A Return to Lingti, 1987

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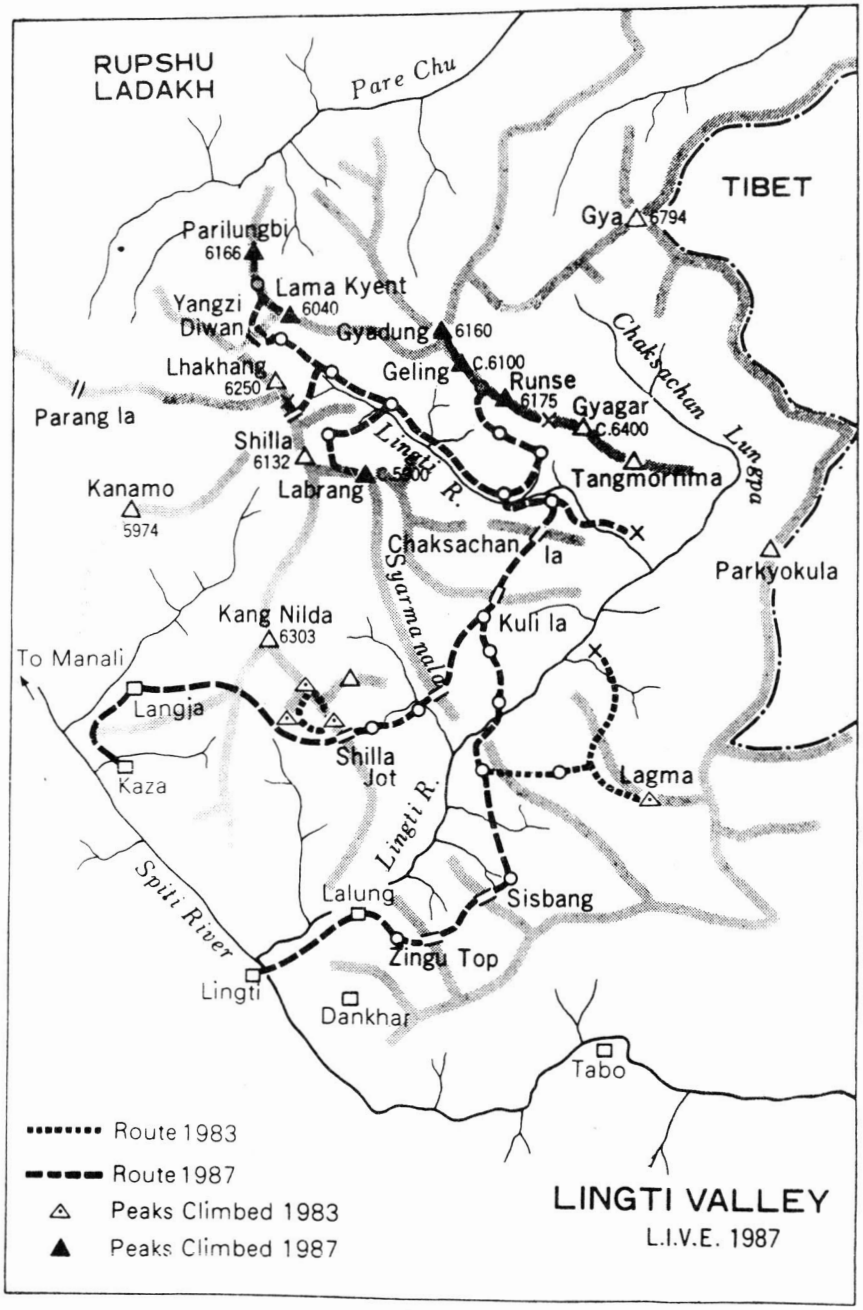
Returning to an area of past exploits is like rekindling an old love affair. One has the knowledge and the experience, but is still unsure whether all the excitement and expectations of the first time will ever be repeated. However, this is all the excuse one needs to fall in love again with old memories, pictures, peaks and people.

Three of us, who ultimately made it, were old hands at Spiti. Muslim Contractor and I had climbed in the Lingti valley in 1983,[1] when the deep gorge and lack of proper logistic support stopped us at the halfway mark. Dhiren Toolsidas had missed the trip, though he had been part of the Spiti dream till the last. Now, with this return trip, his attraction for Spiti stood vindicated, just as ours was reconfirmed. Ravi Mariwala accompanied us during the initial trek and made every meal a healthy eating competition. Our four old Kumaoni porters were back too.

