

TREKS TO PASSES ON INDIA – BURMA BORDER

Pangsus Pass and Chaukan Pass

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During the Second World War, many areas of Eastern India were fully embroiled in the Burmese war operations. Some of the place names, like Ledo, Lekhapani and Pangsus pass were part of the legendary but cruel history. The allied troops drove and marched into Burma to fight the advancing Japanese troops from here. At first the Japanese beat them back in 1942, forcing the soldiers and civilians to a retreat, which was through Pangsus pass and many areas in Manipur. Uniformly the retreat was cruel and devastating as the journey was through knee-deep sticky mud. Many lost their lives and others barely survived. Today legends of these areas are almost forgotten but history still hangs in the air.

The Patkai range divides India and Burma, with Pangsus pass as a low point on the ridge. Both side of the range is thick jungle. The range is much smaller in height compared to the Himalayan range, but it is no less difficult in terms of difficulties of travel. To the north, the range follows an easterly curve to meet the Kumon range joining it from Burma. This meeting of the ranges is near Chaukan pass which has as much historical significance as the Pangsus. The Kumon range continues northwards to meet the Hkakabo Razi range at the Diphu pass. These two ranges divides Burma (in east) with India (in the west). Apart from these major passes there are several other passes that allows passage across these ranges; namely Siddi, Hukawng, Shwangshan, Hapungan, Khumjawang and passes known only to shikaris like Hoot, Mugaphi, Gaphuka and many others in the latter category.

Frank Kingdon-Ward undertook many exploratory journeys on both sides of these ranges, crossing and re-crossing passes like Diphu several times. Those days borders between India, Burma and China were not strictly enforced and he happily roamed here in search of new mountains, botanical specimens and detailed scientific observations. We and science owes a lot to him about knowledge of these unknown valleys, through his numerous books and papers. He was trapped in the Lohit valley when, in 1950, the major earthquake of 9.6 on Richter Scale cut off these areas. For the first time there was renowned scientist near the epicentre of an earthquake and survived to record it for science.

Over last two years I visited and trekked in the areas adjoining the border with Burma, reaching three passes on the border: namely Hoot Pass (2011), Pangsus Pass and Chaukan Pass (both in 2012-2013)

Ledo-Lekhapani-Pangsus Pass

In January 2013 I returned to the area with a different group of friends. We were to proceed to the eastern-most point of India and along the India-Burma border. First was a ride on the oldest and eastern-most train route in India from Guwahati to

Ledo. Ledo was now a modern but deserted train station. Trains end here, but it used to go till Lekhapani a few kilometres ahead. Two kilometres ahead of Lekhapani, at 'Burma camp', the famous 'Ledo Road' or 'Stillwell road' started.¹ This road was built at great cost and labour across the Pangsung pass to Burma. It was named after Gen. Stilwell who was instrumental in its construction. The goods for the war in Burma were loaded on trucks from here and were carried to Kunming, China- then an ally of the British. A lot has been written about this road, and it was a nostalgic place to stand at and recall old history.²

From Ledo, at first we drove back few kilometres towards Tinsukia. Margherita has many nostalgic mentions in history, but now it is a sleepy little town which has no charms except this catchy name. A small coal museum exists here. Ahead was Digboi, where the first oil well in India was discovered. As the story goes, when the well was being dug a British officer riding a horse encouraged the workers by shouting 'Dig boy, dig'. This was changed to Digboi, the present name. Oil was struck on 19 October 1889 and the well was abandoned in 1932. An oil Museum, and a well kept war cemetery nearby are worth a look.

We spent a night at Jairampur (named after Jairamdas Daulatram, former benevolent Governor of Assam, which included Arunachal Pradesh then). Nearby was a new cemetery recently discovered in the forest, containing many graves of the allied soldiers. It had remained hidden in thick foliage. We spent another night at a 'home stay' at Nongkey near Nampong. We drove to Nampong the next day from where the approach to the Pangsung Pass starts. On 10th January 2013 we were across into Burma through the Pangsung pass, the historic gateway to and from Burma.

Pangsung Pass (1136 m)

During the Second World War, the Japanese advanced into Burma in 1942. They overran the allied forces, forcing them to retreat in a hurry. It was a very disorderly retreat in face of the fast advancing enemy.

