

Views on the Gangotri

Martin Moran

Plates 20–23

The Gangotri is only 300km from Delhi, an array of attractive snow peaks, and unlimited potential for Alpine-style ascents on granite prow and faces. This mountaineering dream-world was unveiled by the Indian authorities as recently as 1979, when the 'inner line' restrictions on the Tibetan border zone of the Garhwal were relaxed.

Access to foreign parties had hitherto been prevented for nearly 30 years, so that neither the Himalayan 'golden age' nor even the modern lightweight revolution had touched the region. The 1930s and '40s saw the initial explorations of the main Gangotri Glacier system, and the first ascents of the most accessible and easy summits.

Tilman and Shipton's 1934 Garhwal travels had reconnoitred the Chaturangi Bamak, the Gangotri's major subsidiary glacier, after crossing into the basin from Badrinath. In 1938 a German expedition penetrated and surveyed the full length of the Gangotri glacier itself, and in 1947 a Swiss party ascended Satopanth (7075m), which is the second highest of the surrounding mountains after Chaukhamba I at 7138m. Then, during the years of closure, Indian expeditions climbed several other summits including in 1974 the coveted prize of Shivling (6543m), the most beautiful and revered of them all, towering awesomely and so conveniently above the glacier snout and the Tapovan camp.

But when, in the wake of the Shivling E Pillar climb by Bettembourg, Child, Scott and White in 1981, *Mountain* blew a fanfare of publicity on the area, Gangotri was still an untapped goldmine to climbers of all ambitions. In the last four years of rapidly increasing popularity this situation has been gradually changed, yet so great is the potential that the many magnificent routes established have merely pointed out a wealth of intervening challenges for the future . . .

The Pilgrims' Trail

The district town of Uttarkashi is located deep in the tree-clothed Garhwal foothills, and the bus journey from there to Gangotri roadhead takes six hours if the road is clear of landslips, tortuously following the precipitous gorge of the Bhagirathi River to provide, in the opinion of many, the most frightening part of their expeditions. However, it gives the porters an easy ride for their first day's pay. Uttarkashi has several registered porter agencies as well as an excellent market and so forms the last major stocking point *en route* to the mountains.

Little is seen of the snow peaks during the trip nor even from Gangotri village, which is closely hemmed in by the valley's walls and offers no distant perspective save for the enticing sight of Sudarshan Parbat which fills the skyline above the final bend of the Bhagirathi. The village is excitingly sited at

