

## Tsangpo : The Final Exploration

*Reaching the Tsangpo Bend From India*

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Harish Kapadia

Since Kingdon Ward's day there have been no significant advances. The Tsangpo still guard its secrets, and will continue to do so until the last great Asian adventure – a journey all the way up the Tsangpo – Brahmaputra from the Assam valley to the Tibetan plateau – is undertaken.

Charles Allen in *A Mountain in Tibet* (p.173)

For earlier explorers, journeys towards the Tibetan highlands from India began in the plains of Assam, arranging supplies, mules and porters. Now roads have been built leading many kilometres towards the mountains, so the journey begins with hiring a taxi. We hired a big one for the 985 km journey from Dibrugarh, in the valley of Assam, to Tuting high in Arunachal Pradesh (formerly NEFA), heading towards the Tsangpo bend.

The first thing one has to ensure while hiring a taxi in mountain areas, apart from good tyres, a good driver and enough diesel, is to see that it has a good cassette player. The hill drivers are addicted to driving with music, any will do as long it makes enough noise to keep him company. In fact, when fog and rain make visibility poor, volume of music is made louder and louder to enable the driver to concentrate better. Our taxi had a player with unique features. The tape always ran at a faster speed making well-known male singers sound more like female singers and as far as female singers were concerned, less said the better. As we drove along narrow lanes of the so called 'National Highway No. 52', the driver matched his speed with that of the tape. But I found it too difficult to keep my mind's eye on as fast a track as the tape. It was exasperating to imagine lightly clad Bollywood<sup>1</sup> actresses dancing to these tunes so fast, rather too fast for my liking.

The Brahmaputra, one of India's mightiest rivers, originates in lake Manasarovar in Western Tibet. It starts off as an unimpressive rivulet and cleaves an easterly course across the Tibetan plateau. The river, called

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<sup>1</sup> The giant Indian film industry, situated mainly at Bombay (Mumbai) is popularly known as the Bollywood rhyming with Hollywood.

Yarlung Tsangpo (Tsangpo means 'river' in Tibetan) in Tibet, steadily swells up being fed by glacial melts from the Himalaya. It takes a southern course at the Namcha Barwa massif in what is known as the Tsangpo gorge. Further south, at Pemako, the river tumbles over a giant waterfall, thus acquiring the energy and momentum with which it sweeps into India. Over a century explorers and mapmakers were puzzled as to where and how the Tsangpo cuts through high mountains and after the gorge, which direction it takes. One school of thought believed it to proceed further east to join the Irrawaddy or the Salween and flow into the Myanmar. Others believed that it flows south into India what is now, Arunachal Pradesh. But here too it was matter of conjecture as to how it flowed south: to the Subansiri, or into the Siang (also called the Dihang) or into the Dibang further east. Due to various names and hostile tribal areas, the course could not be fully investigated. The final question was that does it flow into the Assam plains to form the Brahmaputra?

