

Parbati South, 1973

Rob Collister (John Cardy, Geoff Cohen, Dick Isherwood)

Genesis

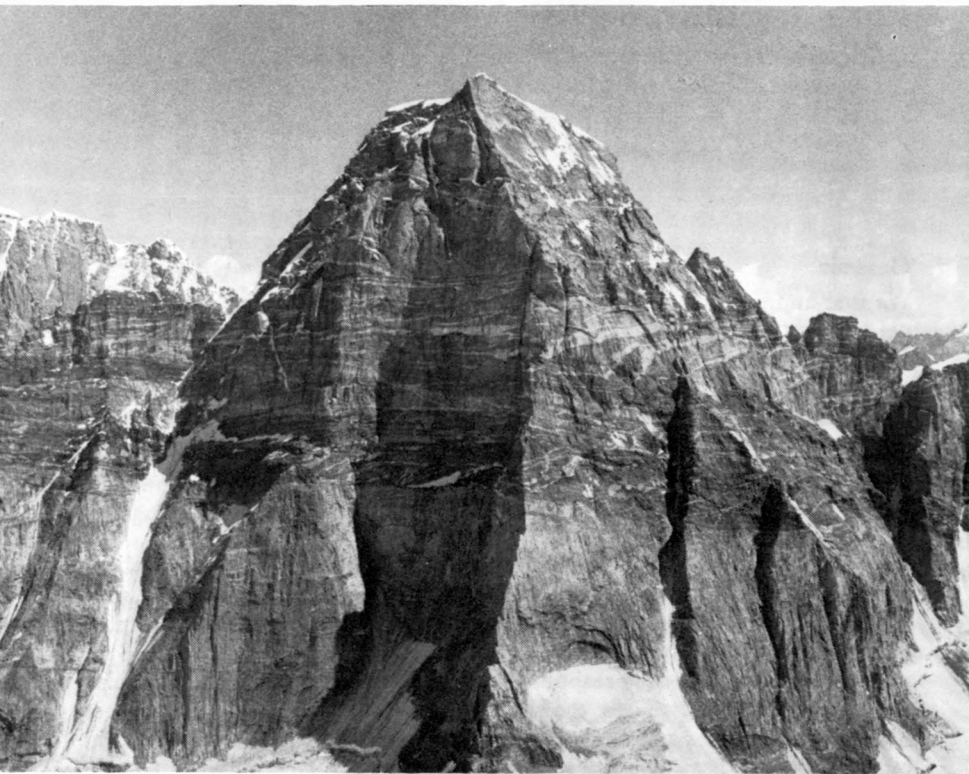
We first approached the Government of India in August 1972, applying for permission to attempt Brammah II in the Kishtwar area of Kashmir. In April 1973, we heard unofficially that our application had been approved by two of the three relevant ministries, and that the third was a mere formality. Two weeks later we were informed that our application had been turned down. This abrupt *volte-face* only became comprehensible some months later when we heard of Chris Bonington's and Nick Estcourt's successful ascent of Brammah. We had no friends in high places. Clearly, they did.

However, the Indian Mountaineering Foundation, through whom all applications have to be made, declared that they could arrange for us to climb in Lahul and gave us a list of suitable unclimbed peaks. Our researches proved that most of them had, in fact, been climbed, but in the end we settled for Point 6108 m, north of Chamba, and duly reapplied. Two months later, this application also was turned down. Obviously the assurances of the IMF are so many sweet nothings. In this context it should be added that what information we did receive from the IMF was solely thanks to a friend in Delhi. The letters we received in England were perfunctory and totally unhelpful. For a small party without influence or unable to combine with Indian climbers, there seems at present little chance of obtaining permission to visit any of the more interesting climbing areas of India.

