
Alpinism



Simon Pierse, *La Grivola*, 2006, watercolour, 72 x 53cm

MICK FOWLER

Vasuki Parbat

The Judgement Game

The cold was getting to be a concern. It was early on our fifth day on the face. Starting up a difficult pitch I took my mitt off to use an undercut for 20 seconds or so. On removing my fingers from the crack I was shocked to see a blister on my middle finger. I warmed it immediately but I swear it was a blister – a memorable, unwelcome and frightening new experience after more than 25 years climbing in the greater ranges. Stakes were rising in the judgement game.

It had all started about five years before when Harish Kapadia, extra helpful chap and acknowledged expert on everything to do with the Indian Himalaya, sent me a disturbing CD containing photos that he thought I might find ‘interesting’. One in particular caught my attention – an eye-catchingly steep face on with a single buttress line cleaving the centre. For some years the image lurked invasively in my subconscious and by 2007 it had found its way onto my screen saver where it provided a sufficiently regular reminder to prompt Paul Ramsden and I to organise an attempt for post-monsoon 2008.

It was nine years since my last trip to India and I had a niggling concern that the country’s much vaunted economic growth might have diluted the aspects of India that I have always found so attractive. I need not have feared. The Indian boardrooms might be stashed full of cash but the adhesive beard salesmen still paraded outside the Red Fort, the roads were still clogged with every method of transport imaginable, people still slept in the most remarkable places and the whole place still had a vibrant feeling of continuous activity and interest.

Much as I had previously managed to derive a degree of satisfaction from overcoming Indian bureaucratic challenges I was, perhaps naively, hoping that surging economic activity would have gone hand in hand with a reduction in the amount of red tape. That may or may not be true for India as a whole but I was soon to conclude that it is certainly not true as regards mountaineering in the recently created state of Uttarakhand – and in particular in the Gangotri region where Vasuki Parbat is situated. Once this was thought of as a bureaucratically straightforward area and it was possible to climb on a set of permits one could organise from one’s home country. Now though it is necessary to obtain permits from the local Uttarakhand government and Forestry Commission, register and pay a daily rate to the Gangotri national park authorities, stick to a rule that says no more than 150 people can enter the park each day and deposit a 10,000 rupees rubbish bond. All of these hurdles can be overcome but tend to sport

hidden catches to trip up the unwary.

Brejish, our Liaison Officer, was a Brahman with an endearing personality and a persuasive aura of confident authority. He proved a star at overcoming such difficulties. Banker's drafts were forced through at short notice, obstructive officials expertly overcome and rip-off merchants curtly dismissed. It was a credit to his efficiency that two days after leaving Delhi we were ready to leave the roadhead at Gangotri and the way seemed clear to base camp. What I regard as Key Stage 1 to any trip (overcoming bureaucracy) had been accomplished.

An hours walk beyond Gangotri a smart official with a side parting and fetching cardigan sat in a tin shack at the side of the track.

'Rubbish bond. 10,000 Rupees. Banker's draft only. And park fees.' Our paperwork clearly showed that we had already paid park fees but this was apparently irrelevant. But it was the rubbish bond that was the real sticking point. Mr Side Parting insisted that a banker's draft was necessary. The last bank was in Uttarkashi about six hours away. This didn't look good. Brejish battled firmly, exercising his mobile telephone (amazing where you get a signal nowadays) and harassing senior officials in various distant towns. And then for some delightfully inexplicable reason the problem disappeared as quickly as it has arisen, tea was offered, cash accepted and we were free to go on our way. In retrospect such encounters add to the Indian Himalayan experience. At the time though it is not always easy to see it that way.

Three days later we were approaching base camp and having our first good view of what we had come to climb. It didn't disappoint. Several buttresses soared up towards an overhanging headwall that appeared to be broken by a single possible line. The west face looked as impressive as it had in the photograph on Harish's CD. And it appeared that conditions were good – a plastering of snow and ice on the face but none on the approach to the base. Could this be too good to be true?

Forty-eight hours later only about 5cm of our tent poked out of the snow. Brejish dug a trench and stuck his head in.

'What are you going to do?' he asked, a twinge of concern audible in his voice.

Paul and I lay in our sleeping bags contemplating. It had been snowing for 36 hours and we had already delayed the start of our acclimatisation by a day. One day might not sound a lot but on a tight timescale it was pretty significant. We had allowed one week to get here, one week acclimatising, one week doing the route and one week getting home. On that time scale we had three days leeway. So one day lost was a cause for concern.

'Be fine tomorrow,' we chorused glumly.

Next morning the clouds had lifted just above base camp. Taking this as a sign that the weather might be clearing Prem Singh, our cook, prepared an inspirational bowl of hot milk on cornflakes and we waded off to acclimatise. Our plan was to follow the tried and trusted method of somehow getting up high and then just lying there reading and popping headache



2. The west face of Vasuki Parbat (6792m), Garhwal Himalaya, attempted by Mick Fowler and Paul Ramsden. (*Mick Fowler*)



3. Ramsden eyes conditions at Vasuki Parbat base camp. It will snow for another 24 hours. (*Mick Fowler*)



4. Fowler searches for a bivvi at the close of Day 3. *(Paul Ramsden)*

tabs for a couple of days. Brejish and Premsingh stood outside their tent and waved goodbye until we had disappeared. This took a ridiculously long time and their arms must have been exhausted by the time we dropped out of sight down onto the Vasuki glacier.