To reach safety of the British India from pursuing Japanese troops, the refugees and returning army had to cross the Pangsung pass, on the Patkai range, which divides India and Burma. It was a disastrous and hard journey. Soldiers and several civilians had to trudge through deep sticky mud, a curse of this frontier. Many times they sunk till their waists in the soft mud, going on without much food, ravaged by malaria, lashed by the monsoon and a variety of ailments. The rainforest was dense and the rivers were flooded. A large numbers of refugees came across the Pangsung and though it was a lower pass, it was a steep climb and through knee-deep mud. This historic gateway was nick named 'Hell gate' by soldiers.

¹ There is confusion in names. Lekhapani is the name of the last railway station, starting point of the Ledo road and home of army camp from where the Burma war effort was helped. Likabali is an army station, north of Brahmaputra, across from Dibrugarh. Both are in Assam.

² *The Burma Road*, by Donovan Webster. (Pan Macmillan, Oxford, 2003)

Across the pass was the Pangsung village, about 3 km inside Burma.³ The road was atrocious and one is not allowed to drive on the Burmese side and have to walk about three kilometres reach way. The terrain on both sides was same and on fast moving motorbikes Burmese boys were ferrying goods from the Pangsung pass to the village. We enjoyed Burmese food and saw the small bazaar that had sprung up for this day. The Burmese military boys (yes they were very young) checked our permits and ensured that no camera or mobile phone was carried inside their territory. Now the road is being widened to a four lane highway and it is planned to be the Asian Highway connecting India with southeast Asia. Looking at conditions today this is a far away dream.

Lake of No Return (Nawng Yang in Burmese)

It was nostalgic to see the 'Lake of No Return', in plains of Burma from here. It was a vast lake, the only clearing in thick forest. During monsoon vast surrounding areas would fill up with water too, making it a giant lake. When they developed engine trouble, the planes flying across the 'Burma Hump' tried to land on these waters, their best chance of survival amidst thick forest all around. Most of them did not return to tell the story.

Few more stories explain the name of 'Lake of No Return'. The second has it that a group of Japanese soldiers returning from battle lost their way and ended up at the lake. There, they were stricken by malaria and died and hence it is called the Lake of No Return. According to a third story, US army soldiers, working on the Ledo Road, were sent to examine the lake and got trapped by the undergrowth and perished trying to escape. A fourth story says this is the 'lake of no return', because retreating British troops in 1942 got lost in quicksand. Adding myth to legend, one author claimed he had encountered the name on a document written by one of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel, which he claimed still hides out in the area.⁴

By late afternoon we returned to Nampong and drove a short distance to Miao (via Jagun) to start preparing for our venture to another historic pass, the Chaukan pass. Miao is the major administrative centre with government and Namdafa National Park offices. Permits had to be obtained from here. It has rather mixed population as Chakma refugees (Bangladesh refugees) were settled here around Miao since 1971.

The Epic of Chaukan Pass

One of the little known groups fleeing the Japanese army consisted of the British who were trapped at Fort Hertz (now known as Putao) in north Burma. They too

³ Indians are allowed till here on 10th, 20th and 30th of every month. Burmese are allowed into India till Nampong on every Friday.

⁴ An Indian newspaper *The Telegraph* reported, in a story on the possible reopening of the Ledo road in 2007, that 'close by [Pangsung] is the Lake of No Return — the local Bermuda Triangle. According to folklore, aircraft that fly over the lake never return.' The lake's reputation is advertised in hopes of making the area more attractive to tourists? Who knows, the 'Indian' Bermuda Triangle might just turn out to be the next tourist-puller of the region!

were fleeing the advancing Japanese troops who may overrun Fort Hertz if they waited till the monsoon period passes. So in heavy rains they left Putao with Mishmi guide and porters to cross the Chaukan pass, nearest to their location.

