# Saser Kangri 1987

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(*Plates* 32–35)

'Saser Kangri' literally means 'Yellow Mountain'; it derives its name from the bright yellow granite rock which can clearly be seen on the summit ridges. The Survey of India lists the mountain as K22 at 7672m. Situated in the eastern Karakoram range in the district of Ladakh of Jammu and Kashmir State, it is the highest peak amongst a group of 7000m peaks which constitute the Saser range. This range is bounded by the Nubra river to the west and the Shyok river to the east and south (see sketch map). The mountain itself is surrounded by seven main glaciers and defended by precipitous rock and ice faces. The area, often referred to as 'Little Tibet', is particularly rugged and has developed a culture of its own as a result of being cut off from the rest of the world for most of the year by high passes and heavy snowfalls. Early reconnaissance expeditions considered the peak to be impregnable.

The first person to have recorded the mountain was Arthur Neve who, in 1899, climbed a peak near Panamik and photographed the Saser range. Dr Tom Longstaff (the first man to climb Trisul in the Garhwal Himalaya) led an expedition to the area in 1908 and reached a height of 5486m on the Phukpoche glacier to the west of Saser I. He recorded the difficulties of a western approach in an article for the *Geographical Journal* published in June 1910. Other visitors to the area were the Vissers who mapped the area in 1929, and Lieutenant Colonel Jimmy Roberts who made the first attempt on the mountain in 1946. Although the attempt was unsuccessful, Jimmy Roberts's thorough reconnaissance of the western approaches added immeasurably to our knowledge of the mountain. Another attempt from the west was made by an Indian team led by Major N D Jayal. This team counted no fewer than 20 avalanches hurtling down the W face of Saser I in one day. Again they could find no way up. Another Indian expedition attempted the west side of Saser I in 1970. It was led by the late Major Bahaguna (who died on the ill-fated 1971 International Expedition to Everest). With Captain Alok Chandola, he directed the main effort towards an approach via the N Phukpoche glacier and up the NW ridge of Saser IV (7310m). Again, the sustained difficulty of the route turned the climbers back after they had reached a high point of approximately 6600m. No other serious attempt was made from the west and attention turned to an easterly approach (advocated by Jimmy Roberts). In 1973 the mountain was at last climbed from the east by a team led by Commander Jogindar Singh, after an epic approach march via the E Shyok river and the N Kunchang glacier. The western side of the mountain remained unvanquished.

The 1987 expedition was a joint British-Indian Army Expedition, sponsored by the Army Mountaineering Association in conjunction with the Royal Geographical Society, with the aim of climbing the unclimbed W ridge of Saser I (7672m) and the unclimbed Saser Kangri IV (7310m), between 4 April and 3 July 1987. It should be noted at the start that Saser Kangri is in a disputed area which belongs to India but is claimed by both China and Pakistan. In consequence the area is subject to constant border skirmishes which in the past have prevented foreign expeditions from visiting the region. We were privileged to be allowed to climb in the area on a joint basis with the Indian Army.

The expedition was to consist of 19 British Service climbers and a similar number, with a support team, provided by the Indian Army. It was led jointly by myself and Colonel Dashan Khullar, an experienced Indian mountaineer with many successful expeditions to his credit, including Everest in 1984 (when the first Indian lady achieved the summit). From the British team's point of view there were two important supplementary aims: firstly to help select a team for the British Services Everest Expedition 1988, and secondly to record the ecology and environment of this seldom-visited part of the world.

The expedition flew to Leh on board a giant Soviet-built Ilyushin 76 transport plane on 4 April 1987. The British team needed time to acclimatize and also to get to know their Indian counterparts and to climb together. The ancient city of Leh is at a height of 3300m and we chose the mountains of Zanskar to the south for our work-up training. It was during this training period that some members of the team were privileged not only to see but also to photograph three beautiful snow leopards, a mother and two fully-grown cubs. It was the first time that these elusive creatures had been photographed in the wild in India.