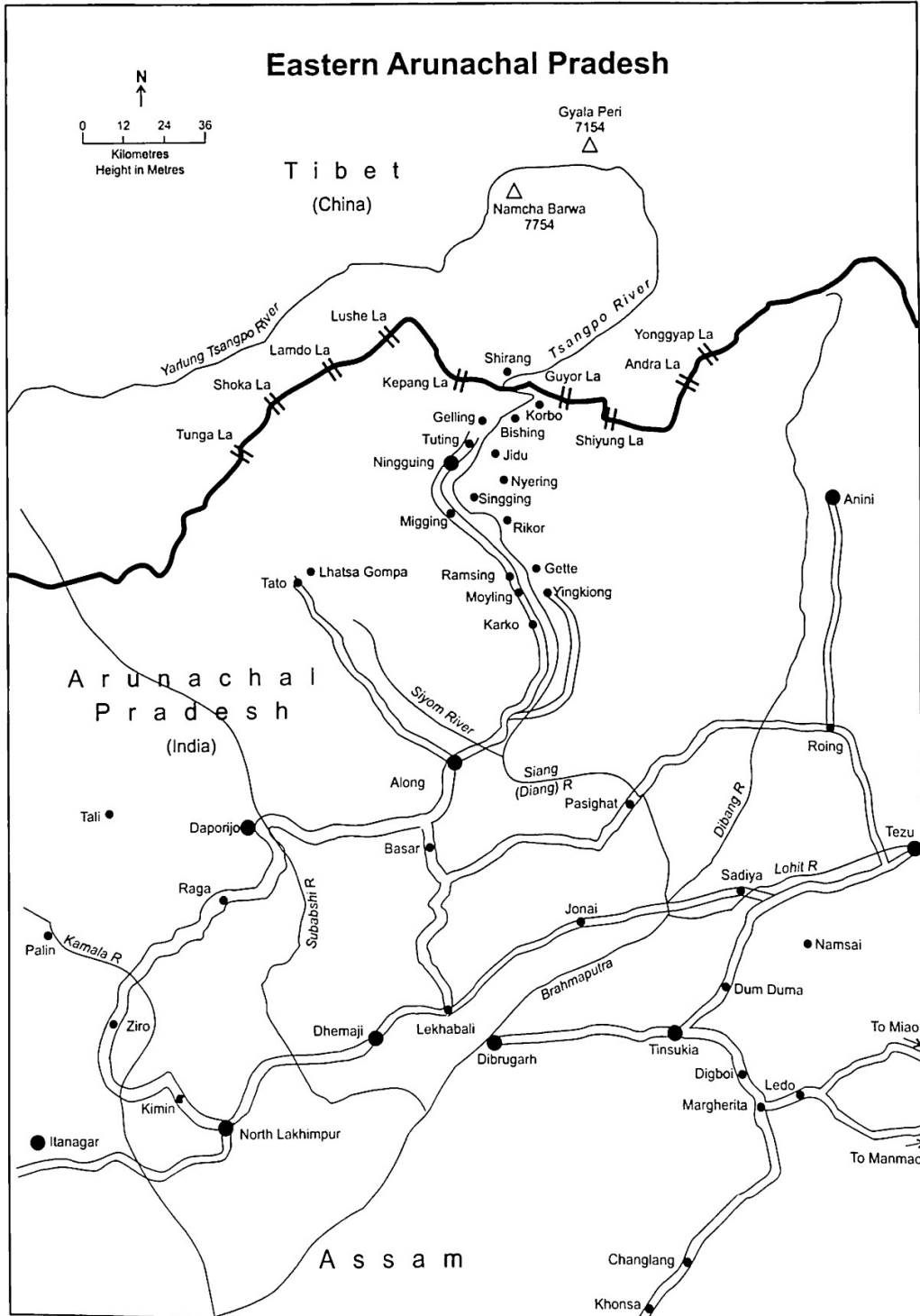
Aerial photography and satellite imagery have now confirmed beyond doubt that the Tsangpo enters India, is called the Siang and forms a major tributary of the Brahmaputra. But, all said and done, seeing is believing, and nobody had done that so far, that is reaching the spot where Tsangpo flowed into India to be called the Siang.

The Tsangpo bend expedition 2004 was organised with two main objectives: firstly, to reach the bend where Tsangpo enters India and secondly to see if Namcha Barwa could be viewed from the Upper Siang valley. The expedition comprised of Harish Kapadia, Motup Chewang and Wing Commander V K Sashindran.

We had come only some distance after landing at the Dibrugarh airport. The first thing we noticed in Dibrugarh was the drive through the famed tea gardens. The one nearest to the town was called Cha Khowa, it being the first one to be established by the British more than a century ago. *Cha* means tea and *Khowa* means plant so this name, given by the British, was simple as it meant 'tea garden'. Soon we crossed the mighty Brahmaputra in a huge ferry, which accommodated four army trucks and a number of people on this two-hour ride across. As the boat was expertly navigated looking between two bamboo poles as indicators, and going through several channels, we relaxed on the upper deck.<sup>2</sup>

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2 See description of such a crossing in 'A Short Tour of the East,' by Col. Balwant Sandhu, *HJ* Vol. 59, p.40. They trekked on the eastern bank of the Tsangpo to Gelling in 2000.



On the other bank (northern bank) we drove to Itanagar to obtain our inner line permits. The capital of Arunachal Pradesh had nothing much to offer, except one curious sight. As we checked into a hotel, we noticed that the clerk at the reception desk had locked himself behind an iron grill and we were to pass our registration and money through its little gaps. It made for a funny sight and illustrated how fragile security was in these areas.

### **The Long Winding Road**

Going through the usual procedures in the babudom of the Government Secretariat we were out with the prized permits in less than two hours, a record. We immediately started our journey via a roundabout road to Tuting from where we would start our trek. The first halt was at Ziro in the Kamla river valley. The drive was amidst thick forests and you could observe a variety of people and their customs on the Apatani Plateau famed for its beauty and local customs.