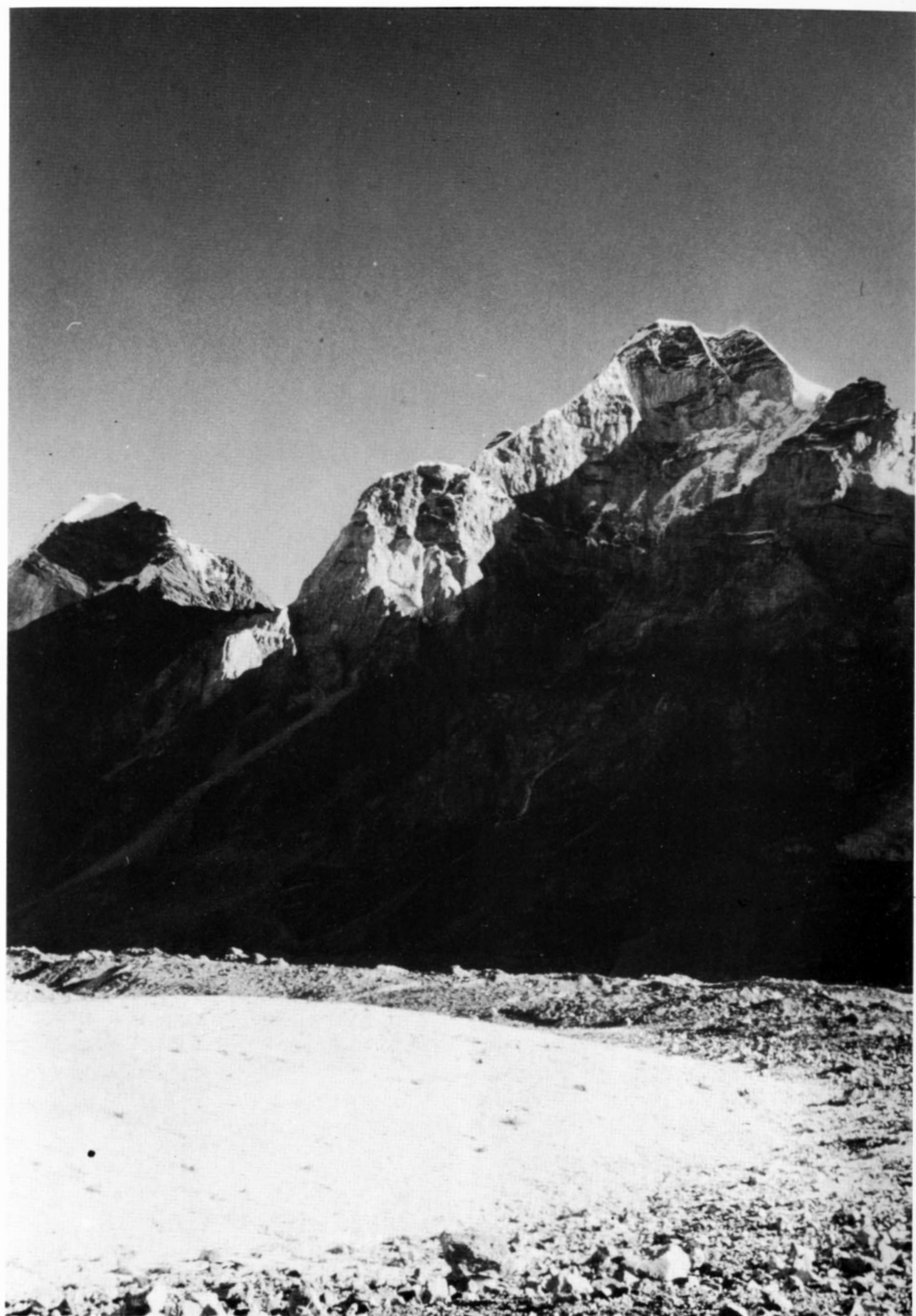
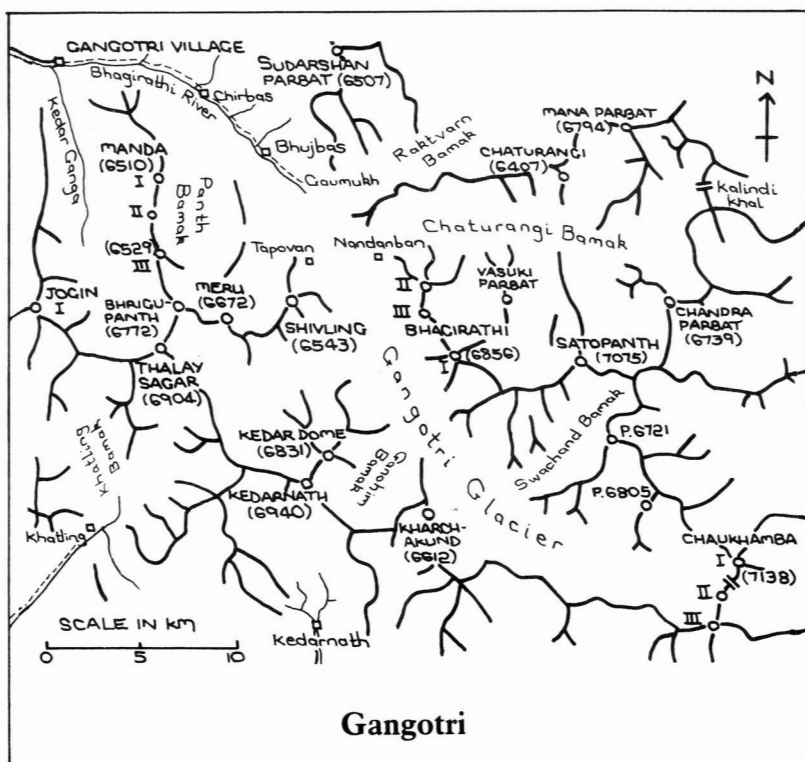


