
NANGPAS ARE FLYING CHANGPAS ARE SMILING

Climbing and Trekking in the Southeast Ladakh

HARISH KAPADIA

AT FIRST I was almost worried about visiting Tso Moriri. Opened only recently to tourists, there were already articles appearing in the press about the environmental degradation taking place at this remote lake in the southeast Ladakh. There was talk of fumes from taxis, commercial sharks and piles of garbage.¹ It appeared like even breathing the air there would be polluting it. Environmentalists were recommending a total ban on visitors, of course, after enjoying it to their hearts content. 'Ban them all,' was their war cry, like some other areas in the Himalaya.

As the fastest growing industry in the world, tourism has reached out to touch every part of the globe, and the Himalaya is no exception. The extraordinary growth of tourism led its detractors to conclude that tourism (and trekking) has ruined many a fine coastline, destroyed unique wilderness areas and wildlife habitats like Tso Moriri, polluted the air and water, uprooted communities, undermined traditional ways of life and corrupted local cultures.

Tso Moriri lake and southeast Ladakh was under wraps for almost 35 years due to the 'inner line' restrictions and even before that access was limited by the difficult terrain. Thus people at the only village on its shore, Karzok,² lived amidst beauty without much contact with others, following their nomadic lifestyle and facing severe winters. In 1994 restrictions were lifted,³ roads built

1 See 'Ri Ri Tsomoriri,' by Shubhendu Kaushik, *India Magazine*, May 1995.

2 Scholars and locals prefer to call this 'Korzok' but the Survey of India maps mention it as 'Karzok'.

3 See 'Ladakh Revealing its Secrets,' *India Today*, September 1995.

to reach its shore and it was possible to travel through this area by jeep. Suddenly this part of Ladakh was most popular with jeep-safari travellers, casual visitors as well as serious trekkers and mountaineers. Its beauty, its past remoteness, was an attraction to visitors and it was promoted as such. Rupshu arrived at its cross-roads in history. It was in such a scenario that we were visiting it, to enjoy it before the environmentalists were up in arms, if that were possible.

Remote yes, but the area was not unknown. Several early travellers had visited Karzok, for it lay on the main trail joining Shimla and Spiti with Ladakh. This area had a long history. Many travellers had visited this lake and some books mention its charms. The early travellers here were George Trebeck (1822), H. Strachey (1846) and Thomas Thomson (1847). A. H. Francke, a Moravian missionary commissioned by the British Government visited the lake in 1909 and made a list of all the valuable statues and paintings here. F. Drew's famous book *Ladakh* gives many scientific readings about the lake.

Surprisingly none of the early travellers mentioned the peaks and mountains of the area. They travelled amidst some of the highest mountains of Ladakh, but besides stating that mountains were there, no one tried to describe, explore or give a name to them. It was left to Romesh Bhattacharjee (1984 and 1993) to write about the peaks of the area, explore them and climb the first peak here, Mentok II. His excellent articles in the *Himalayan Journals* paved the way for climbers to follow.⁴ His 1984 expedition checked several readings about the lake, possibly the first to do so after F. Drew. We certainly owed our inspiration to him.

Flying to Leh, the capital of Ladakh, we acclimatised there for 3 days, till the 30th June 1995. We followed the well-known diktat: 'Don't act like a Gama in the land of Lama'⁵ and took our time to break in gently. To visit and climb around the Tso Moriri lake a permit is required, which can be easily acquired from the local authorities. The lake is 221 km away from Leh. The first part of the journey is on a fine black tar road via Upshi (46 km) and

4 See H.J. Vol. 41, p.82 and Vol. 50, p. 125.

5 Gama was a well-known pahelwan who was known for his strength and agility. He won international wrestling titles.

Chumathang (76 km) to Mahe bridge (22 km) where the Indus is to be crossed . The rough road ahead turns west to Sumdo (24 km) and then proceeds south across the Namshang la (12 km) to Karzok (31 km), the only village in the area and on the western shore of the lake. Some portions of the road are sandy, requiring a four-wheel drive. There is a small rest house at Karzok for which advance permission must be obtained from Leh. A branch of the motorable road continues west from Sumdo going over the Pologongka la to the Tso Kar lake finally joining the Leh-Manali road at Debring, covering 70 km from Mahe. This circuit is rather popular with jeep-safari travellers.

We stayed two days at Karzok visiting the monastery and arranging for donkeys to carry our luggage ahead. Immediately we noticed the two peaks which towered above the eastern shore of the lake. The earlier name suggested for this massif was Thalda Kurmi peaks. But at Karzok no one seems to have heard this name. The lamas and elders of the village called the higher peak Lungser (the golden mountain) and the other peak Chhamser (the place to worship). These peaks at 6666 m and 6622 m were some of the highest peaks in Ladakh and had never been attempted before. The other peak was named Lapgo (the place for prayer) after the nala.

Karzok is a small village and most of the inhabitants are nomads. During the summer months they camp at various places in their *rebo* (small tents) and look after their flock. These sheep produce the famous pashmina which is the costliest variety of wool. Traditionally weavers from Kashmir and the Himachal buy this wool and the recent boom in its value has led to their prosperity, though this was not evident in their life style.

