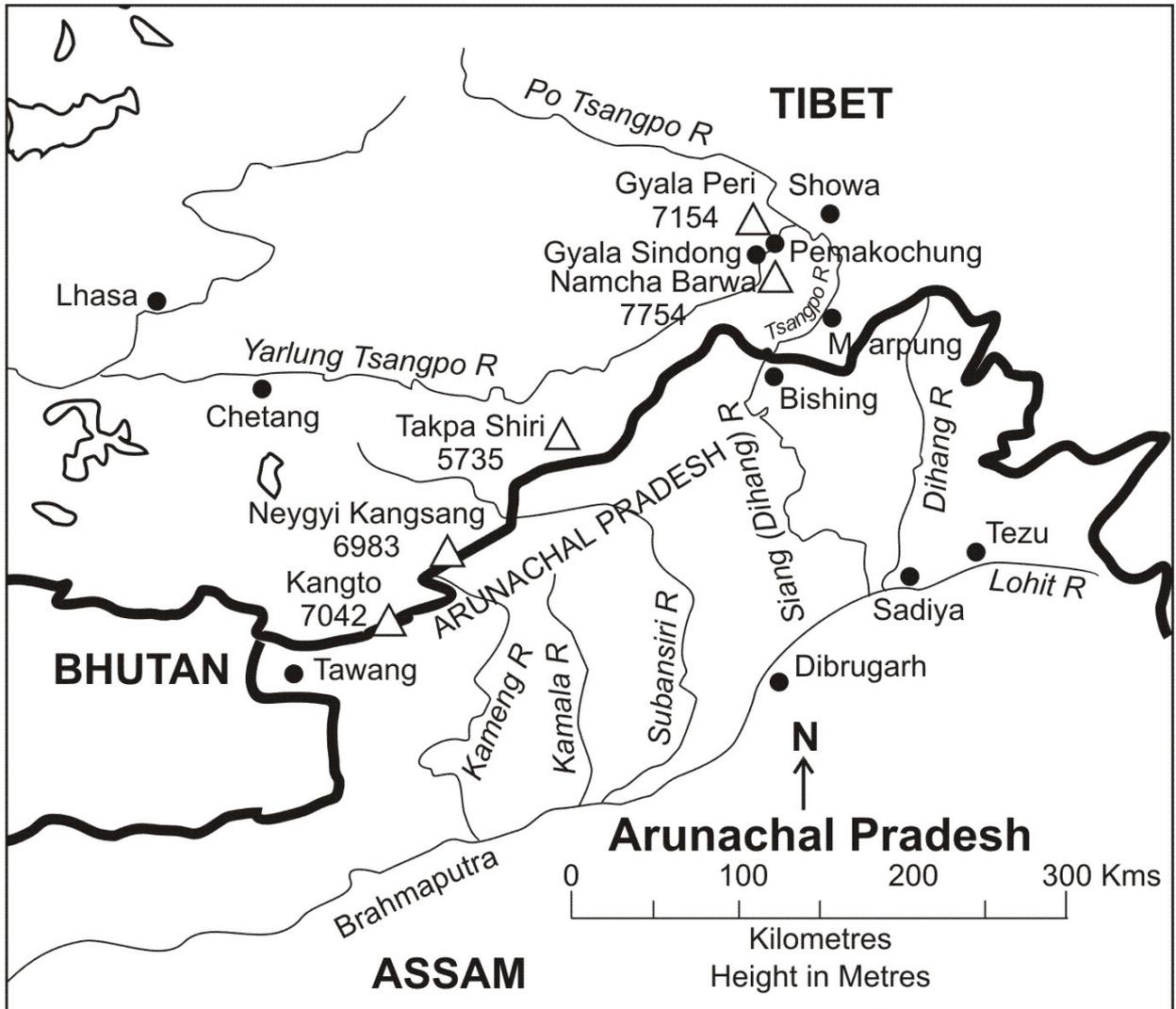


# THE SUBANSIRI VALLEY EXPEDITION 2005

On Pilgrim Route of Takpa Siri, Arunachal Pradesh



Dedicated to memory of Lt **NAWANG KAPADIA**  
[www.nawang.com](http://www.nawang.com)

