

The T.W.T.C.C. Expedition To Central Lahul.

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Summary

This report is an account of a small, lightweight mountaineering expedition to the Lahul and Kulu regions of Himachel Pradesh state, Northern India during September/October 1990.

The objectives were the first ascent routes on Mulkila (21,380ft) and Minar (20,250ft) in a remote part of Central Lahul, a dry and barren mountainous region beyond the influence of the monsoon. An alpine attempt of the S.W. ridge of Mulkila was made from a base camp 25 miles away without support. The foot of the final 1,500ft summit ridge was reached before bad weather forced an early retreat off the mountain and from Lahul before snows closed the Rhotang pass, our return route.

Further climbing in two areas of Kulu, an alpine like region just south of Lahul, showed the potential for alpine style climbing in this region. Although bad weather still persisted, a small trekking peak was finally climbed by all the team members.



Mulkila



Kulu

1. INTRODUCTION

The objectives of this mountaineering expedition were to make the first ascents of the north face of Minar (20,250ft) and the south east ridge of Mulkila (21,380ft) in the mountains of Central Lahul, part of the Indian Himalaya, during September to October 1990.

The state of Himachel Pradesh lies in the mountains of northern India, several hundred miles north of Delhi, between the areas of Kashmir and Garwhal (see figure 1). The state consists of the regions of Chamba, Kulu, Lahul, Parbati and Spiti. It is essentially a mountainous area marking the transition from the Indian plains to the Himalaya and in the region of Lahul it crosses this high barrier to the Tibetan Plateau. The mountains of Central Lahul are surrounded by the Chandra and Bhaga rivers which lie just north of the lush Kulu valley over the Rhotang pass. Although being on a trade route to Zanskar and Ladakh, which crosses many high passes, many parts of Lahul have seen few western visitors and is relatively unspoilt.

The first recorded mountaineering expedition to Central Lahul was in 1939, when the highest peak in the region, Mulkila, was climbed by an Austrian party. However, it was not until the 1950s that further expeditions visited the area and produced representative sketch maps, showing scores of peaks all around 20,000ft high. Since then only a trickle of expeditions have visited this little known area and many peaks remain unclimbed.

The intention of this expedition was to be small, lightweight and low budget with careful regard for the fragile environment. The aim was to explore and climb in the CB (Chandra-Bhaga) range of mountains in Central Lahul. Access to the region to be gained via the Rhotang pass from Kulu, along the Chandra river to the East and then by the Samundar Tapu Shigri glacier into the heart of this wild mountainous region.

2. PERSONNEL

The climbing team consisted of members of the TWTCC (Too Wet To Climb Club), a climbing and fell running club whose members consist of mountaineers who enjoy fast, lightweight travelling in the hills and climbing in the mountains.

Members :-

- Rob Brown
- Helene Diamantides
- Dave Hill
- Neil Redburn
- Steve Wrigley
- Tubby Brown (Rob's Teddy)

3. ADMINISTRATION AND ORGANISATION

3.1. Research

Having previously been to the Pakistan Karakorum, in order to go somewhere different India was chosen, the idea being to climb a peak in the region of 20000ft, preferably as yet unclimbed.

Initial research, by looking through past Alpine Journals revealed much recent British activity in the Garwhal and Kishtwar but very little in the Himachel Pradesh. So, having an adventurous spirit this region was chosen.

Further, more detailed research through Alpine and American Alpine journals narrowed the field to the CB range of mountains in Central Lahul region of the Himachel Pradesh which seemed to have plenty of unclimbed peaks.

A literature search was conducted using the new Himalayan Index set up by the Alpine Club. This highlighted some Himalayan Journal articles which we obtained from the Fell and Rock library at Lancaster University.

Key articles are given in the bibliography, the most useful from Hamish McArthur's expedition in 1955, who in addition to climbing a handful of first ascent peaks produced an excellent sketch map of the area which proved an invaluable aid to our expedition.

Bob Pettigrew provided us with some first hand knowledge of the region and very useful contacts in neighboring Kulu.

3.2. Red Tape

Permission to climb mountains in India has to be arranged through the Indian Mountaineering Foundation (I.M.F.) with all its associated hassles.