Karzok, meaning the 'middle of the body' (where the soul resides) or 'middle of mountain', (where it was located) had an excellent location, overlooking the lake. The monastery at Karzok is ancient. Though no one can tell the exact date it is believed to be about 500 years old. People as far as Hanle towards south and up to the Indus in the north followed the teachings of gurus from this gompa. Recently a lama-incarnate had arrived from Darjeeling to head the congregation. This young Rimpoche, called 'Tulku' locally, was a 6 year old boy and blessed us. A small 'palace' was situated next to the monastery though the former 'king and queen' now worked at the rest house and at Nyoma weaving centre.

During our stay at Karzok we expected the worst, as described by the prophets of doom. But we found not more than an occasional jeep arriving with tourists. They camped near the village and visited the monastery and the lake. There was no sight of the proverbial litter and fumes. Changpas certainly lit up in smiles at seeing the tourists for they meant business. Villagers were using several commercial products whose packaging was discarded carelessly. Perhaps, more than the tourists, it was now time to educate villagers in lessons of environment, on how to handle these products, which included bottles and aluminium foil.

Tso Moriri was brought to the notice of the world by the photographers Bedi brothers.⁶ Staying on the lake for sometime they photographed *Nangpas* (wild geese) and several other wildlife species found here, including the snow-leopard. Their use of the motorised boat was rightfully questioned by some but the army has been using such boats on this lake for many years for pleasure. More alarming would be the proposal to use the lake for water-sports. In many ways, Changpas were benefiting from interaction with civilisation. It was changing their lifestyle, not necessarily for the worse as feared. Till only few years ago they used the lake to dump garbage and wash themselves every morning. The quality of their houses and clothes was improving, medical facilities both for men and goats were now available, and transport enable them to sell their wool at a better price. Some progressive measures were also proposed by authorities for the future. No houses were allowed to be built within 700 m of the lake and in fact the present rest house which falls within this radius was to be shifted. Researchers were recording this unique area, and we met one at work at Karzok. (See article 'Living In Rupshu', in this issue). The advent of civilisation by the new road were benefiting both, tourists who can now enjoy the beauty of the area and the locals who can look forward to enriching their lives.

On the second day, late in the evening, I saw a middle-aged man walking with a horse towards Peldo. I said 'Jule' and proceeded to chat. He was Nawang Thondup, the local medicine-man, and he was returning from Karzok after treating a sick lady. He was so gentle that one took an instant liking to him. He agreed

6 See 'In Search of the Snow Leopard,' *India Today*, January, 1992.

to accompany us with some of his donkeys and became our informal guide about Rupshu, if not about the terrain. Nawang lived with his flock at Peldo and spent winters near Chumar in south Rupshu. Like all other Changpas he led a nomadic life with his family but had certainly gathered the wisdom of the world by observing people and listening to their travel-lore.

After proper acclimatisation we were ready to climb the mountains. With donkeys provided by village committee (a sensible system) we started from Karzok on 4 July. We established the base camp at Kurchyu (4915 m) a little above the eastern shore of the lake. This is one of the very few places where drinking water is available. Here the vast expanse of the lake and a wide variety of wildlife was visible. Several *phya* (marmots) were around and so were some *skyangs* (wild donkeys). We saw rabbits, fat lizards and at least a pair of bharals. Amongst birds, there were ravens who devastated our food once at a higher camp, and snow-pigeons, Himalayan chuff and sparrows were seen many times. The best sight of them all was of brahmani ducks floating effortlessly on the lake with *Nangpas* flying around the lake. There were two pairs of *Chathungs* (black-necked cranes). If something needs to be specially preserved and enjoyed it is this treasure of Rupshu.

Divyesh and Vineeta Muni, with one porter, left for the Lapgo nala as planned. They were to climb on their own. Monesh Devjani decided to leave for Leh and Bombay after the recurrence of an old ankle-ligament injury. For the next two days we recceid a site for the advance base camp, which was ultimately selected on the Rungyado phu (5720 m), again the main consideration being the availability of water. Loads were ferried to the advance base camp. A plateau had to be crossed to reach the base of our first peak Chhamser Kangri. After studying the various ridges we decided to attempt the southwest ridge via the Chhamser col. By the 13th of July we were ready to attempt the first peak.

Chhamser Kangri (6622 m - 21,725 ft): Second ascent

On the 14 July, five of us (Mistry, Kothari, Harsinh jr., Kesarsinh and I) left Camp 1 at 7.30 a.m. It was rather cold with a strong breeze blowing. Traversing a steep moraine we reached the beginning of the south ridge which climbed up to meet a snow slope. This slope led to the southwest ridge. The snow slope was steep with patches of ice. We put on crampons and the porters, who were

without crampons, were belayed at some places. By 11 a.m. we reached the southwest ridge and found a cairn erected by a khalasi of the Survey of India. We followed the gradually rising southwest ridge from this point onwards. It rose steeply towards the summit in the end. Kothari stopped at this point, about 150 m below the summit. The rest of us reached the summit at 1300 hrs. Again a giant cairn marked the top ! These khalasis of the Survey of India seem to have been everywhere for this is the second high peak that I climbed where I was greeted by such cairns. The view was stupendous. We could see the Tibetan plateau, the Indus valley and the Tso Moriri lake. We left a flag on the summit cairn and retreated by the same route. A tired party reached Camp 1 at 1600 hrs.

In the meantime, unknown to us, the Muni couple also decided to attempt Chhamser Kangri the next day from the opposite direction. The two of them left from a high camp on the morning of 15 July and climbed the northeast ridge. As they approached the summit they were surprised to see not only the cairn, but also a flag ! They reached the summit to collect the souvenirs left by us. Thus this high peak was climbed by two separate routes quite unknown to each other.