We were much delayed from leaving Leh at the start of the expedition by heavy snowfalls on the Khardung La (at 5600m the highest motorable pass in the world) which prevented any movement north into the Nubra valley. We were not able to cross the pass until 1 May, some two weeks late. The Khardung La road is a masterpiece of Indian engineering which zig-zags for miles up the steep snow-sides of the pass and at one point actually cuts through a glacier to allow the trucks to pass. It is the supply line for the Indian Army stationed on the Siachen glacier to the north of Nubra: a narrow road with very few passing points which has to be cleared at the start of each day by a snow-plough. When a truck breaks down it is sometimes easier to push the truck over the edge rather than hold up a convoy of hundreds of vehicles! The evidence of a number of such broken-down trucks can easily be seen in the valley below. The journey over the pass and into the Nubra valley took about 20 hours, and was the roughest journey in a truck that I can remember.

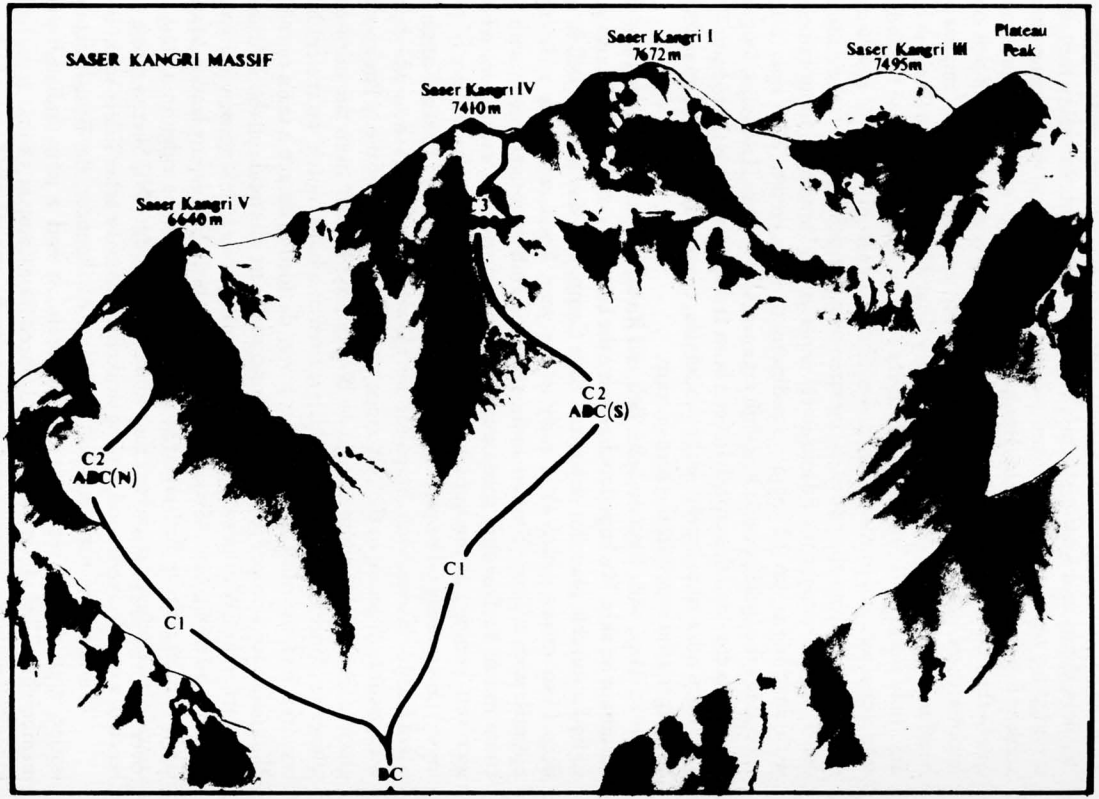
The scenery of the Nubra is on a vast scale and is almost completely devoid of vegetation, as the mountains of Zanskar to the south block off the passage of the summer monsoons in this remote region of the eastern Karakoram. The valley base was established at Panamik in the Nubra, at approximately 3200m. The route to Base Camp followed the line of the precipitous gorge of the turbulent Phukpoche Nullah. The intention had been to use a large number of locally recruited porters to help shift the 30-odd tons of