Photo: Martin Moran



the tumultuous confluence of the Kedar Ganga which drains the great cirque of Thelay Sagar (6904m) and crashes down to join the Bhagirathi in a roaring ravine of smooth bare granite. The shining white portals of its temple mark Gangotri's social and spiritual focus. Yet the place has a dishevelled and neglected atmosphere, especially in autumn when a piercing mountain wind blows down-valley raising the dust and wreaking havoc among the makeshift shacks of the bazaar and tea stalls as if to quicken the annual exodus of its populace to lower climes for the winter. The scheming entrepreneur would drool over the potential to convert Gangotri into one of the world's most delectable tourist resorts, but perhaps it is better left as it is — dirty but culturally intact.

The 16km walk to the Gangotri glacier is shared with a stream of pilgrims, for the Bhagirathi is worshipped as one of the sources of the Ganges. The glacier snout at Gaumukh, where the river emerges from a concave cavern of ice, is one of the four holy places in India to which the devout Hindu makes his lifetime quest. All castes and classes are seen on the well-made track, from the wealthy of Bombay, borne shoulder high in dandies, to frail and ravaged old men, clutching their cheap metal water pots, and shrinking inside thin white cloths at the chilling mountain vespers. Their ardour is rewarded by one of the most gentle and beautiful mountain rambles imaginable. It is therefore sad to

hear rumours that a jeep track may be driven up the valley by 1990.

