Bhagirathi III

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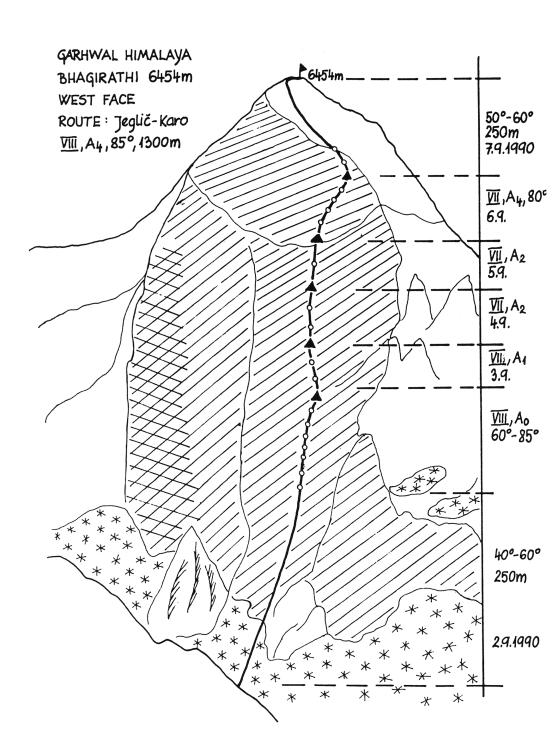
SIAN HEAT and time constraints encourage Janez Jeglič, Dr. Mojca Zajc and me, together with our liaison officer Hemant Bohr, to leave New Delhi on the second day after our arrival on August 17. Following our climb in India, Jeglič and I would continue to Nepal to join the Alpe Adria Expedition on Mount Everest. We leave the Indian plains and travel to the roadhead at Gangotri village. Two days later, we set up Base Camp at Nandanban at the edge of the Gangotri Glacier.

We combine acclimatization and viewing the west face of Bhagirathi III with ferrying equipment. After a short rest in Base Camp, we start up the face on August 27. By afternoon, we have already climbed 450 meters and set up a bivouac. Yet, as the Slovene saying goes, "Bad luck never rests!" As we climb into the portaledge, an ice screw anchoring the hammock breaks and leaves us dangling on pitons a meter lower and helplessly watching food and gear roll down the face. We can't go on, but rockfall below prevents descent until the morning.

On September 1, we are back under the face again. We spend most of the day examining the impressive wall above us. On its left ridge rises the Spanish route and on the right one, the Scottish. The central part has been left untouched. We repack a minimum of food and gear. We calculate on seven days of climbing. By evening, the haul bag and single rucksack are ready. The tension is great and we barely sleep, constantly checking the watch.

Early on September 2, we head up the face. We know the dangers of the bottom part. We must climb it before the sun reaches it to avoid the cannonade of rocks, water and ice. We ascend the ice on the first section quite fast, but the mixed terrain then makes the job more difficult, where we are hampered by the haul bag. After eight pitches, we set up a bivouac where the ice ends. As we settle in, only the tip of Bhagirathi is lit by the setting sun. The water, cascading down the wall, freezes into silence in the approaching evening cold.

Above us, the wall overhangs. We must now increase the weight of our loads by adding ice. The face above is dry and the only liquid we can get is from ice. We begin the real climb. The first pitch is rock. The major difficulties are the ice-filled cracks, which have to be cleared to place protection. We do the next pitch in rock-climbing shoes, still frozen from the previous day. As we complete the third pitch, the weather deteriorates dramatically. We rapidly set up the bivouac as snowflakes find us despite the overhang. An already short day now

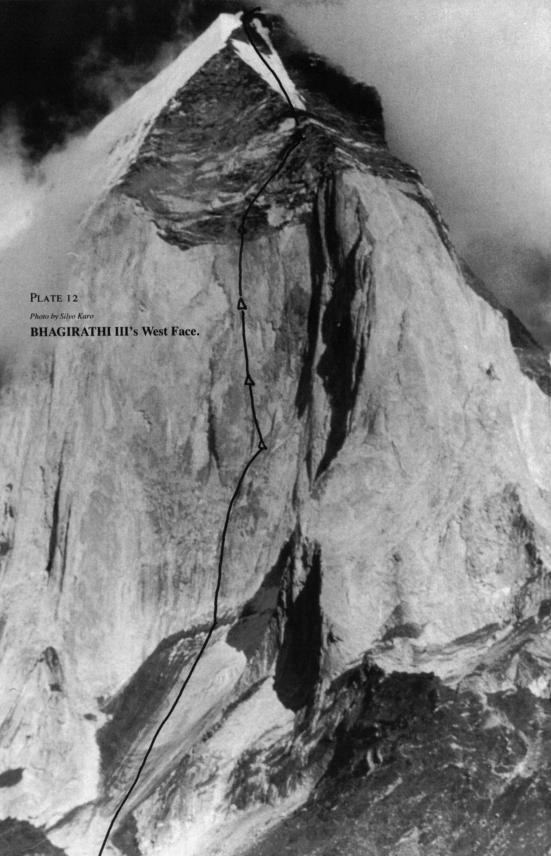


becomes even shorter. The mountain world around us falls into a silent snowy evening.