By now our air tickets had been bought and despondently we began to look for something to climb in Kulu, the only unrestricted mountain area in India, and as a result, the most comprehensively worked out. Or so it seemed. Then our attention was drawn to an excellent article by Charles Ainger in *HJ* 30 on the South Parbati region, which had escaped notice during the hectic exploration of the bigger mountains farther north. In particular, there were some impressive photos of the unclimbed Point 6127 m. It looked a worthy objective and our spirits rose. They sank yet again when Rob paid a visit to Kulu in August and discovered that the Parbati valley was involved in a hydro-electric project and had been declared a restricted area. Indians may obtain permission to visit it from the District Magistrate, Kulu; foreigners must apply to Delhi, which can mean only one thing. Nevertheless, as a forlorn hope, an application was made to the Home Ministry. Three months later a reply still had not been received, but by then we had long since climbed the mountain.

Approach

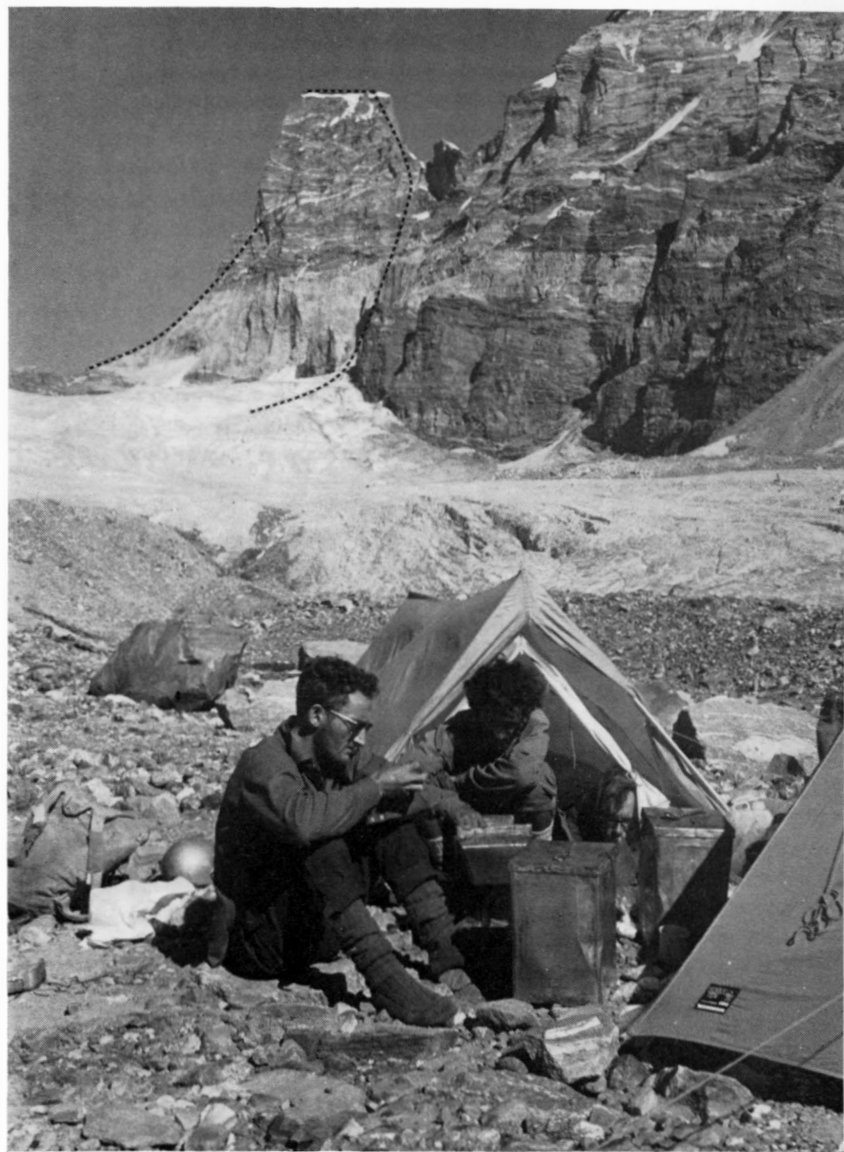
With entry to the Parbati valley guarded by a police check-post, the only hope of approaching Point 6127 m was the Sainj nal to the south. The pundits in Manali could tell us nothing about it; nobody had been there and the tendency