Although provisional acceptance was received over 6 months before departure, final permission was not forthcoming until our arrival in Delhi.

Full application forms need to be completed well in advance (3 months minimum), preferably as soon as having received provisional acceptance, to ensure the climbing permit is issued on time. The permit is not actually issued by the I.M.F. but by the Ministry of Home Affairs, an Indian Bureaucratic monster, need I say more!

A specific mountaineering visa is required, which is issued only after a permit is issued. So if there are problems, travel to Delhi on a standard tourist visa. The Indian High commission in London can be quite an obstructive bunch in this matter, so apply for visas at the Birmingham office, who we found extremely helpful.

On arrival in Delhi with just a tourist visa, a trip to the ministry of home affairs is in order, armed of course with passports and a letter of introduction from the I.M.F. to the Director explaining what is required, i.e. a mountaineering visa. This involves extreme patience and especially persistence, with only specific times of day allowed for foreigners.

There was only limited form filling to be done at the IMF building in Delhi, with a short report required to be written on return from the hills.

Our liaison officer, Yamin, was an Indian student at Delhi University, LOs no longer needing to be government officials. His English was poor so communication was difficult. He was primarily a 'city boy', his experience of mountaineering consisting of the renown "basic course", need I say more.

Luckily, due to his shy nature he wasn't obstructive to the expedition. His liking for carrying a rucksac, walking, sleeping on hard ground or arm wrestling with Helene was very poor, making his active involvement in the climbing very difficult.

Apparently, if you know an Indian mountaineer, you can request for them to be your LO; it's probably worth trying.

3.3. Fund Raising

We were pleased to receive grants from the Mount Everest Foundation, the BMC/sports council and the Alison Chadwick Memorial fund.

No attempt was made to gain commercial sponsorship, however large discounts were obtained from the Rock and Run shop for gear and a generous baggage allowance from Lufthansa.

3.4. Insurance

Expedition insurance for the group was obtained from the BMC.

4. TRAVEL

4.1. Air

We flew from Manchester via Frankfurt to Delhi on Lufthansa. Although not the cheapest airline it was convenient, reliable and gave us 10kg free excess baggage per person. This allowance plus heavy hand luggage enabled us to transport all our equipment on our flight at no extra cost.

It is possible to fly between Delhi and Bhuntar, just south of Manali. However tickets need to be booked at least 2 weeks in advance, baggage allowance is limited and having a ticket doesn't guarantee a seat, as we found to our cost when on our return journey.

4.2. Road

4.2.1. Delhi-Manali

Through a 'friend' of one of the IMF officials we managed to hire a Matador minibus plus drivers to take us by road to Manali, a distance of approximately 300 miles for a cost of 4000Rs.

The overnight journey to Manali took 17 hours and is not advised for the faint hearted. In all we counted 8 seemingly fatal head on collisions, mostly between lorries. We were detained at the Punjab border for a couple of hours whilst our vehicle's tax status was discussed, the usual few notes solving the problem.

4.2.2. Manali-Batal

The journey over the Rhotang pass to Batal was done using the local Manali-Kaza bus service. This runs from July to October, these dates being determined by the end of the monsoon and the onset of winter.

The bus leaves Manali at 6.30am, arriving at Batal mid afternoon. It can be very full so hiring of locals at the bus station to load on gear ensures enough space. Again the journey is a 'white knuckle ride' and loud walkmans are essential to maintain sanity.

4.3. Walk In

From Batal we had intended to hire pack horses to take the expedition as far as the Samundar Tapu Shigri, a two day journey. However the unusually bad weather and lack of local grazing worried the local horsemen and an astronomic figure of 9000Rs was quoted for one way, over 4 times the usual rate. Compounded with the wait of 3 days before the horses would arrive, we made the decision to set up base camp at Batal, about 25 miles from the summit of Mulkila.

The route to the mountain from Manali is shown in figure 2.

5. HOTELS

5.1. Delhi

The first few nights in Delhi were spent in a very basic hotel in Connaught Circus, the Hotel Bright. This had the advantage of being cheap and very close to the Super Bazaar, from which most non-perishable food supplies can be obtained.

