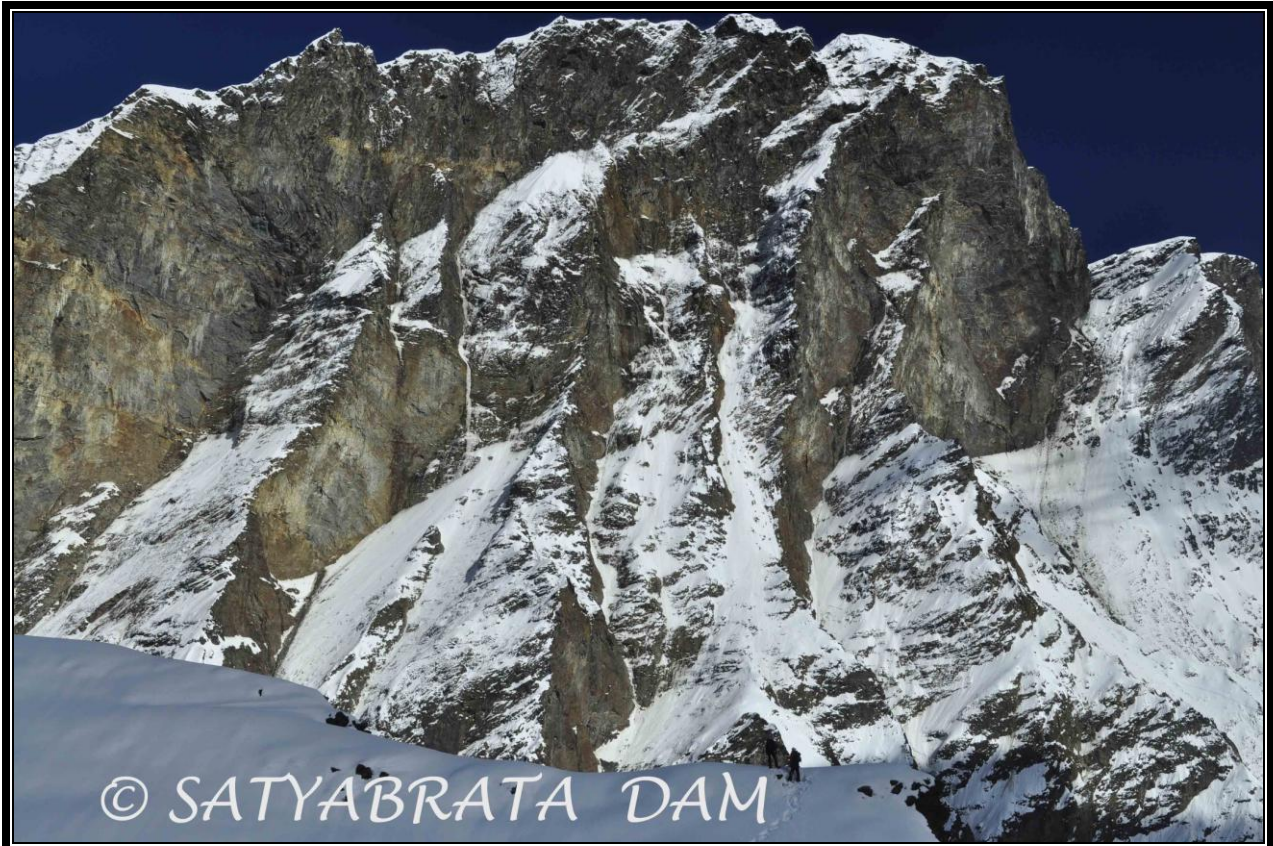


## WEST FACE OF VASUKI PARBAT

### OCT 2010: FINAL REPORT



**This report details the first ascent of the West Face of Vasuki Parbat 6792m in the Garwhal mountain range of the Indian Himalaya. The expedition took place from 11<sup>th</sup> September to 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2010.**