They had to come across the junction of the Patkai and Kumon range through dense forest in heavy rains. More than 230 Britishers crossed over here with Sir John Rowland including a three month old new born child. They had to flee in June, when it was warm but at the height of monsoon, with flooded river and leeches, snakes and malaria mosquitoes. Once across the pass their progress was almost reduced to a crawl, covering just about 2-3 kilometres per day. There were no villages and the trail almost unknown. Finally they were stopped by Tilung Hka, the first major tributary of Noa Dihing.

A party of two persons had gone ahead and reached Miao, to alert the authorities about the plight of the trapped party, and a rescue was organised. Food was airdropped to them whenever the weather was clear. A party led by Gyles Mackrell, from the Indian Tea Association of Assam, mounted a major ground rescue with several elephants. He was accompanied by troops from Assam Rifles, all sturdy Gorkhas who excelled in helping the rescue efforts. At one point the refugees were stranded on an island near Dapha Hka. Elephants with the Mackrell party, surrounded the island and rescued all of them on the backs of elephants. The island was soon washed away. This rescue saved many lives. As they neared Miao ground support increased and food was sent by porters and progress to safety was faster.

These efforts by men and animals saved many though about two dozen perished. Finally a haggard party reached the Lekhapani-Ledo railway line and onwards to safety. This was the Epic of Chaukan pass.⁵

In 1961, a year before the Chinese invasion, Indian army mounted 'Operation Srijitga' to reach Chaukan pass. They too encountered many difficulties and the party led by Maj.Gen. Guraiya finally reached the Chaukan pass on 27 November 1961 and planted the Indian flag.⁶ After joint discussions with the Burmese authorities Border Pillar No. 183 was erected here in 1971 with the Watershed Principal being followed. All rivers from this horse shoe basin flow west-southwest

⁵ *Forgotten Frontier*, by Geoffrey Tyson. (Spectrum Publications, Guwahati, 1992) and *Flight By Elephant*, by Andrew Martin (expected June 2013). See the movie 'The Elephant Man' (rescue of Chaukan pass refugees, Cambridge University).

⁶ *Dipti Bhalla and Kunal Verma, The Children of the Dawn. Northeast Trilogy. (KaleidIndia, Gurgaon, 2011).*

into the Noa Dihing, which then flows into Assam as the 'Buri Dihing'. It then merges with the Lohit river and finally into the Brahmaputra.

To occupy the area permanently many Nepali families of retired Assam Rifles personnel were settled here with full government support. Large grants and land was given to them. Food was supplied to them through helicopters and AN 32 planes,(even today) and the Miao-Vijaynagar road was built in about 1972 (not fully functioning even till today). Several native Lisu tribal families, who were originally migrants from Burma settled here over decades, much before India-Burma boundary demarcation.

During Feb to April 2000, a party of scientists from Anne Mane Foundation, Bangalore wanted to research routes of Elephant migration between India and Burma. One of their aims was to reach Chaukan pass. Due to difficulties they stopped at least three days before reaching the pass.⁷

After almost 70 years from the first crossing by the Burma refugees and 52 years after 'Operation Srijitga', we were to follow this trail, and experience the difficulties they had faced. Little did we know that the difficulties had multiplied many fold due to floods, landslides and erosion.

Our Epic of Chaukan Pass

We drove to the Deban tourist lodge located in the Namdafa Sanctuary. Facing Namdafa river and on banks of Noa Dihing it was well situated to observe birds and wild life. Dapha Bum peak (4570 m) is seen towering over the river valley from here.

The Noa Dihing was a beautiful river, now serene and blue, surrounded by forest. In monsoon it must be a terror with flooding water and crumbling sides. The valley is adjoined on three sides by the Burmese territories and for generations it was ruled by the Ahom kings of Assam. This land was occupied by the Singhpos, who were akin to Kachins of the Hukawng valley of Burma.

In May 1825 Burmese forces advanced through the passes to reconquer it from Assam. The Singhpos who dealt in slaves, a policy not tolerated by the British, feared that they may be expelled also from land they owned in the Brahmaputra valley, they turned against the British and joined the Burmese forces. The invaders had reached lower Noa Dihing and built defences there. They were met by Captain Neufville with 300 Sepoys and two gunboats at Dapha. A strong stockade position was held by many Burmese soldiers and few cavalry. Capturing these positions the British force proceeded upstream. They met a large force of Burmese and Singhpos at Bisa, about two miles upstream on a tributary of Noa Dihing. In a brutal fight Burmese were defeated and Singhpos scattered. For next decade the British held all

⁷ See the film 'The Old Elephant Route' by Anne Mane Foundation.

the passes on the Patkai range and cleared the valley from occupation by the Singhpos and Burmese.