Lungser Kangri (6666 m - 21,870 ft): First ascent

Lungser Kangri is the highest peak of the Rupshu area, and the second highest in Mangrik (the vas area of south Ladakh, not including Zanskar). With a view to attempting it we shifted our camp to 6240 m (Camp 2), on 15 of July, heading towards the final col leading to the north ridge of the peak. Kothari and Kesarsinh had left for the advance base camp.

On 16 July, four of us (Mistry, Harsinh Sr., Harsinh Jr. and I) left Camp 2 at 6.30 a.m. descending to the Lungser nala and then climbing up to the Lungser pass by 8.30 a.m. Then we followed the northeast slopes which were gentle but crevassed to where they joined the north ridge, at 6400 m. Harsinh Sr. fell into a crevasse but was held by the rope. Mistry led on the steep ice slope of about 150 m and soon we were on the final summit slopes, at about 6600 m. But it was far from over. The summit plateau kept rising for 1.5 km, the last 60 m testing our strength and patience as each slope rose like a gentle sea-wave. Finally, at 1.30 p.m., we were on the extreme southern end of the plateau which

was the true summit. Thank God, there was no cairn here ! The views of Ungti, Chummar, the great bend of Pare chu and Hanle were a great reward. On the west of course was the expanse of the Tso Moriri lake.

We started descending from the summit at 2 p.m. and with two rappels and a gentle descent on the ridge reached the low point of the Lungser nala by 5 p.m. The climb up to Camp 2, about 250 m above was torture for the tired party and took almost two and half hours. It was a lesson never to pitch a summit camp where the summitters had to *climb up* to a camp after a tired day.

We reached the base camp on 17 July and the horses arrived the next day. We were soon safely lodged in the Karzok rest house with the Munis, listening to the stories of their adventure.

Lapgo Peak (6405 m - 21,014 ft) : First ascent

As planned, Divyesh and Vineeta Muni had separated from the main party from the base camp on the 5th July to climb peaks to the northeast of the Lungser massif. With one porter, Diwansinh in support, they spent the next 12 days climbing two high peaks. They established a camp at 5800 m and recceeded the area. On the 10th July two of them started at 7.30 a.m. in rather unsettled weather. They climbed the northwest slopes of Lapgo peak which consisted of hard snow. Using crampons they reached the summit at half past noon. After 45 minutes on the summit they started to descend and reached the camp by 14.15 hrs. Later on 15 July they climbed the east-northeast ridge of Chhamser Kangri. They returned to Karzok after a long grind, completing their sojourn. They travelled back to Leh on the 19th and left for Bombay.

Trek to the Northern Rupshu

Rupshu is the name of a vast area extending generally from the borders of Spiti on the south to the Indus in the north. To its east lies the present India-Tibet border and to the west is Zanskar with the Manali-Leh highway passing in-between. Now Rupshu is the most accessible part of Ladakh. There are at least three peaks above 6600 m (Lungser Kangri, 6666 m, Pologongka, 6632 m and Chhamser Kangri, 6622 m). With other peaks above 6500 m (Kula, 6546 m, Chokula, 6529 m) the area could be a climber's delight. There are literally hundreds of other peaks of various heights in the area.

In his book *Physical Geography of Western Tibet*, H. Strachey mentions a high plateau covered with permanent snow and ice even when all the other snow in the area has melted. Indian Air Force pilots flying over here nicknamed this plateau as the 'Rupshu Ice-Cap'. Two such ice-caps, both at average heights of 6000 m plus, can be seen on the north and south of Gyambarma stream.

Three lakes are situated north of Tso Moriri. Legends state that once these three lakes were connected. The *Gazetteer* mentions them as Thugje Chenmo (salt covered plains). As these lakes are salty or brackish there could be a geographical explanation for these lakes rising from the sea. The north-western lake is Tso Kar, (Salt lake). Till recently it supplied salt to Ladakh. The second lake, Thazamkuru is immediately to the north of Tso Moriri with a motorable road passing on its shore. The historic trail passed from Parang la to Karzok and proceeded north over several passes, to reach Thugje. The most well-known of these passes was Pologongka la, now motorable. Going northwest the road joined the Manali-Leh highway. Going over different passes and making a circuit we decided to follow the ancient trails on horses, as the early caravans had proceeded. As the motorable road passed through some portions again we will chance to see the impact of visitors.

But the first impact was on us. As we started on 20 July, it was immediately known, who will be the boss: the horses and Changpas. The beasts moved as they liked, at their speed and in a line. It was impossible to guide them in anyway. I remember vividly Kaivan sitting helplessly on horse as his feasted on grass. Vijay even talked of charging fees to the Changpas for grazing mules on their behalf! Two Changpas who accompanied the horses, also had their traditional timings of travel, which no amount of coaxing could change. They finished a late breakfast by 8 a.m., followed by leisurely reining and loading of horses. In the afternoon a two hour lunch-break was a must. Thus the trek ended at almost 7 p.m. however short the route. This coupled with afternoon storms made us feel like we are on a strenuous trek.

We settled to the routine. Crossing 5 passes we were at Thugje village, on the banks of Tso Kar. We passed the Startsapuk lake en route. Around the lake several empty villages were situated. Like Thugje itself, these villages were used for a temporary stay while grazing around there. None of these were a permanent

habitations. Thugje had a monastery, small but revered by many. The vastness and bareness must be seen to be believed.