**Paul Figg**

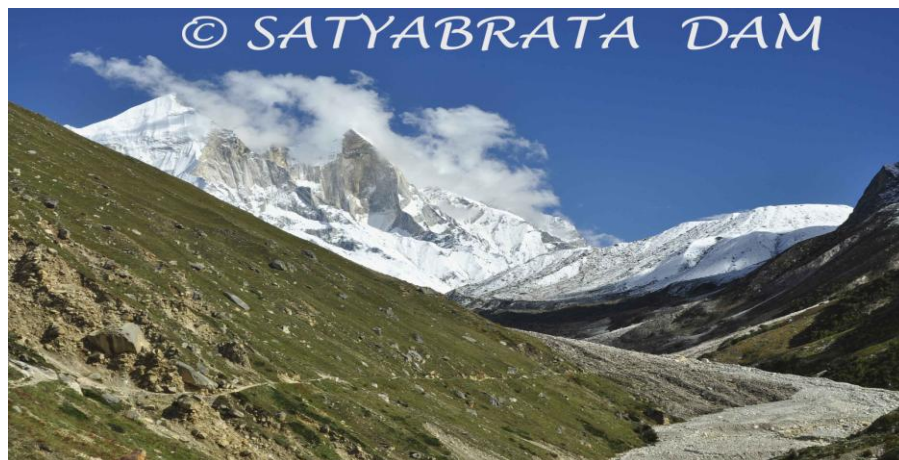
**February 2011**

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## 1. Summary

Vasuki Parbat 6792m, (named after the King of the Serpents in Hindu Mythology) is situated in the Garwhal region of the Indian Himalaya, during September and October 2010 British mountaineers Malcolm Bass, and Paul Figg made the first ascent of the unclimbed west face. The summit was reached on October 12<sup>th</sup> as part of a 10 day round trip descending the North West ridge.



*The approach walk along the side of the Ganges, the Bhagirathi peaks are seen in the distance. (Photo Satyabrata Dam)*

## **2. Introduction**

The Garwhal region is well known to trekkers and mountaineers alike and for those making the pilgrimage to the source of the river Ganges at Gamukh (4140m) at the mouth of the Gangotri glacier. To mountaineers the biggest draw is probably the perfect looking mountain Shivling (6540m) or Satapanth (7075m) one of the easier 7000m peaks, both most commonly climbed with commercial outfits.

In 2004 as part of a British / New Zealand expedition Malcolm Bass, Paul Figg and New Zealander Pat Deavoll made an unsuccessful attempt on Jankuth 6805m at the end of the Gangotri glacier. The plan was to make another attempt on the peak but due to problems obtaining a permit from the Indian Mountaineering Federation it was decided to change plans and make an attempt on the unclimbed west face of Vasuki Parbat. The face had been attempted in 2008 by British mountaineers Paul Ramsden and Mick Fowler but due to poor acclimatization and extreme cold the pair were unsuccessful. An article on the attempt by Paul Ramsden and Mick Fowler can be found in the 2009 Alpine Club Journal.

Vasuki Parbat is rarely attempted and prior to our ascent had only had one confirmed ascent in 1980 by a Japanese expedition via the East face, using fixed ropes on the lower 600m. An earlier but disputed claim was made in 1973 by an Indo Tibetan Border Police expedition by an unspecified route. Two further attempts have been made on the North West ridge but failed to reach the summit.

## **3. Expedition Members**

The expedition consisted of 3 climbing members, Malcolm Bass (Team Leader), Pat Deavoll and Paul Figg. Rachel Antill accompanied the team as expedition artist.

Malcolm Bass has experience from 6 Himalayan expeditions, 3 Alaskan expeditions including the 1<sup>st</sup> ascent of Haiza Shan 5800m with Pat Deavoll, 1<sup>st</sup> ascent south face of Yogeshwar 6770m and new routes in Alaska Including 'The Prey' on Mount Hunter with Paul Figg and two new routes on the south face of Kahiltna Queen. Pat Deavoll has multiple trips to the Himalaya and Karakorum under her belt including the 1<sup>st</sup> ascent of Haiza Shan 5800m with Malcolm Bass, solo 1<sup>st</sup> ascent of Karim Sar 6200m and an ascent of 'Deprivation' on North buttress of Mount Hunter.