47 *Parbati South from Ridge Peak* This and next three photos: R. Collister

was to dismiss it as impracticable. We were in a quandary until enquiry at the government map office in Delhi revealed, to our amazement, that we could actually buy a quarter-inch map of the area based on the survey of 1917, but a map nonetheless. The Sainj nal, according to our new information, contained several small settlements, and at the very foot of the glaciers falling from Point 6091 was a grazing ground known as Rakti Tapta. It could not be totally inaccessible. Admittedly, there was still a question mark over the foot-path, the line of red dots mysteriously coming to an abrupt end a few miles up the nal, only reappearing ten miles later at the village of Marawr. There was no way of telling whether this implied an impassable gorge or a surveyor's error. However, from the village of Gosheini (Bandal on the map) at 1800 m in the parallel valley to the s, another path was shown running over a 3950 m ridge and down to Marawr, 2450 m. We decided to take this path rather than risk the Sainj route.

Though a magnificent high-level walk, this was a mistake. A path does, in fact, run all the way up the Sainj nal, and our route not only took three days instead of two, but left us porterless at Marawr, where the male population seemed to be rather less than two men and a boy. The porters from Gosheini refused to go any further up a strange valley. They had already done their best to abandon us on top of the ridge during the second day and only a timely display of tem-



48 *Parbati South from Advanced Base Camp*

perament on Dick's part, when all argument and cajolery had failed, saved the expedition from an early demise.

Netti and Molly, who had come for the walk, left us at Marawr and returned down the Sainj nal accompanied by Lubdram, our expensive and totally ineffectual Sirdar. From there on we were our own porters and it took six days of ferrying loads up to 80 lb before a Base Camp could be established at 4125 m on the grassy floor of a wide moraine valley.

The mountain was still not visible, being obscured by a huge ice-fall. The only safe route appeared to be on its right-hand side (true left), but when we attempted to carry loads up it, we discovered that falling stones made even this way far from safe. Climbed at night it would have been feasible, but as a regular route to and from Base Camp it was too hazardous. From a height of 4725 m, after a day of sustained and, at times, technical ice-climbing, we turned back.

The mountain could not be climbed from the Sainj side, so it would have to be the Parbati side after all. From Base Camp we could see a peak we identified as Ainger's Snow Peak. The 5175 m col to its w looked easy to approach and we knew that Ainger had found it straightforward from the N. Arbitrarily deciding that rations designed to feed two men for five days could really feed four men for the same period, we compressed food and fuel for ten days, as well as climbing gear, into 65 lb loads and in two days crossed over to the Parbati, or N, side of the watershed.

Advanced Base was on a moraine at the junction of the two arms of Ainger's Glacier IV and near the site of his Camp 1—we even found his cache of sausages which some, though not all, of us enjoyed. From there we could attempt not only Point 6127 but also a cirque of peaks overlooking a high snow bowl at the head of the s arm of Glacier IV.

The climbs

For the sake of simplicity, we have retained Ainger's heights (Ridge Peak 5791 m, Snow Peak 5639 m, Advanced Base 4975 m) and used them as terms of reference for our own measurements of height, even though we suspect them to be overestimates.

Route lengths refer to vertical height rather than rope-lengths.

The Alpine nature of all the routes makes the use of Alpine gradings an appropriate means of indicating the difficulties. We have tried to be as objective as possible, bearing in mind that at 5800 m, a pitch of, say, IV feels much more like V. As far as we know, all the climbs were first ascents.

- 1) Ridge Peak 5791 m E face. 1500 ft. F. 14 Sept Collister and Isherwood.
23 Sept Cardy.
An easy climb on loose rock, though the descent by the NE ridge was on ice.
- 2) Point 1 5700 m N face. 2400 ft. D. 15 Sept Collister and Cohen.
For two-thirds of its height a typical alpine ice-face, 50° at the top and capped by a cornice. Then steeper (60°) slopes of excellent frozen snow and a rock pinnacle for a summit. Descent down a rock ridge and ice slopes on the s side of the mountain.
- 3) Point 6127 s face. 3000 ft. TD. 17/18 Sept Collister and Isherwood.
An ice-couloir on the right of the face (climbed at night) was followed for 500 ft before a traverse could be made on to the face. From there until the summit ridge, the climb was almost entirely on rock of varying types and



49 Ridge Peak from the SW ridge of Parbati South

quality, giving many enjoyable pitches but, surprisingly, nothing harder than IV, though route-finding was complicated in places. Some stone-fall. Bivouac near the crest of the E ridge and three rope-lengths below the summit ridge. Eleven abseils needed on the descent, keeping well clear of the couloir which is a death-trap by day.

