
CHRIS BONINGTON

Indian British Panch Chuli Expedition 1992

(Plates 53–55)

Historical background

Towering above the little hill station of Munsiairy, Panch Chuli has always been worshipped and admired by local people, and by pilgrims and traders on their way to Tibet. Its name signifies the five hearths of the legendary Pandavas who are supposed to have cooked their last meal on the five peaks on their way to heaven. The first mountaineer to explore the approaches of the range from the east was Hugh Ruttledge in 1929. W H Murray's Scottish expedition and K E Snelson, with J de V Graaff, attempted the mountain from the east by the Sonar and Meola glaciers respectively in 1950, but made little progress. In 1951 Heinrich Harrer made an attempt from the west up the Uttari Balati glacier, reaching the foot of the W ridge at 6000m – a very impressive achievement by a two-member team. P N Nikore of India claimed a solo ascent of Panch Chuli II in 1952, but this has been discounted. Another attempt was made in 1964 by an expedition led by Squadron Leader A K Chaudhury. They failed on Panch Chuli II, but claimed ascents of Panch Chuli III, IV and V, the two latter on the same day. There seems little doubt that they mistook the three small peaks running down from the end of the SW ridge for Panch Chuli III, IV and V.

Panch Chuli I (6355m) was the first peak of the range to be climbed by an Indo-Tibet Border Police expedition led by Hikam Singh in 1972. The SW ridge of Panch Chuli II, at 6904m the highest peak, was climbed the following year by another large ITBP expedition led by Mahendra Singh, when 18 climbers reached the top after almost the entire route had been fixed with rope. In 1991 two Indian army expeditions climbed the NW ridge and the E ridge.

There can be no doubt that Panch Chuli III (6312m), Panch Chuli IV (6334m) and Panch Chuli V (6437m) had never been attempted. Rajrambha (6537m) was first climbed from the north by another ITBP team in 1976.

An Indian–British joint expedition

Panch Chuli was therefore an attractive proposition when Harish Kapadia approached me to suggest a joint expedition. Editor of the *Himalayan Journal* and a keen Himalayan traveller, Kapadia had initiated two previous joint expeditions, one to Rimo in 1985 and the other to Chong Kumdan in 1991, both in the Eastern Karakoram. He provided a successful formula – more like a climbing meet than an expedition with a single objective – within which

everyone could realise his own ambitions. The British contingent numbered six and planned to climb as three pairs. Stephen Venebles with Dick Renshaw and Victor Saunders with Stephen Sustad were long-standing climbing partners, whereas my own partner, Graham Little, and I had only climbed together over several weekends in Scotland. The five-man Indian team were all old friends; they were planning a full-scale assault on Panch Chuli II, utilising the help of a small team of high-altitude porters, camps and some fixed rope, while the British members were planning a series of alpine-style ascents on the peaks in the region.

To the Uttari Balati glacier

The expedition left Bombay on 10 May and travelled via Delhi and Ranikhet to Munsiairy and the roadhead at Madkot. The team started the approach on 16 May and reached Base Camp at 3270m below the snout of the Uttari Balati glacier on 18 May. The last village was Ramthing, only three hours walk from Madkot, and the route beyond that was along narrow paths across rocky and heavily forested terrain up the dramatically steep Balati valley. 84 porters were employed to carry the expedition baggage. They were willing, cheerful and honest.

The Uttari Balati glacier flows to a particularly low altitude and has three formidable icefalls which were eventually turned on the true right bank. Glacier Camp was established on 22 May near the centre of the glacier above the first icefall at 3900m. A route was initially fixed on the left edge of the second icefall through a series of tottering seracs. An easier but still frightening alternative was found by Harish Kapadia on the right bank, avoiding the second icefall. This was probably the route chosen by Harrer. Another gully led to the top of the third icefall where Advanced Base was established below a small rock buttress (4840m) on 26 May.

Sahadev East (5750m)

Graham Little and I moved up to Advanced Base on 26 May and, after a day's rest, decided to attempt the magnificent peak, later named Sahadev East and West (after the second youngest brother of the Pandavas), on the other side of the glacier. Sahadev West is marked as Point 5782m on the map. We set out at 1.45am, crossed the glacier and climbed easily to the foot of a snow spur leading to the summit of Sahadev East. A difficult bergschrund covered by unstable snow led to steep soft snow lying on ice that led up to the summit, which we reached at 8am and descended by the E ridge to get back to Advanced Base at 11.45am.