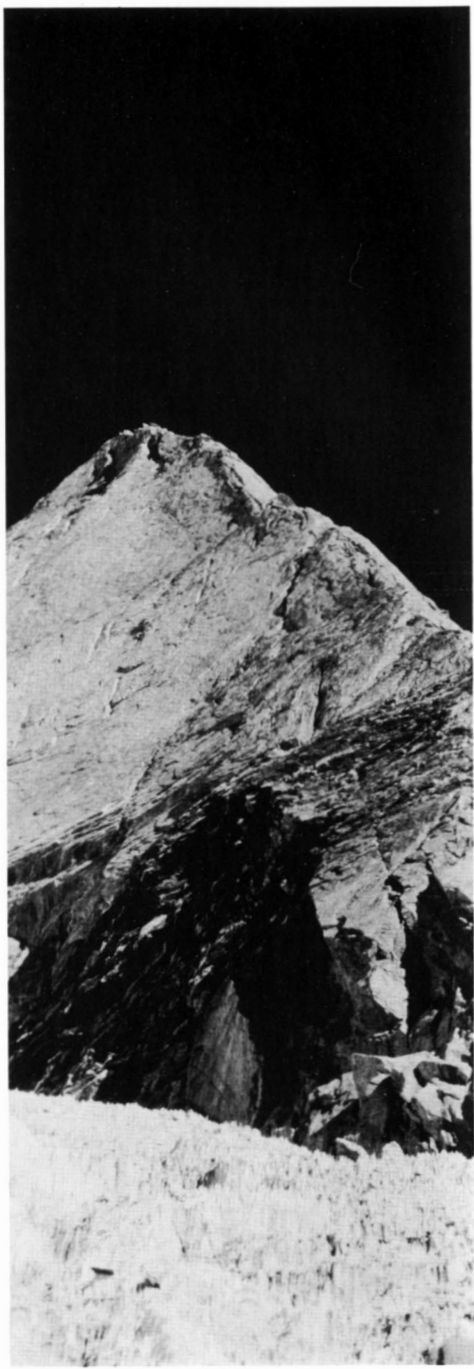
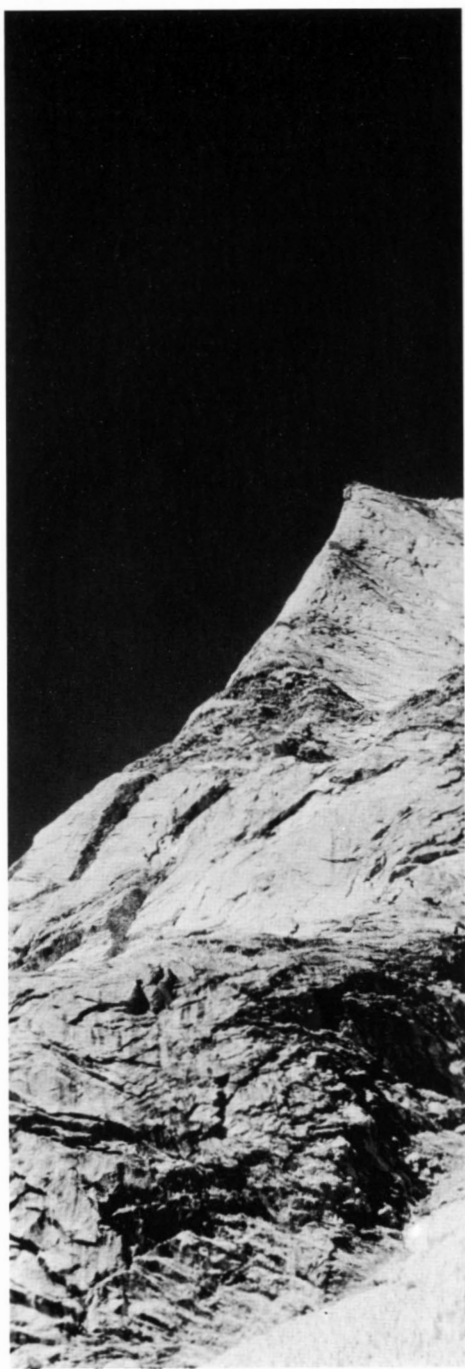
The trail is especially a revelation to the climber, whose gaze is upward and onward. Initially, sheer monoliths of orange granite rising over 300m frame the valley sides. Yet when Pat Littlejohn and John Mothersele climbed the striking dome on the south side of the river 3km upstream from Gangotri in October 1984 they were almost certainly making the first incursion in a rock-climbing paradise that could easily absorb a two month stay in itself. This 12 pitch route followed the NE edge of the dome, gave sustained HVS climbing with a crux corner of E3 6a, and was climbed from a snug bivouac in the woods beneath the face. With idyllic camping spots and the summer teashop at Chirbas close at hand, the joys of exploration on these sunlit walls could easily distract parties away from the high peaks, but they could also provide an ample consolation in event of failure or bad weather in the mountains.

However, as height is gained the brilliant snowcaps of Bhrigu Parbat and Manda are noticed peeping over the cliff tops and then, as the southerly bend of the river is turned, the Bhagirathis — II, III and finally I — are unfolded in a majestic tableau across the valley head. Their serried N and W ridges and faces were the preserve of British parties until 1984. B II presents a fine snow and ice face above Nandanban which was climbed in 1981 by the Irish team of Tommy Maguire, Ian Rea and Dawson Stelfox. Next in the ranks comes the rapier-edge spur of B III, a stunning line climbed in 'capsule' style by Bob Barton and Allen Fyffe in 1982, and etching a lofty skyline on the right, the snow arête of B I's W ridge which Charlie Heard, John Mothersele and myself did a year later. Since then a three-man Italian team has climbed the W ridge of B II, and most impressively the W face pillar of B III was ascended by four Spaniards in May 1984, a route already repeated twice and giving 20 pitches of perfect granite climbing, mainly on aid, topped by a 50°–60° ice face.

