

Rupshu Expedition

1997



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Introduction

An account of a short expedition to the Rupshu region of the Indian Himalaya, undertaken during August 1997, with the objective of making the first ascents of two peaks in the area.

Acknowledgements

Mount Everest Foundation and **British Mountaineering Council**, who provided grants that helped with the considerable cost of expeditions to peaks in this part of the Indian Himalaya.

Harish Kapadia, who suggested these excellent peaks as objectives and provided maps and a photograph.

Mandip Singh of **Ibex** who liaised with the IMF on our behalf to such good effect, and provided excellent expedition services.

Multipower Fitness and Nutrition, who provided **Top Form** drink mix and **Protein Energy Bars**, which were staple constituents in our high altitude rations. Adequate fluid intake is crucial to acclimatisation and performance, and **Top Form** provided energy and made drinking large quantities of liquid palatable.

Garraways Ltd, for providing excellent coffee, drinking chocolate and tea which quenched all our thirsts above Base Camp.

Background

I first found references to Rupshu in Harish Kapadia's book *Exploring the Hidden Himalaya*, in which it is referred to as a remote ice cap; later, in a detailed and tempting article by Bhattacharji in the *Indian Mountaineer* (2), which mentioned various mountains. The American military map of the area revealed a number of peaks and lakes, and fuelled by this and a further article by Bhattacharji in the *HJ* (3), I applied for permission to climb a peak near the Tso Moriri Lake, which was refused. It was therefore with some doubt that I applied to climb in the same area again, and this time, I was pleased to be given permission. On the kind advice of Harish Kapadia, we had chosen two peaks to attempt. Harish provided a copy of a map that is probably the most detailed available of the Rupshu area. (It has since been published in the *Himalayan Journal* (4)).

Both peaks were selected because of their proximity to the road: we had very limited time, so the aim was to set up roadside base camps, with ABC hopefully a day away, and within striking distance of the summit. This was the case with Pologongka, but our chosen route on Chakula was not so easily accessible.

Personnel

The expedition was made up of four Britons and an Indian Liaison Officer.

The British members were Mike Ratty (expedition leader), Richard Law, (environmental officer), Trevor Willis, and Anne Allcock.

Due to a variety of circumstances, Anne was not able to take part in any of the climbs, and Trevor was only able to stay for the first climb, on Chakula.

Our Liaison Officer was Narinder Singh, who proved to be an active and enthusiastic member of the team, and who took part in both climbs, and the setting up and stocking of advance base camps.

Accounts

The expedition's expenses were shared equally among the four participants. Very little equipment was bought specifically for the expedition as the team members already had sufficient tentage, cooking and climbing equipment. However, clothing had to be found for the Liaison Officer, and consumables bought.

The expedition was in receipt of two grants, one from the Mount Everest Foundation and another from the British Mountaineering Council.

Please note that these figures do not include the cost of international air travel which team members organised independently (average cost £405 return to/from Heathrow), and internal flights, which were part of the charges levied by Ibex.

The two major costs were expedition services and peak fees. With very limited time to spend in India, it was decided to cede all responsibility for organisation of travel, camps etc. to an Indian expedition agency: this would minimise time spent negotiating with drivers, pony-men and potential camp staff in Leh, and maximise our time together on the hill. Ibex Expeditions of Delhi were able to provide a complete service, and so this appears as one cost item.

Peak fees for this part of India are very expensive, because they are within the former Inner Line. However, because two peaks were to be attempted, the second was costed at half price, and there was a further reduction (negotiated by Mandip Singh of Ibex) to compensate for overpayment on a previous expedition.

All of us had limited summer holiday, and in particular Trevor Willis could only stay until mid August, giving him time to attempt just one of the mountains. For this reason his personal contribution to expedition income is smaller.

All members took cash with them to India (approx. £200) to cover expenses and additional incidental costs. This provided an *ad hoc* petty cash account, which does not appear below. For example, Syrian Airlines withdrew a baggage concession without notice or explanation, so cash payments were needed for excess baggage at Heathrow and for freight at Delhi. Various members paid these, and along with the costs of meals, drinks and taxis, adjustments were made at the end of the trip.

The following is a summary of the income and expenses of the expedition.

