South Simvu: Kanchenjunga's last kept Secret

Text & Photographs: Anindya Mukherjee

"Maps, if caviare[1] *to the general, are, as Louis Stevenson has insisted, very suggestive to persons with proper imagination."*
- Douglas Freshfield, Round Kangchenjunga, p-20

Story of maps and an invisible glacier

For the last few years I have been trying to explore the valleys and glaciers of the south-eastern flanks of Kangchenjunga. To be a bit more specific, my explorations were focused on the little or completely unknown glaciers like Talung, Tongshyong ,South Simvu glaciers and the valley system created by their rivers (Rukel-Rongyoung or Talung Chu) emanating from them.

From the south summit of Kangchenjunga (8476m) a high ridge extends east separating the Zemu glacier valley on the north from South Simvu, Tongshyong and Talung glaciers to the south. These three glaciers form the head of the Talung Basin. Although both Tongshyong and Talung glaciers have been visited by explorers (Talung, for the first time in 1890 by J. Claude White and Tongshyong in 1920 by Harold Raeburn) before; one glacier remained completely unknown- the South Simvu Glacier.

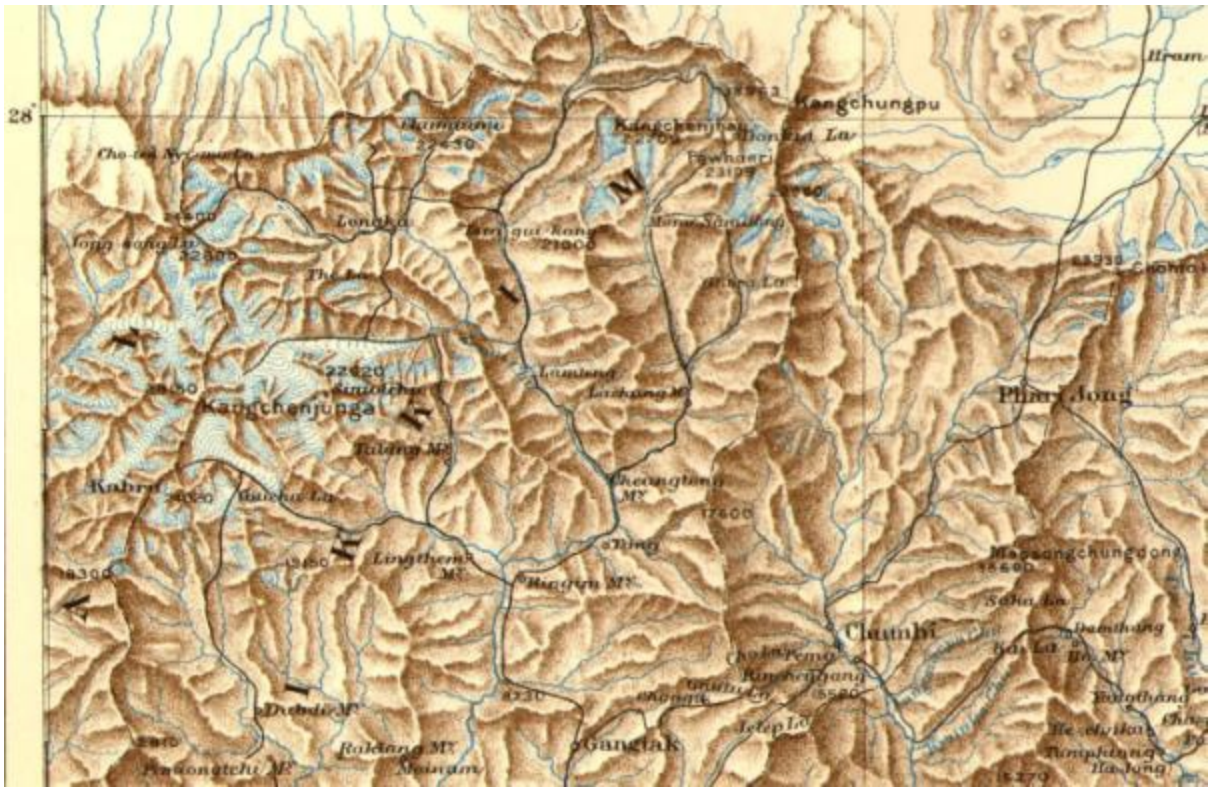

Figure 1 John Claude White's map of Sikkim and Bhutan (published by RGS 1910) shows Talung, Tongshyong and Passanram glaciers