The ashram and rest house of Bhujbas is the final settlement in the valley, a place of well ordered peace as well as conviviality. The scene has opened and from here on Shivaling's emergence captures all the attention, though a rightwards glance must be spared up the Panth Bamak, which reveals a shaded slice of white granite on Bhrigu Peak that defies all normal conceptions of scale, verticality and smoothness.

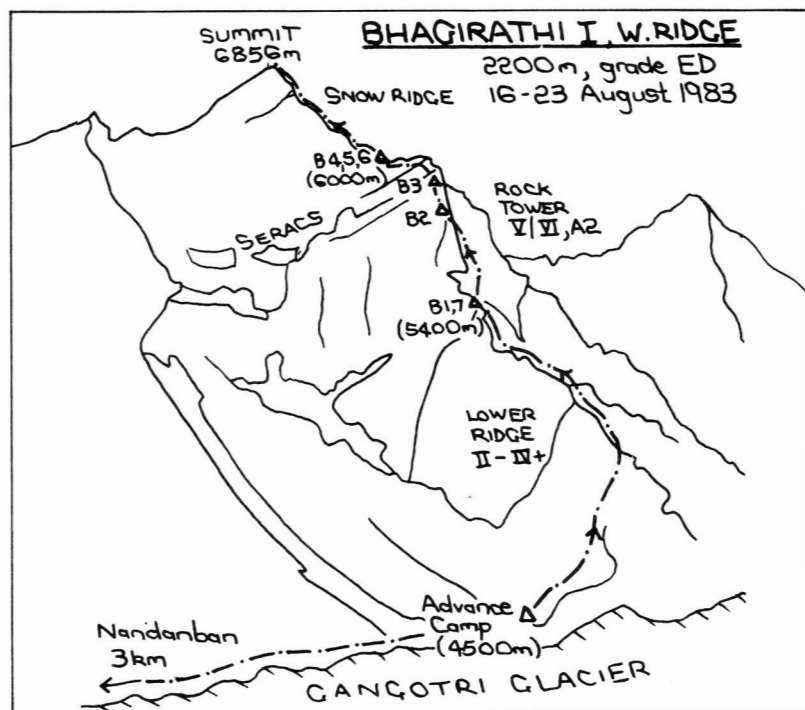
At Gaumukh, 4km further on, the pilgrims are left and the track forsaken for the rough and stony climb on to the Gangotri Glacier. There are two possible Base Camp sites, both on alluvial shelves which are shored up behind the lateral moraines, Tapovan on the W bank, and Nandanban further up on the E bank at the fork of the Chaturangi Bamak. Both provide grass, shelter, a wealth of alpine flowers in summer and fresh water, although Nandanban usually dries up in the post-monsoon period.

Arrival here at 4350m is immediate and exciting, but in the rapid approach lurks a big danger of altitude sickness. The transit from Uttarkashi at 1000m is typically pressured by porter requirements and economics, and usually takes just 2½ days. With no chance to adapt gradually to this height gain, base-camp oedema (and pneumonia) is a recurrent problem in the Gangotri, claiming the chances of one of our own team in 1984, and likewise a Polish expedition doctor in 1983 who had recently been to 8000m on Makalu.



21a & b Sunrise Pillar on Kedar Dome E flank. The route follows the crest of the ridge throughout.

Photos: Martin Moran



Above the Base Camp meadows, the glacier sweeps onward into a haze of distant peaks, and with a total length of nigh on 30km seems to have no end.

Bhagirathi I, West Ridge

For structural elegance and purity of line, the W ridge of Bhagirathi I touches the margins of perfection. A series of broken rock buttresses rises from the glacier moraines at 4500m joining and linking to support a smooth monolithic tower of granite at half height. With savage loose cliffs and hanging serac barriers on either side, the tower guards the only means of access to the upper ridge, a sculpted snow arête which after a brief pause sweeps up for 900m to the summit at 6856m. What great fortune and privilege to chance on such a route, in 1983 untried and untouched.

