East of the Saser La

Exploring the Aq Tash and Chong Kumdan glaciers

HARISH KAPADIA

(*Plates 5–7*)

Like many good expeditions, ours began with problems. There are always many bureaucratic obstacles in the way of climbing in the East Karakoram, and this time some added difficulties almost ruined our trip. To begin with, our flight from Delhi hovered over Leh and, because of the cloud cover, landed us back at Chandigarh. So we flew to Srinagar with all the luggage. Muslim Contractor and Vijay Kothari were packed off with it in a truck, and suffered a three-day journey with road blocks, a drunken driver and the other usual hardships. The rest travelled by bus. We all gathered at Leh, five days behind schedule, on 6 July 1989. We contacted the army, and everything seemed to be in order.

Next evening, as we roamed about in the streets of Leh eating kebabs, there was a small riot, and suddenly a furious mob attacked a gompa and a mosque situated opposite each other. This was the start of the four months of riot which were to change the face of Leh. The Buddhists of Ladakh and Shia Muslims were protesting against Sunni Muslims from Kashmir who had cornered the trade. There were bomb blasts, and Leh was put under total curfew for three days. 'This must be the first violence in Leh since the days of Zorawar Singh' (1840), one Ladakhi scholar said sadly. Leh looked desolate and tense, and we felt sad for this Shangri-La which we had enjoyed so much in the past. When we returned in late August there was not a single tourist around. Luckily a settlement was reached later in the year, and an uneasy calm returned.

On 13 July we managed to leave Leh at last, in a private truck. Quickly we crossed the Khardung La (5080m) where we enjoyed an excellent view of the northern ranges. We left Shyok at Khalsar, turned into the Nubra valley and reached Sasoma in time for breakfast with the army there. In the early days caravans took seven days to cover these 158km; now it is a one-day journey. The road ahead leads to the Siachen snout; army convoys pass in both directions with monotonous regularity.

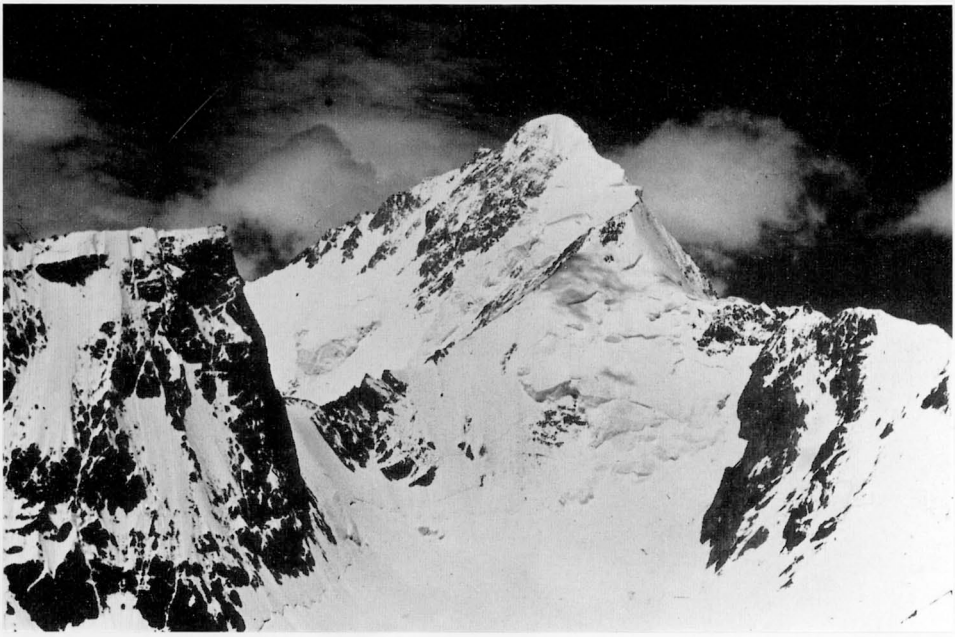
Subedar Raftan, who was in charge of the camp at Sasoma, welcomed us with a firm handshake but discouraging news. We required 12 to 15 mules for crossing the Saser La. First, because of the uncertain weather, the pass, feared by muleteers, was open only intermittently. Secondly, a large army expedition to Mamostong Kangri on our route had already acquired 125 mules, and no other mules were available in the Nubra valley. So we could only wait. Our days were spent quite interestingly with the jawans and subedars, veterans of the Siachen



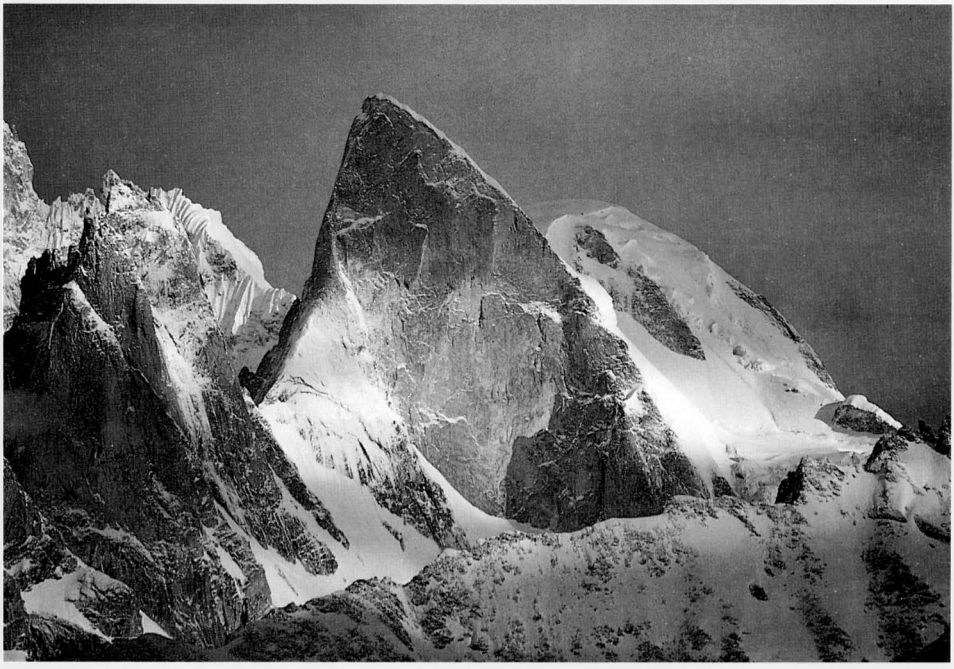
5. The great bend of the Chong Kumdan glacier. Water-level marks on the walls can be clearly seen. (Harish Kapadia) (p 28)



