

TIRSULI WEST 7035m

EXPEDITION REPORT

*An exploration of the Bagini Glacier area
and attempt on Tirsuli West during
May and June 1995*



*Julie-Ann Clyma on summit of Snow Dome (5820m).
Tirsuli W (7035m) on right. Pk 6635m on left.*

1995 TIRSULI WEST EXPEDITION

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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SUMMARY

An exploratory expedition to the Bagini glacier and an attempt by two climbers on the unclimbed NW ridge of Tirsuli West (7035m). Ascents of virgin peaks up to 6300m were achieved and a large amount of reconnaissance in this little explored area was undertaken, with an updated map drawn and further mountaineering objectives identified.

INTRODUCTION

While climbing on Nanda Devi East in 1994 from the Milam Valley, we were struck by the imposing presence of a large massif at the head of the Milam Glacier. Our map showed three summits over 7000m high, linked by a large central plateau, with a complex barrier of ridges, walls and glaciers guarding access to the tops. This was the Tirsuli group (the trident of Lord Shiva), with Hardeol (Tirsuli S) at 7151m the highest, Tirsuli (East or main summit) 7074m and Tirsuli W 7035m.

A review of the history of exploration of these peaks showed that there had been few visitors spread over many years, and with very limited success. By 1938 the Milam Valley had been fully surveyed, but no mountaineering party had reconnoitred these summits. In 1939 however, after their success on Nanda Devi East, the Poles made their way to this group to make an exploration. This foray was to end in tragedy, with 2 climbers killed by avalanche while approaching from the east under the slopes of Chalab and Kholi. After this time, with the advent of the second world war and the independence of the Indian sub-continent in 1946, the area was closed to all foreigners.

It was not until 1964 that an Indian expedition led by M S Kohli made the next attempt on Hardeol from the Milam side. They were defeated by bad weather conditions and acute avalanche danger as was another Indian expedition the following year. Finally in 1966 a strong Indian-Sherpa team under the leadership of C K Mitra reached the summit of Tirsuli Main on October 8. Eight years passed before Hardeol was attempted again in 1974 when a joint Indian-NZ women's team set off via the Milam valley. This expedition was also to end in tragedy with 4 lives lost in an avalanche. Taking a new approach, in 1975 an Indian expedition under the leadership of S P Mulasi attempted Hardeol from the West via the Bagini glacier. This was unsuccessful due to heavy falls of snow, avalanche danger and difficult terrain. However, returning to the Milam side in 1978, Mulasi and his team reached the summit of Hardeol on 31 May.

Two summits of the trident had been climbed, but it appeared from our research that the third, Tirsuli W remained a virgin summit. Attempting this mountain with a two-person, alpine-style approach seemed a challenging objective.

Having decided on an objective, the first difficulty was finding more information on this neglected peak. We were able to obtain copies from the Himalayan Journal of expedition accounts by the Indians, which gave approach details and old photographs of both the Milam and Bagini Glacier side. Reading details of the

avalanche prone slopes on the Milam side, and finding some intriguing pictures of the SW face of Tirsuli W from the Bagini side, we decide to make our approach from the west.