**The Subansiri Expedition 2005**  
 Lt Nawang Kapadia Chowk,  
 16, Carmichael Road, 72 Vijay Apartment, Mumbai 400 026.  
 Phones: (91 22) 2352 0772 E mail: harikaps@vsnl.com

*The Subansiri Valley Expedition 2005*  
 Dedicated to memory of Lt Nawang Kapadia or 4/3 Gorkha Rifles

# THE SUBANSIRI VALLEY EXPEDITION 2005

## On Pilgrim Route of Takpa Siri, Arunachal Pradesh

There are three pilgrimages in Tibetan Buddhism, which every Buddhist is urged to perform once in lifetime. The *Kora*, or circumambulation around Kailash in the western Tibet has a special place in heart of Tibetans. The Pemako area through which the Tsangpo flows and passes between the peaks of Gyala Peri and Namcha Barwa is lined with many monasteries. These gompas form a circuit, which devoted Tibetans undertake. It extends in to the Yang Sang Chu valley near Tuting, India. The third major pilgrimage is the *Kora* around Takpa Siri peak north of the Subansiri valley. Both the latter pilgrimage routes extend south into the Lopa country (North East Frontier Agency or the present day Arunachal Pradesh). The Kailash pilgrimage is undertaken by hundreds of Hindus from India too. Tibetans and Indians earlier followed the *koras* and pilgrimages freely across both countries. The political borders were drawn later. The political upheavals stopped the Kailash pilgrimage for the Indians (and by some extent for Tibetans too) between 1959 and 1982. The Chinese even forbade Tibetans from undertaking Pemako and Takpa Siri pilgrimages during this period. The tradition of longer Takpa Siri pilgrimage stopped since 1953 and as the route is divided between India and China, it remains forbidden after the Indo-China war of 1962.

### Takpa Siri Pilgrimage

Takpa Siri is a massive ridge running north to south approximately 20 kilometres north of village Taksing. The highest point is Point 5735. At the base of the ridge and close to Keju la lies a small lake called Purang or Potrang. The lake and the ridge are both considered sacred by the Tibetans, and a yearly pilgrimage called Kingkor is made around the ridge from July to September.

Tibetans believe that a mountain with four hills/ passes and four water bodies is sacred. Takpa Siri Ridge consists of four hills/ passes and is hence called 'Rejincey'. The passes are Keju la, Sangyo la, Kangyo la, Sagam la and Chuma la (Longju). Similarly, the four water bodies, or the 'Chujincy', is formed by Yume Chu in the west, Tsari Chu in the north, Hembrang Chu in the east and Taktsang Chu in the south. The Tibetans consider a yearly pilgrimage around such a mountain to be sacred. Tibetan believe that , there are three lakes : while Purang, or Potrang is the 'Husband' Lake, Kyomu is the 'Wife' Lake and Umbare is the 'Son' Lake. Of these three, Purang or Husband Lake is considered most sacred, and is worshipped by pilgrims from all over Tibet.

Ringkor, called 'Logar' by the locals of Taksing, is the longest pilgrimage, performed once in 12 years. It was last performed in 1953. There are no records of this pilgrimage after the 1962 Sino-Indian conflict. As per tradition, only male members from all over Tibet carry out the pilgrimage. The route followed is Chosam,

Tsari Chu, Longju, Gelemo, Gelensiniak and along Subansiri to Taksing and hence to Yume. Pilgrims undertaking the Ringkor were scared to enter the Tagin areas of the Subansiri Valley, as the local tribals would set traps and loot them en route. As a result, they resorted to buying protection and guides from the Tagins by way of 13 yaks, 50 Dao (Dah), 108 Muni (bead necklaces) and food grains.

These guides escorted the pilgrims up to the junction of Chayul Chu and Yume Chu, where a feast was organised prior to the departure of the pilgrims. They were seen off with Apong (local brew) and other food items.