Paul Figg has experience from 2 Alaskan trips ascent including the ascent of 'The Prey' on Mount Hunter and a successful ascent of Khan Tengri 6995m in the Kazakhstan Tien Shan, he was also part of the unsuccessful team on Jankuth 6805m in the 2004.

The team was accompanied by artist Rachel Antill who would be making a record the expedition and surroundings. The Liaison Officer as required by the Indian Mountaineering Federation for the team was Indian mountaineer and explorer Satyabrata Dam who offered a wealth of experience and knowledge to the team.

## **4 The Climb**

The difficulties started in the first few days of the expedition, previous trips had warned us that getting our kit from customs would not be straight forward and this trip was to be no exception. After 3 days of signing documents and sitting about waiting we were finally in the possession of our kit. Obstacle one was overcome and on the 15<sup>th</sup> September we headed out of Delhi. During the bus ride to Rishikesh it became obvious that the recent torrential rain was going to cause problems on the road up ahead with sections washed out. Between Rishikesh and Gangotri the road steadily became worse and with our bus driver becoming more and more tentative. Eventually we became to a section of road that had collapsed and become impassable depositing a truck on its side, thanks to the quick thinking of our 'Mr Fix it' from Ibex Expeditions we acquired the assistance of two 4X4's beyond the landslide and continued on our way, as much of a relief to us to be going forward as to our original bus driver that he wouldn't have to go any further. Later on during the trip we became aware that we were one of the last groups to make it beyond the landslide, the condition of the roads became so bad that eventually the Uttarakhand authorities prohibited all tourist travel, by the time the road had been opened some expeditions would have lost large periods of their expeditions leaving insufficient time to walk in, acclimatize and summit.

Once at Gangotri we were forced to spend an additional 2 unplanned days there, due to the heavy rain the footpath ahead had been washed out and trekkers weren't allowed beyond Gangotri. During this we took the opportunity for a walk to help acclimatize up a side valley toward Thalay Sagar. On the 21<sup>st</sup> with much relief we moved out of Gangotri heading to Bhojpassa and our camp site for the night, we were on our way again heading to the mountains. Beyond Bhojpassa we passed Gamukh, the source of the Ganges and a focal point for many pilgrimages by Hindus. Here we left the footpath and headed onto the Gangotri glacier with fantastic views of Shivling and the Bhagirathi peaks dominating the skyline. Shortly after we turned east onto the Chaturangi Glacier and onto the snow line, Our second night camp was spent just above Nan Dan Ban in the company of Indian Army Bengal Sappers who had been attempting to climb the Bhagirathi's. The following day took us to our base camp at the base of the Vasuki Glacier approximately an hour's walk short of the lake Vasuki Thal, a popular base camp for climbers on the nearby peak Satapanth. Our camp offered superb views of our objective the West Face of Vasuki Parbat and easy acclimatization on the lower slopes of the Bhagirathi peaks. After a day establishing base camp at 4900m all team members started their acclimatization, over the next 3 days steadily moving up to 5800m. It was during this acclimatization that we came across one of the worst aspects of large scale expeditions, the Indian army expedition had left a huge amount of waste including light bulbs, gas cylinders and

spare tinned food at one of their camps. After our expedition returned to Delhi this was reported to the Indian Mountaineering Federation who to their credit arranged for a team to clean up the rubbish. As well as acclimatizing it became evident that the light weight sleeping bags we hoped to use rated to -7 wouldn't be anywhere near warm enough and we would be forced to use our warmer but much heavier base camp sleeping bags.