On 16 August the parallel was hard to draw as the three of us slogged up those lower ramparts in a cloying monsoon drizzle, weighed down by 15kg loads and double boots, and plagued by that aching altitude fatigue where the blood throbs relentlessly in the temples yet deserts the leaden legs. Two weeks earlier John and Charlie had romped up these slabs in shirt sleeves and training shoes on our first exploratory foray, and then a serious attempt had ground to a halt halfway up the tower in conditions not dissimilar to those we were now resigned to accept on this the crucial effort.

An overhung rock crevice 200m below the tower provided an ideal first bivouac, sheltered from the spongy mist, which overnight left a verglas shell



Photo: Martin Moran

that delayed our morning's departure until 10am when the sun poked its head over our ridge.

Its emergence provoked a surge of activity for we knew the clouds would be likely to regroup by mid-afternoon, and were compelled to complete the tower before a decent bivouac ledge could be expected. Therefore the grade V and VI flakes and grooves of the lower tower were reclinbed to our high point with barely a pause to appreciate their superb quality. In particular one improbable diedre into which Charlie had launched with an enormous aid climbing rack had yielded in 10 minutes to an athletic string of 4c and 5a laybacks and finger jams in hidden fissures.

Leads were alternated so as to share the joys of sackless pioneering and the agonies of load carrying. However, after I had surmounted another long flake diedre and Charlie had turned a prominent candle of rock by a ramp on its left, John was landed with the pleasures of an unprotected off-width chimney — its back choked with ice. Each intricate step of progress towards outwitting the tower brought an immense thrill, especially as every pitch had gone free so far, but now with 90 minutes of light remaining and ominous cloudmasses shrouding the ridge, a successful solution to its final wall and overhangs became grimly imperative.

After balancing up a tenuously protected series of wall flakes the fading light stopped me just 25m from the top, and we despondently accepted an open bivouac spread across the sloping ledges below. The darkness prevented any cooking, and soon after it began to snow thickly and heavily. The fall was later interrupted by an intense electric storm, which brought the continuous buzz of static, and cascades of burning charges down the rock candle just 15m to our left.

The dank and misty dawn found us unscathed but frightened, wet and buried under 15cm of fresh snow. The rocks were sheathed in a coat of slushy ice. Had we reached our limit? Every big Alpine route must have its crisis point, and this was ours. We elected to go on. A retreat from the top of the tower would hardly be more problematic than abandoning the cause one pitch lower.

I had to dig deep into unplumbed resources to go back up. Using aid from nuts and 'Friends' in cracks choked with melting snow the final roofs took four exhausting hours to lead, which only left us just sufficient time to seek a ledge on the banded shale slopes above for the night.

Being increasingly extended both physically and logistically, all our hopes resided in the weather, and a brighter morning spurred us up the 200m of loose mixed ground which debouched onto the slender snow crest that we had sought for so long. Yet hardly had we drawn breath at the sight of the summit crown of Bhagirathi and laid our sleeping bags out to dry, than the clouds closed ranks and here, at 6000m, a light snowfall commenced.

For 30 hours we were pinned down, squeezed into our two-man tent at the foot of the arête, with the great seracs on either side creaking and groaning, pondering with a tingle of excitement and a chill of fear the true meaning of Himalayan commitment. The sensation was appreciably enlivened when our gas stove exploded the following evening nearly incinerating both our tent and ourselves.

Our provisions now comprised only one breakfast, a family sized Yorkie, a freeze-dried stroganoff and two days of fuel for water, but on the morning of our expected retreat the skies cleared and the temperature plunged, enabling a 'now or never' summit bid to be hastily mounted. We set out lightly laden, carrying a stove and pan but no sleeping gear. The mass of new snow clinging to the arête was crusted and stratified, but after cautious initial soundings we pronounced the surface safe. Cornices were small or absent thanks to the lack of recent wind and often our steps straddled the knife-edged crest which rose in waves from 30° to 50° in angle.