The traverse of Rajrambha (6537m)

The rest of the British members reached Advanced Base that afternoon and decided to attempt a complete traverse of Rajrambha from the head of the



53. Indian British Panch Chuli Expedition. Chris Bonington near the summit of Panch Chuli II, 6904m. (*Graham Little*) (p98)



54. The climbing team, from L: Muslim Contractor, Bhupesh Ashar, Wing Cdr Anil Srivastava, Stephen Venables, Chris Bonington, Harish Kapadia, Graham Little (behind), Monesh Devjani, Dick Renshaw, Vijay Kothari, Stephen Sustad, Victor Saunders. (*Graham Little*) (p98)

Uttari Balati glacier. They set out on 1 June and that day reached 5800m on the E ridge of Menaka (6000m), a subsidiary peak of Rajrambha. The following day they crossed Menaka to stop at 2pm for the usual afternoon storm. On 3 June they reached the foot of the first gendarme on the summit mass of Rajrambha itself. The following day they tried to reach the summit with difficult climbing on snow, ice and rock. They had reached 6300m when they were hit by an electric storm. Saunders, carrying a broken tent pole which they couldn't dismantle, acted as a mobile lightning conductor and was struck by lightning, though fortunately he was not injured. They left their rope in place to ease their progress next day and retreated to a possible camp site, where Saunders fell about 5m through a cornice, injuring his back. Visibility was nil with high winds and driving snow.

The following morning (5 June) it had cleared and they set out as usual at around 4am. Venables fell through a cornice on the way to the summit which they reached at 7am, enjoying superb views of Panch Chuli II to the east and Nanda Devi and its Sanctuary to the west. They then descended the W ridge to a col and went down the steep snow of the S face to the glacier below. They had to descend the complex glacier in cloud but reached Advanced Base just before dark. The five-day traverse was both long and committing over varied ground and gave some magnificent climbing.

Panch Chuli II – South West Ridge

Meanwhile, the Indian team, on the SW ridge of Panch Chuli II, found a route up a shelf leading from the upper Uttari Balati glacier to the Balati plateau, establishing Camp 1 SW on a shoulder at the start of the plateau at 5750m. On 5 June, the first summit team of Muslim Contractor, Monesh Devjani and Pasang Bodh moved up to Camp 2 SW (6120m) on the SW col. They were supported by Harish Kapadia, Bhupesh Ashar and Yograj. The summit team fixed the lower rock step with 100 metres of rope that day.

On 6 June the summit team established and moved up to Camp 3 SW at 6400m on the SW ridge (the route taken by the ITBP expedition in 1973). The support team occupied Camp 2 SW that day. 7 June was cloudy and windy; however, the summit team left camp at 4.45am, reaching the foot of the upper rock band (6600m) in two hours. It was climbed over steep snow and ice in 45 minutes to 6700m. Battered by strong winds, they climbed 45° ice to the junction of the S ridge and SW ridge (6800m). The route ahead was very exposed with stretches of hard ice and huge cornices to the east overlooking the Meola glacier. Using protection and climbing very slowly they reached the summit at 10.15am in heavy cloud.

They immediately started descending and on the way down Devjani fell through a cornice but arrested his own fall. By 12.15pm they were at the bottom of the rock band with the weather now turning for the worse. It took them two hours to locate and reach the tent in white-out conditions with strong winds. They had frequent sightings, throughout the day, of Graham Little and me on the W ridge. On 8 June the three summiters, now very tired, descended the lower rock step through deep powder snow to be received by

the support party. Because of the unsettled weather and poor snow conditions it was decided not to put in a second bid for the summit.

Panch Chuli II (6904m) – West Ridge

After our ascent of Sahadev Graham Little and I made an abortive attempt on Nagalphu (6410m), the only major unclimbed peak to the north of Panch Chuli. We retired to base for a rest and on our return decided to concentrate our efforts on Panch Chuli II, and attempt its unclimbed West Ridge. We accompanied the Indian team as far as Camp 1 SW and then branched left onto the upper Balati plateau through a complex crevasse system to establish Camp 2 W (6120m) at the foot of the W ridge on 5 June. Next morning we left camp, carrying our tent and cooking gear, at 3.30am to climb a steep bergschrund at the base of the ridge which led to continuous ice; this was made easier at times by a thin but precarious crust of old snow. It was necessary to 'pitch' the entire arête and at 6400m we were forced to traverse onto the W face to avoid a serac barrier. The snow now became very unstable and progress was slow. It was only at 3.30pm, after 12 hours of climbing, that we managed to find a possible tent site below a serac wall on the crest of the ridge at 6610m.

The following day (7 June) we worked our way below a series of serac walls and crevasses towards the upper stretch of the W ridge to camp early in the afternoon at the bergschrund below the summit cone, at a height of 6730m. It had been a short day but we wanted to be in position to be able to leave our sacks behind and to reach the summit in the early morning with a good chance of a view.

It snowed heavily that night but dawned fine, though cold and windy. Setting out at 6am, we joined the SW ridge about 150m below the summit and reached the top at 7am to enjoy a magnificent view of Gurla Mandhata in Tibet, and Api and Nampa in West Nepal, to the east. After half an hour on the summit, we returned to the tent, dismantled it and crossed to the SW ridge to descend to the SW col, where we received a wonderful welcome from the Indian team.