*Malcolm Bass and Paul Figg on day one in the lower narrow gully. (Photo Pat Deavoll)*

After a few days back at base camp when we were rested on 3<sup>rd</sup> Oct Malcolm Bass, Pat Deavoll and Paul Figg accompanied by Rachel Antill and Satyabrata Dam walked around to the Vasuki Glacier and made camp to allow for an early start the following morning. Early on the 4<sup>th</sup> Pat Malcolm and Paul continued up the glacier to the foot of the route, a narrow gully containing a thin layer of ice. Pat had the first block of leads and set off up the gully, never very steep but the thin ice and loose rock in the side walls made placing protection difficult. After 6-8 pitches the gully opened out, and a col out to the right across large snow slopes could be seen, our target for the day and camp 1. Climbing as a three the plan had been to use one 2 person tent a bivi bag to save weight and allow maximum flexibility at bivi / camp sites. Pat bravely offered to go for the bivi bag. Whilst packing for the following morning we decided we were going to have to leave some kit behind to reduce weight, hopefully picking it up on the descent. The climbing

on day 2 looked much easier than anticipated, from base camp it looked as though it would all have to be pitched but in reality was much easier. Whilst we were about to head off Pat talked about her reservations in carrying on as she was suffering from the cold and poor acclimatization. After reassurance we headed off up the snow slopes. During the early afternoon the weather showed a few signs of worsening and we opted to make use of a possible bivi site lower than would have been ideal, but in the end a good move, as we out later there was nothing else suitable within reach ahead. After camp 2 with Malcolm getting the short straw and spending the night in the bivy bag we continued up easy ground to the base of another steep gully. It was here that Pat decided to call it a day suffering from the cold and poor acclimatization, descending with the aid of our haul rope Pat descended to the site of our camp one stopping there for the night to wait for better conditions before descending the following day to base camp. By now the sun had started to warm the gully above and the stonefall started from above, Malcolm managed to take shelter from the bombardment but Paul took a blow to the shoulder momentarily slumping onto the rope eventually gathering my thoughts and joining Malcolm in a niche to shelter from the stonefall. It was decided to stay there until the sun had moved off from the gully so after a break of a couple of hours Malcolm led off up the gully containing a conglomerate mix of ice and stone. In the darkness we missed the traverse line taken by Mick Fowler and Paul Ramsden and climbed too high up the gully and were forced to bivy on a small sloping ledge, it was whilst establishing a belay that Malcolm dropped his camera from around his neck whilst removing some slings, amazingly the camera was found in pieces by Pat whilst she descended. After a cold night the following morning we managed to move out right for 3-4 pitches that lead to a spectacular bivi site on top of a pinnacle about the size of a pool table. This put us below the start of the steep mixed terrain, not knowing where the next bivy would be we took the opportunity to make the most of the spacious bivy. The following morning after packing camp Malcolm traversed back left and started up the steep ground, however after only 20m out Malcolm whilst placing a piece of gear by his feet overbalanced and fell around 10m, in a state of concussion Malcolm reversed back to the site of our bivy. After a few brews it was obvious Malcolm wouldn't be up to climbing again that day so back up went the tent, minus a pole, this time it was Paul who managed to let a pole fly off down the mountain. At least we'd save a bit of weight and the tent pitched ok. After a good rest the next day we set off up the steep ground giving great climbing. This ground took us to the high point of Mick Fowler below a tower of broken rock. After a false start and scaring myself on the loose rock I retreated and left it to Malcolm to force a way, at one point we were forced to haul the lead sack through the bulging rock, the incoming dark didn't help. From now on we didn't have the advantage of Mick's knowledge and were literally be in the dark. After several further pitches in the dark desperately hoping for a bivy site we came across a small snow ridge where after an hour of digging we had a spot barely big enough for our Black Diamond tent. A short pitch of unconsolidated snow led to more steep mixed ground and with Malcolm bridging up on small footholds and making long reaches for good ice surmounted what would be the technical crux of the route and around Scottish VI 7. Above the last of the mixed ground ahead lay a long easy angled snow slope, although easy climbing it was slow, hard going with the altitude and last few days taking their toll. With both of us starting to suffer from the effort we took the opportunity to rest and brew up below a huge overhanging roof that would have made a fantastic bivi had it not been so early in the day. Traversing right below the overhanging rock for a couple