Later Daphna Game, one of the four prominent Singhpo chief crossed the Patkai range from Hukawng valley and attacked Bisa. The British reacted strongly and repelled the rebel after a stiff fight and loses on both sides. A permanent British post was now created at Bisa. Most of the Singhpos returned to Hukawng valley in Burma where slavery was prevalent.

A detailed survey for India-Burma railway line was undertaken in 1896. A strong force with the surveyors crossed the Patkai range to the Hukawng valley and joined it with a similar survey party in upper Burma. However the survey for a railway line remained on paper only.⁸ The Noa Dihing valley remained part of the British empire and later of India.

On 13th January 2012 we drove on the Miao-Vijaynagar road or 'MV Road' for a short distance. We first stayed at 40th mile, all stops are named as such. We met our Lisu porters here and we had to now walk about 117 kilometres to Vijaynagar. The first taste of this road was enough to send the weak-hearted back home. It was a hell road, with deep sticky mud everywhere. Powerful four wheel drive trucks had to be pushed by bulldozers to proceed. While walking if you get off the road you can slip in a culvert and if you step on the other side it was in knee-deep mud. Shoes were stuck in, walking poles fell apart and clothes were as dirty as they can ever be.

On the second day we went down to the river and crossed the 'Burma nala' on a swinging bridge. The route ahead was a delight to walk on, along the river, passing the Lisu village of Ngawazah where we tasted the local fruit Thazi (Persimmon or Sharon). Crossing the Noa Dihing on a couple of scary stilt bridges called dahlons we reached the village Nibodi ('52 miles'), where we camped on an open ground. Next day we had to return to the muddy MV Road. For the next three days we were entirely on the road camping on clearings (at approximately 55 miles, 62 miles and 69 miles) by the side of the road with a water source nearby. Small thatched huts of local persons along the road sold tea, biscuits and some sundry stuff. Large fish were seen hanging in many of these shops available for sale. After 62 miles, a futile attempt to hitch a lift on a truck ended in disaster when the truck itself got stuck and even the bulldozer could not move it. On the fifth day of the trek, we descended from the road to a beautiful campsite right on the river bed close to the village Sichodi through which we walked past the next day. It is a wonder how these remote villages survived with meagre supplies and in heavy rains with such a muddy road.⁹

⁸ *History of Upper Assam, Upper Burmah and North-eastern Frontier*, by L.W. Shakspear. (Spectrum publications, Guwahati, 2004).

⁹ These villages are part of Namdafa National Park. This is their traditional home and any suggestion to shift from the area is strongly rejected by them.

From Sichodi, climbing steeply through the jungle, we were back on the road and back to mud. The valley opened up as we neared Gandhigram, named after a small statue of Gandhi installed here. It seems decades ago two or three statues of various leaders arrived for installation. No one could recognise the statue of Gandhi from the lot. Finally another statue was flown in with words 'Gandhiji' written on the back, which can still be seen. The original name of the village 'Shibudi or Shidi', was now renamed as Gandhigram. We spent a day at Gandhigram going around the well laid out village and eating some delicious locally grown pineapple and sugarcane.

It was a peaceful village and with friendly Lisu villagers. Ahead there were villages of settlers- Nepalis retired from the Assam Rifles, who were assisted to settle here. The villages, Ramnagar and others were well kept, clean and looked prosperous, a pleasant surprise as the only contact with civilisation was through irregular helicopter flights. Above to main road seven kilometres to the south is Pritnagar, a small village known for its beauty with a small lake.