This Siang Frontier Division (now known as Upper Subansiri) had recorded an unfortunate incident of massacre at Achingmori in 1953. Hostile Tagin tribes inhabited these valleys and they had a distrust of visitors. 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. All of a sudden, locals attacked them 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 of entire villages, a practice well established since the 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 to be made by the Indian officials in the area.<sup>3</sup>

Things have moved on since then and today we did not encounter a single tribe, which looked like a 'tribe'. Most of them were wearing city clothes, were educated, using telephones and going about their business.

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<sup>3</sup> See *Enchanted Frontiers*, by Nari Rustomji, p. 128 for full details.



Christianity is prevalent here and there was a large Baptist church at Ziro and many small churches built in bamboo huts. This was the earliest spread of the religion in the area and villagers who earlier followed 'Donyi-Polo' (the Sun and Moon Gods) religion were converted to Christianity. Though foreigners are not allowed to enter Arunachal Pradesh, local priests who are trained at Shillong, continue the worship. Verrier Elwin studied the traditions and beliefs of locals and has written several books on it.<sup>4</sup>



17. Arunachal lady with typical headgear. (Harish Kapadia)

We drove to Daporijo in the Subansiri valley across a high ridge of Joram Top. Near the road and in some villages there were bamboo structures at prominent places and with an eagle and other birds hanging on it. On inquiry, we were told that these were funeral towers erected on recent graves and the birds were supposed to take the soul to heaven. It was considered an ill omen to go too near to it. After few months a permanent solid rock grave would be engraved here.

Along the road, we saw two important products of Arunachal Pradesh. One was mithun, which is the main strength of local farmers. It is yak-like in appearance, as strong and semi-domesticated. In the early days, the wealth of a local would be judged on how many mithuns he owned. During marriages, it is still quite common to sacrifice several mithuns for a feast. We saw large fields of chillies being grown, in a variety of colours and shapes. These were very hot but no Arunachal meal is complete without a dose of hot chillies. One particular variety is known as the '*Mithun Mirchi*' (mithun chilly) as it is so strong that by eating it even a Mithun can be tamed. These were small but extremely potent chillies, the *jaan leva khursani*, (*mirchi* that can take life). Eat three of them, and your life could be in danger. Our friend Motup ate some mithun *mirchis* and literally for weeks, he complained of serious acidity.

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4 Verrier Elwin was an advisor to the government on tribal welfare. He wrote number of books on the tribes of the Arunachal Pradesh and the northeast. His family lives in Shillong. See his book *A Philosophy for NEFA*.

We enjoyed the forest during the drive, looking at a wide variety of trees with great pleasure. Such rain forests were of great interest for the botanist F. Kingdon Ward who has written several books on the subject. Much of the forest here is privately owned and ironically, that is why it has been so well preserved. On way to Daporijo, by a coincidence, we came across several villages, with names similar to those of our friends. One was called ‘Gigi’ that of a friend of mine living in the USA, another was called ‘Paka’, a friend living in Mumbai, and ‘Dua’ maiden name of my daughter-in-law! It was a pleasant surprise and we played a guessing game during our drive.



18. Traditional bamboo tower over a grave. (Wing Cdr. V. K. Sashindran)

Soon we were at Along which was the original trade centre for salt and was called ‘Alo’. The next day after completing formalities we started driving towards Tuting along the Siyom river. The clear water of the Siyom began to merge with the muddy flow of the Tsangpo. The first view of Tsangpo, (called the Siang or Dihang here) was stupendous. It now led us to our destination.

### **The Journey of the Tsangpo**

At foot of the pass Mayum la, little southeast of Kailash and Manasarovar lake, starts a small stream. One cannot imagine that this stream will become a large river, travel long distances and cause much debate. This is the source of the Tsangpo (for Tibetans, simply the ‘great river’).

It travels along the great Tibetan barren plateau on its eastward course gathering many small rivulets and soon acquires name of the Yarlung Tsangpo to distinguish itself from other rivers. At Saga in Central Tibet it is a huge river and has to be crossed in ferry (a bridge across the river is almost complete). In the early days it was crossed by small boats, sometimes on inflated animal skins—all sounding romantic but dangerous. Now there are two bridges across it, at Lhatse and Gonggar, thus allowing

easy access. The river continues east to pass Yamdrok Tso and Lhasa, little to its south. The Younghusband Expedition to Tibet in 1904 had to cross the Tsangpo in improvised boats to finally reach the city.

Further east, the great massifs of Namcha Barwa (7756 m – 25,446 ft) and Gyala Peri (7151 m – 23,460 ft) blocked its course. In order to negotiate this great wall, the river forms a deep gorge between the two, and is joined by the Po Tsangpo. Turning south the river starts losing height quickly to enter India.