more pitches toward the end of the snow ramp, we were approaching a moment of uncertainty, would there be a way round the corner or would it be a dead end. From base camp it had been impossible to know if it would go. In near darkness I tentatively traversed around the rock shelf, unable to see a way ahead in the dark I scuttled back along the shelf to make a bivi for the night. The following day, 11<sup>th</sup> Oct, Malcolm retraced my ground disappearing round the corner and lowered himself down 2m with tension from the rope and belayed in the gully. Once I'd joined Malcolm it looked as though there would be a choice of options, straight up the gully above or carry on traversing up and right, from base camp this had looked the easiest route to the summit ridge, so slowly off we went with calfs and thighs burning from the effort. Once on the ridge we were rewarded with fantastic views across to the Tibetan plains, turning North along the narrow ridge we continued, moving together along undulating ground looking for a suitable bivi, at the base of a 30m rock tower and at the top of a gully we managed to dig out a small level patch, this was possibly the top of the gully mentioned earlier and would give more direct access to the ridge. Malcolm easily negotiated the tower at the start of day 8, 12<sup>th</sup> October, this was to be the last technical climbing before rejoining the ridge. The ridge gave easy access to the summit, moving together we passed slightly below the summit, both independently giving our thanks to Lord Vasuki, King of the Serpents, for allowing us to safely reach the summit and asking for a safe descent.



*North West ridge of Vasuki Parbat, Paul Figg and Malcolm Bass are just visible on the descent.*

Traversing along the ridge sometimes with feet on the west face and hands reaching over sinking into soft powder snow on the east, with hands and forearms buried in the snow almost constantly all day, our fingers were starting to show the first signs of frost nip. As we continued to descend we could pick out the end of the ridge and where we would need to drop off to the

**North West ridge. A couple of abseils down brought us to our last bivi spot below a small rock outcrop. As usual every day we could see our base camp with a bit of luck we would be there tomorrow night. On our 10<sup>th</sup> day we continued down the North West ridge in terrible soft powder snow, the ropes were put away as there was no way of protecting the descent. Half way down, a stuff sack containing maps and head torch fell from Malcolm's badly rucksack, a result of bad packing brought on from the exhaustion of the effort over the last 10 days.**

**Continuing on down we passed remnants of fixed ropes from the 1985 French expedition. Given good snow conditions the ridge would make a fantastic means of ascent. With the light slowly going we toiled on down not 100% driven on by the desire not to spend another night out with base camp so close. Stumbling on in the dark across the moraine with one headtorch between the two of us we passed Vasuki Thal and over the final rock ridge that separated us from base camp. Once within shouting distance after whistles and calls, head torches appeared from the camp heading toward us. Rachel Antill was first to meet us offering hugs and congratulations with Satya and Pat not far behind. Chander and Shanker our cook and cooks assistant didn't let us down and prepared a fantastic feast for us, a far cry from the gel sachets and muesli bars we'd lived on for the last 10 days. Heading away from base camp on the 17<sup>th</sup> of Oct we were back in Delhi on the 20<sup>th</sup> for a de-brief with the Indian Mountaineering Foundation and the round of paperwork with customs to get our kit back out of the country.**



***Gamukh: the source of the Ganges, a place of great religious value to Hindus. (photo Satyabrata Dam)***





***West face of Vasuki Parbat, the line of ascent is shown in black and descent in red. (photo Satyabrata Dam)***

## **5 Logistics**

### **Permits / Peak Fees**

**A permit is generally required from the Indian Mountaineering Foundation to climb most peaks and must be gained a minimum of 90 days prior to arrival in India. Peak fees depending on the height of the peak must also be paid and include the Peak fee, Camp site, Trail Management Fee, Environmental Levy and Service charges. Comprehensive current information can be found at the Indian Mountaineering Foundation web site [www.indmount.org](http://www.indmount.org)**