*32. Elderly Ladakhi lady with prayer wheel.* (Ivar Hellberg) (p 54)



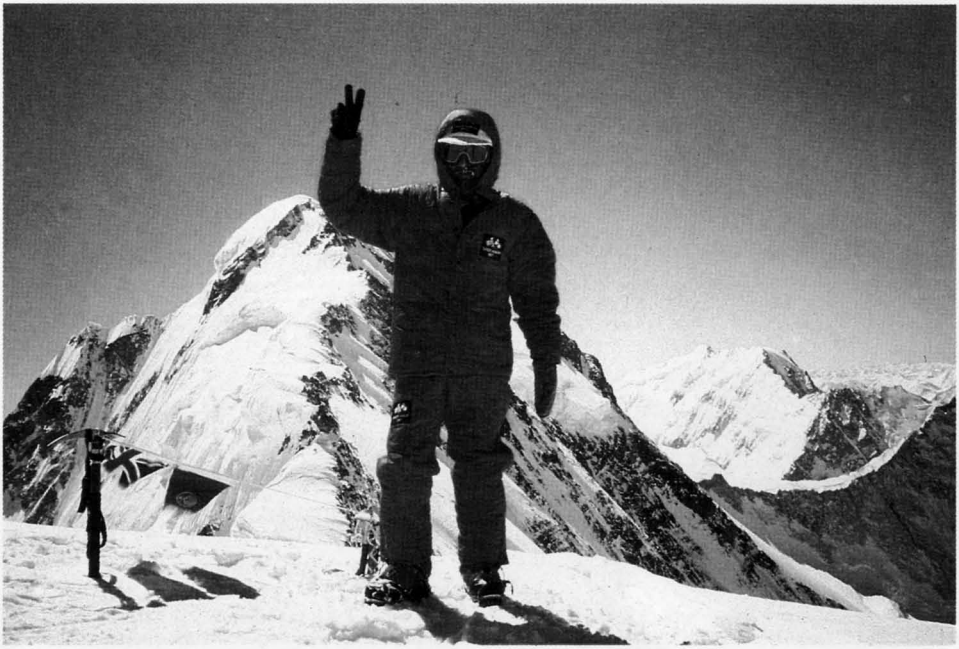
*33. Ivar Hellberg on the summit of Saser Kangri V.* (Dave Orange) (p 54)


SASER KANGRI MASSIF
Saser Kangri I
7672m
Saser Kangri III
7495m
Plateau
Peak
Saser Kangri IV
7410m
Saser Kangri V
6640m
C2
ABC(S)
C2
ABC(N)
C1
C1
BC