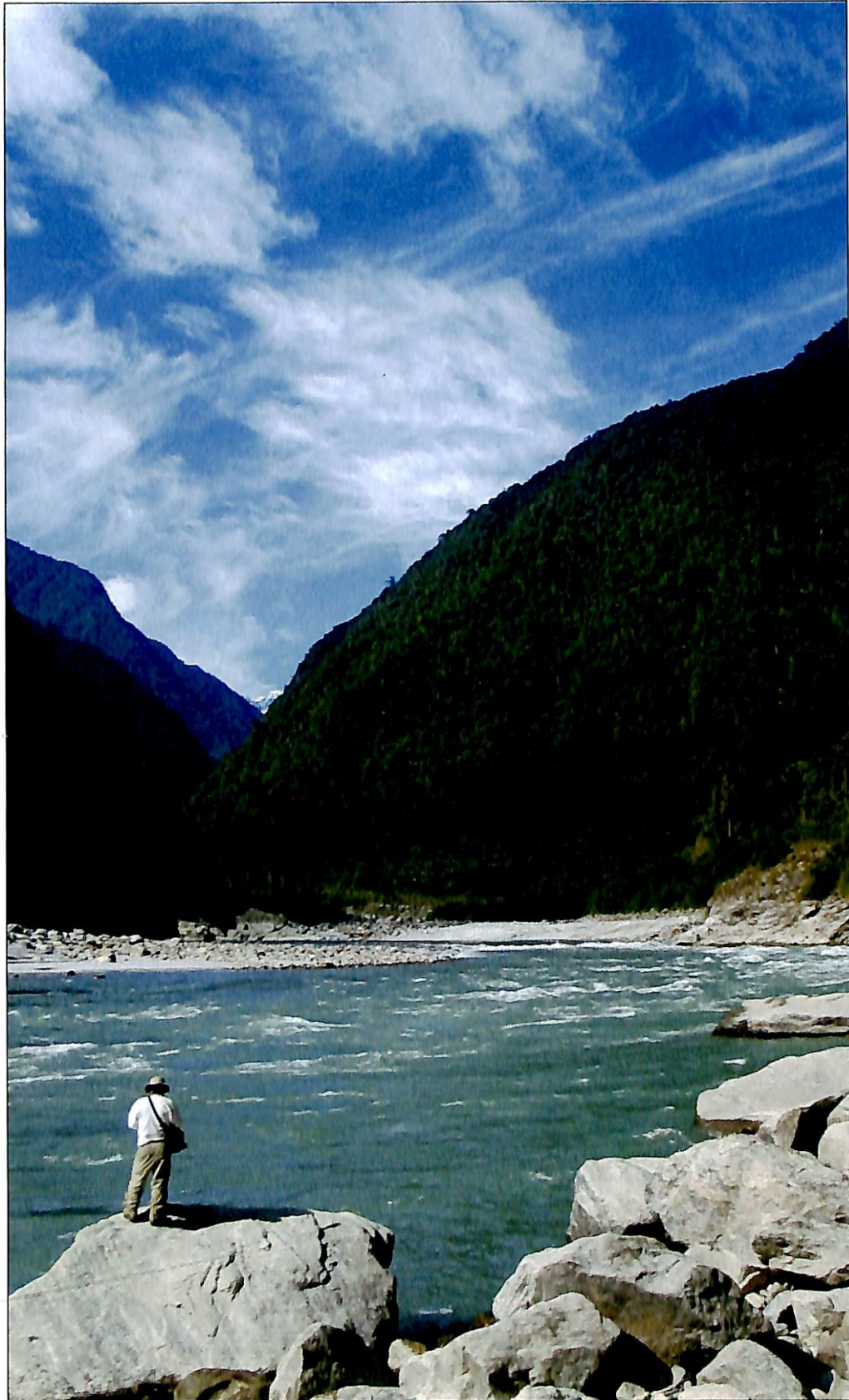
Ahead, as our taxi negotiated a sharp bend at village Pakong and Jengging, the three of us suddenly shouted ‘Wah’ shocking the driver that major part gone wrong. Far in the distance were the peaks of Namcha Barwa and Gyala Peri. It was rather rare to have got a clear view for we were told that almost throughout the year the area remains cloudy and foggy. We spent a night at Moyling and passed Migging. On the opposite bank was the village of Singging. It was up to here that the British army had reached a century ago while trying to explore the entry of the Tsangpo in India.