Relatively good accommodation is also available at the IMF buildings. Although it suffers from being on the outskirts of Delhi, it is an ideal base for expeditions, having large open spaces and storage areas and during working hours IMF officials can be easily chased up to sort out bureaucracy.

5.2. Manali

Whilst in Manali we stayed at John Banon's guest house, a relatively upmarket, small hotel set in apple orchards overlooking the Kulu valley. It was run by John Banon, the local secretary of the Himalayan Club, who was a very kind, generous and helpful man, with many interesting tales to tell.

6. EXPEDITION FOOD

6.1. Food from Britain

In order to save weight, the only food brought from Britain was homemade flapjack and beanfeast.

6.2. Food From Delhi

The majority of 'luxury' non-perishable foodstuffs were bought at the Super Bazaar in Delhi. This has a reasonably good selection of food (for India), especially good for porridge, dried milk, cornflakes, jam, pasta, canned cheese, condensed milk and loads of biscuits. Chocolate was bought from a number of local street vendors.

6.3. Food From Manali

With the assistance of a cook (Channeram Thakur) and a cook boy (Gitteram) most fresh and staple foods were bought in the market in Manali. This included rice, flour, sugar, fresh vegetables along with large paraffin stoves and cooking utensils for base camp.

6.4. Base Camp Cooking

Our cook, Channeram, was an invaluable member of the expedition, providing us with excellent meals. These included many superb vegetable and flossy (lamb) curries, fresh chappaties, porridge, gallons of tea and if we were good occasionally egg and chips!

His local knowledge proved invaluable to us, in reality filling the role our liaison officer should have taken.

7. MEDICAL MATTERS

7.1. Innoculation

Polio
Typhoid
Tetanus
Cholera
Hepatitis B

Anti malarial pills (paludrin and chloroquin) were also taken.

7.2. Medical Kit

Flagyl (gardia)
Amoxyl (antibiotic)
Potrym (eye infection)
Codamol (strong pain killer)
Paracetamol (weak pain killer)
Ibuprofen (anti-inflammatory)
Lomotil (diahorrea)
Immodium (diahorrea)
Dioralyte (rehydrant)

Throat sweets
Cough mixture
Sunblock
Plasters
Zinc oxide tape
Lint dressings
Crepe bandages
iodine tablets

7.3. Illnesses

The only illnesses experienced were a couple of cases of Gardia (diagnosed by eggy smells) which were promptly treated with Flagyl. Unfortunately Helene had too strong a dosage of Flagyl which was only found out by a visit to the hospital at Manali after being very ill for 3-4 days. There was also a suspected case of mild altitude sickness on first arrival at base camp which was cured by a return to Manali for a few days.

It is worth noting that due to the dry atmosphere of Lahul, dehydration at altitude was considerably worse than experienced in Kulu, making acclimatisation very difficult.

The only other problems were hangovers from drinking too much of the cook's rice beer.

8. CLIMBING

The expedition objectives were:-

The first ascent of the north face of Minar (CB33), 20,250ft.

The first ascent of the south east ridge of Mulkila (CB8), 21,380ft.

At an early stage of the expedition we decided to concentrate our efforts upon the S.E. ridge of Mulkila. This was due to the weather, which the locals expected to close in a month earlier than expected, giving us only two weeks from arriving at base camp until we had to return over the Rhotang pass to safety. Once the Rhotang pass is closed by the snows, the buses stop running between Manali and Kaza, which means a very long walk out from base camp with no porters.

As a consequence of this expected bad weather we were unable to obtain packhorses to transport our equipment to our intended base camp on the Bara Samundar shigri glacier. Instead we had to settle for Batal as our base camp, 25 miles from our peaks.

These factors, forced us to make a long range, lightweight attempt, carrying only enough food for 10 days, so climbing 2 peaks in that time wasn't possible. Mulkila was chosen, firstly because it was the major peak in the area and secondly it was expected to be less technically difficult and hence quicker to climb, especially with the limited amount of equipment available.