Already racing against the encroaching clouds, John led us strongly and relentlessly to a rock step at three-quarters height, and promptly decided to quit. His feet were wet and already cold, and he could not afford to risk a bivouac. Passion, ego, rationality and prudence were hopelessly tangled, but with John's encouragement Charlie and I went on, awkwardly rounding the step and ploughing up the final 200m to emerge in a white-out on the top. We staggered and wallowed about in deep powder to fix the highest point and then fled.

At 4.30pm, night was only two hours away, and the weather deteriorating by the minute. Climbing solo for speed and rhythm, eight hours of upward effort were reversed in a non-stop sequence. We desperately strained our eyes to find our tracks, which were fast disappearing under new snow and which were our sole means of salvation. By the last glimmer of daylight we rejoined John back at the tent, utterly drained, perhaps more mentally than physically. We had not seen much of it, but what a great and unforgettable route.

Two days later John and I staggered down to our advance camp with a dreadful weariness and sadness. We had left our closest friend on the mountain, killed when an abseil anchor failed on the shale bands, the only dangerous piece of an otherwise sound and objectively safe route. Our own deliverance was only secured by the spare rope which we had left at the top of the tower. Never can we properly celebrate the Bhagirathi climb, but I hope that those who follow will revel in its magnificence, and value the sacrifice that Charlie made in bringing it into being.

A Sunshine Climb on Kedar Dome

Kedar Dome (6831m) has a gentle NW flank that provides perhaps the easiest and most frequented climb in the Gangotri area, but its E side is of an altogether different calibre, a precipice of some 1600m in vertical height, and forming a sweeping prow of granite that would be ranked as one of the world's most beautiful rock structures were it better known.

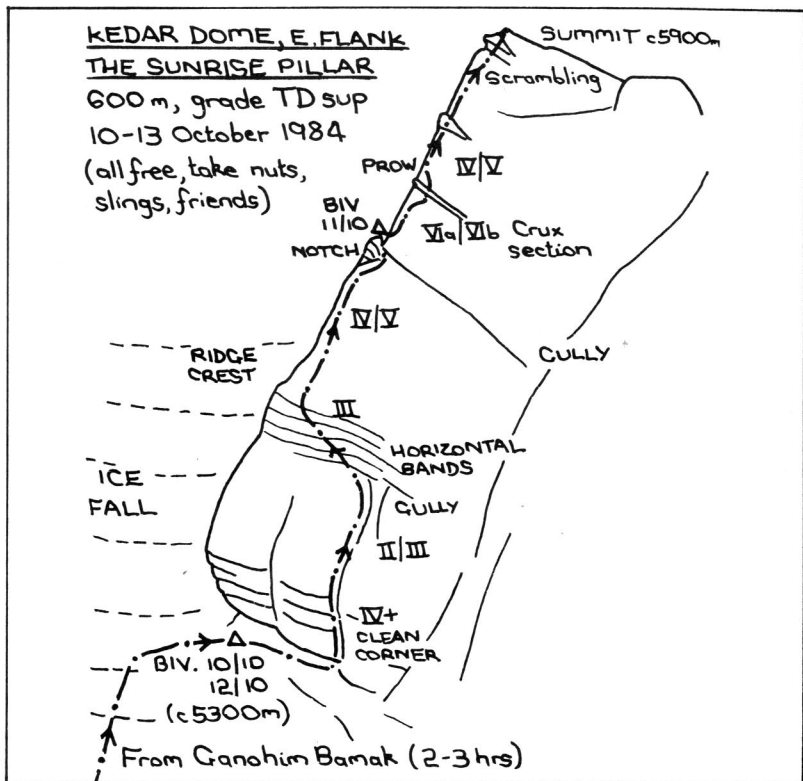
Gathering the temerity to dare to violate this great fortress, Dave Cuthbertson, Pat Littlejohn, John Mothersele and myself came to the Gangotri in late September 1984, a post-monsoon of brilliantly clear weather but bitterly cold and dry winds.