### **Explorations from Assam**

The exploration from the south, Assam valley, started in 1824 when Lt. Wilcox surveyed a number of rivers including the Siang and the Lohit that formed the Brahmaputra. They learnt from locals that the Tsangpo and the Siang were the same river but it could not be verified as hostile tribes did not allow any entry along the course of the Siang. At the same time various theories again surfaced about the Tsangpo flowing into the Irawaddy and the Salween, specially a view held by Robert Gordon who was a government official in Assam. Lectures at the Royal Geographical Society saw much heated exchanges between explorers.

In 1910 the Chinese had expanded their influence in the Pome and Zayul districts and down the Lohit into Assam. This alarmed the British government who decided to move to interiors of the tribal country of NEFA (North East Frontier Agency). Noel Williamson who was following the Siang to check the Chinese infiltration, was murdered by tribes. A major punitive force under General Hamilton Bower was sent which burned many Abor villages. The main force of the expedition stayed at Kebang while other detachments went up many side valleys. One detachment followed the Siang to reach Singging about 40 miles (64 km) from the border. The gap between this observation and Kinthup’s earlier observation from Onlet was only 80 miles (128 km) in a straight line.



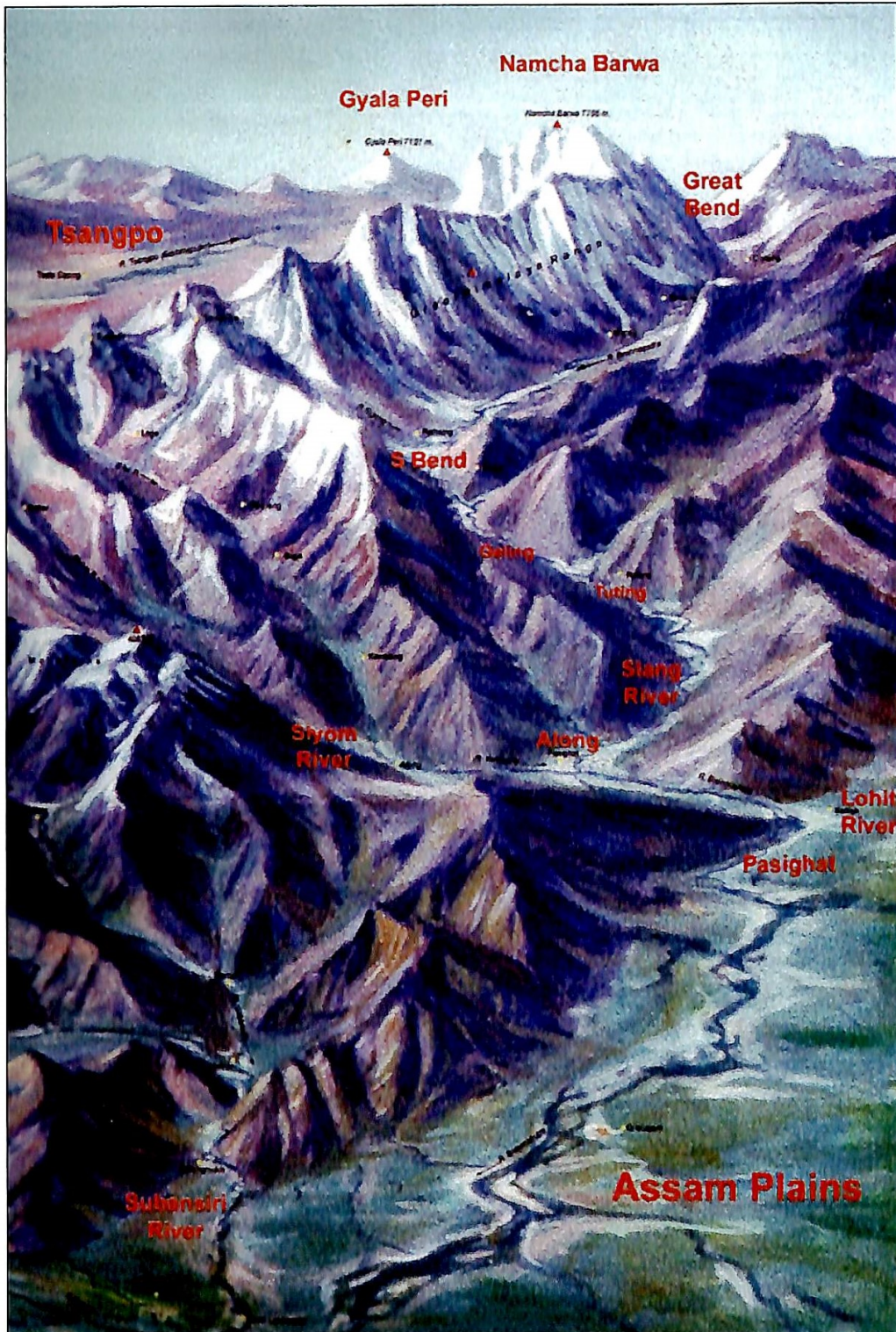


14. The Tsangpo (Siang) flowing into India, making an 'S' bend. (Harish Kapadia)



15. The Tsangpo (Siang) as it enters India. (Harish Kapadia)





16. A sketch of flow of the Tsangpo-Siang-Brahmaputra. (Sketch by Serbjeet Singh)

Ahead of Moyling the road was rough, narrow, winding and with many potholes. As the road deteriorated, our taxi slowed down but its cassette player played songs as fast as before. The show must go on, so now the heroines were dancing rather slowly in my imagination, but with more jerks. The road signs too were unnerving. 'If your brakes are not fit, you will land up in shit!'

By late evening we were comfortably stationed in the rest house at Tuting and making our final arrangements. It was a small little village with Dipun Peak (3338 m) rising in background. Yang Sang chu drained into the Tsangpo from the east. This valley contains several trekking opportunities with high altitude lakes and the peak of Doni Lipik (4612 m).<sup>5</sup> The only attraction in Tuting was ruins of a Dakota aircraft, which crash-landed here in 1988. We visited village Jiddu across the Tsangpo crossing over a Foot Suspension Bridge or FSB and we were to cross many such FSBs during our trek. These bridges were locally constructed of bamboo planks over steel wires. Many times they slanting on one side, some footholds are broken, swings high over turbulent river, but it gets you across! Tuting in a way was the end of the inhabited world for only about two small villages were situated ahead and a special clearance was required to proceed further.