6. The site of the Chong Kumdan glacier dam in 1989. In 1929 the water-level reached 120m. See marks on the walls on the right and on the scree slopes, left. (Harish Kapadia) (p 28)



7. *Chong Kumdan I (7971m): an unattempted 7000er.* (Harish Kapadia) (p 28)



8. *Biachari peak and dome.* (Sandy Allan) (p 43)

war, whose relaxed routine involved office work, telephone messages and preparation of food for the convoys. In the evenings we played volleyball. Some of us visited the Yarma gompa which is believed to be as old as the Potala. The Nubra river is marked on the map after this gompa as 'Yarma Tsangpo'. The lamas' tradition of painting walls and stones survives in the Nubra valley which is beautiful and full of flowers and poplars, living up to its original name Dumra ('valley of flowers and trees').

After five days the mules finally arrived, and what a happy sight it was for us. We left on 20 July, ready to face the next delay. The track climbs *chhatis mod*. It is hewn into the tough rock, about 550m in height, reaching the Tulum Puti La (3750m) after 36 U-turns. The route, a masterpiece of roadmaking, was constructed in the 19th century from local materials by the engineer Ali Hussain who came from Central Asia. The work was commissioned by the Sultan of Yarkand, after pilgrims on their way to Mecca had complained of hardships on this section of their route. If this story sounds improbable, the unique track into the valley ahead, leading to the base of the Saser La, is even more fantastic. This is what Eric Shipton wrote of the area, which has not changed much:

> From the fertile valley of Panamik, the track climbed a slab of rock, 2000 feet high, so steep and smooth that from a distance it looked scarcely passable for a mountain goat. Beyond it we entered a wilderness of rock and ice surrounded by lofty peaks and by the evening of the second day we reached the foot of a glacier cascading in a series of steep ice-falls from the Saser Pass (17,480 feet). The only way through was up a narrow gully of large moraine boulders between the ice and a vertical cliff. Though this type of ground is familiar enough to any mountaineering expedition, never before had I dreamed that it would be possible to climb it with heavily-laden animals. There was no vestige of a path, and as the ponies clambered up the great boulders, their hooves scraped and slithered agonisingly in their efforts to gain purchase and retain their balance on trembling, bleeding legs.[1]

Beyond the Tulum Puti La we followed the river, crossing it at Umlung over a natural rock bridge. Above it were the plains of Lama Kheti. We crossed the Thangman nala to make a camp at 4054m. We continued along the river, crossing the Lashi and Namlung nalas which come from the south and drain glaciers of the same name, surrounded by peaks up to 6500m high. Of these, only Lashi (6265m) has been climbed. One of the high cols leads to the Chamshen group of peaks which drain into the Shyok and are otherwise difficult to approach. These glaciers are a storehouse of peaks for future climbers. After the open ground of Turtyalak, the track climbed up 280m to Skyangpoche. The Mamostong Kangri glacier was opposite to us in the north. A group of Yarkandi travellers had tried to find a way through this glacier across a col to avoid the much-feared Saser La. They crossed the col at 5885m to the Thangman glacier (Kichik Kumdan glacier). This would have led them quickly to the Chong Kumdan glacier and the Karakoram Pass. But the party perished,

and the glacier and the col were called Mamostong ('thousand devils') and Thangman ('glacier of healing'). We camped ahead at the Changmolung nala. The rains arrived, and that gave us our fourth problem. It rained for the next two days, almost as heavily as in Garhwal. The weather in Ladakh is surely changing. Gone are the days of constant blue skies and dry weather. The heavy rain has a devastating effect on the fragile Ladakh landscape. It is difficult to give any reason for the change, though some blame the large plantations in the lower valleys of Ladakh. But the army is very business-like and operates in any weather. They have a simple saying, as Subedar Wani had later put it:

Mausam ka illaj nahin
Hukum ka jawab nahin
(You cannot rely on the weather,
you cannot reply to an order.)

On 24 July we could move at last, with the muleteers already grumbling. The route became wilder and steeper. Another aspect was added which all the earlier travellers had written about.