The bus journey to Kaja (3600m) was completed with the usual hardships, after the inner-line permits had been obtained at Shimla. We visited the Dankhar and Ki monasteries, and were immediately struck by the change. A lama passed by on a battered cycle, a great achievement for an area which had missed the wheel revolution until about 25 years ago (except for the prayer-wheel, of course). We inquired about the Rimpoche (head lama) from a meditating priest and he pointed a finger upwards. Looking at our solemn faces, about to offer condolences, he spat out some chewing gum which was helping him to concentrate and quickly stated: 'He has gone to Japan.' That was our re-introduction to Spiti: Japan was replacing heaven, there were buses and roads everywhere, electricity and supplies in plenty. Tons of wood stored in summer by the Commissioner is distributed in winter; solar energy is harvested for daily use, monasteries are well supplied, movie shows and travel have changed life-styles. The Ladarsa 'mela' has been revived. For many years a fair used to be held at Ladarsa (near Kibar), where traders from Rupshu and Kulu gathered to barter goods with the Spitians. Now the fair is there for buying modern goods from Kulu and traditional items from Spiti. Some of the old values remain. Village laws rule and religious ceremonies are a way of life – for how long, one wonders? There is talk of a helicopter service for tourists (Heaven forfend), and even some small industry. But as Spitians themselves would say: 'Flow with the river, don't try to swim. If you swim you get tired.'

Back to Lingti

Lingti is the unknown valley in eastern Spiti. As there are no known passes at its head, the locals don't venture beyond the Chaksachan La, which is the last


RUPSHU
LADAKH
Pare Chu
TIBET
Gya 5794
Parilungbi
6166
Lama Kyent
Yangzi
Diwan
6040
Gyadung 6160
Chaksachan Lungpa
Lhakhang
6250
Geling
c.6100
Runse
6175
Gyagar
c.6400
Parang la
Shilla
6132
Lingti R.
c.5800
Labrang
Tangmorrima
Kanamo
5974
Chaksachan
la
Parkyokula
Syarma nala
Kang Nilda
6303
Kuli la
To Manali
Langja
Shilla
Jot
Lagma
Kaza
Lingti R.
Spiti River
Lalung
Sisbang
Zingu Top
Lingti
Dankhar
Tabo
Route 1983
Route 1987
Peaks Climbed 1983
Peaks Climbed 1987
LINGTI VALLEY
L.I.V.E. 1987

grazing point. From Lalung the valley goes north-east to its junction with the Chaksachan Lungpa river. From here it takes a sharp turn to the north-west up to the watershed with Ladakh. A high pass ('Yangzi Diwan') leads across to Rupshu to join the trade route from the Parang La (5800m). In the distant past the Yangzi Diwan may have been in use, but no one seems to remember it, particularly as the Spitian is neither a trader nor a traveller, and the Parang La was always more popular. On the eastern rim of Lingti, the high peaks of the Parkyokula range rise up to 6526m, effectively blocking off Tibet (Pare Chu valley). Gya (6794m) is at the head of this valley, at the important triple junction of Spiti, Rupshu and Tibet. No one seems to know of Gya as the highest peak in Himachal Pradesh (or the highest between Nun-Kun and Satopanth). We intended to investigate the approaches to it, photograph it and establish the glory which is its due.

The upper Lingti has side valleys, each with many peaks. On the north the major valley is that of 'Gyagar'. On the south lies the Chaksachan La and the 'Labrang' and 'Lhakhang' nalas which pave the way to high areas.

We were back at Lalung village, our entrance to Lingti. This year the yakwalas charged us almost double the previous rates. We had a nine-day journey over a known route. They agreed to take us up to the Chaksachan La (5230m). They had no knowledge of anyone having gone beyond that, and they would not venture further. From 17 June we followed the route over the Sisbang pass to Sheru and down to Phiphuk, as we had done in 1983. We settled down to a routine, a late start after the yaks had been gathered, reined and loaded. It was instructive. This sturdy animal takes a long time to be gathered, shooed and pampered. But once the string attached to the nostril is caught, it resigns itself to its fate and carries for the day without any more trouble.

We went over rough terrain, admiring lovely scenery. From Phiphuk (4005m) our new venture started on 22 June. Initially the route went up in two days to Lakshitang (4560m), Shelatse (4800m) and over the Kuli La (4880m) to Shaktijung (4530m). On the final day the route climbed steeply to a high notch on a ridge which they call Chaksachan La. We were deposited here in front of a great view.