The aura of the E face is enhanced by its remoteness, being tucked away in the side valley of the Ganohim Bamak 16km upstream from Tapovan. The way there is cruelly rough, for the Gangotri glacier is a convoluted mass of rubble-coated moraines seamed with meltwater channels, dammed lakes and fields of



23 Part of the E face of Kedar Dome, seen from the Sunrise Pillar.

Photo: Martin Moran



ice spillikins. Making the first trip to the site of an advance camp beneath the face, alone and with a 30kg load, gave one of the most gruelling yet inspiring days of my life. Ahead in the view Kharchakund (6612m) forms a graceful cornerstone to the Ganohim Bamak, never seeming to draw a mite closer whilst the Bhagirathis slowly file past on the left and behind, flies the 'butterfly' face on Shivering's S side.

The overpowering desolation and grandeur of the scene on my exhausted arrival below the E face was enough in itself to deter my ambitions, but more materially Cubby's serious illness, my wife Joy's own sickness, and a resultant lack of time and manpower prevented our even attempting the prow.

Eight days later I returned from the trials of valley reorganisation to the lonely Ganohim to find that John and Pat had just embarked on the W ridge of Kharchakund. Prowling about the glacier for a suitable solo objective I espied a clean rock spur plunging for 600m down from Kedar's E flank just to the right of the E face. The need for a partner was immediately solved by the chance arrival of the Kiwi hobo and climber, Don French at the advance camp.

On the following three days we enjoyed a happy and carefree climb, planned and timed with fortuitous perfection. From a bivouac on the edge of the ice-fall beneath the pillar we did 14 excellent pitches between grade III and V to a

prominent notch at two-thirds height. Our tactics were profoundly unconventional. Rightly expecting the route to be bare of snow, we carried 6 litres of water, but in order to maintain some speed in the enterprise I left my plastic boots and sleeping bag behind, climbing in rock slippers and using a Gortex bivouac sac for the long and for me the cold night at the notch.

Difficult free climbing was only possible during the hours of sunlight between 8am and 3pm and only when dawn flushed the steep final tower to a golden brown did we continue. Here was slab and flake climbing equal to the very best on Chamonix granite, all free with crux pitches of VIa and VIb (to use the current French gradings), and breathtaking exposure with the E face prow rearing up just a few hundred metres across the void to our left. At noon we reached the top of the pillar, a subsidiary summit at 5900m, and then reversed the route by a nerve-racking combination of downclimbing and rappelling. Without any more water we were anxious to avoid a second night on the spur, and touched down on the glacier just as the stars were lighting up. Soon I was cocooned in my sleeping bag and supping hot tea at the bivouac, but the glow in my veins that night sprang from something more than the return of bodily warmth.

Overall deserving a *TD sup* grade, the Sunrise Pillar, as we dubbed it, is a route of classic dimensions, and will be a marvellous training climb for future parties before making a more serious assay of the innermost recesses of the Ganohim cirque.

No End in Sight

As we left the mountains in late October, the Gangotri was packing up for the winter, the bus service soon to terminate and the valley deserted save for a handful of holy men and hermits.

Already the mountains and glaciers were lightly daubed by the harbinger flurries of the coming snows, but recalling the view from the top of the Pillar, I dreamt of the array of unknown summits above the final arm of the Gangotri glacier and the oceans of smooth bare rock on the neighbouring peaks.

In two brief visits to the Gangotri I have been granted one of a host of great mountaineering routes, and made the slightest of scratches on the area's rock climbing potential — truly a rich personal reward. Yet I am glad and reassured that there is so much still left to the will of others.