TIME CHART

May and June 1995

- 15 Depart Manchester pm
- 16 Arrive New Delhi am
- 17 Delhi: waiting for IMF permit
- 18 Delhi: waiting for IMF permit
- 19 Delhi: permit granted, shopping for food, hire of taxi
- 20 Delhi - Bowhali
- 21 Bowhali - Joshimath
- 22 Joshimath: visit sub district magistrate for restricted area permit, shopping for food
- 23 Joshimath - Gopeshwar - Joshimath: visit district magistrate for restricted area permit
- 24 Joshimath: visit sub district magistrate for permit. Forestry department for permit.
- 25 Joshimath - Jumma - Dunagiri: bus to Jumma. Army checkpoint. Walk to Dunagiri.
- 26 Dunagiri: porter strike, carry own loads up to Bagini glacier
- 27 Dunagiri - Base Camp: hire of new porters, all of expedition to base camp
- 28 BC - 5120m Bagini Glacier reconnaissance
- 29 BC - 4800m Silent Valley reconnaissance
- 30 BC - 4820m Bagini Glacier, camp overnight
- 31 4820m camp - summit of Dome Peak 5820m, back to camp
- 01 4820m camp - 5450m Bagini GI reconnaissance. Move camp to ABC 5150m
- 02 ABC 5150m to BC
- 03 BC - 5010m Icicle Valley reconnaissance
- 04 BC - 5030m Pikka Valley reconnaissance
- 05 rest day
- 06 rest day
- 07 illness
- 08 illness
- 09 BC - ABC
- 10 ABC - 5860m
- 11 5860m - recce to pk 6150m - return to 5860m
- 12 5860m - The Notch 6300m - return to 5860m
- 13 5860m - traverse of ridge back to Dome Pk and descent to BC
- 14 BC: dry equipment and re-pack
- 15 BC - 5325m Pikka Valley
- 16 5325m - BC
- 17 BC - Dunagiri Village
- 18 Dunagiri - Jumma - Joshimath - Karnaprayag - Srinigar
- 19 Srinigar - Rishikesh - Haridwar - Delhi
- 20 Delhi: IMF debriefing. Depart pm
- 21 Arrive Manchester am.

NEW DELHI

The expedition arrived in Delhi on the morning of Tuesday 16 May 1995. Unfortunately, due to complications with Tirsuli W being near the 'restricted area' close to the border between India and Tibet, we were obliged to travel out to India without having received the required peak permit. We understood that we were taking a great risk in doing this, as there was no guarantee that the permission would be granted by the Indian Home Ministry at all, but having booked flights and prepared equipment and food it seemed better to continue in hope, rather than cancel the expedition outright at very short notice. To our great good fortune, after a wait of 3 days in Delhi (with strong support from friends at the IMF) our permit for the peak came through. After this tense start it seemed that all would be well as we set off on our two day car journey to the mountains, this time via the hill town of Bowhali to the pilgrim destination of Joshimath in the Garwhal. Unfortunately we were soon to discover that permission from the national government via the IMF was not sufficient for the authorities in the civil service in Uttar Pradesh.

JOSHIMATH

On our arrival in Joshimath, our liaison officer went the following day to see the local Sub-District Magistrate. He was not available. On the second day we arranged a meeting to clear our progress, only to find that he could not (or would not) authorise our access as he considered we were travelling into the 'restricted area' and this would require authorisation from a superior. This meant that we had to travel half a day back down the highway to Gopeshwar to see the District Magistrate. Fortunately he was most obliging and by dark we were back in Joshimath. The third day required another meeting with the SDM who eventually after a long, drawn out meeting, signed our papers. However, it was made clear that as Delhi had not notified Lucknow in enough time about our presence in the area, we could not have a camera permit (which would take around 2 months to process) and therefore we would not be allowed to take any pictures. Further, we were to hand over any maps, or map-making materials to our LO. We then visited the Forestry Department to ensure that our approach did not intrude into the boundaries of the Nanda Devi Sanctuary, and were given clearance by them. Our final obstacle was to be a military checkpoint at Jumma, the last village before we started the walk-in.

At the same time that the permit problem was being resolved, we were also trying to hire a cook and porters. While in Pakistan we have always hired our own local staff, in India there is a great deal of resistance to this. Despite lengthy discussion with our LO and local agents over this, we eventually had to compromise and our hotelier sent out a message among his contacts that we required help. Within a couple of hours we had 15 Nepali porters and 1 cook. We were somewhat puzzled to find Nepalis working from Joshimath, but we were told that they were better workers than the locals and so we went ahead with the agreement. Everything was set for our departure, when on the last meeting with the SDM he informed us that Nepalis could not go to base camp, because they were foreigners and did not have permits. We would have to dismiss them and hire local people. On top of all the other delay and confusion, this very frustrating. We slept the last night in

Joshimath without porters or a cook, but with an assurance from another agent that he would arrange men at the roadhead the following day. Highly sceptical by this stage that anything would turn out to be as was promised, we awaited the morning.