The first few days after arriving at base camp, were spent finding the best route to the Samundar Tapu Shigri glacier and at the same time ferrying loads part way there. After various alternatives were tried, the best route was to follow the left bank of the Chandra river only part way, until the wire rope crossing a subsidiary river. Then a fairly steep climb was made up to a plateau at about 16,000ft which provided some pasture for horses in the summer. A shoulder was then followed until the cliffs above the glacier were reached. Following these cliffs up the glacier led to an easy way down onto the flat moraine of the glacier where our small Advance Base Camp was sited. Figure 3 shows a sketch of this route and the position of camps on the mountain.

After spending one day at ABC, Dave, Steve and Neil set off for Camp 1. Rob staying at ABC, Helene and the L.O. still at B.C. feeling ill.

From ABC, the left hand side of the moraine was followed past the snout of the glacier until the junction with the Candi Ki Shigri, where Camp 1 was sited on some moraine. This involved much tiring work over the lateral moraine and hence turned out to be a bad route choice. A much better line was in the centre of the glacier, which was free from crevasses. This way was used by Rob when ascending the next day and on descent by all the party.

The following day, Dave, Steve and Neil crossed the Samundar Tapu Shigri to its right bank and climbed up the seracs and moraine of the right hand side of the Mulkila Shigri. Camp 2 was sited on the top of this glacier at its southern end.

The same day, Rob climbed from ABC and bivouaced within a few hundred yards of camp 2 although unaware of it at that time, after having failed to find camp 1 in the lateral moraine of the glacier junction.

The next morning, after a brief reunion, Dave, Steve and Neil continued on up the route. Due to the exertions of the previous day and more importantly not enough provisions (some had been left at camp 1 to pick up) Rob descended back down to ABC.

The route from the Mulkila Shigri now lay up a snow filled gully on to the ridge connecting CB53 and Mulkila. This took about 5 hours and camp 3 was established at the foot of the south east ridge at around 20,000ft. The team had fine views of the CB range and the final

1,500ft to the summit of Mulkila. The ridge looked fairly straightforward climb, mainly on snow.

For camp 3, a small snow hole was dug on the north side of the ridge and a fairly miserable night was spent.

The next morning brought heavy snow and poor visibility and so the team reluctantly retreated to camp 1, having no time or provisions to sit out the bad weather.

The next day saw Steve, Dave and Neil return to ABC, the weather still bad. Here the whole team were reunited, the decision made to return to base camp the next day, food having nearly run out and it looked as though winter had arrived.

From base camp, we returned using the bus to Manali, the Rhotang pass already looking wintry.

8.1. Kulu

With 2-3 weeks left before having to return to Delhi we decided to stay in the Kulu region and try some trekking and climbing here.

At the suggestion of the cook, who knew Kulu well, we decided to travel to the head of the Solang Nala, which is surrounded by many 5000-6000m peaks of a wide variety of difficulty. We set up base camp at Dhundi, a 2 hour jeep ride from Manali followed by a very short walk to some beautiful green pastures by the river, a sharp contrast to the desolate landscape of Lahul.

We made one light load carrying trip up the valley to Beas Kund, a high altitude pasture just below the Solang glacier. From here we decided to attempt Ladakhi Peak (5342m) a fairly straightforward trekking peak. From Beas Kund we had a bivouac at about 16,000ft, just below the permanent snowline. Although it snowed fairly heavily that night, dawn brought clear skies and fantastic views across the whole of Kulu including the unclimbed north face of Hannuman Tibba, which was just opposite us and looked an interesting proposition. The L.O. descended from here complaining of the altitude, while the rest of the team set out for a summit bid. We soon reached the foot of Shikatar Peak and traversed left along snow slopes onto and up the glacier below Ladhaki peak until we reached steep snow slopes below the summit. However we were now sinking thigh deep into new snow and the last 1000ft looked rather dicey. The onset of thick clag sealed our fate and so we beat a hasty retreat down the glacier, snow conditions rapidly deteriorating into porridge.

Having returned to base camp the next day, we spent the next few days waiting for a break in the weather. However with it snowing heavily at altitude each day, the mountains were clearly going to be out of condition for at least a week, so Hannuman Tibba would have to wait for another time.