Here the conditions were such that it reminded me of the Arwa glacier, perhaps only 20 miles away in a straight line. There, back in 1999, the surface crust was such that Steve Sustad and I were reduced to crawling on all fours pulling our sacks behind us. Here there was no crust but wading was so exhausting we resorted to one person breaking trail without a sack, the other following with his sack on and, after half an hour or so, the first person returning to his sack and bringing up the rear. The roles would then be reversed. Progressing in this manner was ridiculously slow and amaz-



5. Mick Fowler in his element. Pushing the route on Day 4. (*Paul Ramsden*)

ingly exhausting. It took just over two days to reach the foot of the face at a paltry 5100m. Here we lay in our tent trying unsuccessfully to convince ourselves that the seriously heavy breathing necessary to get to this height might be better for acclimatising than lying still at our target altitude of 5800m. We tried to go higher but the snow stayed uniformly appalling such that we only managed one night at about 5200m. That would have to do.

Back at base camp the weather seemed to be changing. Up to now we had been too hot in our sleeping bags. Now though it was suddenly cold, base layers were worn and we woke to find water bottles in the tent had frozen solid.

'Be nice and cool at 6800m,' commented Paul cheerfully; he being a man with a well exercised urge to climb in sub-zero spots such as Antarctica and Patagonia in winter.

I prodded my frozen water bottle doubtfully, noted the heavy build up of hoar frost inside the tent and packed some extra long johns.

'Winter is here now,' announced Prem Singh helpfully whilst serving up yet more hot milk on soggy cornflakes.

And it certainly felt that way. The skies had cleared completely and the day had that cold, crisp feel reminiscent of the European Alps in fine winter weather.

Four days later we were below the steepest section and had cut a pleasingly level but narrow nose to tail ledge, hung the stove between us, put

some snow in to melt for a brew and snuggled down to some reading.

In a world where weight is so important it sometimes surprises me that we cut our toothbrushes in half but still carry superfluous weight in the form of reading material. I never used to do this but five days stuck in a tiny mountain tent with Victor Saunders on Spantik in Pakistan in 1987 was the turning point. It snowed incessantly and we left the tent only to go to the toilet. Even the normally garrulous Victor ran out of things to say. We just lay there in a mind-numbing silence except for the patter of snow against



6.
Fowler with the
'alarm call' rock.
Note the hole in the
tent.
(Paul Ramsden)

the tent. Eventually I didn't even bother to put my contact lenses in and just sat there in a blur. The experience left a marked impression on us both and since then I have always carried reading material to sustain morale through periods of inactivity.

From our bivouac the walls above looked disturbingly challenging compared to how they had appeared through binoculars. The snow and ice that we had hoped would provide enjoyable mixed climbing could now be seen to be stuck loosely to near-vertical rock or blasted up under overhangs. A snow/ice traverse line leading to a tenuous vertical line near the edge of the buttress looked to offer the best possibility but the first section of the traverse was devoid of ice and looked far from straightforward.

Normally we alternate leads with both the leader and the second climbing with their sacks on. That is the style of climbing we most enjoy and it generally flows smoothly. It gives us both the opportunity to enjoy the climbing and, equally importantly, have a good rest and admire the view at stances. Here though it didn't take long before our usual routine took a knock. Paul's first pitch turned out to be challenging to the extent that he was soon forced to abandon his sack. Sack hauling is the anathema of our

style of climbing, particularly on diagonal pitches. When it was my turn to climb, not only was I soon teetering badly in the face of a nasty pendulum but my efforts to control the sack were sadly lacking. In fact all I could do was unclip it and vaguely control its pendulum to where it promptly got stuck, after which Paul pulled as hard as he could while I pushed as hard as I could. Paul's sleeping mat parted company in the struggle and we were both exhausted by the time I reached the stance. I hate sack hauling.

Panting aside, the climbing position was now magnificent. Days away from anyone else; just the two of us half way up a huge unclimbed face with steep ground all around and wild drops below. Together we both savoured the position in between staring intensely at the little digital screens on our cameras and trying to zoom into our images of the face to pick out the best line up the technical ground ahead.

Out right still seemed best. The further right we traversed the more the ground fell away steeply below. Great squeaky white ice traverse pitches followed until a rock pinnacle on the crest provided a wild bivouac spot right on the edge of a huge overhanging wall forming the right side of the buttress. Although the pinnacle itself was vertical or overhanging on all sides its top had accumulated a knife-edge snow crest deep enough for us to simply chop the top off and pitch the tent. Inside it was easy to forget surroundings. We could have been on a grassy campsite; the only slight giveaway being the belay ropes snaking out of the entrance.

But much as I was cosy and slept soundly, the cold was becoming an issue. My feet had been intermittently numb during the day and although they looked pink and healthy when I peered at them in the evening I could feel the first stages of cold damage were present. Paul's feet too were cold, despite him wearing boots designed for much higher altitudes.