Income

1	Personal contributions:	
	M. Ratty:	£2000
	R. Law:	£2000
	A. Allcock:	£2000
	T. Willis:	£1300
2	Grants	
	M.E.F.:	£600
	B.M.C.:	£450
3	Other income	
	Bank interest:	£ 8
	Income total	£8358

Expenditure

1	Expedition services	£4400
2	Expedition food	£ 75
3	Peak fees	£3233
4	Liaison Officer expenses	£ 650
	Expenses Total	£8358

Geography

Appendix I contains three maps. The colour map shows the locations of the two ranges, relative to the main landmark, the Tso Moriri Lake.

Rupshu is in the south-eastern part of Ladakh, on its borders with Tibet. Described variously as an ice cap (1) and high altitude desert (2), it is -like much of Ladakh- arid and mountainous, but also has a number of interesting and sometimes large lakes. Tso Moriri has become a popular tourist destination, with four wheel drive treks visiting Karzok (Rupshu's main town). The Pangong Tso, which lies on the border with Tibet, is also on many itineraries. There are some sites of geothermal activity, with steaming sulphur-yellow holes visible from the road, and a number of salt lakes. One, the Tso Kar, has been used as a commercial source of salt. Apart from Karzok there are a number of villages and also the inevitable army bases. From the mountaineer's point of view there are a number of small mountain groups to be found, all well below 7000m, but some with good rock and small glacial systems. All can be reached in a day from Leh by road, although not all the roads are surfaced.

Our first target was Chakula (6529m). This is the highest peak of a group immediately NE of Chumatang, an army base about one day's drive from Leh. The group is complex: on the Western side a steep and rocky ridge runs approx. N to S, and from this a series of ridges run E to W, forming a number of cirques on the eastern side. This produces several peaks around 6000m, of which Chakula is the highest, and at the centre of the group. Cairns are visible on some of the summits, and there is scope for all manner of climbing. Plenty of snow covers the ridges, which enclose small glaciers, and the N faces are steep and ice covered. The rock varies, but in places is reassuringly solid and blocky, apparently granite. Map 2 shows details of the Chakula range, with roads, tracks and camps.

Visible from the moraines above ABC were two lakes to the north. One was apparently covered in ice, although well below the level of any glaciers. Whilst the rest of the team was engaged on the climb, Anne explored the lakes and the surrounding area. The "ice lake" was reached by a gradual climb to a broad col passing meltwater lakes and boggy ground, and a descent to the lake. Over half of its surface was covered in sheet ice, and there was a build up of broken ice on the eastern shore. The water was not noticeably saline.

The second peak was Pologongka. This was less than a day's journey away from Chakula by road, and the two ranges are clearly visible from one another: however, the two are very different. Whilst the Chakula range has glaciers and icy faces, the Pologongka range are rocky, blunt topped mountains that belie their height. Although higher than Chakula, the peaks in this group carry snow only on the summit ridges and north faces, and the south side is windswept and rocky, with the occasional shrinking glacier. They lie on the north side of the Pologongka La, a broad pass linking the salt lakes of the Thugje Chemno plains with the valley of the Tso Moriri. Map 3 shows the Pologongka group, with details of the ascent, descent, approach, and supporting camps.

Chakula: Approach & Camps

We arrived at the Mahe roadhead after a wet journey from Leh. At one point the road was almost completely blocked by a huge boulder that a landslip had left behind. To our amazement, our driver manoeuvred the Tata 4WD around the boulder, despite the huge drop just inches beyond the offside wheels. Needless to say we got out!

At Mahe we set up camp in the fields below the monastery, and the following day visited Tso Moriri while the road was cleared and the lorry with our baggage and camp staff arrived.

Our map had proved accurate: from the village a good trail wound north through the range of mountains, leading to the Pangong Tso, and a lake offered a good Base Camp location. This took one long day to walk in over two passes. The baggage went in on horse, pony and donkey back: we hired the animals from the monastery. The second pass was very steep, and gave the horses some problems.

Base Camp was a pleasant site near a stream at the head of the basin containing the Yaye Tso Lake. A short walk through boulders led into the next valley. This is a broad flat basin in which there is a small lake and much bog, presumably the remains of a much bigger lake. The glacial valleys of most of the Chakula system open into this basin, so this is the key to accessing the range. The following day we followed the western slopes until Chakula could be clearly seen, and found a site for ABC on the hillside below the moraine of the Chakula glacier. We pitched two tents here, and over the next three days we ferried equipment to ABC and then on to a cache below the glacier snout. The rain that had accompanied us from Leh dried up and we enjoyed fine weather. Mike explored the glacier which was gently sloping, and apparently without crevasses. It occupies a classic position in a horseshoe shaped valley formed by the truncated spur descending eastward from Chakula and the steep ice and snow of the North face of Chakula's southern neighbour: the two peaks were linked above the glacier head by some fairly solid rocky cliffs.