After sightseeing around Manali for a few days we decided to do a short trek on the eastern side of the Kulu valley, starting from near the village of Nagar up to below Deo Tibba and Indrasun. At this point the L.O. parted company, anxious to return to Delhi and allergic to carrying a rucksack and doing some walking. After two days walking up the beautiful Jagatsukh Nala, constantly accompanied by scores of eagles and lammergeirs, we reached Seri, a summer pasture at the head of the valley and about 1000ft below Deo Tibba base camp.

The following day we ascended what we believed to be Consolation Peak (5232m) a straightforward snowplod above Seri, although thigh deep snow the whole way made going very tough and we had to use our secret weapon, Helene (recent winner of the Mt Kinabalu race in Borneo) to act as snowplough up the final slope. The effort was well worthwhile, rewarding us with fantastic views across to White Sail, Papsura, Kulu Makalu and the Parbati peaks. That evening brought further heavy snow, at least a foot having fallen at Seri

overnight, the bad weather clearly continuing. Descent was made to Manali in one day, which marked the end of the climbing, only 2 days being left before our scheduled return to Delhi.

Since returning, further research on this area makes me believe Consolation peak was to the left of our peak at about the same level, so I've named our peak "Tubby Tibba" (Tubby's peak) after our TWTCC mascot and co-summiteer.

9. CONCLUSIONS

Although not achieving our major objectives, the team, on their first trip to the Indian Himalaya had a satisfying and enjoyable expedition. Everybody tried their best and given even marginally better weather would have succeeded on Mulkila.

Climbing in both Lahul and Kulu gave us a wide experience of the area and all members wanted to return in the future.

In retrospect, the expedition would have been better climbing in Lahul during July where clear warm conditions are predominant. However, weather patterns this year were unusual, the post monsoon period of good weather never really appearing in Kulu.

REFERENCES

1. H.J. Vol.XIII p.54
The Mountains of Central Lahul
Ludwig Krenek 1946
~~1939~~
2. A.J. Vol. 61, p.279
Central Lahul
Hamish McArthur 1956
3. H.J. Vol. 36, p.103
Minar and M6
Sqn. Ldr. F.J.M.Thomas 1978

APPENDIX A

EXPEDITION ACCOUNTS

| EXPENDITURE | PLANNED | ACTUAL |
|---------------------------------------|--------------|--------------|
| Visas | | |
| Peak fees | | |
| Air fares | 1,800 | 2,225 |
| Insurance | 400 | 520 |
| Personal Equipment | - | 1,780 |
| Expedition Equipment / L.O.s gear | 500 | 392 |
| India (transport, food, accomodation) | 500 | 1,510 |
| Hire of labour (cook/boy for 26 days) | 500 | 188 |
| Contingency | 500 | - |
| | <u>5,000</u> | <u>7,364</u> |
| INCOME | | |
| MEF grant | 500 | 500 |
| BMC sports council grant | 300 | 300 |
| Expedition members contribution | 6,000 | 7,364 |
| | <u>6,800</u> | <u>8,164</u> |
| Cost to each member (5 people) | 1,200 | 1,313 |

APPENDIX B

EXPEDITION LOG

- sept. 14 - left Preston
 15 - arrive Delhi
 16 - business in Delhi
 17 - business in Delhi / leave for Manali
 18 - arrive Manali
 19 - L.O./S.W. to Batal
 20 - R.B./D.H./cook to Batal
 21 - H.D./N.R. to Batal, D.H./S.W./L.O. to Chandra Tal
 22 - H.D./S.W. to Manali, R.B./N.R. load carry along Chandra river
 23 - R.B./N.R./D.H./cook load carry left side of Chandra valley
 24 - S.W. to Batal
 25 - S.W./N.R./R.B./D.H. to ABC
 26 - S.W./N.R./R.B. back to gear dump, H.D. to Manali
 27 - S.W./N.R./D.H. to Camp 1
 28 - S.W./N.R./D.H. to Camp 2, R.B. ABC to Camp 2
 29 - S.W./N.R./D.H. to Camp 3, R.B. to ABC, H.D. to Batal
 30 - S.W./N.R./D.H. to Camp 1
 Oct 1 - S.W./N.R./D.H. to ABC, H.D./Cook to ABC
 2 - S.W./N.R./D.H./H.D./R.B./Cook to Batal
 3 - Batal
 4 - team return to Manali
 5 - Manali
 6 - Manali
 7 - to Solang Nala, Kulu valley
 8 - load carry to Beas Kund
 9 - attempt on Ladaki Peak
 10 - " " " "
 11 - return to Beas Kund
 12 - return to base camp at Dhundi
 13 - base camp
 14 - return to Manali
 15 - trek up the Jagatsukh Nala
 16 - " " " " "
 17 - climb "Tubby Tibba" peak
 18 - return to Manali
 19 - Manali
 20 - day trip to Manikiran, Parbati Valley
 21 - Manali
 22 - Manali to Delhi
 23 - " " "
 24 - Visit to Agra
 25 - debrief at IMF
 26 - return to U.K.