> In the valley leading up to the Pass we had seen the first of the corpses, skeletons and heaps of bones which formed a continuous line of hundreds of miles until we reached the first oasis beyond the ranges.[2]

These skeletons made a gruesome sight but soon we were used to them. Even today, many mules die on the pass and you have to pay compensation. The army can afford it, but a private expedition has to be careful not to press the muleteers too hard. We camped about 2km before the pass, at a camping ground usually used before the crossing. The weather is crucial on the morning of the crossing. If it is cloudy, the snow does not consolidate enough and mules will sink in. As it is, one has to make a midnight start. We did this, and found after one hour that the mules were sinking into the snowfield. The ponies began to weaken, many were limping and several kept collapsing hopelessly. There were blood marks on their legs. We had to return to the camp. Now we were stranded once again, for the pass was not open yet. The only way out of our fifth problem was to ferry our loads to the crest of the pass and arrange for mules from the other side to pick them up. This we had to do for the next three days. It was a gallant effort by the team, more like a desperate attempt to establish a high camp rather than travel on a trade route.

Bad weather persisted, and we appreciated the wisdom of the great explorer Sir Francis Younghusband:

> The Saser Pass was not so difficult at this time of year as it often is. But on the day after we crossed it a terrible squall of snow and rain overtook us, and on looking back I saw the pass hidden in a cloud as black as night; and it is because of these terrific storms that the pass is so much feared.[3]

Finally, on 26 July, we left at 1am with torches. It was a clear night for a change, and walking on the snow was a pleasure. The route went over the scree to the final ice-wall, and traversed across the wall to a plateau above. It is surprising that mules can go at all on such a route, so much like something one encounters on a mountaineering expedition. Whenever we felt concerned about the safety of a mule, the muleteer always reassured us: 'This is a *sharif* (gentleman) horse. He knows where to place his legs. He won't fall.' These sturdy beasts-of-burden, the Karakoram mules, are legendary. They have played no small role in supporting trade and travel, and now defence, in this area. A small temple on the eastern side marked the end of the pass, which was about three hours from our high camp. A steep descent to the Shyok valley led us to the Saser Brangza Camp.

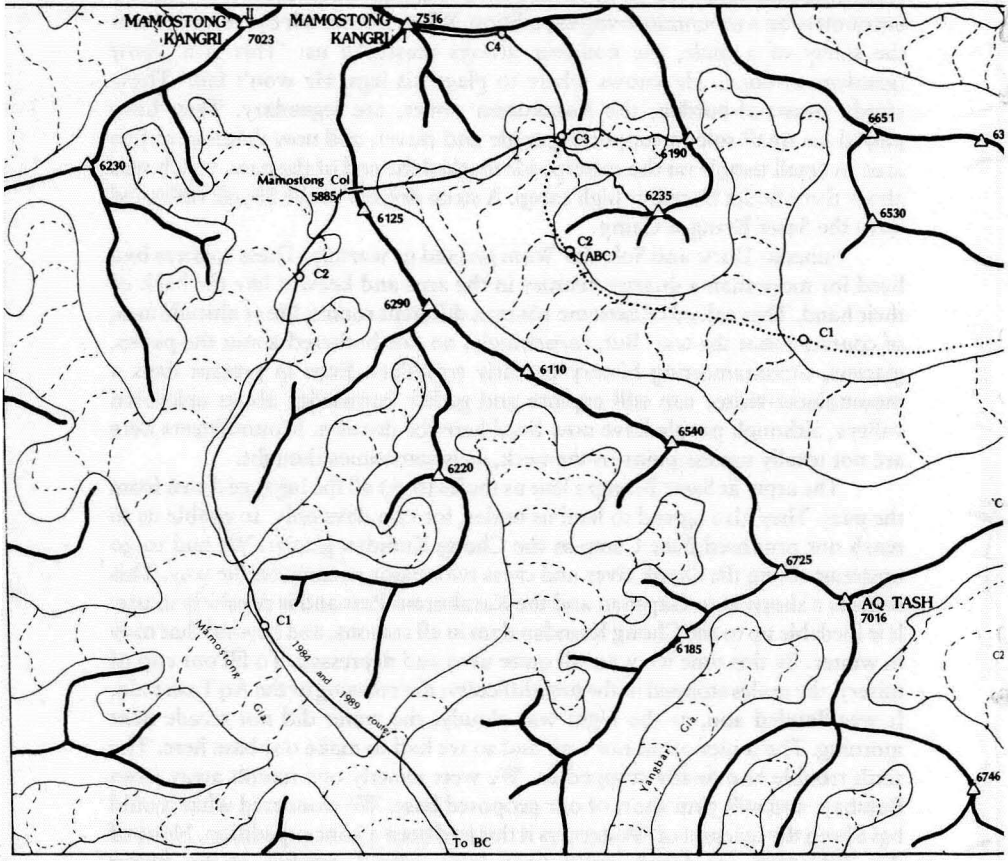
Subedar Dorje and Subedar Wani greeted us warmly. These soldiers had lived for more than a quarter-century in the area and knew it like the back of their hand. They talked of extreme winters, different routes, life at altitude and, of course, about the war. But, surprisingly, no one bothered about the peaks, glaciers, mountaineering history or early travellers. Even in present days a mountaineer-visitor can still explore and gather knowledge about unknown valleys, although people have now lived here for decades. Mountaineers here are not totally useless pains-in-the-neck, as is sometimes thought.