The motorable road from Mahe-Sumdo to Debring passes Thugje. We followed the road for some portions on our return and camped at the historic Pologongka la. In the evening three Israelis appeared on motorbikes. They were looking for 'Tibetan-Gypsies', presumably Changpas. Suddenly the impact of tourism hit us. The Israelis visited a Changpa camp nearby, paid them to photograph and drank chhang. Changpas were smiling. But will this smile last or the traditional hospitality will be replaced by commercial service? Late at night two jeeps passed, inquiring about Changpas and the way to Tso Moriri. We in our small tents with our horses felt distinctly uncomfortable.

We left the road and followed the traditional route via Nakpogoding, Nankla and Kamdar la to descend to Peldo. Nearby was the Changpa camp of our friend Nawang Thondup. We spent some excellent time observing their life style and enjoying their hospitality. Nothing had changed for them as they milked goats in the strong Rupshu wind. Children played around, *goor-goor* tea was served inside their comfortable rebos, a ferocious dog was constantly barking outside and horses were grazing. In the distance the peaks we had recently climbed, rose above the deep blue waters of Tso Moriri, with Nangpas flying around non-challantly. I would not exchange this serenity for all the dollars tourists might bring. Perhaps environmentalists are right.

As Aamir Ali says in his famous article,⁷ 'The old dilemma: protect Ladakh completely from outside influence as if it was a museum ? Unacceptable. Allow free access to every tripper and carpet-bagger ? Surely not. Where is the golden mean ?'

Our trip ended soon. By 28 July we were on our way back to Leh, wrapped with memories of Rupshu.

As I look back on our enjoyable climbs and our stay in Rupshu the questions come to mind. Trekking in such a vast and remote area is not only about observing mountains and wildlife. It is about people and places. It is crucial to balance development with conservation. Intermingling issues of local culture, history, landscapes

⁷ See 'Ladakh, 1979', by Aamir Ali, *H.J.* Vol. 37, p. 113.

with the mountains at the fore. Both tourists and those who promote and provide for them affect the environment of the places they visit and the lives of local people, as seen in the lives of Changpas. As long as a connection is made between damage to the environment, damage to ancient cultures and the enjoyment of visitors, trekkers and mountaineers, there is hope. You cannot simply keep 'change' out of the lives of the Changpas, by banning all visitors. Visitors to Rupshu could start a tiny cartwheel rolling that would propel the change - or a juggernaut that will amplify the destruction of environment.⁸ The impact is both positive and negative depending on the choices made. It is imperative to appreciate the 'value' of such areas as Rupshu and not only know the 'price' of visiting there.

Nomenclature in Rupshu:

Lungser : golden

Chhamser : place of worship

Mentok : where flowers grow

Kurchyu : water hidden in ground

Karzok: middle (of body or mountain)

Mangrik : vast, large. Old name for Changthang and Zanskar.

Lapgo : place for prayer

Peldo : flat camping ground

Pologongka : Polo-between. Gongka- easy ascent. (Name for an easy pass)

Nakpogoding : nakpo - black mountain. Goding - place near. (Place near black rocks)

Thugje : Thuje chhey (a thanksgiving-branch of Karzok monastery)

Nankla : where the grass has turned yellow.

Kamdar la : where the grass is sparse (with stones)

Yabro : a traditional dance.

Rebo : a group of shepherds or their tent.