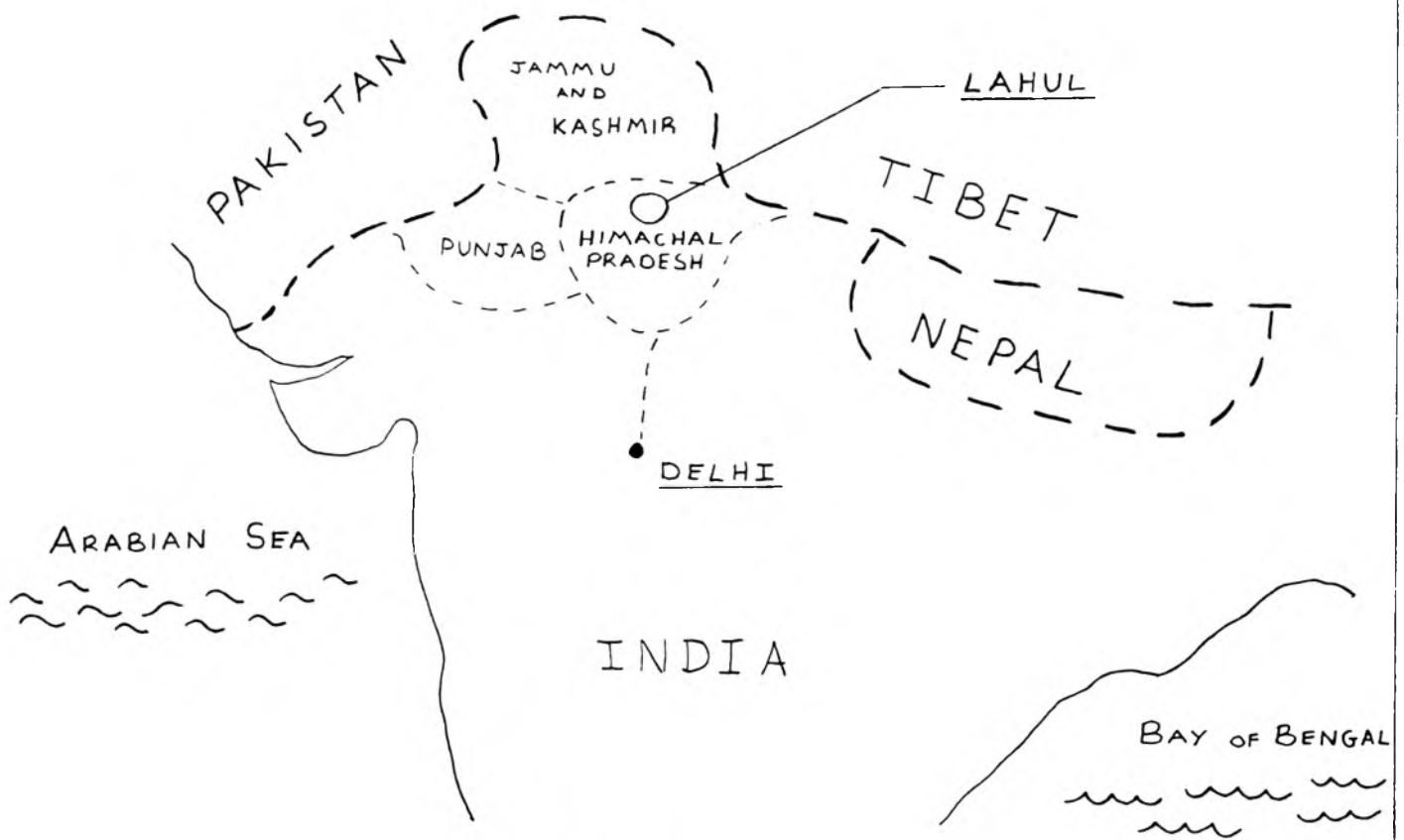


FIGURE - 1