**The expedition's original aim had been to make the 1<sup>st</sup> ascent of Jankuth (6805m), despite receiving a permit and making an unsuccessful attempt in 2004 our application for a permit to make an attempt in 2010 was declined.**

### **Communications**

**Satellite phones are not permitted by the Indian government due to the increased terrorist threat, due to the direct line of sight between the West face and base camp radios would be an option for team members to keep in contact. Radios were not used on this occasion.**

### **Ibex Expeditions**

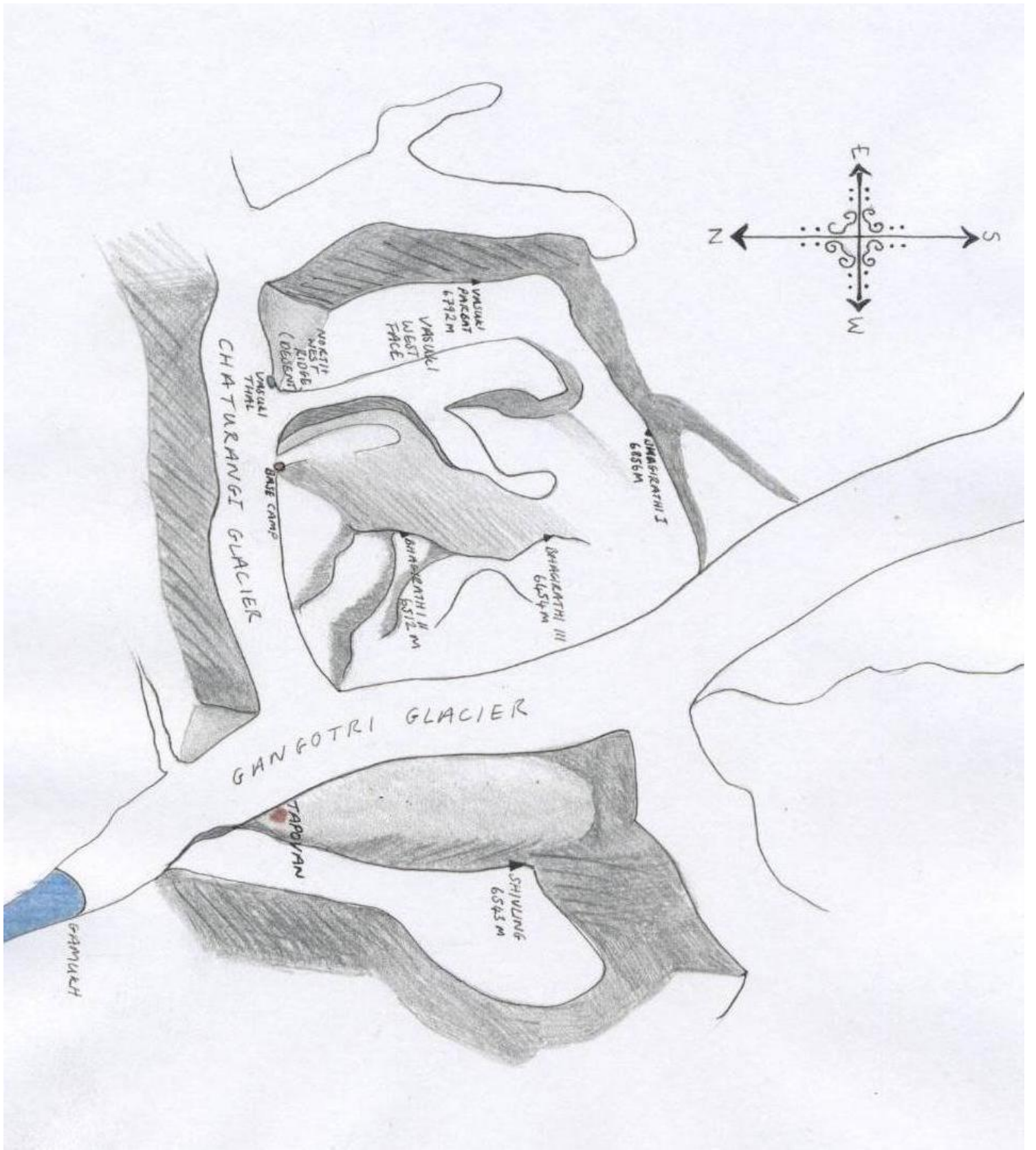
**Support in India was provided by Ibex Expeditions who provided valuable assistance in obtaining permits, arranging accommodation, transport, porters and base camp support. The staff from Ibex provided a superb service, and thanks only to their resourcefulness and quick thinking did we make it to base camp at all.**