We surveyed the scene. 'Gyagar' (*c*6400m) with all the peaks on the high ridge was opposite. Below was the Lingti river. Since Phiphuk, where we had crossed the river, it had taken a sharp north-westerly turn. At this turn the Chaksachan Lungpa comes in from the north-east. It was evident that Gya (6794m) was very far from us, and the only way to it was to go down the Lingti to the junction with the Chaksachan Lungpa and then go up along the latter valley. This was our first objective. We had to ferry all our luggage 1000m down for three days into the valley and were camped on its bank. We called it 'the cantonment': a lovely glen with plenty of juniper. After a rest and a bath we were ready for our first failure. It was 29 June.

Going down the Lingti for four kilometres, we recognized the difficulties. We had to wade across four times and had to climb up the adjoining steep scree-slopes twice. At the end we ran into a gorge where, true to its name, the Lingti ('an instrument that cuts rocks') cuts through steep walls on both sides. It was possible to go ahead only in winter or early summer, but at that time the

passes would be blocked lower down. This was the problem of the approach to Gya, which we had to leave for a team with a year in hand.

Returning to the cantonment, we decided that what could not go down should go up and for the next three days we went up the Lingti to its head, bordering on Ladakh. A most beautiful and difficult valley unfolded. The gorge was narrow, but luckily it always allowed us a passage. Crossings were frequent, and by now we had settled down to a routine for them. The spot was decided after observations, and then one of us would probe and go across with a rope tied to him. Once the rope was fixed, we went over in turns carrying light loads and making ferries to and fro. At some places where the river was too wide, it had to be done in batches, with belays from both sides moving up and down. It was not possible to cross after midday and, as the days passed by, each crossing required more time and expertise, the last one being almost disastrous. In the unknown Transhimalayan areas these river-crossings are a challenging aspect of the trip and assume as much importance as climbing a peak. We did about 15 major crossings and had to be very careful in order to remain unscathed.

Climbs in the upper valley

We established a camp at the junction of the Lhakhang nala on 3 July. Muslim left with Harsinh (jr) to climb Lhakhang (6250m), a shapely dome. In two days they were established at a 6000m col between the peak and Shilla. Next day, 6 July, as they went up the porter complained of headache and a frustrated Muslim had to return. After this we did not divide the group.

Dhiren and I had left with Balamsinh for the Yangzi Diwan on 4 July. We had to negotiate a minor glacier and ice-walls up to the high ridge at 6000m. 'Lama Kyent' (6040m) was next to the col and was climbed, offering a fine view. Many peaks stood on the same ridge, giving an appearance of a 'village' full of peaks (see the note at the end for an explanation of names). We crossed the watershed and descended to Rupshu, a high camp at 6000m above the pass. Parilungbi (6166m) was in front of us, separated from the Lama Kyent ridge by the Yangzi Diwan pass and standing aloof in Rupshu. At its foot the Parang La trade route passed by, and on its two sides the valleys dropped towards the trade route.

On 6 July we descended 250m to the pass and climbed unroped on the S ridge. It was very steep scree with gendarmes which we had to bypass. By 9.50am we were on the summit of Parilungbi – marked by a survey cairn and a pole. The survey party must have climbed to here from Rupshu, as it was standing on the trade route. It was called 'Parang La Station No 1', but we could not ascertain the year of ascent.

We spent a delightful hour on the top. The view extended right across the Rupshu plain, to the Tso Morari lake and Demchok in the north. Nearby, towards the north-west, were the Parang La and unnamed peaks of 6364m and 6343m. In the north-east were high peaks of 6623m and 6642m. We almost mistook one of them for the elusive Gya, which was in the distance. To the south, Lhakhang, Shilla and the Lingti completed the circle. The visual and

intellectual delight in unravelling the panorama was just as great as the physical pleasure in climbing up to it. What a forbidding country lay across. We had spent hours studying the maps and dreaming about how it would look from up there. Almost like a dream of the poem 'Kubla Khan' fulfilled and confirming the topography.