This fraught start could not have contrasted more with the relaxed approach to Nanda Devi East via the Milam Valley. There is clearly a significant problem in communication between national and state government about where the 'restricted area' borders have been moved to, and a great deal of debate between forestry and other bodies about access into or up to the Sanctuary. The climber is caught helplessly between the parties with the outcome depending a good deal on luck and an adept liaison officer.

APPROACH TO BASE CAMP

We finally caught the local bus from Joshimath to Jumma and started the walk-in on 25 May. While the army checkpoint went by without a challenge, as anticipated, our worries were not yet behind us. The local agent who had said he would arrange 15 porters to meet us at the road head could not find enough men. After some discussion it was agreed that we would set off with the eight most important loads, and he would follow on later in the day with 7 porters and the other loads. With great misgivings, but little choice we set off to Dunagiri Village. The 4 hour walk through pine groves, jasmine and other exotic forest was a balm to the shattered psyche, and our arrival in Dunagiri met with a warm welcome. To add to our upbeat feelings, the other loads did eventually appear. We settled in for a relaxed afternoon distracted by the children who gathered around to engage us in talk and play. A pleasant day then began to deteriorate as darkness fell and rumblings were heard from the porter camp. It transpired that having agreed a set number of stages and pay in the valley, they had now decided that they wanted twice the agreed sum. We discussed and argued for hours, assuring them that if the distance was further or the terrain more difficult than the easy walk we had already undertaken we would of course pay extra, but stating that until we reached base camp the agreement must remain as it stood. This line ended with them then demanding three times the agreed sum (the most unusual bargaining strategy we have ever come across) and communication broke down completely. By 6am the following morning we were desperately anxious to get going, but the impasse remained. Finally, with little option left, we dismissed them all and set off to carry the loads to base camp ourselves. This rather took everyone by surprise, and there was a bemused huddle as we strode out of the village steaming with frustration and carrying 25kg loads.

Despite the heavy loads, it was a delight to walk through flowering rhododendron forest and then alpine like terrain to dump our equipment 6 hot hours later. We returned to Dunagiri village to find the original porters gone, but a new line-up of local men who agreed to carry the remaining loads for us, for a reasonable sum. The expedition was almost there. The following day the Dunagiri men took us past our first stop, following much easier terrain, to a beautiful site on meadows at around 4510m. In sight were a range of stunning, difficult peaks, some only marked as spot heights on the map and others not marked at all.

RECONNAISSANCE

Our first foray was to travel further into the upper reaches of the Bagini Glacier to try and find a good route to our mountain and spy out possible lines on it. We spent a full day reaching 5200m and were rewarded with views of the three summits of Tirsuli and the surrounding peaks. At first impression it seemed that the spur we had anticipated attempting from the old pictures, was out of the question. A huge serac straddled the spur, and any attempt would require spending at least one day directly beneath it (Roger immediately named it the Bachelor Route - it being no place for a married man!). Instead we were struck by the possibility of the very attractive NW ridge, which started from a subsidiary summit which was difficult to identify from the map. From our vantage point it was not possible to see how this subsidiary summit and the connecting ridge might be gained, so for our next exploration we decided to look at the valleys on the other side.

None of the valleys which opened onto the Bagini Barak and our base camp area were named on the map, nor did local people have names for them, therefore we allocated names on the main features we encountered. The first valley to be explored was the 'silent valley', devoid of any of the bird song so prevalent at base camp and with peak 6635m at its head. It was very difficult to equate what we could see on the ground, with the detail on the map, therefore as our next objective we decided to climb a nearby peak to try and get a better view of the surrounding terrain.