### **Equipment**

**The plan had been to climb as a team of 3 using a combination of one 2 man tent and a bivy bag to give us optimum flexibility at camps and kept the overall weight of kit down, whilst lower down as a team of 3 this worked well but should we have continued as a team of 3 this may have been more tricky and reduced the number of possible bivy sites available. We had also planned to use a haul rope should we encounter sustained hard technical climbing and we were forced to haul the leaders rucksack. One point of great concern before we arrived in India was the availability of butane / propane gas cylinders. Recent changes to import regulations now mean they are extremely hard to obtain, luckily we had previously arranged that our Liaison Officer Satya Dam and Ibex Expeditions would be able to provide enough for the acclimatization and main climb. During acclimatization it became obvious to all 3 climbers that the sleeping bags we intended to use, rated to minus 10 would be inadequate and we were forced to take our larger but warmer base camp bags.**

## **6 Itinerary**

<b>Sept 12th – Sept 14th</b>	<b>Delhi: Customs / shopping</b>
<b>Sept 15th</b>	<b>Delhi – Rishikesh</b>
<b>Sept 16th</b>	<b>Rishikesh - Utterkashi</b>
<b>Sept 17th</b>	<b>Utterkashi - Gangotri</b>
<b>Sept 18th – Sept 20th</b>	<b>Gangotri (rain delay)</b>
<b>Sept 21st</b>	<b>Gangotri – Bhojpasa</b>
<b>Sept 22nd</b>	<b>Bhojpasa – Nan Dan Ban</b>
<b>Sept 23rd</b>	<b>Nan Dan Ban – Base Camp</b>
<b>Sept 24th – Sept 27th</b>	<b>Acclimatisation up to 5800m</b>
<b>Sept 28th – Oct 3rd</b>	<b>Base Camp</b>
<b>Oct 4th – Oct 13th</b>	<b>On route, summiting 12th Oct</b>
<b>Oct 17th – 20th</b>	<b>Base Camp – Delhi</b>





*Collapsed road due to the heavy monsoon rainfall. (photo Rachel Antill)*

## 8 Useful Contacts

**Indian Mountaineering Foundation**

**Ibex Expeditions**

**Mount Everest Foundation**

**Alpine Club**

**British Mountaineering Council**

[www.indmount.org](http://www.indmount.org)

[www.ibexexpeditions.org](http://www.ibexexpeditions.org)

[www.mef.org.uk](http://www.mef.org.uk)

[www.alpine-club.org.uk](http://www.alpine-club.org.uk)

[www.thebmc.co.uk](http://www.thebmc.co.uk)



*Wild Ibex seen from base camp.*

## **9 Acknowledgements**

**The expedition would like to thank the following for their generous support: The Mount Everest Foundation, W.L. Gore (Shipton – Tilman Grant) The British Mountaineering Council, The Alpine Club, DHL, Mountain Hardwear and Wayfarer meals. The team would also like to give special thanks to Mick Fowler and Paul Ramsden for their encouragement and providing invaluable route information from their attempt in 2008.**

**The compilers of this report and the members of the expedition agree that any or all of this report may be copied for the purpose of private research.**



'Toward The Source', Gangotri valley, pencil on paper 12.5cm x 27cm20cm. Rachel Antill