Chakula Attempt

The obvious line of ascent for Chakula was to climb to the top of the spur via the gullies above the glacier head, and from here access the upper ice (snow?) field below the summit. The alternative approach –up the truncated spur- looked like hard work among interminable loose rock..

Our time was limited, so on August 12th Richard, Trevor, Mike and Narinder set off to bivvy at the glacier head. This unfortunately coincided with a decline in the weather, and the bivouac was an uncomfortable one, beset with wind, rain, snow and spindrift. The early start the following morning was postponed, but finally the sky cleared and moving together in two pairs, we set off up the gully. Soft snow slowed progress, and we reached the shoulder late in the afternoon. We were a little short of 6000m. Cloud was building up again, and all were tired, so we reluctantly retreated to ABC, and slept through another snowfall. In two day's time Trevor was due to return to Leh and fly home, while the rest of us were to move on to Pologongka. There was no alternative but to abandon the attempt on Chakula and leave enough time to clear away our camps.

Pologongka Approach and Camps

Our base camp was just below the pass, literally at the roadside, on soft ground near streams. The numerous small holes scattered over the ground proved to be burrows-homes to a colony of hamsters. Every day herds of yak and flocks of sheep and goats were driven over the pass, and occasional jeeploads of tourists drove by on their way from Tso Moriri. Climbing the slopes S of the road gave a good view of the complex northern skyline. Steep sided spurs, truncated by the broad pass, run down from the main spine that runs westwards from Thugje (6148m), the peak which looms over the Tso Kar salt lake. Pologongka (official height 6632m) is the highest point of a long ridge, in fact the western spur of a huge irregular cirque. It has an eastern twin (from which it is separated by a deep notch in the ridge) that is a little lower; this is not named on any map that we have seen, and is called Pologongka II on Map 3, because of its continuity with the main peak. Joined to the main ridge are several minor peaks, both inside and outside the cirque. The largest of these is probably Gurzak (see map 3).

The lack of ice and snow made Pologongka a relatively easy mountain to approach. At Basecamp, foreshortening gave a totally erroneous picture, so Richard and Mike walked up one of the hills opposite the Pologongka group. This revealed the layout of the range, and the highest point was identified. ABC was pitched at the base of a rocky spur that ran down from the long summit ridge. The spur gave an apparently direct and reasonably angled route to the summit; alternative lines were scree filled gullies or large convex boulder slopes.

The summit party was three: Mike Ratty, Richard Law and Narinder Singh.

Ascent of Pologongka Peak

Three expedition members reached the summit of Pologongka at approximately 11:00 am on Wednesday 20th August, after leaving ABC around 04:30. By the altimeter we carried, we believe it to be 6470m (approx. 21,220'). No technical ground was encountered on the ascent, but the route followed a wide scree-covered buttress immediately above ABC.

After some photography and refreshments on the summit, 2 members turned west, to descend into the head of the nearest pass, in the hope of finding an alternative ascent routes for the fourth member. One mountaineer (Richard Law) turned east, to complete the traverse of the summit ridge.

This started with easy snow slopes descending from the summit, and bearing first east then southwards. By keeping close to the inside rim of the cwm, better progress was made, as the snow was more solid, with patches of rock to walk on. Within a quarter mile of leaving the summit, a line of fresh animal footprints (possibly snow leopard) was seen, which appeared and disappeared periodically on the snow for much of the rest of the way.

A small subsidiary summit was passed, after which the ridge turned markedly to the south, and soon afterwards a large bulge of snow was reached, blocking the ridge. The ridge at this point was quite narrow, with steep loose scree on the West side, and hard snow on the east. The snow bulge appeared too unstable to tackle direct, so the decision was made to skirt it on the East side. A rather precarious traverse went along the top of a drift for about 30m, directly underneath the most overhanging section, and then scrambled up a short rock step to rejoin the ridge.

For some while the going was once again uneventful, until the edge of the rock buttress that can be seen from the Pologongka La was reached. To descend this directly would require abseiling, and no rope was carried. Some scree-strewn ledges on the east face were thus used, to reach the bottom of the cliff; this also avoided the ice-choked chimneys in the cliff itself.

After that, the traverse produced no more difficulties other than some awkward steps at the end of the ridge, descending towards one of the big snow patches high up in the cwm above ABC. Once confidence was gained in the stability and condition of this snow patch, it provided an easy method of descent into the cwm, from where a long walk back over boulder-scrree ensued to ABC itself.

