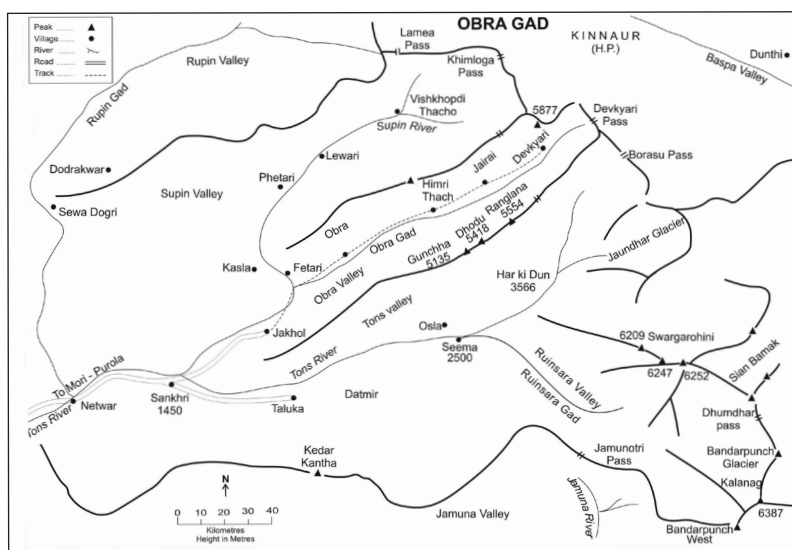


DEREK BUCKLE & MARTIN SCOTT

Temples and Mountains¹

Climbing in the Garhwal Himalaya

Our destination was the Obra valley, a remote region of the Garhwal Himalaya characterised by a blend of steep granite walls and magnificent glaciated peaks rising to almost 6000m in height. It looked as though there was something here for everybody, but we had our eyes set on the rugged mountains that formed a broad cirque at the head of the glacier enclosing the upper reaches of the valley. With typical armchair enthusiasm we had greedily identified the highest of these peaks (5930m and 5760m) as our primary objectives.



10. Obra Gad valley, Garhwal Himalaya, by kind permission of Harish Kapadia.

It transpired that this is the spectacularly beautiful grazing ground of Devkyari, an area almost unvisited and unknown except by a few shepherds and the local inhabitants of Jakhol who every 10 years make a pilgrimage here. This is the supposed birthplace of their village deity, Lord Someshwara Mahadev – the lord of *devas* (gods) and *pitars* (forefathers) and the provider of fearlessness. On account of this, there are regularly spaced *thaches*, or shrines, along the valley that culminate at the deity's birth place in a holy cave just short of the current terminal moraine. From here onwards frequent square-cut prayer stones lead towards the glacial



11. Looking south from Camp 2 over the Devkir glacier to Ranglana.
(Buckle & Scott coll.)



12. Prospecting the Devkir icefall, Peak 5760m behind. *(Buckle & Scott coll.)*



13. Sherpas Dawa and Dorje traversing under Devkir icefall, Peak 5760 behind. (*Buckle & Scott coll.*)

snout and a less obvious thach that is said to exist close to the glacier itself.

We had originally planned to return to the Nyenchen Tanglha range in Tibet in order to attempt some unclimbed mountains that we had seen from the summit of Beu-tse, a 6270m peak in the neighbourhood of Yangpachen to the northwest of Lhasa². Sadly, a combination of world politics and the impending Beijing Olympics meant that permission was not forthcoming.

Fortunately, during an earlier visit to India during the spring³, Martin had met with Harish Kapadia, an authority on the Indian Himalaya. It was his recommendation that we should visit the Obra valley, which he had visited in 2006 with Suman Dubey⁴⁻⁷. Their expedition had explored the middle valley in the region of the Jairai Rocks where they had unsuccessfully attempted the impressive Ranglana (5554m). They did, however, succeed on a nearby peak, Dhodu Ka Guncha (5130m)⁵.

So, after flying to Delhi, we boarded the Shatabdi Express to Dehra Dun. Then, after a night in the hill town of Mussoorie, we travelled in a 4x4, driving north towards the Garhwal Himalaya. Gradually the roads became narrower and bumpier until finally giving out at the village of Jakhol where we met our porters. It was immediately clear that any anticipated cathartic experience would be spoilt, at least on the walk-in, by the inclusion of numerous porters, morning tea in bed and other luxuries; conditions quite unknown on our earlier Tibetan expeditions.