Over the next two days we move up into a camp on the Bagini Glacier at 4820m and then climbed 'Snow Dome' (5820m). From the summit we could see a snowy ridge with two unmarked summits which eventually terminated at peak 6635m. This in turn appeared to mark the lower end of the NW ridge of Tirsuli W. It was clear that in order to climb Tirsuli W we were going to have to climb over at least one other peak, if not more.

From our vantage point we could also see a ramp line of seracs tucked under the S face which looked as if it might offer a shorter way up to peak 6635m. In order to look at this line the next day we continued up into the Bagini Glacier, travelling right to its head at c5450m. While the initial part of the approach looked promising, once at the top of the serac band, it seemed it would be necessary to traverse a final 300m section of ridge up to the summit of 6635m which looked extremely steep and friable, and which was broken spectacularly by a very deep notch. Keeping this in mind we moved back down to our camp at 4820m and then relocated it for a potential 'advance base camp' to 5150m beside a small lake at the edge of the snow line. We then descended to base camp and returned to an exploration of other valleys to see if we might find a more straight forward way over the summit of 6635m.

An exploration of the 'icicle valley' showed that there was a Col which would give access to the NW ridge of 6635m, but the slopes beneath this were a jumble of icicle fringed seracs and stone strafed buttresses. Moving further NW again we

went up into 'pikka valley' to see if we could find a way onto peak 6267m and then do a traverse over 6635m. This seemed to have some potential, but again we could not see the detail of the descent from 6267m to the next col. Looking at the long distance involved and not having seen all of the terrain, we decided then that our first attempt on Tirsuli W must be from the Bagini Glacier via the serac ramp despite our reservations about being stopped by the notch in the ridge.

SUMMIT ATTEMPT

After a few days lost through illness and a knee injury we then spent 5 days on our first summit attempt.

On the 9th June we moved from base camp up to the lake and advance base camp site. It is worth noting that the weather throughout most of the expedition, from the day we arrived until the end of our first summit attempt, was incredibly stable. Each day was calm and sunny, but one disadvantage was the intense heat, which caused a rapid stripping of snow from the surrounding peaks, quickly putting a number of lines out of condition in a short space of time.

On the 10th June we woke at 3am and set about preparing for our first day on the hill. By 5am we had packed up the tent and set off to traverse the slopes beneath Snow Dome in order to reach the top of the Bagini Glacier and the start of our serac ramp. We reached this point at 8am and then traversed onto the start of the ramp, which in its early part was in fact a diabolically loose rock ridge. We picked our way carefully up the flank of this and then followed the ridge, moving from side to side to avoid major obstacles. It was with some relief that we reached a flat platform around mid-day at the point where the rock gave way to snow slopes above. We stopped for an hour to melt water and have plenty to drink as the heat was intense, and then set off again to try and reach a shelf we had seen on our earlier explorations. Gradually steepening ground led to a couple of icy pitches, then a short section traversing above the lip of the biggest ice cliffs and we reached our 'shelf' at 5860m. This provided an excellent camp site and we soon had the tent up and a brew on. For the first time since arriving at base camp, we then had a brief snow flurry, but this cleared to leave a glorious evening. We could see parts of the route ahead, which looked as if it might be quite interesting - our concerns were mainly centred around whether the snow ramp would provide a continuous line up to ridge leading to Pk 6635m, or whether we would find ourselves perched over one of the ice cliffs and unable to go on.

The following day we set our alarm for 4.30am hoping for a cool, early morning start, but we were tired from the previous days efforts and slept on until 7am. We did not get the tent packed up and ready to go until 9am. Initially gentle slopes gradually steepened and we were required to climb two pitches on hard ice covered in bizarre 'penitentes' which collapsed and avalanched down the slope in a most disconcerting fashion. These pitches took us to the top of another set of ice cliffs which we traversed, and once again found a small level platform beneath the next step in the ramp at 6000m. It was mid-day and extremely hot by this point, so we stopped for lunch and then decided to dump our gear and continue up the ridge

unladen in order to check out the route ahead for the following day. We now had to follow an elegant snow crest to the top of one of the subsidiary summits we had seen from base camp, but which were not marked on our map. Unfortunately as we reached the top of this at around 6150m, the cloud rolled in and we could not see any further ahead. It now being 2.30pm we headed back to the tent for dinner. Once again, by 6pm it was snowing and this lasted intermittently throughout the night.