These last kilometres from the Indian side would physically link up the exploration of Kintup and the British.

### **The Riddle of the Tsangpo**

In 1715, Fathers Ippolito Desideri and Manuel Freyre stood on Mayum la and were the first outsiders to view the source of the Tsangpo. They travelled along the Tsangpo to reach Lhasa. Their report that this was the beginning of the great river was confirmed only in 1913. Several other explorers followed them. Among them were George Bogle (1774) who described the middle course, Thomas Manning (1811) who followed the route of Desideri from its source, Edmund Smythe (1864) and Sven Hedin.

With the interest in the Tsangpo growing, the Survey of India deputed the first of its Pundit explorers, Nain Singh<sup>6</sup> to venture here. He travelled

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5 Bhattacharjee, Romesh, *Lands of Early Dawn*.

6 Nain Singh was awarded the Patron's (Royal) Gold Medal by the Royal Geographical Society in 1877 for his two pioneering journeys. He was the first Indian to receive this Royal honour. He lived in Milam till his last days.

in disguise as Tibet was closed to outsiders, and in two epic journeys, in 1865 and 1874, followed the course to Lhasa and beyond. Reaching Chetang, east of Lhasa, he was forced to turn south as his subterfuge was revealed to the Chinese. He crossed into India at Tawang. His notes and information were invaluable. Another Pundit, Lala was deputed to continue south from Chetang where Nain Singh had reached but he failed in 1876 and 1877.

In 1874, the Assam survey was placed under Lt. Henry Harman. He measured the flow of various rivers and found that the flow in the Siang was greater than others, thus proving that most likely, the river was the Tsangpo. He recruited Nem Singh in 1878-79 to be dispatched to Tibet. Kinthup, a tailor from Darjeeling, accompanied him. They followed the Tsangpo from Chetang onwards between the gorge of Namcha Barwa and Gyala Peri and turned south to reach Gyala Sindong before returning. They had taken the exploration further by 287 miles (460 km) thus making a major contribution.

Harman, now posted in Darjeeling, again deputed Kinthup to Tibet in 1880. As Kinthup was illiterate, a Chinese lama accompanied him. From Darjeeling they went to Lhasa and followed the course of the Tsangpo to Chetang and Gyala Sindong. After 15 miles (24 km) they reached Pemakochung village where, as Kinthup described, the Tsangpo fell 150 ft (45 m) in a waterfall which came to be known as the 'rainbow waterfall'.

The Chinese lama unfortunately sold Kinthup to slavery and disappeared. Kinthup escaped and reached Marpung, 35 miles (56 km) downstream but was captured. However later he was allowed to go on a pilgrimage. He crossed the Tsangpo to opposite bank and prepared 500 logs with special markings. These were to be thrown into the Tsangpo, and if they appeared in the Brahmaputra it would conclusively prove the course of the river.