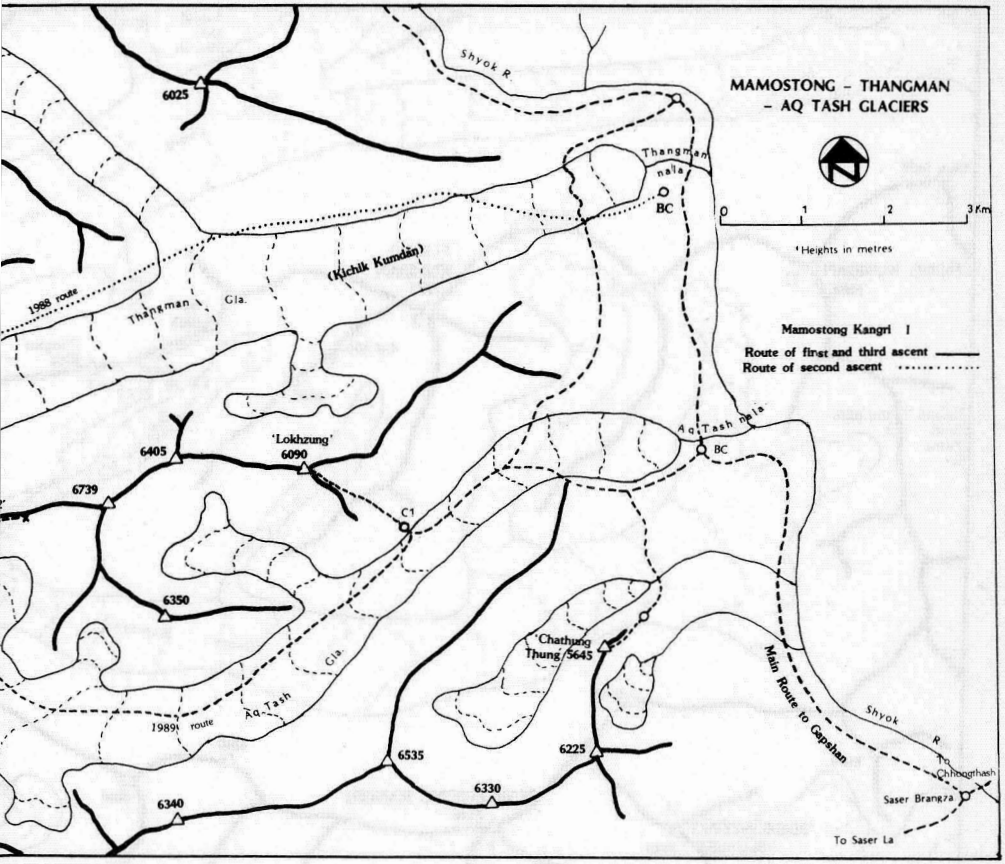
The army at Saser Brangza lent us mules to get all the luggage down from the pass. They also agreed to lend us mules, for two days only, to enable us to reach our proposed Base Camp at the Chong Kumdan glacier. We had to go upstream along the Shyok river and cross two major streams on the way. This route is a shortcut to Gapshan and the Karakoram Pass and is regularly in use. It is fordable up to the Chong Kumdan dam in all seasons, and beyond that only in winter. By this time we were all quite tired and depressed. To fill our cup of misery, the mules stopped at the first difficulty: the crossing of the Aq Tash nala. It was flooded and, as the night was cloudy, the water did not recede next morning. The mules could not wait and so we had to make our base here. The sixth trouble had finally stopped us. We were exactly one month away from Bombay, and still 5km short of our proposed base. We wondered what would have been the reaction of Westerners if this had been a joint expedition. None of the difficulties we faced could have been solved quicker or by better organization. They were all part of the game of climbing in the East Karakoram. In spite of all the support, how could we have stopped the rain, changed the terrain or forced the bleeding mules? As has been said: 'You can change history but you cannot fight geography.' We accepted the situation with oriental fortitude, while a foreigner in a hurry might have been angry and impatient. But how would that have helped?

