. It sounded too gentle!