In 1882, he was allowed on another pilgrimage to Lhasa from where he arranged for a letter to be sent to Nem Singh in Darjeeling informing Harman about the logs and dates when he would throw them in water. Unfortunately Harman had left India and the letter was not opened. Not knowing this Kinthup returned to Marpung and threw logs into the river. Afterwards he followed the Tsangpo down stream as far as small village Onlet (Olon). It was close to Dalbuing



(called Tarpin by Kinthup). He could see the haze of the Assam plains and a small village (Korbo?) on the banks of the Tsangpo in India. He was about 40 miles (64 km) in a straight line from the border. He returned to Darjeeling in 1884 and took up his old job as a tailor. Two years later the Survey debriefed him, but he was hardly believed. It was only in 1913 that his description was acknowledged as remarkably accurate.<sup>7</sup>

Attempts to follow the course of the Siang/Tsangpo upstream from Assam were abandoned due to tribal conflicts. F. M. Bailey<sup>8</sup>, who was a member of the Younghusband expedition to Lhasa, explored the Lohit. As the Lohit flowed from Tibet, north to south in to India, that left no room to doubt that the Tsangpo had to be flowing south into the Brahmaputra as it could not cross the Lohit to go east to the Irrawaddy basin. Later he joined General Hamilton Bower's Abor expedition to go further north. In 1911-12 A. Bentick followed Kinthup's steps but challenged Kinthup's discoveries. As a result F. M. Bailey returned to the area to check the topography. H. T. Morshead<sup>9</sup>, a surveyor accompanied him. They travelled east of the Tsangpo to Showa and then turned west to Gyala Sindong to try to locate the falls at Pemakochung. He found Kinthup's topographical descriptions accurate except that the waterfall was on a side stream and not on the Tsangpo. They travelled upstream along the Zayul river (the Lohit in Assam) and by late June reached Shugden gumpa (monastery). He discovered that a river not far to north from here, the Nugong Asi chu, ran into the Tsangpo. He was very near to the border, as it is now known!

Finally they travelled upstream to Chetang and turned south to reach Tawang and Darjeeling. Details of their travels formed the basis on which the McMahon Line was drawn on the maps at the Shimla conference in 1914, which determined the borders between India and Tibet. Kinthup was summoned to Shimla, debriefed again and given Rs. 3000 for his services. He died in Darjeeling in 1915, relatively an unsung hero who had done much to explore the course of the Tsangpo.

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7 Refer *The Pundits*, by Derek Waller.

8 F. M. Bailey was awarded the Patron's (Royal) Gold Medal by the Royal Geographical Society in 1916 for his explorations. He continued his distinguished service and died in 1967, aged 85.

9 H. T. Morshead received the Macgregor Medal of the United Service Institute of India in 1916. Morshead was unfortunately murdered in the jungle near Maymyo in Myanmar, 'during an early Sunday morning ride' on 17 May 1931.

Though journeys of F M Bailey and Kinthup had effectively settled the doubts about the exact course of the Tsangpo one gap of 40 miles (64 km) on each side, remained to be explored. On the north the Chinese have presence near the entry point to India.

### **Pemako**

The area from where the Tsangpo flowed between Namcha Barwa and Gyala Peri was known as Pemako, one of the holiest parts for Buddhist pilgrims. The Pemako region extends across the political borders till Yang Sang chu valley near Tuting and the whole region was a site of pilgrimage for Tibetans, Monpas and Adi for circumambulation. Tensing Norgay's wife Daku was on a pilgrimage to holy Devakota cave in the Pemako area when due to the altitude sickness she passed away.<sup>10</sup>

In 1924 Captain F. Kingdon Ward and Lord Cawdor managed to close the gap further. They climbed down the gorge at several points and it convinced them that the river dropped fast and dramatically thousands of feet in more or less unbroken rapids but there was no possibility of any waterfall. They could not proceed further down stream towards India.<sup>11</sup>

With the First World War intervening, attention was drawn away from the remaining exploration. The British soon were busy with the Indian independence movement and left India in 1947. The area was more or less unvisited and the Tsangpo was left alone.