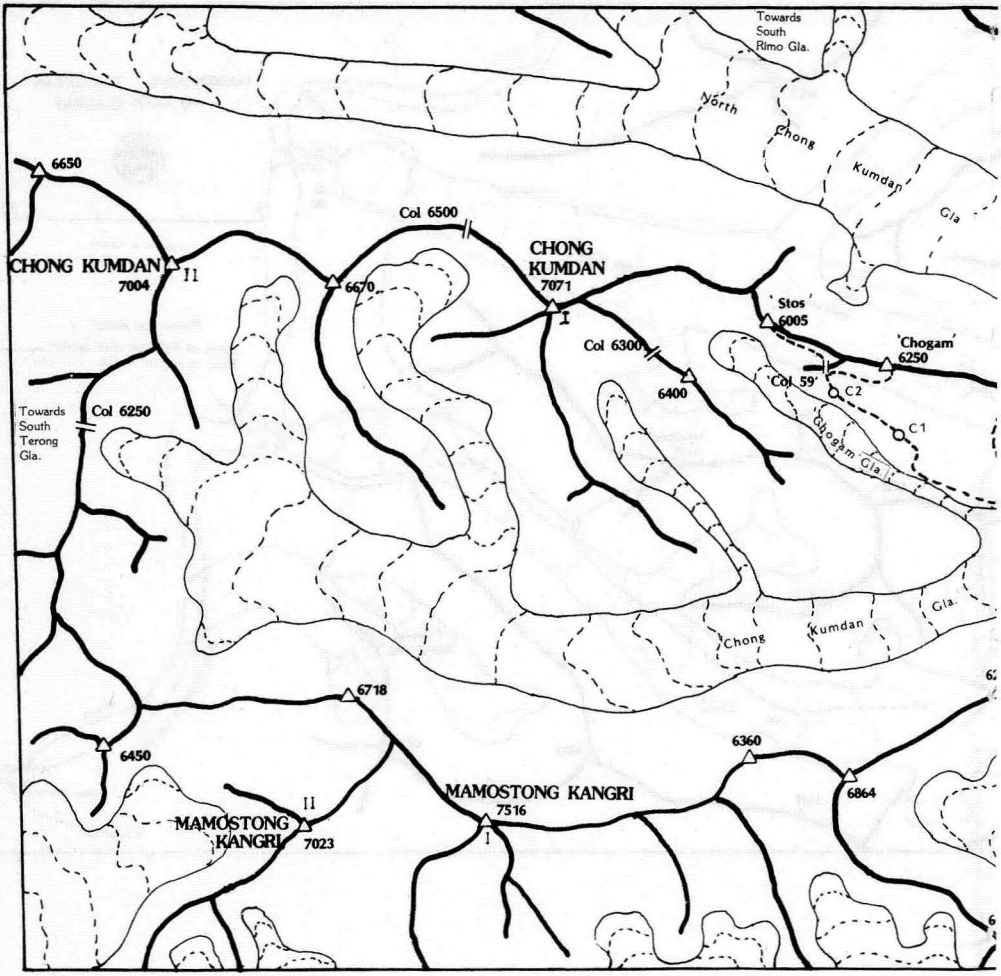
The Skeleton Trail

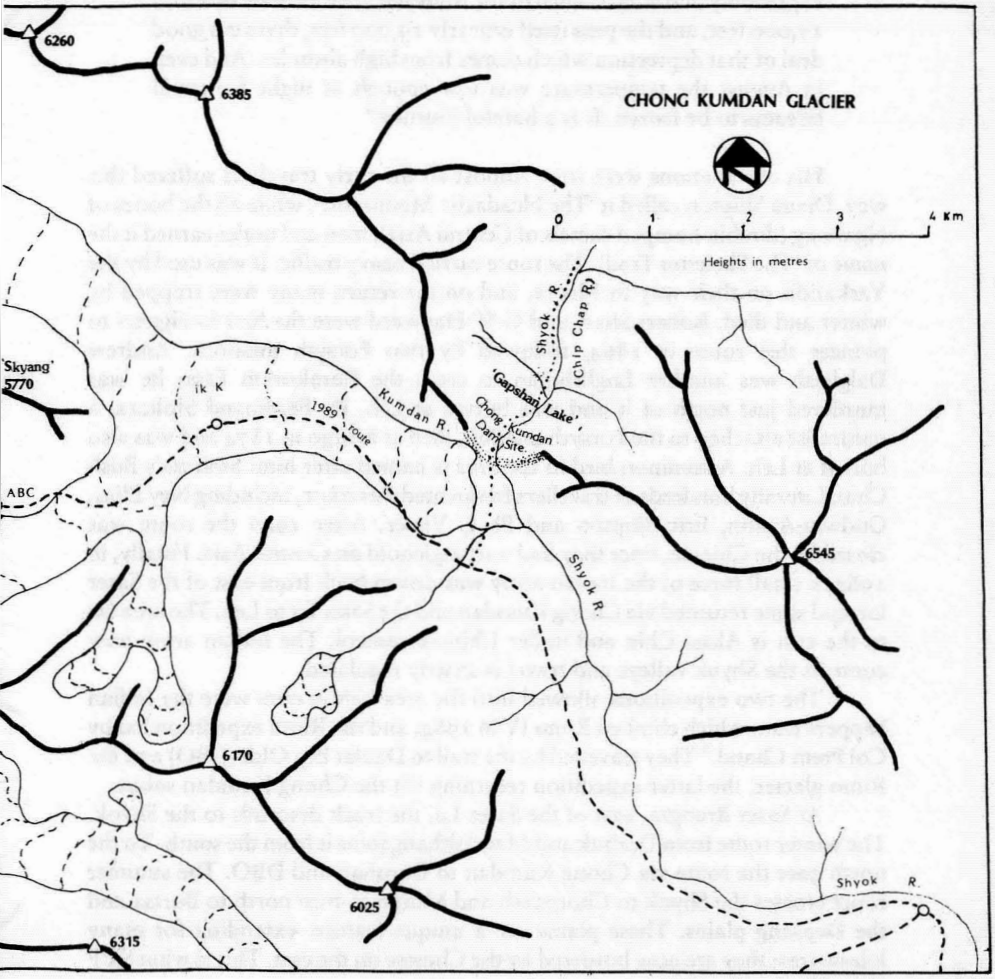
The track we were following was the famous Central Asia Trade Route. This historic route was the main trade route between the plains of India and Central Asia. In his autobiography, Sir Francis Younghusband wrote:

> The crossing of the Himalaya by the main caravan route to Central


MAMOSTONG KANGRI II
7023
MAMOSTONG KANGRI I
7516
C4
C3
6190
6651
6230
Mamostong Col
5885
6125
6235
6530
C2
(ABC)
C2
6290
C1
6110
6540
6220
6725
AQ TASH
7016
C1
6185
Mamostong Gla.
1984 and 1989 route
Yangbari Gla.
6746
To BC


MAMOSTONG - THANGMAN
- AQ TASH GLACIERS
0 1 2 3 Km
Heights in metres
Mamostong Kangri I
Route of first and third ascent
Route of second ascent
Shyok R.
6025
Thangman nala
BC
(Kichik Kumdan)
1988 route
Thangman Gla.
Aq Tash nala
BC
'Lokhzung'
6090
6405
6739
C1
6350
'Chathung Thung' 5645
Main Route to Gapshan
Shyok R.
To Chhongthash
Saser Brangza
To Saser La
1989 route
Aq Tash Gla.
6535
6225
6330
6340