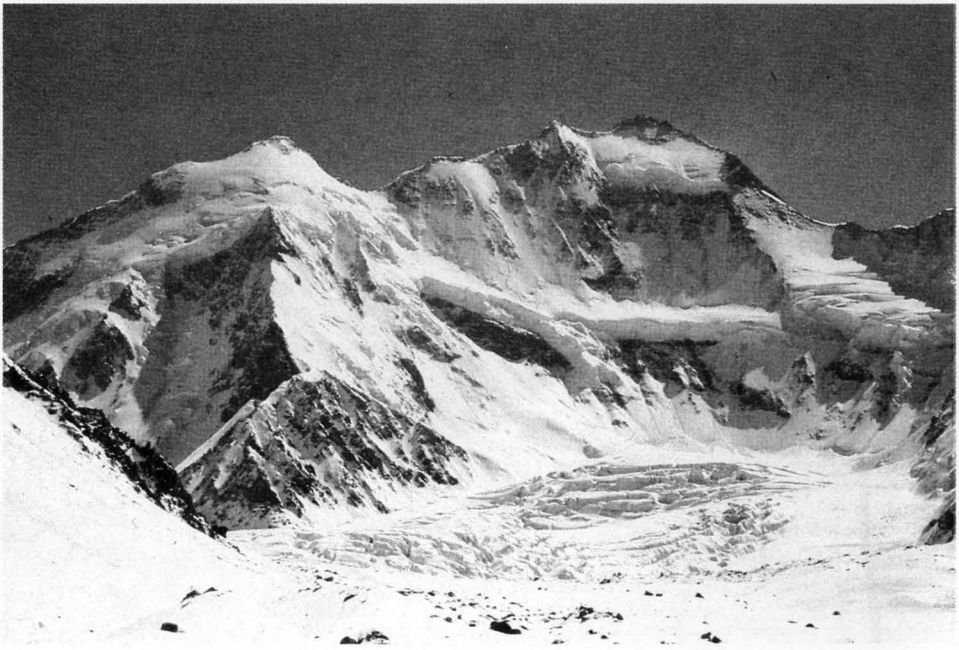
expedition supplies and equipment over the two-day march from Panamik to Base Camp. However, very few porters could be recruited from amongst the local people, as most of the able-bodied men were ploughing the fields with oxen and planting seed. For the most part, therefore, expedition climbers had to carry 20kg loads every day for about two weeks, with one day's rest in three. This caused a good deal of anguish for some who felt that they were expending needless energy and wearing themselves out for the climb. In reality they were undergoing rigorous acclimatization! The nullah was a magnificent route, secured by ropes in the more dangerous places, leading to an intermediate camp established on uncomfortable boulders at about 4300m. Base Camp was only another three hours' march beyond this point, and as people acclimatized it became possible to make the whole journey from Panamik to Base Camp in one day. Base Camp was fully operational by 11 May, and by this time the Indian team members had miraculously grown in number from 19 to 36! It was also readily apparent to the relatively inexperienced British team that their Indian colleagues were super-fit and extremely experienced Himalayan mountaineers, with anything up to 12 major expeditions to their credit. With only a few exceptions the Indians came from hill regiments – Gurkhas, Ladakhis, Dogras, Garhwalis etc – and therefore had been born at altitudes of at least 3000m. This gave them miraculous speed in the mountains, causing admiration, incredulity and depression amongst the British team.

On 12 May, with Captain Steve Bell and Rana, I departed for a recce of the mountain on skis. We hoped to determine the best route on to Saser IV and also to find a suitable place for Advanced Base Camp. The skis worked well in the deep fresh snows which exist early in the year. Rana, who was a cheerful optimist with a Terry Thomas smile, provided endless entertainment with his commitment to downhill speed and unbelievable stopping techniques which involved 'yetiing', as the impact area resembled the legendary impact of this mysterious creature. The recce confirmed that the SW ridge of Saser Kangri IV was a feasible if somewhat difficult route. However, it failed to show whether it was possible to get on to the NW ridge from the direction of the N Phukpoche glacier. Clearly this route needed to be explored further from the northerly glaciers as, once the NW ridge which started at a huge 'notch' on the col had been reached, the route looked good. It was decided to detach a team to the N Phukpoche for a proper recce while a concerted start was made on the SW ridge. The start of the SW ridge was gained by 300m of 70° ice climbing on which fixed rope was installed. Morale was shattered when the Indian deputy leader, Major Gash Gill, and Steve Bell jumared up to the start of the ridge in a state of considerable exhaustion, where they found the legendary ND Sherpa eating his lunch in a very relaxed mood, having walked up from the other side in mukluks!

The northern team was led by Major Kit Spencer, the British deputy leader, and, like all teams on the mountain, it had a joint Indian-British membership. They set up their own Advanced Base Camp at 5800m at the head of the N Phukpoche glacier under another significant peak of 6640m which was named Saser Kangri V. Fixed rope was put in place up a steep snow-field which led on to a col under Saser V where Camp 3 was established. On 31 May the summit of Saser V was reached by Kit Spencer and Surgeon Lieutenant Andy



*34. Dave Orange on the summit of Saser Kangri IV.* (Ivar Hellberg) (p 54)



*35. Saser Kangri I, 7672m.* (Ivar Hellberg) (p 54)

Hughes, together with Lobsang and Mahavir. However, the summit party reported back that the route to the NW ridge of Saser IV would be long and difficult and was definitely not such a favourable proposition as the SW ridge.