Back to reality, and in the Lingti valley we were reunited with Muslim at the upper base on 7 July. We withdrew down one valley camp to enter the Labrang nala. Shilla (6132m) was our next aim; this famous peak had aroused attention to Spiti because of its inaccurately given height.[2] It was called 'Parang La Station No 2' and, with Parilungbi, played an important role in the survey. On its south lay the Syarma nala, but we were approaching it from the east through the Labrang nala. We quickly went up the valley in two days, to establish ourselves at the foot of the northern ridge on 10 July. It was corniced, and may possibly allow access only from a high point. The next day I staggered on the slopes because of a late dose of Valium. Muslim and Dhiren continued to within striking distance of the N col, but the ridge they saw ahead was sharp and certainly not easy. Our hope of trooping up the 20° slope with a flag-pole, like the unnamed *khalasi* in 1860, evaporated.

Next day (12 July) we decided to attempt the peak from the E col. In 1985 an Indian team had reached the summit via this route.[3] They had come up from the Syarma nala, whilst we climbed the slopes from the east. From the col we could see that the ridge was full of gendarmes and cornices. The true peak lay over a subsidiary hump. The time to climb Shilla most easily is after the disappearance of snow and on the summer scree. We proceeded to climb south to 'Labrang' (*c*5900m). It gave us a good ridge walk and an excellent view all around.

By this time Muslim had run short of tobacco for his pipe and he put his foot down for a refill in the true Shiptonian fashion. That was all the excuse we needed, and we were quickly down to the cantonment again on 13 July.

The Gyagar nala

By 16 July we were ready to move up the Gyagar nala for our last climbs in the valley. As we entered the valley we were faced with a gentle col of scree at 5840m to the north. We christened this 'Chaksachan La north', as it appeared to lead down to the foot of Gya. We studied it on the map and later confirmed it by observation from above. Our excitement to view the peak now mounted and in two days we were at the foot of the very steep névé coming from Runse. Climbing this was tricky, and our porters excelled here. We had to fix ropes and on 18 July we were on the Gyagar ridge at 5970m. And behold, across the valley in the north stood Gya. It was a majestic rock-monolith, rising steeply about 1200m from the valley bottom. A sharp conical top guarded the view to Tibet. It was awe-inspiring and this view was a fitting finale. It will defy the best rock-climbers and will require immense logistic arrangements to approach it.

The same evening, 18 July, we went up 'Runse' (6175m), now easily within our reach, in an hour. But ahead the ridge dropped to a col and to 'Goor' (*c*6160m). It was impossible to cross this peak to reach the final slopes of

Gyagar (*c*6400m), so we decided to go west from the camp next day. 'Geling' (6080m) was a rounded dome, while 'Gyadung' (6160m) was a sharp ridge top. Both were fairly good climbs. Again and again the views from the tops were exciting.

The cantonment was humming with activity on 21 July. We had ferried up the luggage and it was time for the final departure from Lingti. We quickly withdrew to Shelatse below the Kuli La, each stage being a hard repeat ferry for the luggage. No yaks would come up, as the Lingti lower down was unfordable in July. We took a different route to return, something that would complete a full investigation of the valley.

We climbed up to the Syarma La (5040m) and down the steep scree-slopes to the Syarma nala on 24 July. It was turbulent, and next day in cold cloudy weather Dhiren was almost swept away in the crossing. Wet and shivering we climbed up to the Shilla jot (5850m) to link up with our route of the 1983 trip. It was a long two-day march that led us through to Langja and Kaja – back to chhang, momoes and a rough bus journey to Manali.

For five years we had dreamed of Lingti and Gya and now the project was fulfilled, substantially if not in full measure. Working to fulfil a dream is satisfying. And it was important to pursue it: for if Samuel Taylor Coleridge's dream had been broken, 'Kubla Khan' would never have been written.

Nomenclature in the Lingti valley (refer also to *HJ40*, 106, 1982–83, for earlier names and explanations).

Gyagar:	Indian.
Runse:	A famous monastery.
Geling:	Piped instrument of lama.
Gyadung:	Long trumpet of lama-band.
Yangzi Diwan:	A new pass.
Lama Kyent:	Monk's village. (For many peaks on the ridge.)
Lhakhang:	God's house.
Labrang:	Lama's house. (Both near Shilla, 'the place of monastery'.)
Goor:	A disciple through whom a local deity manifests itself. (The peak leads to Gyagar.)

REFERENCES

1 *HJ40*, 96–108, 1982–83.
2 See the preceding article (p56) for the early history of Shilla.
3 *HJ42*, 190–191, 1984–85.