1 Spelling unchanged

How come a whole glacier in the close vicinity of the mighty Kangchenjunga stood unnoticed this long is a fascinating story! I can accept and fully understand its oversight by the explorers of early 1900s. The lack of a detailed map is always a major hindrance for the exploring kind. But in this curious case of South Simvu glacier, it was simply not there! Col. Waugh's map of 1848 and Sir Joseph Hooker's map of 1849 (and subsequently of 1854) naturally did not have any detail of the Talung valley as no one had ventured there yet. John Claude White's crossing of the Guicha la and subsequent journey down the Talung Chu gorge in 1890 resulted in another map (The Geographical Journal 1910. Figure- 1). This map brought a new light. Talung and Tongshyong glaciers got noticed here for the very first time. But the most significant work of cartography happened with Douglas Freshfield's 'high level tour' of the Kangchenjunga in 1899. Freshfield was accompanied by cartographer Prof. E.J. Garwood. Professor Garwood's map was very close to being perfect in reference to the other glaciers in the same valley, namely Talung, Tongshyong, and even Passanram glaciers. But there was no sign of South Simvu. The cause of the invisibility of the glacier in Garwood's map is self explanatory today, when one reads Prof. Garwood's comments on how he had drawn this particular section in his map, *" ...in the case of heads of the glens under Si-imvovonchum and Siniolchum, from sketches made by Mr. Freshfield from above Gantok."*[2] It is quite obvious that any map of a jagged terrain of Himalayan scale, drawn with inputs from observations made from as far as (and as low) Gangtok surely cannot be without errors.

Figure 2 Prof E. J. Garwood's map shows Talung, Tongshyong and Passanram glaciers but no South Simvu

2 Freshfield, Round Kangchenjunga, page-304

Interestingly, this glacier did not appear in the knowledge base until the recent mappings done by the Swiss (Sikkim Himalaya map of 1951). This was later incorporated by the American Army Corps of Engineers map of 1955. However, a very clear depiction of Upper Talung region, especially of South Simvu that drew my attention most is Tadashi Toyoshima's map of 1977. In all my expeditions in Sikkim Himalaya so far, I have used Toyoshima's map for preliminary planning and found it to be very accurate despite this map not being a topographical one.

The Protagonists

J. Claude White's journey through the Talung gorge and Freshfield's epic tour around Kangchenjunga opened doors for exploring mountaineers. Starting from Harold Raeburn (1920) to H.W.Tilman (1938), the visitors of upper Talung valley had a few distinct, yet limited objective- climbing. Mount Pandim (6691m), the Zemu Gap (5861m) and the Kangchenjunga remained their centre of attraction. Everything else around was overshadowed. Once they were done with their efforts and attempts, they did not have enough time or energy to stay back and look around in this inhospitable part of remote Sikkim. The only significant exploratory trip in the Raeburn-Tilman era (1920-1938) was taken by a small team of Paul Bauer's party (1937). They crossed the great East Ridge from north (Zemu Glacier) and entered the middle Talung Valley via a col located at the head of Passanram glacier. While doing their crossing in October 1937, they in all probability could not have noticed the existence of South Simvu glacier as 'their' col never gave them the optimal and strategic elevation to have a sneak peek on what lay immediately south of the Simvu twins.

This era was followed by a complete absence of exploratory action in this valley till 1975 and the second phase of exploratory action began. But this second phase concentrated on what their predecessors left unfinished and a series of onslaught on Zemu Gap started. Thus, in spite of being visible from the 1950s, South Simvu remained unnoticed till our visit in May 2014[3]. As a mountain explorer from heart myself, I looked at this blank in the map as a loadstone sending out strong vibrations of invitation.