But it was the blistered finger incident first thing the next morning that really gave me food for thought. I'd only had the mitt off for seconds to use the undercut. I squawked about it to Paul who looked suitably subdued.

'My feet are cold,' he said forlornly. '8,000m rated boots too.'

From my point of view I was uncomfortably aware that I was already wearing my biggest mitts. I wondered whether it would be warmer to get two sets of inners into one shell but vaguely thought the extra tightness might have the wrong effect. And I concluded that this was not the place to experiment. I was going to have to make do with what I had and be careful. The pitch itself was fantastic; Scottish V right on the edge of a wildly exposed buttress and leading to an excellent small, flat belay ledge. But we could both increasingly feel that all was not well. The pitch had taken me 90 minutes to lead and we both knew we were slowing down and gasping (even) more than usual. My trademark 'rest the helmet against the ice' move was becoming more and more frequent. At that point though the elation of making upward progress in such a fantastic position was such that neither of us voiced any concerns.

It was difficult to pick out detail on the screens of our digital cameras but it seemed the best way ahead was to cross the rib to our left and traverse

a hidden ice band left for 50m or so. After that it looked possible to easily gain access to a snow/ice slope and the end of the section we felt would contain the most technically difficult climbing.

It was not long before we had to conclude that small camera screens are not the best for detailed route-finding decisions. Firstly the traverse proved a lot more challenging and time consuming than we had expected but the real shock came on the second traversing pitch when it became clear that the ground we had expected to lead easily to the snow/ice slope was, in reality, near-vertical rock with powdery snow stuck at a remarkably steep angle. Out to the left a much longer route, exposed to falling ice in the afternoon sun, looked a vague possibility but my immediate reaction on seeing what was ahead was that we should retreat along the traverse and try to climb a short rock buttress which looked to give an alternative route to the snow/ice slope.

The trouble was it was getting late in the day. By the time we had reversed the traverse it was time to be looking for somewhere to spend the night. And where we were there was no possibility beyond a hanging or, at best, a sitting bivouac. It was this that prompted our first major dither. Normally I would vote strongly for staying at our highpoint but here I knew we were tiring and the cold was giving increasing cause for concern. Two abseils below us was the pinnacle bivouac site where we knew we could pitch the tent and enjoy a sound night's sleep. Paul was keen to descend, have a good rest and return fresh to our highpoint the following morning. I dithered. We had two 7.5mm ropes and the idea of tying them together, abseiling on a single rope and then starting the next day with a long jumar back up was enough to prompt me to hesitate. Surely it would be best to stay where we were? But the sun was low in the sky and I could feel the cold biting hard already. Cutting a reasonable bum ledge might not be possible and would, at best, take a long time. The pinnacle bivvi platform was ready and waiting. We discussed, traversed a bit in search of a possible ledge, failed to find one, discussed more ... and decided to retreat to the pinnacle bivouac. As I was abseiling over the difficult ground that we had fought our way up that day the balance of probabilities about our success began to change in my mind.

There was little conversation in the tent but an unspoken acceptance that we were weakening. The conversation lacked sparkle and our reactions were slowing. Our dream was slipping but we couldn't yet bring ourselves to discuss turning back. We were determined to push on while we judged it was even vaguely sensible to do so.

The alarm bleeped at 4am but our sluggishness was such that it was 9am before we were back at our highpoint. The alternative line we had chosen looked as if it would be straightforward rock climbing at sea level. It was Paul's lead. He took one glove off, touched the rock for a few seconds, commented, 'No way', and put the glove back on again. Meanwhile I rested my helmet against the slope and worked to warm a finger that had gone an unpleasant pasty white colour.



7. High pitch... Bivvi for nights 4 and 5. (*Mick Fowler*)



8. Paul Ramsden on the west face of Vasuki Parbat, Day 4. (*Mick Fowler*)



9. Fowler on Day 5. Scottish V, fantastic climbing, numbing cold. *(Paul Ramsden)*

We always work on the basis that one should continue unless there is no sensible alternative. That leaves plenty of scope for debate about what is 'sensible' but here, even our increasingly befuddled brains recognised that our problems were not going to decrease as we got higher. Try as we might to convince ourselves otherwise, we had to accept that if we tried to go higher the air wasn't going to contain any more oxygen, we weren't going to move any faster and it wasn't going to get any warmer. Frankly, it was clear that we were on the verge of taking on more risk than either of us was prepared to take. It was Paul who spoke first:

'What do you expect to happen if we get over this rock pitch?' he asked. We looked at each other and the decision was made.

Sometimes the mountain wins.

As if confirmation were needed, it was delivered in the form of a hurtling rock as we spent our sixth face night, bivouacked on the ledge we had cut for night two on the way up. A nasty hole in the tent and the disintegration of our hanging stove was not the most relaxing way to start the day. The message was clear. It was time to go home.

Summary: An account of an attempt by Mick Fowler and Paul Ramsden to make the first ascent of the west face of Vasuki Parbat (6792m), Garhwal Himalaya, India, September/October 2008.

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