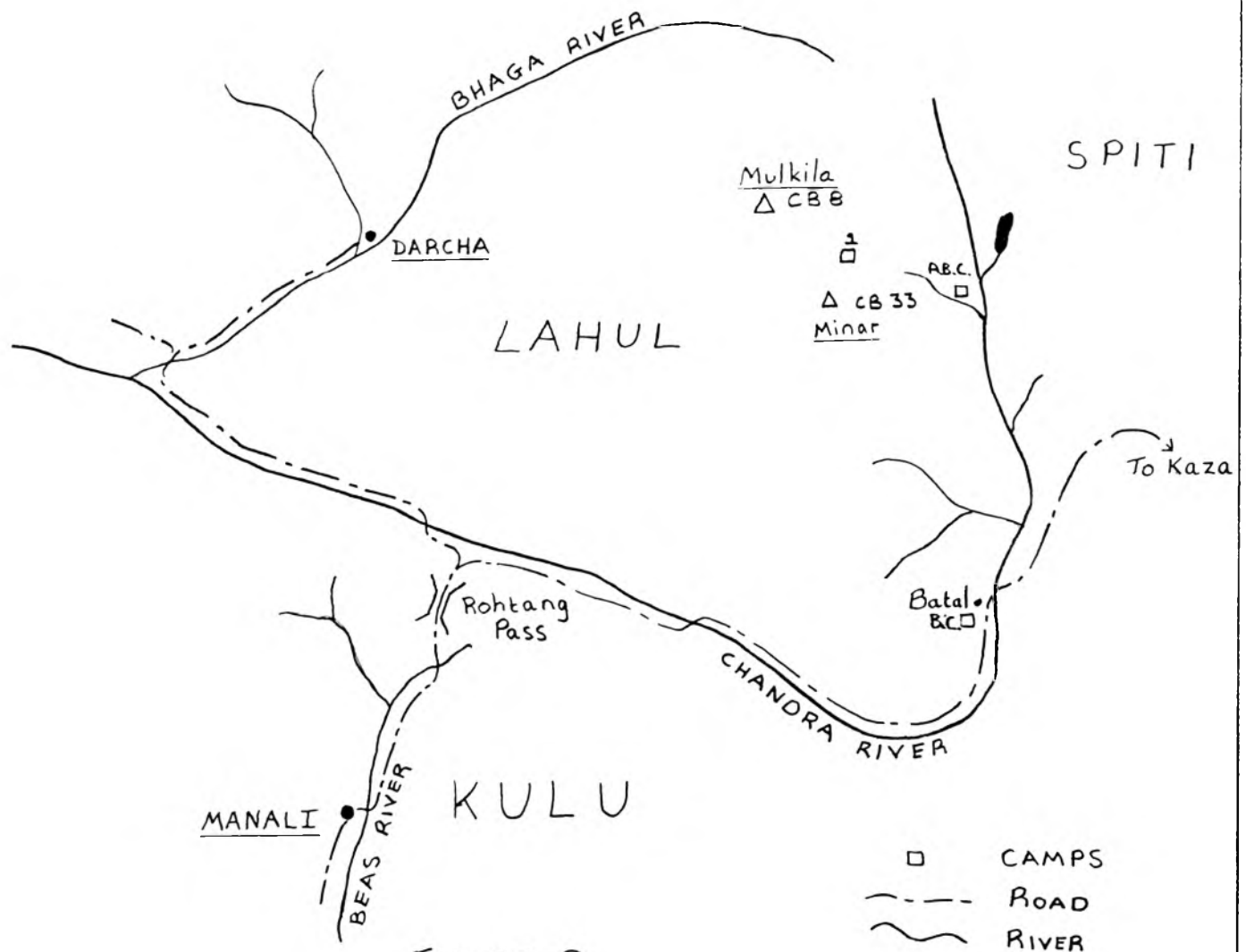


FIGURE - 2