The descent route taken by Narinder and Mike was due West. This follows steep snow slopes that are nevertheless safe and straightforward, and lead to a well-defined rocky gully. This descends to the remains of a glacier, which consists of a large ice mass melting into a pool. These are easily circumvented on the (true) left, and the gully continues down, broadening out at the bottom, near the site of ABC, at the bottom of the rock ridge used for ascent.

ENVIRONMENTAL REPORT

Local Conditions

Much of Ladakh, including Rupshu, is essentially a high altitude desert, with agriculture restricted to the irrigated valleys, and nomadic pastoralism/seasonal transhumance practised in the mountains. In most places, particularly away from the major road routes, Western consumer products are not in great evidence, but this seems to be changing as the amount of goods transported into the region from the Indian plains increases.

Around the villages and summer settlements, there is evidence of an absence of effective waste disposal facilities, or at least an unwillingness to use them if the do exist. Rusting food tins, broken glass, discarded shoes, items of clothing etc. are evident in places, often in concentrations that suggest some form of dumping site. However, this is generally neither intrusive nor significant.

The area's roads are actively being converted from dirt tracks to metalled surfaces by a division of the army, Himank. Quite apart from our mixed feelings about this (better roads makes for easier access, which in turn makes the area more popular) the expedition members were disappointed at the lax behaviour of the gangs in disposing of the empty bitumen barrels. These are opened by puncturing with a sharp implement - pickaxe or similar. When emptied, there seemed to be little attempt to remove them from site or collect them - they are frequently rolled down the hillside or left to rust where they lay.

In the course of moving between Basecamps, the expedition passed through a valley to the west of the Indus bridge at Mahe. Predominantly used as pastureland, there was little sign of permanent habitation, particularly in the upper reaches of the valley. We did, however, see quite a large area which appeared to have been used for sulphur mining, with some spoil heaps, processing plant and dilapidated buildings left where they lay.

Expedition impact

For major movements between locations, the expedition travelled by motor transport. From Leh to Mahe, the members were driven by jeep, whilst the equipment travelled by truck. We also made a jeep trip to Karzok and back. From Mahe village to the Basecamp below Chakula and back, horses and donkeys were hired from the village. Upon our return to Mahe, we transferred to the Pologongka La by truck, and later left there in two jeeps to return to Leh over the Taglang La.

Both Basecamps and the higher Advanced Basecamps were necessarily chosen with a view to the availability of water. At Basecamp, this was normally boiled before drinking, and either boiled or filtered at ABCs. The expedition members were meticulous in their clearing of packaging waste from food packets, cigarettes, drinks etc., all of which were removed from ABCs back to Basecamp. Nothing more than a few spent matches was left on the mountains. A line of cairns marking the route to Chakula ABC was demolished after the last occupancy of that site. Human waste and tissue papers at ABCs were buried in scrapes, or under boulders. At BCs, the toilet tent was erected over a latrine pit some 18 - 24" deep, into which alternating layers of

waste and excavated earth were backfilled. The tent was moved to a new location several metres away when the pit became full.

Packaging and food waste from cooking etc. at BCs was separated, where feasible. The combustible elements were burned in a small pit at Chakula BC, which unfortunately resulted in a bush being scorched quite extensively. The other portion was returned to Leh in plastic bags for disposal. At the Pologongka La Basecamp, the cook staff buried one bag full of kitchen waste in the sand moraine above camp. This was retrieved, at our insistence, on the morning of departure, and returned to Leh with all other waste packaging. Some pieces of timber (from dismantled vegetable boxes) were left at this campsite, as we considered they might prove useful to the passing shepherds.

References

- 1 Mehta, S., Kapadia, H., (1990) *Exploring the Hidden Himalaya*
- 2 Bhattacharji, R., (1985) *Indian Mountaineer*, No 15 pp 35-48
- 3 Bhattacharji, R., (1994) *Himalayan Journal* 50 pp 124 – 143
- 4 Kapadia, H., (1996) *Himalayan Journal* 51 pp 81 - 91
- 5 Microsoft Corporation, (1998) *Encarta World Atlas* CD ROM

Appendix I

Mountaineers planning to visit Rupshu will find no adequate commercial maps. Sheet NI 44-9 of the US Army Map Service includes all of the peaks and roads referred to in this account, but does not show modern roads. Kapadia's map (4) is the most accurate in this respect.