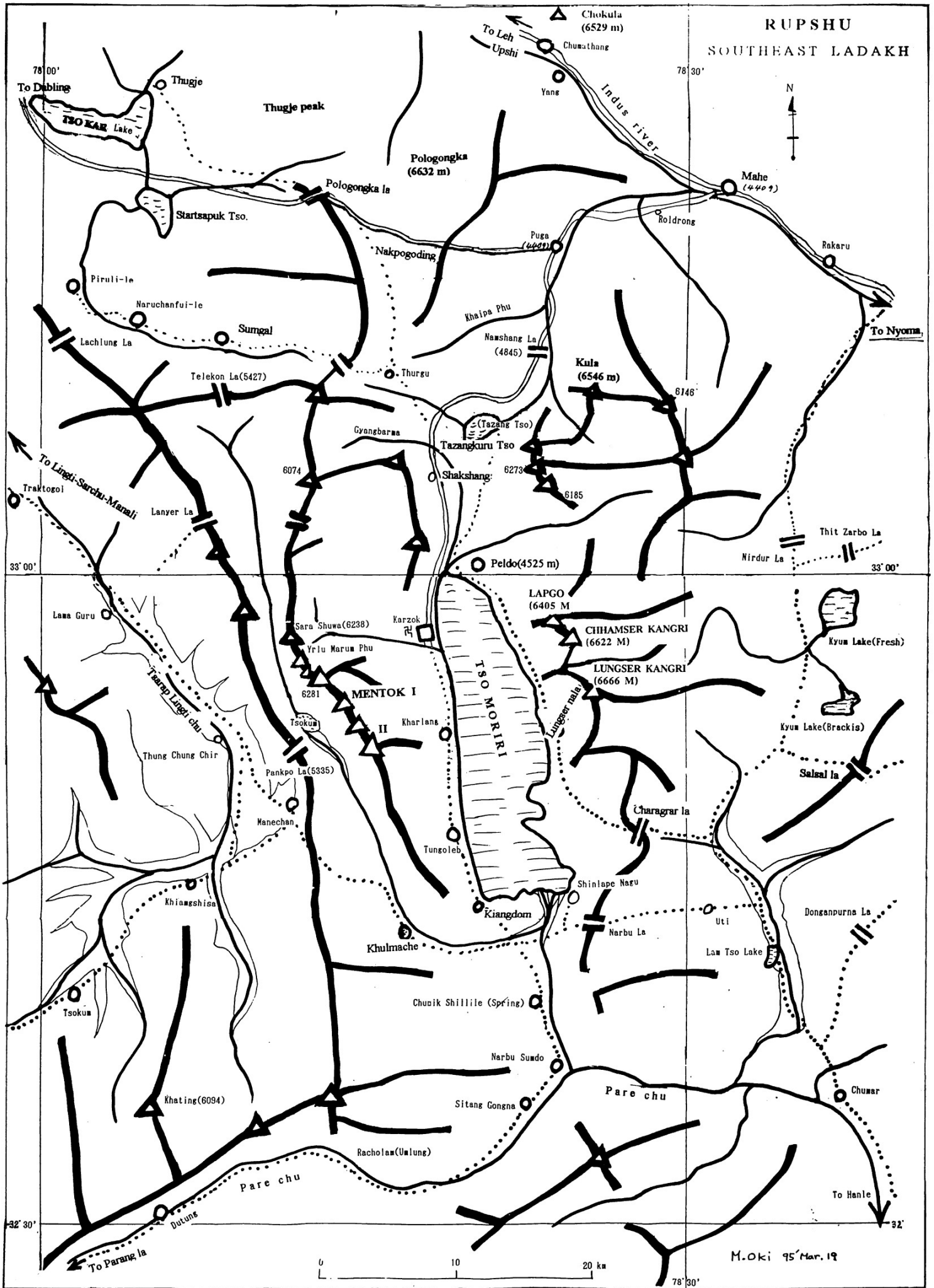
Godma : festival on the 8th day of Shravan, when all rebos gather at Karzok.

Tso Kar : tso - lake , kar - salt. Salt lake.

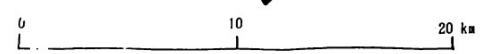
Tso Moriri : Tso - lake. Moriri : based on a legend of a female nun who rode a yak on the bank of the lake. She tried to stop the yak by pulling on the reins and shouting 'RiRi', the

⁸ See 'Tourism Cuts Both Ways,' by Prem Subramaniam, *The Sunday Times of India*, 4 February, 1996.

RUPSHU
SOUTHEAST LADAKH



M.Oki 95 Mar. 19



78° 00' To Dablung
33° 00'
32° 30'

78° 30'
To Leh
Upshi
To Nyoma
33° 00'
32° 30'



traditional shout for a yak. The yak did not stop and pulled her into the lake. Hence Tso Moriri. The gazetteer explains Moriri: as mountain. Hence, simply, a 'mountain lake'.

SUMMARY:

The South East Ladakh Expedition, 1995

Peaks climbed by the expedition:

- | | | | | |
|----|--|--------------|---------------------|---|
| 1. | LUNGSER KANGRI
(6666 m - 21,870 ft)
First Ascent | 16 July 1995 | North
ridge | Harish Kapadia
Kaivan Mistry
Harsinh Sr.
Harsinh Jr. |
| 2. | CHHAMSER KANGRI
(6622 m - 21,725 ft)
Second Ascent | 14 July 1995 | Southwest
ridge | Harish Kapadia
Kaivan Mistry
Harsinh Jr.
Kesarsinh |
| | | 15 July 1995 | Northeast
ridge | Divyesh Muni
Vineeta Muni |
| 3. | LAPGO PEAK
(6405 m - 21,014 ft)
First Ascent | 10 July 1995 | Northwest
slopes | Divyesh Muni
Vineeta Muni |

Passes: Eight passes were crossed in north Rupshu: Yalegon pass (5400 m), Gyamsu la (5400 m), Kanyur la (5410 m), Rang la (4980 m), Horlem la (4600 m), Pologongka la (5060 m), Nanakla (5240 m) and Kamdar la (5120 m).

Participants: Harish Kapadia (leader), Vijay Kothari, Kaivan Mistry, Monesh Devjani, Divyesh and Vineeta Muni (all from Bombay); with Harsinh Sr., Diwansinh, Harsinh Jr. and Kesarsinh (all from Kumaon).

Period: From 26th June 1995 to 1st August 1995.