- 4) Point 3 5822 m N ridge. 1100 ft. AD. 18 Sept Cardy and Cohen.
Though short, a fine mixed climb with III and IV difficulties on rock. Descent down the S ridge. Climbed from Advanced Base, making a very long day, since a route had first to be found through an ice-fall and into the Snow Bowl.
- 5) Point 4 5852 m N face. 1200 ft. PD. 22 Sept Collister and Cohen.
An unpremeditated evening climb from a bivouac in the Snow Bowl, unroped and by different lines, reaching the summit as night fell.
- 6) Point 2 5730 m NW ridge. 800 ft. PD. 23 Sept Collister and Cohen.
An impressive-looking aiguille that gave a disappointing climb.

Post-monsoon conditions

We were blessed with near-perfect weather and climbing conditions. After an initial two days of mist and drizzle at the beginning of September, the weather settled into a dependable pattern, clear skies in the morning, clouding over and sometimes showering in the afternoon, clearing up again in the evening. Only once was this pattern broken by bad weather and that happened to be a rest day.

We had expected the monsoon to leave behind a residue of soft snow, but in fact there was none. Even at 6000 m precipitation must fall as rain, or if as snow, it melts immediately. The s face of Point 6127 m, a mixed face in Ainger's pre-monsoon photos, was pure rock. Glaciers had been stripped bare and crevasses were obvious, making approaches easy. Disadvantages were the sheets of bare ice in couloirs and on snow slopes and the increased danger from stone fall. Only towards the end of September did temperatures drop and the afternoon showers become heavier, so that fresh snow was lingering on the tops.



50 *From Parbati South towards the Snow Bowl and Points 1, 2, 3 and 4*

Climbing potential

The sw ridge of Point 6127 m is a superb rock climb and awaits an ascent. Rob and Geoff attempted it, but after a day's sustained climbing at IV and sometimes V, they were still on the 'easy' section, well below the prominent half-way terrace. As they were carrying only two days' food, prudence dictated retreat. There is little doubt that the route would go, however. The crux would almost certainly be the step just above the terrace which is extremely steep but split by a promising chimney-line.

Pyramid Peak, 6037 m, remains unclimbed, but from Glacier IV its complicated rock face is a confused jumble, with several possible routes none of which constitute an obvious or attractive line.

Glacier III would have much to offer a strong party. Point 6127 and Pyramid Peak both present huge mixed faces on this (N) side and Peak A (which Ainger gives as 5974 m but which was quite definitely higher than us as we stood on the summit of Point 6091 m) a series of impressively steep and compact rock walls with no easy way up.

Conclusion

Once on the Parbati side of the watershed we could not resist travelling through new country, even if it did mean cocking a snook at the authorities. So, having fetched the remainder of the gear and some more food from Base Camp in the Sainj nal, we walked out down the Parbati valley, a beautiful walk marred by heavy loads. The check-post at Pulga was side-stepped without difficulty and we were on the bus from Manikaren to Kulu before anybody woke up. Or perhaps they simply did not bother—after all, there is very little to hide in the Parbati valley.

The expedition ended on a note of farce. Dick, with a plane to catch, travelled down the valley a day ahead of the main party, having waded a glacier stream early one morning which became so swollen by melt as to be impassable by the time the rest of us arrived. Dick was carrying all the stoves and cooking utensils; we had the food. Consequently, he went hungry for two days, while we subsisted for three on dry meat bar and lemonade crystals drunk from the meat-bar wrappers. Civilisation was all the more desirable when eventually attained.