In order to illustrate this report, three maps are reproduced.

Map 1.

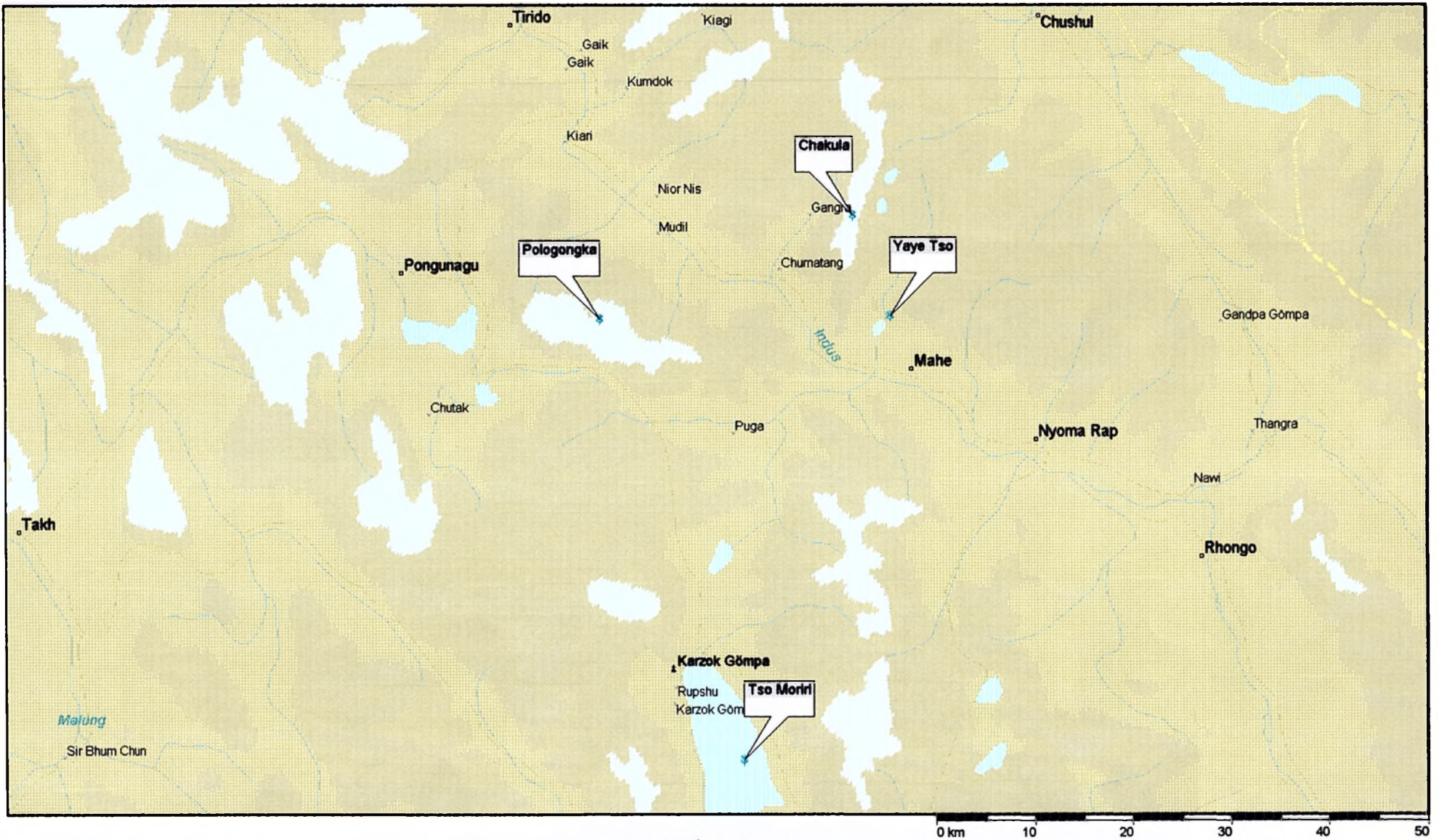
This was derived from *Microsoft Encarta* (3). It shows much of the Rupshu area, and gives a useful idea of the scale of the expedition, and locates it with reference to the Tso Moriri Lake, which is shown on most maps.

Map 2.

Drawn by Mike Ratty from slides taken by him and Anne Allcock. The dotted lines show the routes of ascent and descent from the roadside at Mahe village to the expedition's high point on the mountain. The many ridges and tops of the Chakula group are shown as accurately as possible. No glaciers have been shown.