The rescue of Vijay Kothari

On our descent to Glacier Camp the following day we learnt that our support team had had a narrow escape. On 4 June, while descending the steep gully bypassing the second icefall, Vijay slipped and gathered speed falling towards a giant bergschrund at the bottom. With great presence of mind, Sundersinh ran down behind him and at great risk to his own life caught hold of Vijay at the last moment. Suffering a broken ankle, Vijay was carried by Harsinh Jnr and Suratram back to Glacier Camp. Wing Commander Srivastava, the liaison officer, rushed to Munsiri and initiated a helicopter rescue for Vijay from Glacier Camp to Bareilly Hospital where he received treatment, and thence to Bombay.



55. The traverse of Rajrambha, 6537m. Crossing Menaka summit.
(Stephen Venables) (p98)

Panchali Chuli (5220m) and Draupadi (5250m)

As we descended to Base Camp we met the Rajrambha team on their way back up the mountain and we decided to utilise the last ten days or so of the expedition in an effort to penetrate the Pyunshani Gadhera and attempt Panch Chuli III, IV or V. Stephen Venables tells this part of the story, but while we had our thrills and spills on Panch Chuli V, Harish Kapadia, with Muslim Contractor and Monesh Devjani carried out some useful exploration.

Kapadia and Contractor made a reconnaissance up the Panchali glacier on 17 June. This small glacier, situated south of Point 4934m, led up to a high col. Joined by Devjani with Prakash and Khubram, the party climbed on 18 June to the head of the glacier and established a camp at 4220m. In view of the poor weather the camp was shifted to 4860m on the 19th. 20 June dawned fine and they climbed to Bainti col (5100m) which lies at the head of the Panchali glacier. A route descended to the Bainti glacier and Paina Gad and this could be used as the pass between the two valleys.

The team first climbed the peak to the north-east – Panchali Chuli (5220m), and then the peak to the west – Draupadi (5250m). Both peaks gave excellent views of the unseen valleys of Bainti and Rula glaciers, Nagling and a host of other unclimbed peaks to the east. The party returned to Base Camp the same day and leaving three porters and provisions for the British team, as had already been agreed, set out for Munsiairy the following day (21 June) to complete the final arrangements of the expedition. They reached Madkot on the evening of 22 June and Munsiairy the following morning, where I caught up with them in the late afternoon of the 23rd with the news of Stephen's accident.

The expedition had not only been extremely successful in terms of peaks climbed and area explored, it was also a very happy one in which everyone got on well together and there was not one angry word throughout the period. Old friendships were strengthened, new ones made. We were very fortunate to be sponsored by Godrej, one of India's major companies. It was marred by the two accidents but, thanks to the courage and efficiency of the Indian Air Force and the prompt action by team members themselves, two very dangerous situations were avoided and both Kothari and Venables should soon be back in the hills. In spite of everything it was one of the best and most enjoyable expeditions that the team members have ever taken part in.

Summary: The Indian British Panch Chuli Expedition 1992 visited the Balati and Pyunshani valleys, east of Munsiairy in the Pithoragarh District, U.P., from 10 May to 29 June (Bombay and back).

Team members:

Harish Kapadia (co-leader), Muslim Contractor, Monesh Devjani, Bhupesh Ashar, Vijay Kothari and Wing Cdr Anil Srivastava (liaison officer).
Chris Bonington (co-leader), Graham Little, Dick Renshaw, Victor Saunders, Stephen Sustad and Stephen Venables.

Supported by: Pasang Bodh (sirdar), Yograj, Khubram, Prakash Chand, Sur-atram, Sundersinh, Revatram (cook), Harsinh Snr, and Harsinh Jnr.

Peaks climbed:

28 May	Sahadev East (5750m) 1st ascent, via north snow rib	Chris Bonington Graham Little
5 June	Rajrambha (6537m) Traversed via E ridge over Menaka peak – 1st ascent	Dick Renshaw Victor Saunders Stephen Sustad Stephen Venables
2 June	Menaka (6000m) 1st ascent Traversed on way to Rajrambha	As above
7 June	Panch Chuli II (6904m) via SW ridge – 2nd ascent	Muslim Contractor Monesh Devjani Pasang Bodh
8 June	Panch Chuli II (6904m) via W spur – 1st ascent	Chris Bonington Graham Little
20 June	Panchali Chuli (5220m) 1st ascent via Panchali glacier	Harish Kapadia Muslim Contractor Monesh Devjani Khubram Prakash Chand
20 June	Draupadi (5250m) 1st ascent via Panchali glacier	As above
20 June	Panch Chuli V (6437m) 1st ascent via S ridge	Dick Renshaw Stephen Sustad Victor Saunders Stephen Venables

Cols reached:

15 June	Bagarthora Col (3800m)	By entire team
20 June	Bainti Col (5100m) 1st ascent	Harish Kapadia Muslim Contractor Monesh Devjani Khubram Prakash Chand