Kingkor, called 'Lunger' by the locals of Taksing, is a yearly pilgrimage, which again is undertaken by males only. The Purang or 'Husband' Lake is worshipped during this pilgrimage. It involves a smaller circuit around the Takpa Siri, near its base, along the track Chickchar, Mipa, Sagam la, Tamlangonga to Purang. The return route is not clearly identifiable. However according to locals, it goes via Tumdan, Chakta Changu, Karkyu la to Yume.

There are four rivers which start from the slopes of Takpa Siri, draining into the Tsari Chu and the Yume Chu, on the east and west respectively, of the mountain. The lake of Potrang, considered holy by the Tibetans, forms the centre for circumambulation in this pilgrimage. Tony Huber published a detailed study of this pilgrimage in his book, *The Cult of the Holy Crystal Mountain*.

The early travellers to this area had knowledge of the Takpa Siri pilgrimage. F. Kingdon-Ward, the famous botanist who studied the forest of Tibet and Burma, visited this area and has written about the fauna. F. Ludlow, another botanist, followed in his footsteps and photographed various aspects of Takpa Siri, and its route during his travels. F. M. Bailey with H. T. Morshead were deputed by the British Government to survey the northern range of the Arunachal Pradesh (then called NEFA) and Tibet borders. Based on their survey and observations, the McMahon Line was drawn at the Shimla Conference in 1913, which demarcated the boundary between Tibet and British India. F. M. Bailey and Morshead undertook the Kingkor or the shorter pilgrimage around Takpa Siri, which allowed them to see all the sides and cross Dorlma la. Ludlow and others wrote about the Ringkor, the longer version of circumambulation around Takpa Siri.

### **Our Trek and the Journey**

The route of the longer version, Ringkor, starts from the banks of Tsari Chu in China and passes through Arunachal Pradesh and turns north back from the banks of the Subansiri River. Hence the southern part of the trail is in the Indian territories. We decided to follow the pilgrim trail in both the valleys as far as possible till the Line of Actual Control. This would enable us to research the trail. Traditions and legends are fast disappearing as only elders of earlier generations have knowledge of these.

A party of four Indians, Harish Kapadia, Wing Cmdr. V. K. Sashindran, Mrs. Sangeetha Sashindran and Prateek Deo started from Mumbai on 15<sup>th</sup> November and gathered at Guwahati. They undertook a long journey, of almost 870 kms to reach the starting point of the trek towards this holy mountain. Spread over three days the party proceeded to Tezpur (202 km), Itanagar (198 km) to collect permits, Ziro (175

km), Daporijo (141 km) and Limiking (142 km). 14 kms ahead of Limiking at Orak the road ends at present. Descending to the banks of the river, our trek began.

### **Achingmori Incident**

En route, we had passed the village of Talliha. On the opposite bank, across the Subansiri was village of Achingmori, spread over the slope and the main village on the banks of the river. This place had played an infamous part in the history of the area.

As the British left India, this area was largely left alone until 1953, when a massacre occurred at Achingmori at the Siang Frontier Division (now known as Upper Subansiri). A party of Assam Rifles was resting in this village with their weapons stacked at one side. They were unarmed and were distributing salt as a gesture of goodwill. Hostile Tagin tribes, who distrusted visitors, inhabited these valleys. All of a sudden, locals attacked the soldiers and they were massacred to a man. The main reason was that this party had employed porters from another Abor sub-tribe, whose members, while accompanying the previous column, had caused much harassment to the villagers. The Assam Rifles were out for blood and the retribution for such hostile acts was burning entire villages, a practice well established since British times. But the then Governor, Jairamdas Daulatram, on advice of Nari Rustomji, an administrative officer who loved and understood tribals, ordered not to act aggressively. The culprits were arrested and punished but villages were not burnt. Locals were waiting for their houses to be burnt and were quite surprised when this did not happen. This allowed for the first inroads of acceptance of Indian officials in the area.<sup>1</sup> Six culprits were arrested and each was sentenced to life imprisonment as per law. The last surviving prisoner died in 2001.