On the morning of the 12th we set off with clear skies, knowing that we should reach the notch and confirm whether we had any hope of trying for the summit of Tirsuli W or not. We packed up the tent once more and set off at 8am. Following at first in our tracks of the previous day we made fast progress and could enjoy the panorama around us. From the subsidiary summit of 6150m we had to traverse around the back of another set of ice cliffs and then we were finally on the ridge leading up to Pk 6635m and able to look down into the valleys we had been exploring earlier and also to base camp. The drop from the ridge to the valley floor below was extremely steep and it was clear that there were very few options available for climbing Tirsuli W. Apart from the route we were on, the only other possible option we could see, was to cross over Pk 6267m. The descent from this to climb up to Pk 6635m was along a sharp, broken rock ridge. While this looked as though it would be time consuming, at least it did look feasible, and after that it was straightforward snow slopes to Pk 6635m. From Pk 6635m the ascent to Tirsuli W looked very appealing, similar to the S ridge of Nanda Devi East, with a narrow snow arete broken by technical gendarmes, and the difficulties easing closer to the summit.

However, our current problem was to continue along the S ridge of Pk 6635m and see if we could overcome the difficulties ahead. In order to speed our progress we dumped our sacs and climbed the next section unladen. The climbing was spectacular due to the exposure, but generally very good on firm neve and ice. However, once we reached the notch at 6300m, as feared, our progress came to a standstill. From the gendarme on our side we had hoped it would be possible to abseil into the notch and climb out onto the gendarmes on the other side. What we could see however, were great piles of tottering blocks and gravel. The initial descent on steep, loose rock and sand was so precarious that without fixed rope we could not hope to descend and then get back out after a summit attempt.

It seemed that for this route to go, it would require a concentrated effort, with a lot of fixed rope being required to cross the notch and protect the ridge up to the summit of 6635m. This assumed that the quality of the rock we could see might improve from what was directly beneath us, and this was a questionable assumption. There was a clear change from one side of the Bagini Glacier to another, from the sound granite of Kalanka and Changabang, to the soft, sedimentary rock of the Tirsuli group. Very disappointed at feeling that our route was so near, yet so still far, we turned back to collect our loads and descended to our camp of the previous night.

Now we had little option but to descend back to base camp. However, rather than simply reversing our route down the serac ramp, we decided to descend via a different route, and did a long traverse over subsidiary summits back to the Snow

Dome. The climbing required a great deal of concentration, traversing along the knife-edge snow ridge with sections of loose rock towers, but the view out over the surrounding peaks and glaciers was spectacular, and highlighted the potential for further exploration.

Having lost a week of climbing time due to the bureaucratic delays, our remaining 3 weeks was rapidly drawing to a close. We decided on one last, very optimistic summit attempt, going into the 'pikka valley', trying to gain a Col we could see marked on the map and then crossing peaks 6267m and 6635m from this side in order to reach our objective of Tirsuli W. Despite the very long distance involved, we hoped that with good weather and our improved acclimatisation we might be able to go fast enough to make a reasonable attempt and still get back to Delhi in time for our flight. After just one day at base camp to dry our gear and repack, we headed off. On the 15th June we climbed up into the Pikka Valley and placed a camp at 5325m high underneath the summit slopes of pk 6267m and we hoped, in sight of the col. Arriving in thick cloud, we could not see any detail until waking at midnight under a full moon, our position became clear.