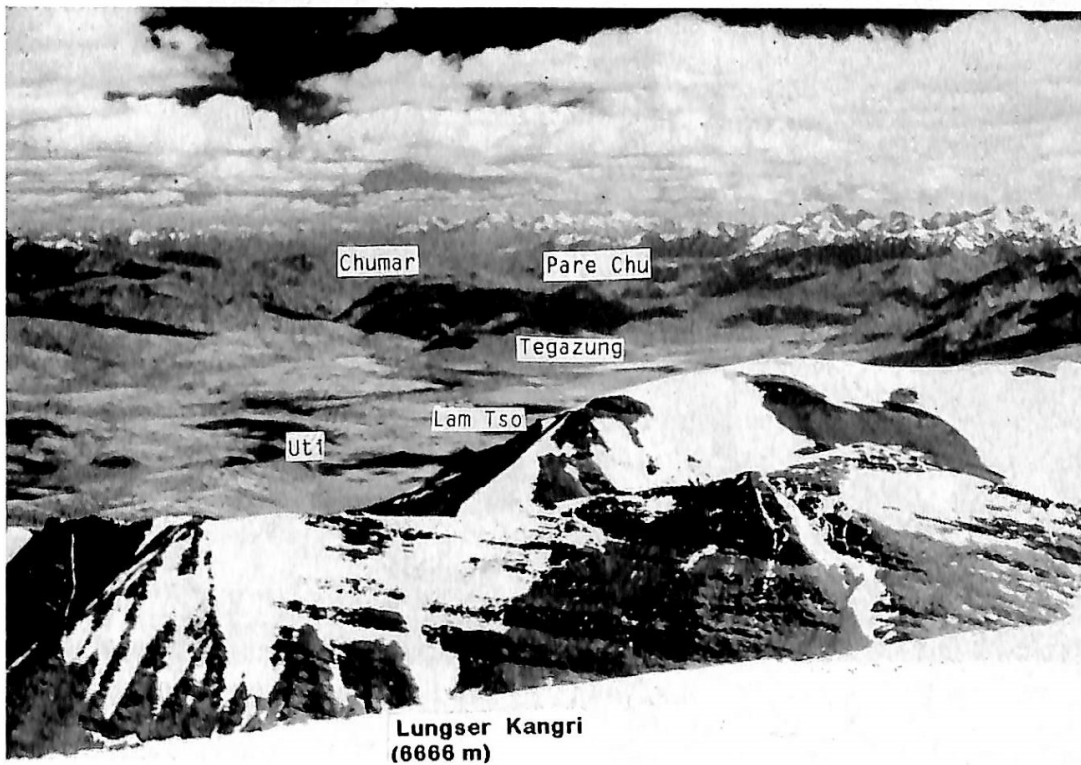
Sponsored by: The Mountaineers, Bombay.



Article 10

(Aloke Surin)

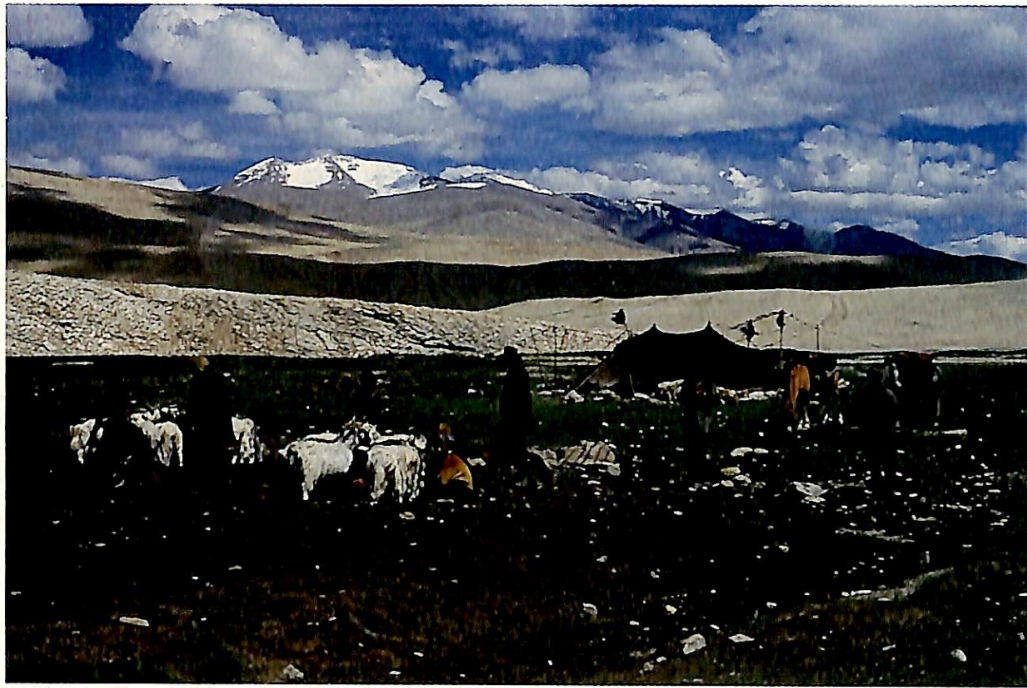
15. Granite peak (6585 m) as seen from the Kuru Topko gap.



Article 11

(Harish Kapadia)