### **Trek Begins**

The trail was to start with a near vertical climb of almost 800 m and we were warned of its steepness and dangers. The first point was the grave of Shere Thapa, a valiant soldier of the Indian Army who held back a major assault by the Chinese in 1962. His supporters were all killed but alone with a light machine gun, he killed several Chinese soldiers as they tried to come down the steep slopes facing him. Though Shere Thapa was ultimately killed in the battle, the Chinese buried his body respectfully and left a small note praising his bravery.<sup>2</sup>

The trail crossed a 'Foot Suspension Bridge', a typical bridge made out of steel wires with wood and bamboo spread at its foot. We were to cross such FSBs at several places, each one of different sizes and quality. Some tilted at the sides making it difficult and dangerous, while some had planks suddenly missing at the bottom. One's leg could easily slip through the gaps if one was not careful. After this FSB, the trail climbed almost vertically. There were several wooden ladders, first of the many ladders that we were to cross, both on the ascent as well as the descent during the trek. These wooden ladders were generally made of two large blocks of wood and

<sup>1</sup> See *Enchanted Frontiers*, by Nari Rustomji, p. 128 for full details

<sup>2</sup> See *details of the 1962 Indo-China war*.

other smaller wood nailed into them. Some of them were as high as 60 m while some were erected across entire rock face with river flowing dangerously below.

We climbed up these wooden ladders to the top and after some refreshments, reached Tame Chung Chung (TCC) - literally 'a place for snakes' (1835 m – 15 km). We were assured that there were no snakes in the area, particularly in autumn.

### **Trek along the Tsari Chu**

The pilgrims from Takpa Siri followed the trail down the Tsari Chu (Gelen Bung) valley. At present the trail enters the Indian territories at Maja. We were to go up this trail from TCC. At first, we had to descend to the Subansiri River. It was one of the steepest descents that anyone can do. The trails in Arunachal never zigzagged and the people always took the shortest and the steepest trail to go up or down. After a tiring descent we reached the junction of the Subansiri and the Tsari Chu at Gelensiniak. Going along the Tsari Chu, the trail constantly climbed up and down, crossed few FSBs to proceed towards Gelemo. We stayed in a cave about three hours before Gelemo for the night (23<sup>rd</sup> November). Reaching Gelemo (1790 m – 17 km) early the next day, part of our party left for Bidak, which was a little flatter walk and went along the river valley. Both Gelemo and Bidak (1800 m - 6 km) were situated in clearings surrounded by thick forest and hills. A pilgrim trail, which led from Bidak to enter Maja, went through Chinese occupied territory at Bissa and ahead to Longju. Longju was the place where the Chinese had surrounded the Indian patrol in 1962 and it became one of the earliest targets in the Indo-China War, known as the 'Longju Incident'.

We returned along the same trail from Gelemo to camp at Gelensiniak (830 m – 14 km) at foot of the climb. Near this junction of two rivers, was an old temple believed to be the site of *Tsuchhkang*, which housed the pilgrims. After spending a night there, refreshed, we climbed up the steep slope to TCC to complete the first part of our trek.

### **Along the Subansiri River**

The pilgrims from Gelensiniak proceeded along the Subansiri to the frontier village of Taksing. To catch the pilgrim trail, we again steeply descended to the Subansiri River and proceeded along it. Once again, we crossed a few FSBs. The trail, of course went up and down with amazing regularity and we had to cross many wooden ladders and bridges particularly in this section. We walked across rocky slopes with a river flowing below. After about nine hours of walking we reached Dajobung (1640 m – 14 km) late in the afternoon, in darkness, as during winter in this eastern part of India, darkness falls by about 4 p.m. Next day (30<sup>th</sup> November), the trail ahead started with a very steep climb to the top of a ridge and then constantly proceeded up and down along the river. It was late in the afternoon, again dark when we reached Dadu (1650 m – 18 km), a small village with few houses and stayed here for the night. It had been another 9 hour walk for us. From Dadu a climb led us to Reding and from here a newly constructed motor road led us to Taksing (2450 m – 18 km).