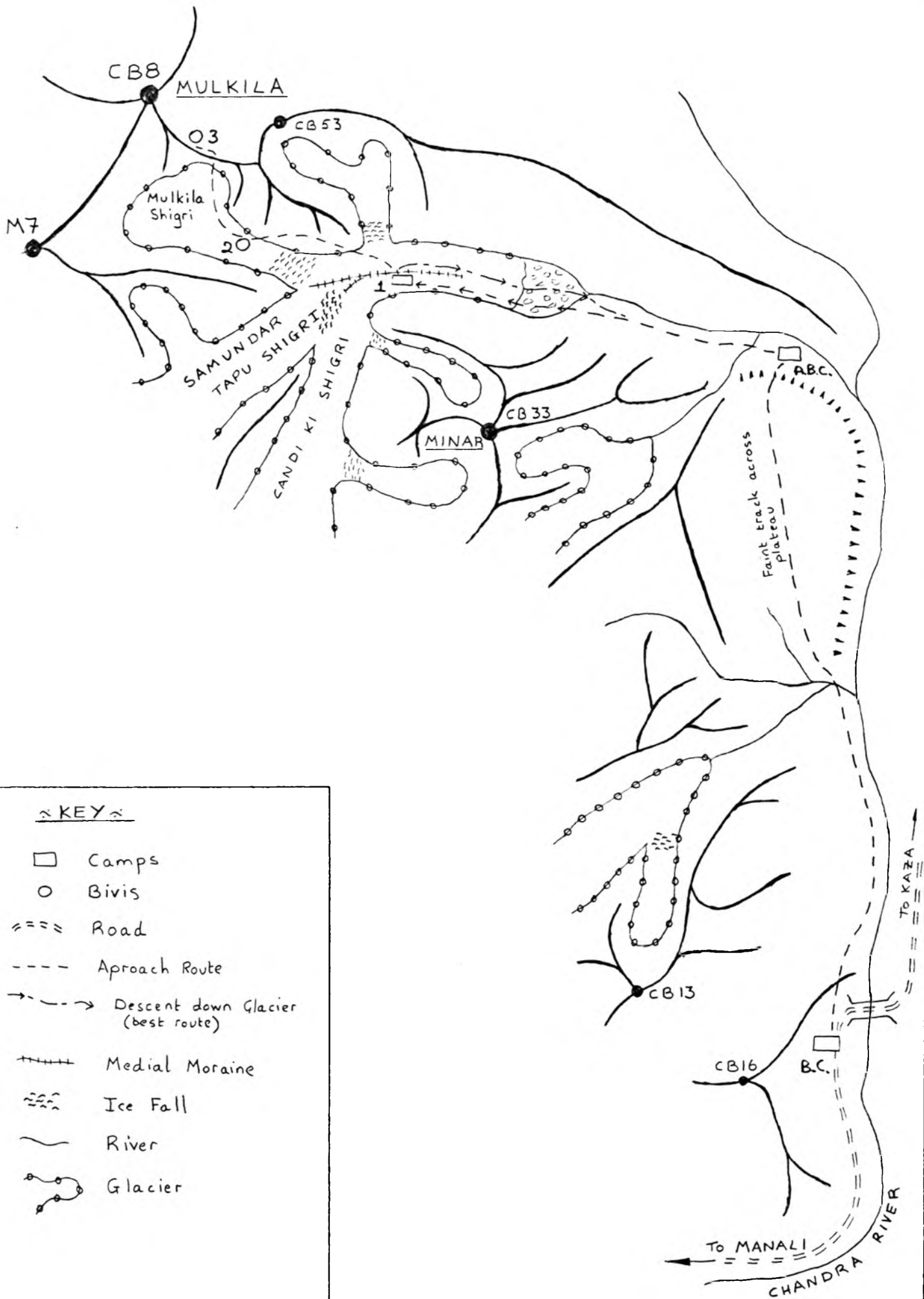


FIGURE - 3