3 Refer to HJ Vol. 68, page-37 for a list of exploratory activity in the Talung Valley

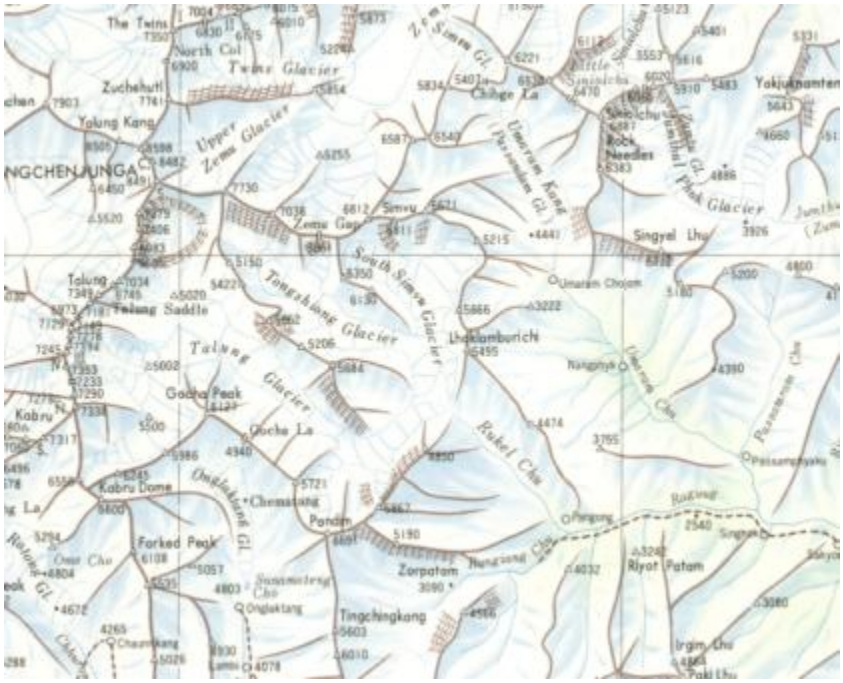

Figure 3 Tadashi Toyoshima's map of 1977

Exploration of South Simvu

In April-May 2014, I was part of an expedition (Alberto Peruffo) that aimed to explore the Tongshyong glacier and Talung glaciers further. While my colleagues were busy and happy looking at the possibilities of countless new routes all around, I decided to head off in the direction of the last unexplored glacier of the Talung Valley; the South Simvu. Our base camp was near the confluence of Talung and Tongshyong streams, almost in the same camping ground as our Zemu Gap expedition of December 2011.

Figure 4 the junction of Talung and Tonshyong Chu. Base camp tents are visible. Pandim's north face in the background

From the observations made during my previous three expeditions in 2011, I had formed a fair idea on how to approach the South Simvu glacier, which like Tongshyong lay completely out of sight from the Talung gorge. Signs, such as old, settled moraine ridges and a powerful stream coming from the direction of Mount Simvu, suggested strongly of a glacial existence. But, it was not visible. We assumed it has withdrawn its reaches higher up to a shelf and has become a hanging glacier. Old terminal and lateral moraines, braided outwash stream; all suggested the classic case of a cirque glacier in our disposal here. Signs were abound to argue in favour of its retreat from a previously greater extension. How and when did South Simvu retreat? Well, this can only be diagnosed by a glaciologist but, my thought was that, as a climbing problem, a cirque or hanging glacier often offers a more severe challenge than that of a valley glacier? What will this one throw at us?

On 3 May, 2014, along with Thendup Sherpa, Lakpa Sherpa, I left base camp and kept following the steep right lateral moraine coming down from the direction of South Simvu. After a continuous climb of 5 hours we reached a big, slightly overhanging rock cliff. Interestingly, during the entire days of April-May 2014, the whole of upper Talung valley engulfed itself in thick fog latest by 9 in the morning. This pattern of early white-out lasted for nearly 4 weeks of our stay inside the gorge. The same thing happened on that day as well, allowing us no chance for a better visibility. Later in the day, we took shelter below that overhang cliff.