Taksing was a large village, consisting mainly of the Monpa community (more akin to Tibetans) and the people seemed to be relying on Government supplies as very little agriculture could be seen. The Tibetan frontier lies a short distance from Taksing. Little ahead from Taksing, the Chayul Chu (Nyarshi river) flowing in from southwest, Charne Chu from northwest and Yume Chu (Hari Siko) flowing from north, meet to be called the Subansiri river. The pilgrim trail from Taksing climbed up along the banks of the Yume Chu into the present day Chinese (Tibetan) territory. The pilgrims worshipped at the Yume Gompa (monastery) considered most holy in the area. The pilgrimage ended here and from this gompa, pilgrims proceeded to their respective villages.

We spend next day at Taksing, gathering information about the ancient Takpa Siri pilgrimage, looking at various local customs and visiting a church and the foot imprints of Guru Padmasambhava in the village. On the return, we trekked shorter distances to make it less strenuous and more enjoyable, by staying extra nights at Reading and camping on the banks of the Subansiri. On 7<sup>th</sup> December we climbed back steeply to TCC (mercifully for the last time !) (1835 m – 8 km) to end our journey along the pilgrim trail.

## **Return**

We climbed down the steep Shere Thapa slope and arranged transport to take us back via Daporijo and Tezpur to Guwahati. We narrowly survived being killed in a car accident on the narrow road, so called 'National Highway No. 52'. In spite of the hazardous trekking trails, crossing FSBs and Bamboo ladders hanging over the river, this was the most serious threat we survived! So much for civilisation and its travails!

Thus ended our quest for the pilgrim trail of Ringkor of Takpa Siri. We followed it as far as was possible in the Indian territory and gathered a wealth of knowledge.

## **People of the Subansiri Valley**

Most of the people in this area are of Tagin tribe and particularly in the upper Subansiri valley are sub-tribes of Tagin Mara. Traditionally, they helped the pilgrims while they were in, what was known as 'Lopa country'. Some of these Tagin Maras were owners of land in Longju and regularly collected revenue from Tibetans. They were paid yearly tributes. When the 12 yearly Ringkor was to be undertaken these tributes increased many times and these Tagins were employed as porters. On the trail, shelters were erected, known as Tsuchhkang, a kind of bamboo hut or large cave where wood and food were stocked so that the pilgrims could move on comfortably. Even today, many of these Tagins live in a primitive way, eating snakes, rats, birds and living off the forest. They kill almost any animal in sight and are experts in knocking down birds or even fish by using rubber catapult. Outside their homes, many skulls and skins of animals killed by them hanged for drying or as decorative pieces. Some of them were of rare animals like Leopard Cat, Flying Fox, Himalayan Red Squirrel and others. Towards the Subansiri valley at Taksing, the population was more of Monpas, of Tibetan stock and origin. They had earlier lived on trade and at present, as there was not much agriculture possible during autumn and winter months, they lived off Government supplies.

## Christianity In the Subansiri Valley

Verrier Elwin studied tribal traditions and gathered legends and the systems of the people of Apatani plateau and the Tagins in upper reaches. His books covering cultural aspects of northeastern tribes are well known. He wrote about changing religious beliefs amongst people here.

The tribes of Arunachal Pradesh were steeped in the local traditions. They followed a form of animistic or nature worship religion, known as Donyi-Polo, literally worship of 'Sun and Moon'. They worshipped nature, but in a primitive and superstitious manner. Their dead were either left open to be eaten by vultures high up on the cliffs (a prominent Tibetan custom) or they were buried with bamboo funerary towers erected over it, decorated with dead birds. Richer and more important the person, more birds would be killed and hanged on this structure. These people knew little of hygiene and had no formal religion as such. However, they were honest, strong and firm believers of nature.