Towards South Rimo Gla.
North Chong Kumdan Gla
6650
Col 6500
CHONG KUMDAN 7004
II
6670
CHONG KUMDAN 7071
I
Stos 6005
'Chogam' 6250
Col 6300
6400
Col 59'
C2
C1
Ghogam Gla
Towards South Terong Gla.
Col 6250
Chong Kumdan Gla.
6718
6450
6360
6864
MAMOSTONG KANGRI 7516
II
MAMOSTONG KANGRI 7023
I


CHONG KUMDAN GLACIER
0 1 2 3 4 Km
Heights in metres
6260
6385
'Skyang'
5770
ABC
Kumdan R.
1989 route
Shyok R.
(Chip Chap R.)
'Gapshan' Lake'
Chong Kumdan Dark Site
6545
6170
6025
6315
Shyok R.
Shyok R.

> Asia over the Karakoram Pass is about as dreary a piece of travel as I know. The part through Kashmir is delightful. After that, and especially over the Karakoram Pass itself, the scenery is inexpressibly dull and as much of the route lies at an altitude of about 17,000 feet, and the pass itself is nearly 19,000 feet, there is a good deal of that depression which comes from high altitudes. And even in August the temperature was low enough at night for small streams to be frozen. It is a hateful journey.[4]

His observations were true. Almost all the early travellers suffered this way. Diana Shipton called it 'The Headache Mountains', while all the bones of Ngabong (double-humped camels of Central Asia), men and mules earned it the name of 'The Skeleton Trail'. The route carried heavy traffic. It was used by the Yarkandis on their way to Mecca, and on the return many were trapped by winter and died. Robert Shaw and G W Hayward were the first foreigners to pioneer this route in 1864, followed by two Forsyth missions. Andrew Dalgleish was another Englishman to cross the Karakoram Pass; he was murdered just north of it and was buried at Leh. Dr Ferdinand Stolicza, a naturalist attached to the Forsyth mission, died at Murgo in 1874 and was also buried at Leh. A common bird in the area is named after him: Stolicza's Bush Chat. Literally hundreds of travellers frequented this route, including Ney Elias, Godwin-Austin, Eric Shipton and Ph C Visser. After 1946 the route was closed by the Chinese, once they had a stranglehold on Central Asia. Finally, in 1962, a small force of the Indian army was driven back from east of the Saser La, and some returned via Chong Kumdan and the Saser La to Leh. The area far to the east is Aksai Chin and under Chinese control. The Indian army now controls the Shyok valleys and travel is strictly regulated.

The two expeditions allowed into the area before ours were the Indian Sappers team which climbed Rimo IV in 1984, and the Rimo expedition led by Col Prem Chand.[5] They travelled by the trail to Daulat Beg Oldi (DBO) and the Rimo glacier, the latter expedition returning via the Chong Kumdan snout.

At Saser Brangza, east of the Saser La, the track descends to the Shyok. The winter route from Darbuk and Mandalthang joins it from the south. To the north goes the route via Chong Kumdan to Gapshan and DBO. The summer route crosses the Shyok to Chongtash and Murgo to turn north to Burtsa and the Depsang plains. These plains are a unique feature, extending for many kilometres; they are now bordered by the Chinese on the east. This is what Sir F Younghusband wrote:

> Of all parts of the world this is the most God-forsaken – dreadful in every way. The plain itself is over 17,000 feet above sea-level, and consists of an open expanse of gravel, bounded by rounded, dull, barren hills. Across it incessantly sweep winds of piercing cold . . . To add to the gloom the plain is strewn with the bones of animals who have succumbed to the strain of carrying loads at these great heights.[6]

Finally all the routes meet at DBO and cross the Karakoram Pass, which is quite unspectacular compared with the terrain already passed. Ahead, over the plains of Central Asia, the route joins the famous Silk Road at Yarkand, running east-west. (Though silk was traded on the Central Asia Trade Route, it was never called the Silk Route. It is a feeder to the Silk Road.[7])

The Indian army officers who are stationed in the area have done extensive trekking. Many relics have been found such as the metal boat, perhaps that of J P Gunn, left in 1929 in the Chong Kumdan lake, the memorial stone of the Visser expedition of 1935, Burtsa stones, remains of caravans and, of course, bones and a few partly-decomposed bodies. Some of these have been air-lifted to army HQ at Partapur, lower down on the Shyok, and are preserved for posterity. Government agencies, geologists, archaeologists and surveyors operate in the area and have collected information and relics.

The final word on the trail is well expressed by Shipton:

> Nothing is known of the men who, centuries ago, first ventured across this monstrous wilderness in search of trade or conquest. It is easier to imagine the toil, hardship and frustration they must have endured than to understand what inspired the courage and tenacity needed to discover a way.[8]

Exploring Aq Tash

Considering the time available to us, and our limited strength, we had to improvise. The alternative plan was for Muslim and Arun Samant to enter the Aq Tash glacier, 8km long, and to try out peaks there. Accordingly, on 31 July, they climbed via the right-hand moraine and crossed the glacier to establish Camp 1. The glacier has prominent white stones which give it its name (Aq = white, Tash = stone). As the Yarkandi caravans passed the snout they must have given this simple identification, as in this land of Karakoram (black rock) an Aq Tash attracts attention. For the next four days Arun, Muslim and porters established two camps to reach the col at 6200m on the shoulder of the Aq Tash peak (7016m). This was 'Col 62'. On the other side it offered excellent views of the Thangman glacier. The entire massif of Mamostong Kangri could be seen to advantage. After the 'Mamostong Col' the entire route on the glacier and the E ridge of Mamostong Kangri (7516m) were observed. But the most challenging view was of the Aq Tash peak, lying to the south-west of the col. The ridge rose sharply and was broken. This stupendous monolith is one of the last three unclimbed 7000ers in the area. It would take a strong all-out attempt to climb it. Arun and Pasang Bodh proceeded north-east of the col, following the ridge. They stopped on the sharp 'Aq Tash Tower', at *c* 6400m. On 8 August all retreated to Base Camp for a rest, leaving all the camp-sites intact.