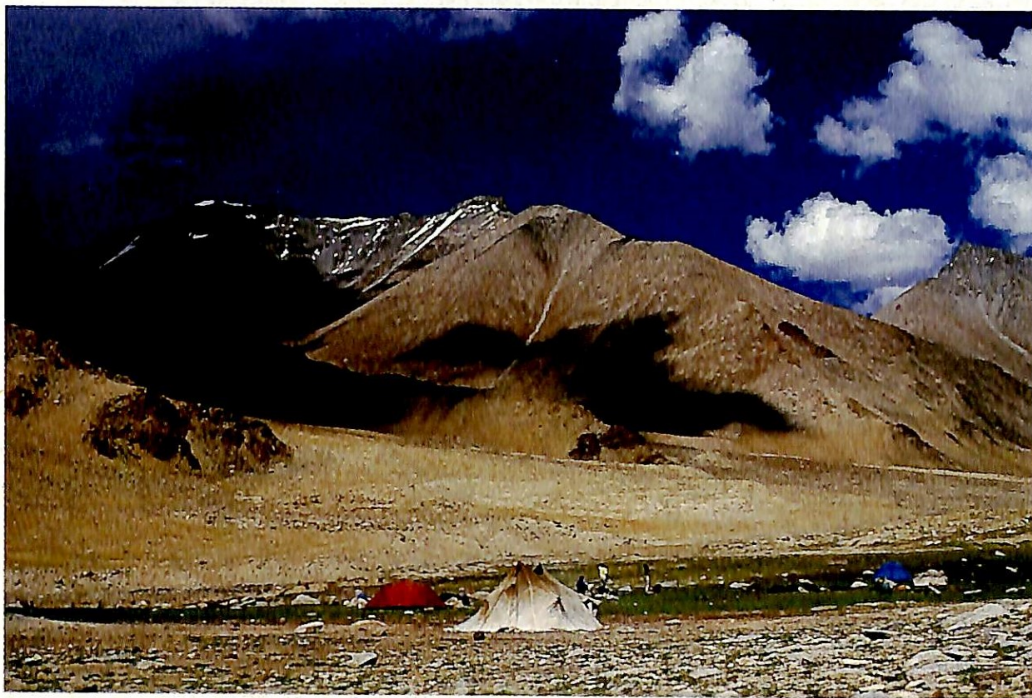
16. The bend of Pare chu, seen from the summit of Lungser Kangri (6666 m).



Article 11

(Harish Kapadia)

14. Changpa camp on Rupshu plains, with Chhamser peak in background.



Article 11

(Harish Kapadia)

15. Historic Pologongka pass with Pologongka peak (6632 m).



SW

Mentok range

W

NW

Kiangdom

Karzok

Peldo

↓ Panorama A: Tso Moriri lake, seen from Lungser Kangri (6626 m).

Article 10

E Kula (6546 m) 6305 m 6275 m

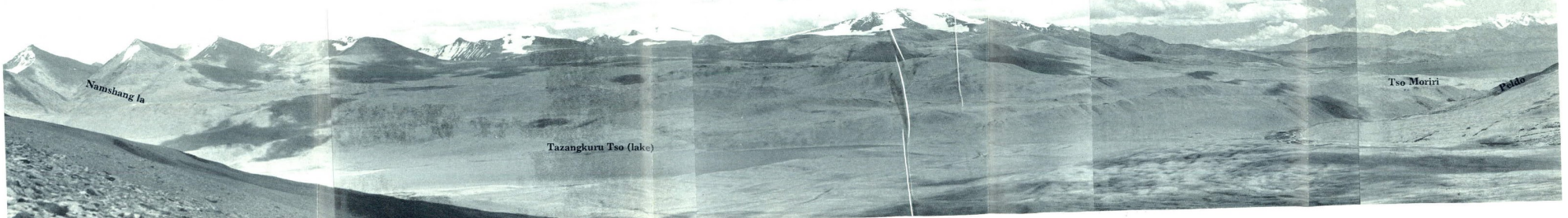
6415 m

6380 m Lappo (6405 m)

Chhamsar Kangri (6622 m)

↓ Panorama B: Approaching Tso Moriri from Kamdar la (Nakpogoding). (Harish Kapadia)

Gya (6794 m) S

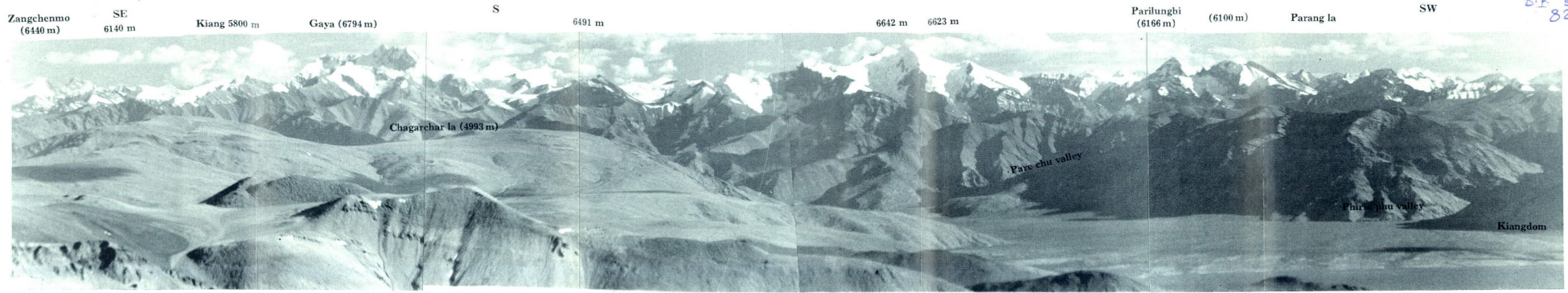


Namshang la

Tazangkuru Tso (lake)