It was in such a scenario that early Christian Fathers came to these areas. They spread the Gospel of Christ and initially supplied all the necessities like education, transport and medicines to these tribal communities. This won them over. Soon many were converted and many small and large Churches were built. The huge Churches are lower down in the valley at Ziro, Hapoli or Daporijo and almost every village has a church including one near the Tibetan border at Taksing. The Hindus never came here to reform them or convert them. There were no Muslim invasions to convert them with swords and surprisingly no Buddhist influence filtered down to them from Tibet. Thus like in other parts of North-Eastern India, it was left to Christian Missionaries to work here. In the last few decades, the inner line regulation does not allow any foreign priest to preach here. However, now there are locally trained priests who continue preaching the religion. The churches have good attendance. Christmas was being celebrated and carols were being sung. Priests run several social centres, though essential services like education, medical aid and transport are now taken care of by the Government. Generally the people who converted to Christianity were found to be more civilised and better educated. However, such conversions did not change basic lifestyle like food habits and it is said that a Tagin will eat anything that flies, except aeroplanes and anything that walks, except the human beings!

It is amazing how Christian influences have spread into such deep areas. There are churches of Baptists faith, Revival Churches and of Catholic faith. The situation here is almost akin to the spread of Christianity in the African sub-continent. The whole concept of Christian preaching can be seen here and it remains a matter of conjecture what shape the lives of these people would have taken if there were no Christianity here.

## India-China war, 1962

In 1959 as the Chinese troops took firm control of Lhasa, the capital of Tibet, the Dalai Lama, spiritual ruler of Tibet fled to India. After travelling for days on horses *inognito* and protected by his guards, he reached the Indian border at Khinzemane, in the western corner of Arunachal Pradesh. He was received by a Gorkha soldier, escorted to India and given asylum. Many of his followers crossed over to Arunachal Pradesh. This infuriated the Chinese.

The year 1962 changed everything for NEFA, now known as Arunachal Pradesh. The Chinese had never accepted the McMahon Line as drawn in 1913 at Shimla Conference. The Chinese delegates were present at the negotiations but the declaration was signed by the Indian and Tibetan delegations only. The Chinese later repudiated the line totally and claimed the entire NEFA as their own. When the negotiations about demarcating the international boundary failed, on 20<sup>th</sup> October 1962 the Chinese attacked Indian army at several places, the major thrust being at Tawang. As if to state a point the first attack was in the region of Khinzemane from where the Dalai Lama had entered India. One of the routes the Chinese army followed was the Bailey Trail in India to bypass the army posts. They ran down to plains of Assam quickly as the Indian army was not prepared to face such a massive attack. The Chinese withdrew to the McMahon Line later but had awakened the area. Roads were built, the Indian army moved to the border and thus the hidden land was well connected with rest of India.

Some part of the Chinese attack was to the far eastern part of Arunachal Pradesh at Walong. This is a sensitive tri-junction where the borders of India, China and Myanmar (Burma) meet. The area is infested with insects and forest so thick that no movement is easily possible. The 'Stilwell Road' built to connect Assam with China in the Second World War ran through here. These parts still remain less known and less connected, as there are no high peaks here.

In the Subansiri valleys the main Chinese thrust was from Longju. In 1960s the roads had reached only till north Lakhimpur, more than 500 kms away from the present border. The Indian Government ordered a party of Assam Rifles to proceed along the Tsari Chu and make a post at Longju, which was near Migiyutin. This was under the 'Forward Policy' and against the advice of the defence forces. The Chinese protested and finally the post had to be withdrawn. Strong differences of opinion emerged between India and China on what was known as the 'Longju Incident'. During the 1962 war, a strong party of Chinese came down from Longju, Bissa and down the Tsari Chu valley until they had a major fight on their hands at the Shere Thapa heights. They proceed further down reaching almost Nacho village en route. The Indian forces had withdrawn till Talliha.

From Menchuka valley, which is to the east of Tsari Chu, a party of Indian soldiers tried to flee down on an uncharted forest trail in to the Tsari Chu valley. The party was trapped in the forest, and four officers from their party died of exhaustion, including their Commanding Officer, Lt. Col. D. A. Taylor.

## The Subansiri Valley Expedition, 2005

**Period** : 15<sup>th</sup> November – 13<sup>th</sup> December 2005

**Members** : Harish Kapadia, Wing Commander P. K. Sashindran, Ms. Sangeeta Sashindran and Prateek Deo.

Mumbai, 15<sup>th</sup> January 2006

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