The last 18 km road travel to Vijaynagar was relatively pleasant. We spent a night at Vijaynagar, at the Assam Rifles post near the airstrip. The original name of this village was Dawodi but the name was changed in honour of Maj.Gen. Guraiya's son Vijay. On north was the Kumon range and south the Patkai range, and almost where both these ranges meet was the Shawngshan pass (and peak) (3287 m) the south-easternmost pass from Vijaynagar, leading to the Hukawng valley of Burma while the Chaukan pass led to Putao in the northeast. It was said that relics of a Buddhist stupa and images had been discovered in the vicinity of Vijaynagar. No one had any knowledge of it now. The area was earlier known as Jahu-Natu.¹⁰

Final Approach to Chaukan Pass

That night at Vijaynagar we sorted our gear and replenished some of our essential rations. One young guide from Assam Rifles was hired., He knew the route but with youthful energy he always went ahead at 'army speed' leaving us looking for him!

Then began the real stuff- the trek on thin trail along the Diyun river (as the Noa Dihing river is known here). Nothing had changed in last seven decades in terms of trail and difficulties en route. Climbing steep ridges, descending wooden ladders, crossing single log bridges required a good balance and a strong heart. To avoid regular crossings we constructed about 16 small bridges to cross the river between different banks and avoid serious climbs. Our Lisu porters, specially Gisa as the chief engineer were marvellous at this local engineering. It was tiring and tense all along as we had to climb and descend regularly. At many places the trail had to be cut, log bridges installed at sides to cross along the bank and cross many fallen tree trunks. We stayed at Bheda, Thapa and finally at the Base camp, all names given

¹⁰ *Gazetteer of India, Arunachal Pradesh, Tirap District*. Ed. S. Dutta Choudhury, Govt. Of Arunachal Pradesh, 1980.

by the Assam Rifles patrols, the only ones to visit here annually. Being January it was cold at night but with so much wood around and supported by strong, helpful and energetic Lisu porters nothing can stop you. The forest was a joy and fear both combined. No animals or birds were seen here – Lisus had ate them all over many generations ! However we could hear calls by Gibbon monkeys, saw few hornbills and much fish in the river. The advantages in this cold season were evident: no leeches, no snakes, dim dim flies and low water level. Finally we were at the foot of the pass, which army had called 'base camp'. From here the river continued to southeast while our trail climbed steeply along the adjoining ridge. Once at the height the trail followed the ridge to descend across two false passes to the Border Pillar.

On the 27th January 2013 we left the base camp early and climbed almost 1000 m (3300 feet) to the top of a ridge. Then we descended along a forested ridge for more than 500 m (1600 feet) and traversed through Burma in the east. Finally after a 10 hour day we descended to the historic Chaukan pass (2419 m) and camped near the Border Pillar no. 183 which marks the border between India and Burma. It was from the Chaukan pass that in 1942, a party of Britishers had crossed over to India. In 1961 the army team during Operation Srijitga had reached the pass and now we were the next civil party reaching here- after a gap of almost 71 years (from the epic crossing) and 52 years (from Operation Srijitga) years! Over the decades except for an annual patrol of Assam Rifles no party visited the pass.

It is said that the pass was a route used by wild Elephants to cross on either side. The pass, where it is marked today, appeared too steep on either side for such a passage. Little before the Border Pillar a wider and gentler crossing point was seen. This appeared to be feasible for such a crossing. Moreover the Diyun river originated near this gentler pass. But only an expert in Elephant migration can give a final observation.

We camped on the pass near the Border Pillar, some tents in India and some in Burma, but just a few feet apart. On 28th January we reversed the trail from the Chaukan pass, climbed up 500 m and descended 1000 m. In all we had an ascent and descent of almost 3100 m (10,000 feet) over two days to fulfil our dreams.

Systematically and with much concentration we carefully covered the return trail over our newly made bridges, muddy forest trails and slippery logs. Finally we were at Vijaynagar. After a two day wait we were able to catch the helicopter sortie which supplies materials here. It was a 60 minute flight to Mohanbari /Dibrugarh, which otherwise would have taken us at least a week to cover. The historical places passed us in either directions: Hoot pass (to north), Chaukan pass (to southeast), Putao (in far northeast), and Pangsus pass (to south). As helicopter landed at the modern airport we almost stepped out of history to the present.

SUMMARY

Treks to passes on the India-Burma border. Pangsau pass (1136 m) and Chaukan pass (2419 m).

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