On 2 June Captain Ashok Abbey of the Indian Army became critically ill with pulmonary oedema and nearly died at Camp 3. Ashok was carefully lowered on a stretcher down 600m of fixed rope by Kit Spencer's joint team with Andy Hughes, the team's doctor, in attendance, administering life-saving oxygen. It was fortunate that Sergeant Pete Kay, Royal Marines, had noticed the state of his team-mate as early as he did while in his sleeping-bag early that morning. Ashok was delirious and almost comatose at times; the speedy action of the team in getting him off the mountain undoubtedly saved his life. The final evacuation was completed by remarkably skilful flying by an Indian Army pilot on board a Cheetah (supercharged Alouette) helicopter which landed in cross winds in appalling visibility at 5800m on the N Phukpoche glacier – a notable achievement. This episode concluded the activities of Kit's team on the northern side of the mountain.

On 10 June I returned to Advanced Base Camp (North) with a selected team of some of the less experienced mountaineers. In an initial abortive attempt I got benighted in the broken tents of Camp 3 in a blizzard, with Captain Sarah Dennis and Lieutenant Lincoln Rowe (our artist). After retreating from our first attempt I returned with Sarah on 15 June, and we successfully scaled the summit of Saser V. The weather, although rather blustery and cloudy, cleared to allow us to get good views. We arrived back at Advanced Base Camp (North) at 6pm after a 14-hour climb. As far as we know, Sarah was the first service lady to have climbed a Himalayan peak above 6000m.

Early progress on the southern side of the mountain was good, although the scale and technical difficulty of the climb were daunting. Camp 3 (6800m) was established on the top of the SW shoulder of Saser IV on 23 May, after 1000m of very steep snow and ice climbing, culminating in a gripping and loose rock-band before safety could be found. On 6 June success was achieved on Saser IV (7410m) when Captain Martin Bazire RAOC and Sergeant Dave Howie RAF reached the virgin summit, followed by Nb Sub Thakur Dass, Hav Devi Singh and Nk Lalit Kumar who reached the top about an hour later. The following day Staff Sergeant Dave Orange APTC, Gunner Dave Torrington and Captain Jo Singh Dhillon also reached the summit.

At the same time the route along the difficult and exposed NW ridge of Saser I was fixed by Magan Bissa's team of four Indian supermen. Magan was unusual in that he came from the Indian plains rather than the Himalayan massif. It was a fantastic effort which we watched with fascination through the Zeiss telescope. Sadly, the weather prevented them from going any further than the S summit of Saser I, at a height of about 7600m. All seemed set for successful assaults on the main summit on the ensuing day. On 8 June ND Sherpa with Sonam, Dorgeh and IB Gurung made a determined bid for the summit but were again defeated by the weather after having reached the S summit at 10am. The weather began to deteriorate, and some of the worst continuous weather I have seen in the mountains prevented any further attempts for 16 days. Three times

teams returned to Camp 3, only to be driven back down the mountain in the face of high winds, blizzards and low temperatures.

It seemed that the Yellow Goddess of the Eastern Karakoram was calling on the weather god to come to her aid, as every day the clouds and wind came racing in to her protection. Time was running out for the British team, who had a plane to catch at Delhi to return to the UK. On 22 June I accompanied the last of the British team down from Advanced Base Camp, believing that the weather would never change. Steve Bell and Simon Lowe arrived back at Panamik, tired and dejected, knowing that their last chance for the summit had finally gone. However, the Indian team with Colonel Dashan Khullar decided to hold out for a few more days, as they did not have our deadline.