After two days Muslim and Pasang returned to continue their efforts on the Aq Tash glacier. Their first aim was a peak (6090m) above their Camp 1 (5200m). It took them seven hours to reach the summit on 12 August. The route went up a nala draining from the north and via a snow-gully. A series of false summit humps had to be overcome. A final climb of 150m led to the summit which was christened Lokhzung ('Eagle's Nest'). To the south of the Aq Tash

glacier two small glaciers led to the ablation valley. On the southernmost valley stands Chathung Thung (5645m, 'Black neck crane'), with a lovely snow-slope and black rock jutting up like a neck on the top. On 13 August Muslim and Pasang established a camp on the slopes of this peak, and on the 14th they overcame three pinnacles to reach the true summit. It overlooked the entire Shyok valley here and gave a bird's-eye view of the Kichik Kumdan river-block of yesteryear. They examined the possibilities of climbing the adjoining peak of 6225m but found the slopes avalanche-prone. So by the 16th they were on their way down and heading towards the Chong Kumdan glacier to unite with the main team.

Chongtash

After Arun and Muslim had left for the Aq Tash glacier Harish started suffering from high fever. When contacted, the nearest army doctor arranged mules for his evacuation to their camp, with Monesh Devjani. Once across the Shyok the party mounted horses equipped with wooden frames made for carrying luggage. A painful journey began. The route entered the Chongtash gorge:

> The Saser Pass led us again into the Shyok valley, 160 miles upstream from the place where we had crossed it near Panamik. Instead of following the valley we plunged almost immediately into a ravine, so narrow that the opposing walls also met, 1000 feet above our heads, so dark that we seemed to be in a vast cavern.[9]

We were now in this cavern. Ladakhi troops marching with us were fit and a confident lot. 'Who needs bullets here, we can just throw stones from above,' they joked. Chongtash ('big stone') was a huge plain with a big rock in the centre, the only one within miles. Ahead we could see the barren fearsome mountain walls of Murgo. As strong winds and clouds gathered, a battered Harish and a suave Monesh were greeted with:

Ladakh ki mausam aur
Bombay ki fashion ka bharosa nahin
(Ladakh's weather and Bombay's fashion
cannot be trusted.)

The army was friendly, comforting and literally warm with *bukharis*. Four comfortable days were spent under the expert care of the army doctor. After sufficient rest, drugs, video films and the warmth of friendly people, Harish recovered sufficiently to return to the Base Camp on the Aq Tash glacier.

The Chong Kumdan glacier

We all gathered together on 9 August. Riots and the problems posed by weather, terrain, sickness and mules had left us only 11 days to visit this unknown glacier. We divided up, Muslim and Pasang continuing to climb in the Aq Tash glacier region, while Arun, Monesh and Harish with three porters left for the Chong Kumdan glacier.

There was a good beaten track leading to the glacier. The Aq Tash nala

was now crossed easily, and we trekked along the Shyok bed. The river flowed majestically and very quietly. The Thangman nala (old Kichik Kumdan) was crossed with some difficulty, and in the evening we camped on the plain leading to the historic dam. Arun and Koylu Ram tried to cut across the ice-penitentes of the Thangman glacier with disastrous results. It is very tiring to cut across these pinnacles and walls of about 50m, and they barely managed to cross. The Kichik Kumdan glacier ('small dam') had blocked the Shyok in the past, and we could observe a deep gorge near the eastern wall where the river had broken through. Now the glacier has receded at least 2–3km and poses no danger. The Kichik Kumdan glacier is 11km long; an expedition led by Major A M Sethi traversed it fully to climb Mamostong Kangri.[10]

The Glacier Dam

This is the meeting point of the Chip Chap river from the north and the Chong Kumdan river from the west. The Chong Kumdan glacier has advanced rapidly over the years. A little higher up, the glacier takes a sharp turn; the movement of its mass was so forceful that it pressed hard against the walls. This blocked the flow of the Chip Chap and Chong Kumdan rivers. (The earlier literature [gazetteer] called the latter the 'Kumdan river'.) However, a glacier is liable to retreat and, the dams weakened by the retreat, bursts occurred. All the dammed water rushed out, and death and destruction was caused as far as Attock Fort, about 1200km downstream. Thus the river acquired the name Shyok – the river of death. Such dam-bursts have occurred in 1780, 1826, 1835 and 1839. The dam-waters rose to a peak height of about 125m; the water-marks can still be seen. The dam was studied by Ney Elias and Godwin-Austen in 1877. Kenneth Mason, the first editor of the *Himalayan Journal*, took a keen interest in the dam,[11] collecting much information. The most serious dam-burst occurred in 1929. Mr T Durgi of the Public Works Department was then posted at the dam-site to warn against future bursts. In 1932 he sent two runners to Khalsar over the Saser pass to warn about floods. The flood waters had already reached Khalsar, but by their phenomenally fast trek (130km in 28 hours) the runners did pass on a warning. Kenneth Mason calculated the frequency of advance and retreat of the Kichik and Chong Kumdan glaciers and predicted:

> As I shall not be here to be proved wrong, I will be precise: the Chong Kumdan will advance rapidly during the winter of 1968–9; the Shyok valley will be blocked; a lake will form above it, some 10 miles long; and there will be floods caused by the collapse of the dam in the autumns (July to September) of 1971, 1974 and 1977, the first one occurring probably in the autumn 2½ years after the glacier has advanced.[12]

However, the available records indicate that the last major burst which caused destruction occurred on 16 August 1929. Since then, there were minor bursts in 1932–33 and 1937–39, when the dam-waters escaped slowly and no major damage was caused. Since then, there have been no further bursts or build-up of dams. The Karakoram glaciers in this region are in a state of retreat.