For the next two days we did reconnaissance trips further up the valley hoping for a clearer day. Finally one morning, before the clouds came up rushing, we saw the outline of an icefall that announced South Simvu's presence. To the delight of our exploratory mind, we saw the twin summits of Simvu rising above the icefall. This re-affirmed our motivation and on 6 May, 2014, myself and Thendup Sherpa left our overhang shelter hoping to cross the first ice fall obstacle and set up a high camp. An easy snow gully to the true right of the icefall gave us access to the upper plateau of the glacier. Due to poor visibility and bad snow conditions it took us nearly 7 hours to reach the neve of the glacier. We pushed on and camped at around 5300m.

An attempt on peak 6350m

From the Swiss contour map I had in my disposal, I was aware of the existence of two unnamed 6000m peaks close to me somewhere. Peak 6350m and Peak 6130m are located on the ridge running south east, dividing Tongshyong and South Simvu glaciers. Now that we have actually entered the South Simvu, my immediate attention was drawn towards those unclimbed 6000m peaks. But, due to poor visibility, we got no bearings on our position that entire day (6 May, 2014) and waited patiently for the early hours of the next morning, when we thought, would be able to orient ourselves.

Figure 5 view of Siniolchu over the 5215m unnamed col. the rock needles on the watershed between Passanram and Jumthul Phuk glaciers also visible on immediate right of col. Photo taken from our high point on peak 6350m

7 May, 2014. We woke up to great expectations! Today, we will see and document a glacier that was never seen before! We felt fortunate and a bit proud to be the first! Thankfully, we were not disappointed with the view that morning. To our north Simvu twins (6812m-West and 6811m-East) looked gigantesque and dominated the skyline. To our NNE, after a stretch of a snow field full of crecentric crevasses, we could clearly see a col (5215m) a bit lower than our campsite sharply dropping to the Passanram (also referred to as Umaram Kang glacier in some maps) side. Above and beyond that 5215m col rose Siniolchu (6887m) in all its grandeur. To our east, right across the glacier (to the south of 5215m col) rock peaks 5666m and Lhokamburichi (5495m) formed the boundary wall between South Simvu and Passanram glaciers. Looking at the unmistakable thumb like feature of Lhokamburichi, I realised that this is the ridge that one can see from lower Talung valley while looking at Simvu. This is the ridge that completely hides South Simvu glacier from its east and south east. This is the reason it never came out in the sketches made by Freshfield from above Gangtok!

Figure 6 Simvu twins on the right and Kangchenjunga on the left. The ridge in centre foreground is the lhokamburichi ridge that guards South Simvu glacier.

Figure 7 Lhokamburichi as seen from South Simvu glacier

To our South we could see Narsing (5825m); Jopuno (5936m) group of peaks, Pandim (6691m) and to our immediate NW stood the two unnamed peaks 6350m and 6130m respectively. Without wasting much time Thendup and I roped up and started towards the nearest objective from our campsite, peak 6350m.

Figure 8 peak 6350m on the left and Simvu west on the right

Within next 4 hours we climbed through a narrow gully to the east of peak 6130m and reached the base of the summit rock pyramid of peak 6350m. We were just a roped up party of two and it did not take us long to decide that we were not bagging any peaks that day. To climb the rock pyramid would need protection, which none of us were carrying in our lightweight push. When we left base camp, the highest we were hoping to achieve was to find and reach the right glacier. And when we reached the glacier, we took our ambition a level higher, to climb an unclimbed 6000m! Such is the human nature.

We were close to 6000m and our high point worked as a perfect vantage point for exploratory photo documentation and so I told myself to be happy with what achieved and retreat. From our high point we could photograph some extra ordinary views of the head of South Simvu glacier, Simvu twins, Siniolchu and even its rock needles over the Passanram valley. It was nearly midday, and snow conditions got worse than ever. Thendup and I have been climbing together nearly a decade now and hence trusted in each other's belay. We reached camp in complete whiteout. Packed up heavy next morning and happily started down towards base camp.

South Simvu glacier is not invisible anymore.

Figure 9 view of Siniolchu from our high camp in the South Simvu glacier

Team: Anindya Mukherjee, Thendup Sherpa, Lakpa Sherpa

Time: May 2014

Summary: Exploration of South Simvu glacier in Sikkim Himalaya