The bivouac in the portaledge is relatively comfortable, but cooking is complicated; we need to hold the stove in our hands. It snows throughout the night. The thunder of avalanches wakes us up in the morning. It is still snowing so hard that day is only slightly brighter than night. Has the world forgotten us? Above lie the biggest overhangs. We move stiffly in the cold, but the exposed pitch warms us up nicely. By the time we haul the bag up, which swings far away into the overhang, we are actually hot. After a third pitch, we set up an airy bivouac. Hanging under smooth slabs, we feel as if we were in a swing. To make life more interesting, the stove malfunctions. Skill is required to patch it with improvised tools. "Outside," it is snowing. We often wake up throughout the night, usually to put salve on dry, painful fingers. Hoping to see stars, we check the sky, but in vain. We have plenty of time to think: how long will we need to reach the black rock and the top of the rock face? We fear that the continuous snowing may increase the danger of avalanches on the summit snowfield.

The ropes we left last night hanging freely have tangled into a thick braid. What a job to untangle them! They have been wet from the first day on. After about ten meters of climbing, the rock is covered with ice. Snow falls on us again. A rather long lead takes us to a small rocky balcony. By now, we are in the black wall and on very different rock resembling crumbly coal. I put in ten pitons, and they hardly do the job of one. From the stance, we move slowly across a snowy shelf to the right. It isn't difficult, but very dangerous; everything one grabs comes off in the hand. We reach a comfortable ledge and can sit down for the first time in four days. There is even room enough for the stove and so we don't need to hold it in our hands. What a luxury! Two ravens appear from somewhere, searching for food. How could they find us when the visibility is less than ten meters? Patiently, they circle us, but there is barely enough food for us. We decide on an early night since there will be a lot of hard climbing the next day.

On the morning of the fifth day, the weather remains poor. The ledge is covered with snow. Only the overhangs stay snow-free." We abandon the portaledge on the shelf, which means we have to finish the face today. Few meters higher, we climb into an overhang of rotten rock which seems like an overhanging, newly-plowed field. What we go through in the next few hours cannot be described. One can only live through it to know what it is like. Falls of ten meters, poor protection in rotten rock, technical grade of A4, the feeling that we won't survive if we don't reach the top of the face by night! But there was no other way. Avalanches from the summit snowfield spilling over the face further complicate matters. Night catches us in a steep ice chimney. In pitch black we roll up onto a small snowy ledge. Soaked, bruised and covered with snow, we squeeze into a sleeping bag. It continues to snow and the bag quickly wets through too. The fifth bivouac is a test of endurance and patience. It took us an age to prepare some mildly warm water. Covered with snow, we try to sleep but increasing wind wakes us up. By dawn, we want to move on but are stopped by hurricane winds. From time to time, a gaping, horrible view down the face



opens up. In a cruel wind, we decide to move on. After a couple of pitches, we reach the large snowfield at the top of the face. Our progress is good on a gentle slope towards the summit against biting spindrift. There is also less to carry; we have left most of the equipment on the face. In the last particularly difficult pitch, we have even left a rope.

On September 7, on the sixth day of the climb, we finally reach the top soon after nine o'clock in the morning. We spend only a little time on the summit. A long and unknown descent is still ahead. For a short moment the fog lifts and so we can at least decide on the approximate direction we should take. The beginning of our descent is on snow but we soon reach rock. It snows heavily and visibility is nil. A snowfield of indefinable steepness is very dangerous. Often we sidetrack into too steep parts, where avalanches threaten. After a third rappel, the rope sticks. Janez struggles with it desperately. He decides on a more dangerous trick. He climbs up a bit and then jumps into the void. This time he succeeds. I see him fly with the released rope and land fifteen meters below in deep snow. We continue our descent with less and less gear. We rely on poorly placed pitons. A number of rappels are anchored on a single piton or Friend. When the rock is poor, we use a couple of them, with one remaining free to serve just in case. Janez now confesses that during one of the rappels, the Friend that should carry the weight popped out and the safety one held.

As we descend the last pitches, we run out of equipment. Even the last rope is left on the face. The slope is flattening, the snow is getting wetter and is mixed with rain. A fall into a crevasse tells me that we are on the Vasuki Glacier. From here we have another fifteen kilometers over the Chaturangi Glacier to Base Camp. At eight P.M., we reach the empty Base Camp. Due to time constraints, Mojca and the porters have already left for the valley. Soaking wet, we sit at the place which used to be the kitchen and enjoy the goodies they prepared before they went. Afterwards, we go to the camp of an Indian trekking party, where we are warmly welcomed. We are exhausted. Our bleeding, swollen hands are so painful that we have to ask for help in removing our boots. We can't even hold a cup of tea. We are too tired to sleep. All night long, all we can do is drink. In the early morning, we continue our way to Gangotri, then New Delhi and Kathmandu. After three days rest in Kathmandu, where we try to restore the ten kilograms of weight lost on the climb, we fly on September 14 to Lukla and on the 17th are already in Base Camp below Everest.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Gangotri Region, Garhwal, India.

New Route: Bhagirathi III, 6454 meters, 21,175 feet, Center of West Face, September 2 to 7, 1990 (Janez Jeglič, Silvo Karo).