Indian army forces have long been stationed in the area, and their records of the Shyok water-level do not mention any floods.

Is it likely that Mason may still be proved correct about the future?

> It must be remembered that it will be a coincidence that the Chong Kumdan and the Kichik Kumdan glaciers will both be at their maximum advance at approximately the same time [1970] and that at their subsequent advances, the Chong Kumdan in 2013 and the Kichik Kumdan in 2005, they will again be 'out of phase'. We can perhaps leave any further speculation to our grandchildren![13]

The Chong Kumdan Peaks

Though the trade route and many caravans passed the snout of the Chong Kumdan glacier, no one seems to have entered on to the glacier. It was first surveyed by E C Ryall in 1862, and a sketch-map was published by the De Filippi expedition in 1914. The glacier is about 15km long, running generally east to west. At the western end lies a high col of 6250m, leading to the South Terong glacier. To the south lies the high Mamostong Kangri wall, with many high peaks that discharge avalanches. To the north of the glacier are the two unattempted peaks of Chong Kumdan I (7071m) and II (7004m). A high col (6500m) between the two mountains overlooks the northern branch of the Chong Kumdan glacier. About 3km from the snout the glacier bifurcates, with the North Chong Kumdan glacier leading towards the South Rimo glacier.

On 11 August we entered this glacier, following the right moraine. A side glacier had cut through, creating a narrow gorge, and we had to climb up to cross it. This opened to our view the entire northern vista up to Gapshan. We moved ahead but after about 2km were forced to descend to the glacier moraine and proceed along it. After the junction of the glaciers we cut across to the north towards the left bank and camped on the glacier late in the evening. Next day an Advanced Base Camp (5040m) was set up on the flat camping ground at the entrance of a small subsidiary northern glacier, christened by us 'Chogam glacier'. While two porters were sent down to ferry more loads, we moved quickly up this northern glacier. On 14 August Camp 1 was placed at 5540m, below a prominent 'dimple' on the ridge. Arun and Koylu Ram left early with their camp, followed soon by Monesh and Harish. We reached a prominent col at 5900m ('Col 59'). Ahead to the NW was Chong Kumdan I, rising from the glacier to a col, then to steep rocks and a tempting rounded summit. The eastern ridge fell sharply to join our peak.

Sir Francis Younghusband was perhaps the first to see it from a distance on his way to Central Asia:

> There followed some dreary marches across the summits of the bare and desolate Depsang Plains from which, though 17,000 feet above sea level, the snowy peaks of Saser and Nubra 'appeared above the horizon like the sails of some huge ships' . . .[14]

Nursing a recent fracture Harish found the steep slopes painful to climb

and hence opted out. The remaining three followed the steep southern slopes of the peak (6250m). After climbing a pinnacle at the end they were on the summit of Chogam ('a box of holy scriptures'). The panorama extended from Rimo in the north-west to Mamostong Kangri in the south.

On 15 August, Arun and Koylu Ram climbed Stos (6005m, 'goat which gives Pashmina wool') from their high camp. It is a peak between the descending ridge of Chong Kumdan I and Chogam.

Our last day of action was 16 August. In the early morning Monesh and Yog Raj left to climb Skyang (5770m, 'wild horse') above our Advanced Base to the north; their energy and speed matched the name of the peak. Going up steep slopes they reached the summit ridge at 9am. On the ridge there were three pinnacles spread over half a kilometre and, to be absolutely sure of the summit, they climbed all three. That evening we built a huge cairn and on a stream 'constructed' our own dam. Exactly 60 years ago to the day, on 16 August 1929, the Kumdan dam had broken with a bang, heard by the Vissers camped at DBO, almost 30km away ('like the noise of a cannon-shot') and by J P Gunn who visited the site immediately from Chongtash. This was the last major burst of a lake which had formed in 1923. That was the year in which Godwin-Austen, crippled at the age of 50, had died, aged 87. A little before he had written to *The Times*, which had just reported another block of the river, vividly recalling his visit to the dam with Ney Elias 43 years earlier.[15] After 1935–39 both Chong Kumdan and Kichik Kumdan went into oblivion and did not cause further blocks or news.

Muslim and Pasang after their satisfying climbs met us at the Chong Kumdan plain. A tired but satisfied party exchanged notes. We were fascinated by the area and even charmed by its barrenness. As Shipton had said:

> As on a long sea voyage, many weeks in the mountain wilderness, remote from the habits and concerns of our former world, had made us intensely sensitive to our new environment.[16]

A tired party staggered back across the Saser La. Subedar Wani has the final quote for us:

Kaun kaheta hai ke Mehboob mera
Langda ke chalata hai;
Woh to hushn ke boz se
Lachak lachak ke chalta hai.

(Who says my [mountain] lover is walking
with a limp,
Because of the load of love [beauty]
he is staggering a little.)

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