On 24 June the weather cleared again and allowed Lobsang's team to return to Camp 3. On 25 June the weather was perfect and by 4am Lobsang and his team of L/Nk T Sonam, L/Nk T Wangdus, L/Nk P Angchuk, Hav Devi Singh, Hav Tashi and Hav Umed Singh started to reopen the route up the NW ridge of Saser I, forcing their way through very deep snow and with great difficulty digging out the fixed rope which was frozen under up to two metres of fresh snow. At approximately 10am Lobsang and his team reached the S summit of Saser I, and by 10.40am they stood on the main summit, having conquered the western approach for the first time. At the same time that Lobsang and his team were forging up the western ridge, another drama was unfolding. The back-up team consisting of ND Sherpa, Magan Bissa and Sonam, who were positioned at Advanced Base, asked permission to tackle Saser IV direct – a very daring and challenging enterprise which was only possible because of the colossal strength of these three climbers. Permission was granted, and by 9am these men reached the col between Saser IV and Saser I. After a short pause they asked permission to have a crack at Saser I rather than Saser IV, and once again this was agreed. They then shot up the tracks of Lobsang's group at an unbelievable speed, considering the height, the wind and the absence of oxygen. They reached the summit of Saser I at approximately 12.30pm, having covered a distance of about five kilometres and gained a height of over 1800m in 9½ hours. They returned before dark to a triumphant welcome at Camp 1. This must surely be a Himalayan record – as a European I am left in awe and wonderment at the power of these mountain people. They have slender frames and meagre rations, yet they have seemingly endless powers of speed and endurance.

The expedition was also a wonderful opportunity to meet the patient, gracious people of Ladakh with their timeless culture, Buddhist philosophy, generous and cheerful outlook. Their life is a hard one, eked out of the cold and unforgiving soil with adze and oxen; it was a medieval scene with no sign of mechanization. What they had they shared without complaint, and they expected nothing in return except friendship. They are a very honest people who strongly adhere to the spirit and strengths of family life. Pressure of time has not reached them; watches and clocks seem irrelevant. It was a refreshing lesson for those of us who had forgotten, or had never known, the joy of bowing to the force of nature and occasionally stopping to consider the beauty of the whole of God's creation.

The wildlife of the region was more prolific than I had expected, bearing in mind the barren desolation of a huge region with very little rainfall (5cm per annum in the Nubra). Of particular note were the Burrel (Blue Sheep) which seemed to be neither goat nor sheep but something in between. The large wolves of the area who hunted, not in packs but in ones and twos, leaving huge paw-marks the size of a tennis ball, will not be forgotten. I had to admire the mighty birds of prey, the lammergeyer and the Himalayan golden eagle, that reside in the precipitous cliffs of the area. However, without doubt, the most lasting memory was the excitement of seeing and photographing the magnificent snow leopard: a privilege none of us will ever forget.

The expedition was blessed with good fortune. We achieved almost all our goals without accident or loss of life. Saser I was climbed by a challenging new route from the west. Saser IV and Saser V were climbed for the first time. We saw the lovely people of Ladakh and were privileged to see the snow leopard. What more could we have asked? From the British point of view it was sad that time prevented any British serviceman from standing on the summit of Saser I with our Indian friends. Considering the difference of culture between the British and Indian teams, the expedition was remarkably successful as a joint venture; the teams mixed well together and learned a lot from each other. Ther is no doubt that the common heritage and traditions of the two armies plus a common language were a great help.

The aim of helping to choose a team for Everest was certainly achieved, as Saser Kangri provided an unusually tough apprenticeship in Himalayan climbing. Saser, the Yellow Goddess, is an irresistibly beautiful mountain with three main sister peaks all over 7300m high, and many others approaching that height. The landscape is on a vast scale and there is a timeless quality about the arid desolation of the region; indeed the whole area is inundated with high unclimbed peaks, offering a mountaineering dream! We were very fortunate to be allowed by the Indian government to climb in this remote yet politically sensitive area. We remain deeply grateful to our Indian hosts for their generous hospitality and in particular to the Indian Army who unstintingly provided all the administrative support we needed. It was a most successful joint operation.