Map 3.

Drawn by Mike Ratty from his slides. The dotted lines show routes of ascent and descent. The descent line to the west was that of M. Ratty and N. Singh, whilst that to the east was that of R. Law.

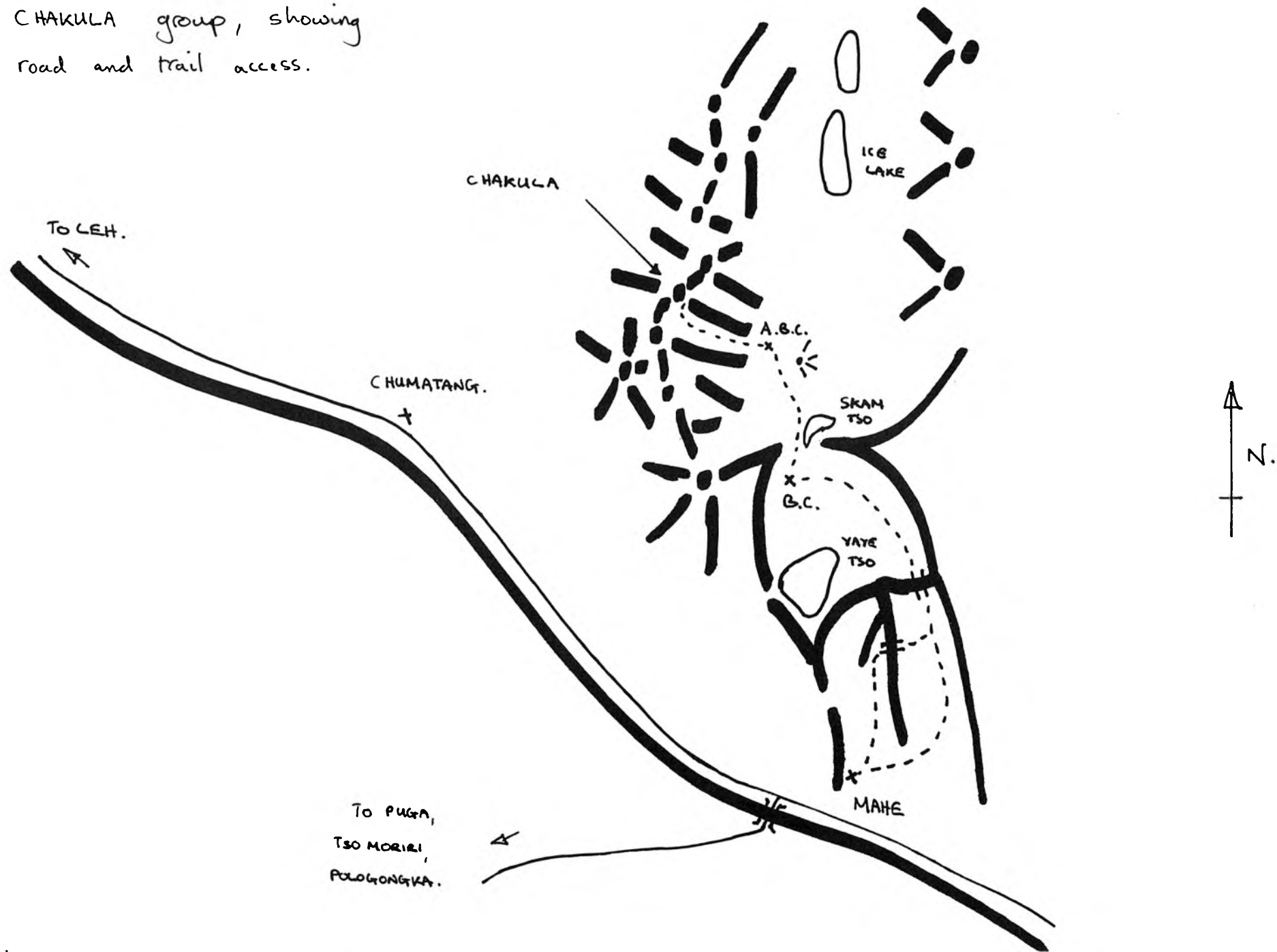


Microsoft
ENCARTA 98
 WORLD ATLAS

Map 1 Map of Rupshu for orientation

Map 2 (not to scale)

CHAKULA group, showing road and trail access.



MAP 3 (not to scale)

POLOGONGKA group, showing road access, and lines of ascent and descent.