Tso Moriri

Peldo

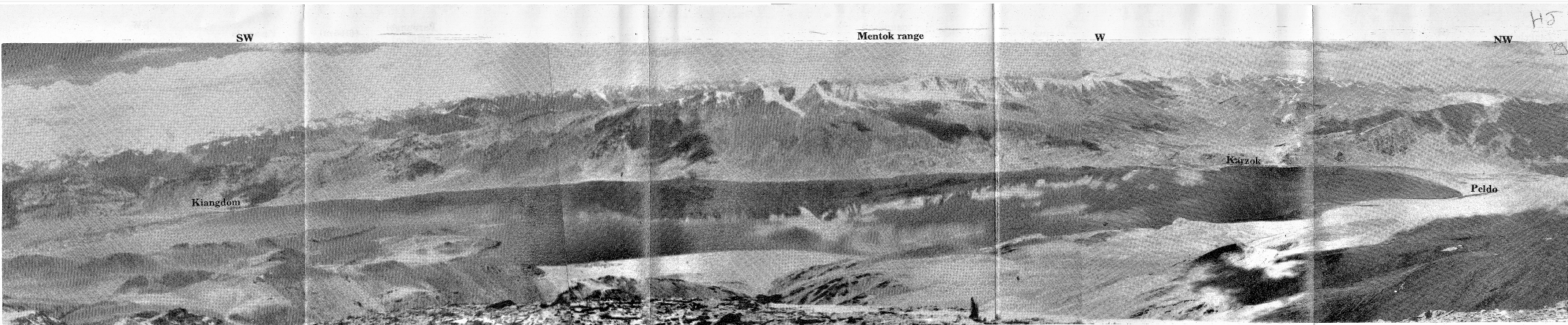


Article 10 (Harish Kapadia)
 Panorama C: View from Lungser Kangri (6686 m). Peaks of Ladakh-Spiti-Tibet divide.



Article 10 (Harish Kapadia)
 Panorama D: Thugje Chenmo plains of north Ropshu, from Horem la.

H252
82



SW

Mentok range

W

NW

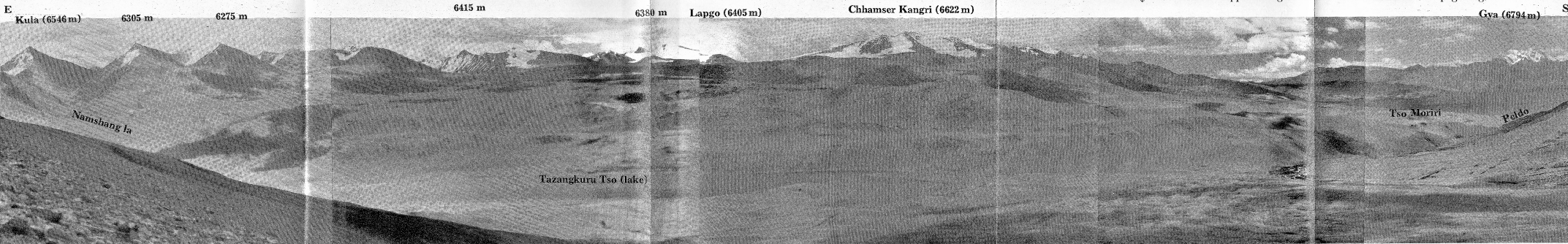
Kiangdon

Karzok

Pelto

Article 10 ↑ Panorama A: Tso Moriri lake, seen from Lungser Kangri (6686 m).

↓ Panorama B: Approaching Tso Moriri from Kamdar la (Nakpogoding). (Harish Kapadia)



E Kula (6546 m) 6305 m 6275 m

6415 m

6380 m

Lapgo (6405 m)

Chhamser Kangri (6622 m)

Gya (6794 m) S

Namshang la

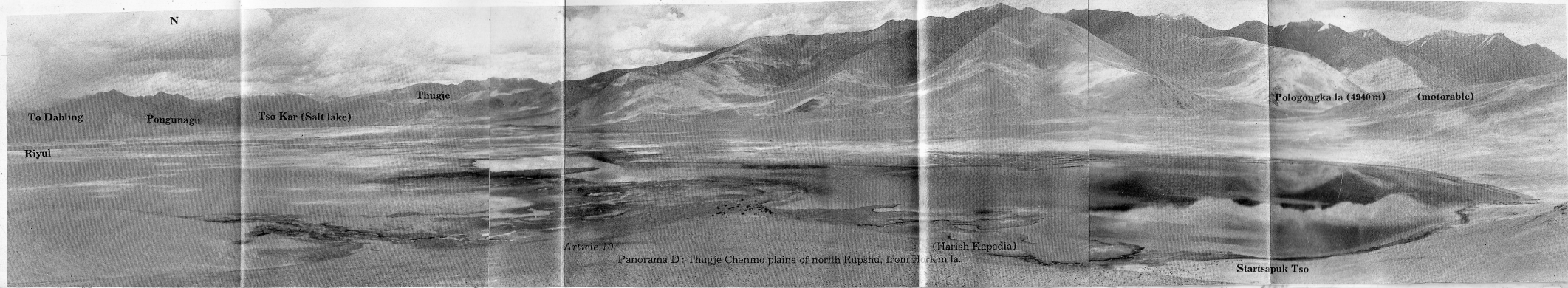
Tazangkuru Tso (lake)

Tso Moriri

Pelto



↑ Article 10 (Harish Kapadia)
 Panorama C: View from Lungser Kangri (6666 m). Peaks of Ladakh-Spiti-Tibet divide.



Article 10 (Harish Kapadia)
 Panorama D: Thugie Chenmo plains of north Rupshu, from Horem la.



Article 11

(Harish Kapadia)

17. Chhamser Kangri (6622 m), left, and Lungser Kangri (6666 m), Rupshu. Routes of ascents.



Article 11

(Harish Kapadia)

13. Ancient Survey of India cairn on slopes of Chhamser Kangri (6622 m). Tso Moriri lake in background.