Once again the map proved to be inaccurate, and the Col we anticipated being beneath, was in fact further to the W at the head of a lower valley and barred to us by seracs and a rock wall. We slept on until morning and then debated what to do. Both of us were feeling tired from our previous summit attempt and energy levels were low. Reluctant to finish the expedition, but really knowing inside that we were done, we spent the next couple of hours looking about and dissecting our position until eventually we started heading back to base. As we descended, the true depth of our tiredness became apparent. Our arrival at base camp was a great relief, and the same afternoon our liaison officer descended to Dunagiri to bring back our porters for the walk-out.

RETURN TO DELHI

The next 3 days produced a marathon travelling event. On the 17th June we descended to Dunagiri village, then on the 18th continued on foot down to Jumma. From there we caught the local bus back to Joshimath, stopped for lunch, then caught another bus to Karnaprayag. Still keen to keep moving, we managed to find a jeep driver who would take us to Srinagar. We arrived around 9pm in the dark, with electrical storms causing sudden downpours and blackouts throughout the town. The following morning we were up at 5am and found a taxi to take us to Haridwar. Unfortunately this broke down halfway, and we then hitched a ride in one of the huge, brightly painted trucks which rumbled up and down the highway. A final transfer to a 'luxury' bus and we were on the last leg into Delhi, arriving at 4pm on the 19th. We were able to complete our debriefing at the IMF the following day and flew out of Delhi that night to arrive back in Manchester on the 21st June.

CONCLUSIONS

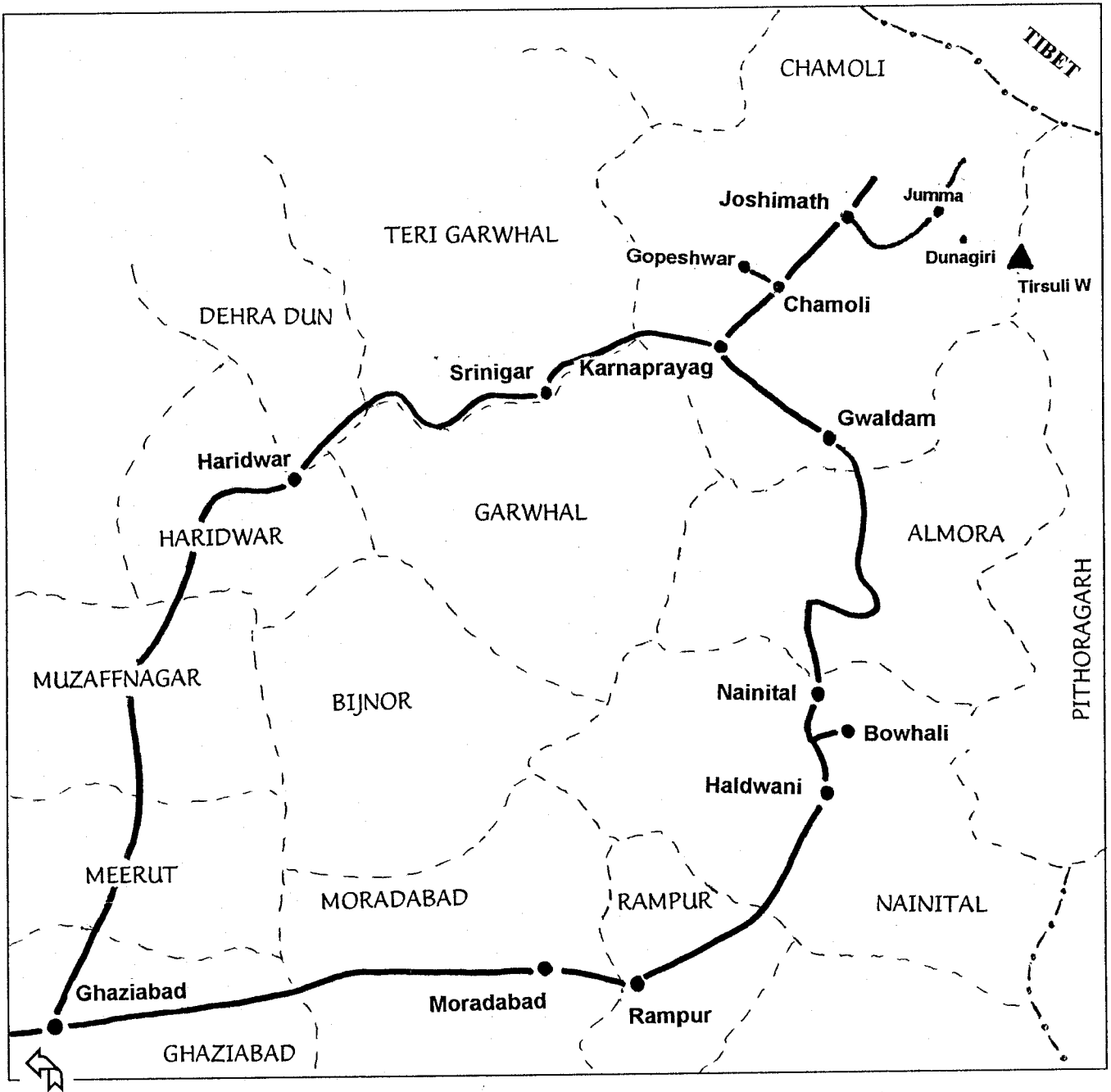
This expedition could not sum up better, the joys and the frustrations of climbing in India. It is very exciting to see the move to open new areas which offer great