We then had a beautiful three-day walk-in up the valley. Initially the scenery was almost Swiss-like with deep pine-clad valleys and distant

peaks protruding high above the tree line. Further up we passed the very tempting granite slabs of the Jairai Rocks before reaching large, ancient terminal moraines. Finally the valley opened out to an extensive grassy plateau large enough to land a largish aircraft. It was here, at 4055m close to the Himri Thach temple, that we made our base camp.

Exploration of the Upper Obra valley

There was simply too much choice. Base camp, at a little over 1km from the snout of the Devkir Glacier, was surrounded by impressive, unclimbed peaks, all between 5000 and 6000m high. Moreover, we had not yet seen our primary objective, which formed part of the cirque at the head of the main glacier. It would have been all too easy to get sidetracked into attempting one of the many mountains that we could see. Nursing mild altitude headaches, and the customary lethargy associated with initial sojourns above 4000m, we temporarily suspended our ambitions to settle for a little local exploration.



14. Sherpa Dawa on the Devkir icefall.
(Buckle & Scott coll.)

First we embarked on short forays up both the terminal moraine and then a side valley to the north in the hope of gaining a better perspective of our surroundings. Both afforded superb views of the north faces of Ranglana and Dhodu, but neither allowed sight of the upper glacial cirque. From the side valley the dominant glaciated Peak 5877m to the north-east of base camp was clearly visible.

From Camp 1 near the prominent 2km long left lateral moraine of the Devkir glacier it was possible to reach Camp 2 at the foot of the icefall and explore the obvious col almost due east across the glacier. We had hoped to attempt the peak to the right of this col, but after lengthy and strenuous post-holing culminating in bottomless snow our enthusiasm for this was rather diminished. Despite encroaching mist, this col did give extensive views into the steep-sided Maninda valley, which provides access to the valleys north of the Borasu Pass.

Steep and often overhanging sugar ice separated by deep crevasses prevented a direct route through the main Devkir icefall but it was possible to traverse rightwards into a prominent couloir that led steeply to a broad plateau at the head of the glacier. It was from here at Camp 3 that we had hoped to attempt our primary objectives. A quick survey of its icy south-east buttress was sufficient to eliminate Peak 5930m from our plans, but the fine, corniced western arête leading to Peak 5760m looked well within our



15. Toto Gronlund, Martin Scott and Bill Thurston ascending the couloir, bypassing the icefall en route to Camp 3. (*Buckle & Scott coll.*)

capabilities. Unfortunately, by the time that we were fully established at Camp 3 and in a position to attempt this peak the weather had deteriorated to zero visibility. Unconsolidated snow added to the difficulties and our attempt was short-lived. After spending an unpleasant night of wind-driven snow in whiteout conditions at Camp 3 we unanimously decided to retreat to base camp.

Back at base camp we looked around for an alternative peak that we could attempt in the limited time that was now left to us. The obvious choice was Peak 5165m that we believed was accessible via a side valley leading northwards from the camp. Following the steep valley bed we eventually emerged onto a snow-plastered rocky plateau that traversed upwards to an obvious col overlooking the Supin valley. From here a narrow south-westerly ridge led easily (Alpine PD) to the final mixed arête over which we scrambled to the rocky summit; there were lammergeiers circling and so it seemed appropriate to name it Lammergeier Peak. A magnificent panorama greeted us. Apart from the obvious Ranglana and Dhodu group above case camp, and the nearby peaks 5877m and 5489m, a particularly impressive 5889m mountain was visible to the north of the Supin valley. There are no recorded ascents of any of these mountains and the opportunities are endless.

With our time in the Obra valley nearing its end we returned to base camp to prepare for a three-day trek back to civilisation and then the Mus-



16. Toto Gronlund on the summit ridge of Lammergeier Peak (5165m) looking WSW to Peak 5405m. (Buckle & Scott coll.)

soorie express back to the fleshpots of Delhi.

Summary: In late September to the end of October 2008 Derek Buckle, Toto Gronlund, Martin Scott and Bill Thurston travelled to Jakhol in the Garhwal Himalaya where they trekked for three days up the Obra valley. From a base camp at 4055m they attempted Peak 5760m at the head of the Devkir cirque but were defeated by poor weather and conditions underfoot. Returning to base camp, Toto and Derek successfully climbed Peak 5165m overlooking the Supin valley at Alpine PD.

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