potential for those who want to get away from the more travelled regions. Unfortunately, finding one's way through the maze of bureaucracy and paperwork can seem impossible, and new obstacles may appear when least expected. How one is supposed to anticipate these problems and who one should contact for advice is a dilemma. The understanding of regulations in the mountain areas can be very different to that of the ministries in Delhi. While the great new potential for climbing being offered in India is attractive, the means of getting there requires persistence, thorough research and a good measure of luck.

Despite our disappointment at not having reached the top of our main objective, with hindsight, we could see how optimistic it was to expect to do this, when so much exploration was required simply to find a way to the mountain itself. The area we visited has great potential for further exploration and the climbing of a number of summits, from snowy peaks to granite towers at all grades of difficulty. In terms of natural beauty, this is an outstanding place, with forests of pine and beech, stands of rhododendron, extensive flower-filled 'alpine' pastures, a multitude of birds and other wild-life. It was a great pleasure to arrive at a base camp which was unspoilt by the rubbish of any previous expedition. Of great priority to any mountaineer who is granted permission into these newly opened areas, must be to endeavour to maintain them in their pristine state.

APPENDIX ONE

MAP 1: Uttar Pradesh and Districts Route taken by expedition



To Delhi
(20kms)

APPENDIX TWO

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High Asia, Jill Neate

Peaks and Passes of the Garhwal Himalaya, Jan Babicz

Maps (available from Stamfords Book Shop, London):

Garhwal-Himalaya-Ost 1: 150,000
(Herausgegeben von der Schweizerischen Stiftung für alpine Forschungen.
Bearbeiter nach den Kartengrundlagen des Survey of India von Dipl. Ing.
Ernst Huber.)

Indian Himalaya Maps, Sheet 8, Kumaon & Garhwal 1:200,000
Pindari Glacier, Badrinath & Nanda Devi Area
(Leomann Maps)

APPENDIX THREE

EXPEDITION ACCOUNTS

UK Expenditure

Insurance	308
Airfares	964
Visas	46
Equipment	482
Medical	45
Food	105
Admin	122
Film and processing	387
Transport (taxi, train)	69

Sub total £2527

India Expenditure (£1 = Rs/- 49)

Peak fee (US\$2250)	1415
Food & Fuel	178
Kitchen equipment	94
HA Gas	34
Transport	231
Food and accommodation	277
Porters	237
Admin	24

Sub total £2490

TOTAL £5017

Income

BMC grant	1000
MEF grant	1000
Member contributions	3017

TOTAL £5017

BALANCE 0000

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