### **The bend unfolds: Tuting to Gelling**

It takes 3 to 4 hours to go to Gelling from Bona, where the road ends. Gelling is the last village on the right bank of the river inside India. It is a large village and is the seat of the local Panchayat. From Bona, the trail runs parallel to the river rising and falling gently. Then passes through paddy fields at the base of the hill on which Gelling (1220 m) is situated. From the foot of the hill it was a continuous one and a quarter hour climb to Gelling.<sup>12</sup> Our porters, like all in Arunachal, were carrying the dao, (a sharp longish iron blade knife). These are used for a variety of purposes

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10 See *Touching My Father's Soul*, by Jamling Norgay, p.11

11 Refer Kingdon Ward, Frank, *Himalayan Enchantment*.

12 Gelling is an administrative headquarter and was visited by many officials. Dr. P. M. Das who visited the village in 1993 has written about it and viewing the Tsangpo/Siang. Refer: 'Travels in the Arunachal Himalaya' in *the Himalayan Journal Vol. 50*, p. 90.

and no one will move without a dao attached to his waist. It is almost like a piece of clothing. And as for modern gadgets, they carried a cricket bat and would start playing the game at the slightest opportunity. Cricket near the Tibetan frontier was a novelty!

### **Kepang La**

Kepang la, situated northwest of Gelling village, could be reached in an hour or two. At 1915 m it is a well trodden pass. The ridge to the west and east of Kepang la, forms a part of the McMahon Line, called here as 'Line of Actual Control' (LAC). To the northeast of the village is a high vantage point at 2073 m.

In 1962 the Chinese invaded the NEFA territories. Though the main force of attack was near Tawang, several columns came down in the eastern sections down the Lohit and Walong. One attack was on Kepang la. In a skirmish two Indian soldiers were killed and there is a small monument in their memory at this pass. Another column came down Lushe la further west. The Chinese had reached Tuting, burnt some villages and retreated later. The Indian army moved up in strength, constructed roads and camps so today one can travel through the lower valleys by road till Tuting. These allowed an easier approach but the romance of exploration of the Tsangpo was not over as yet!

### **Bishing**

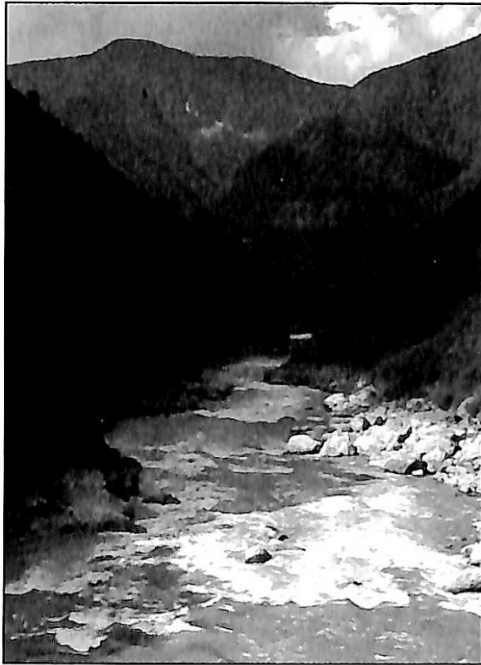
From Gelling we had to descend all the way down to the river in an hour and crossed it on a FSB that was 200 m long. In the next two hours, the trail climbed up to Bishing. A huge waterfall, called Sibi Dingo, probably 160 m high, hurtles down from the ridge above the village. It dominates the last half an hour of the walk and must be awesome in the monsoons.

Many old accounts of this region and maps mention a place called Korbo located on the left bank of the river on the foot of the ridge that forms the Top Spur. As per maps, if coming from Tibet, this should be the first village in this valley on the Indian side. We were shown a major clearing below Bishing, where the earlier village existed. Since 1963 Korbo (the Tibetan name) shifted to Bishing (970 m) which is a typical local name.

Bishing village is the quaintest one that we passed on the trek. Rice is grown in the fields close to the river. Higher up on the hill slopes where irrigation is not possible, the forest is cleared for growing millet, maize

and pumpkin in *jhum* cultivation style. Once a piece of forest is cleared, that area is cultivated for 3 –5 years. It is then abandoned and the cultivators move to a new location. In any other part of the world, one would have serious reservations about this system, entailing cutting down forests, but here, the vegetation grows so fast and so densely that deforestation is unlikely to occur in the normal course of events. There was a row of granaries, called *kinsung*, on the northern edge of the village. These wooden structures built on stilts, were used to store rice, maize and pumpkins. The peculiar feature is the presence of a circular flat

piece of wood sitting on top of every stilt below the superstructure. These are built to keep rats and snakes away.



19. The Siang below Bishing village.  
(Harish Kapadia)

26th November was a clear morning. Motup and Sashindran left with local guides to climb a ridge behind the village towards Pema Jong. Going up steeply they cut through forest to reach the high ridge. And they were rewarded with a magnificent view of high Namcha Barwa glittering like silver in horizon. At its foot was the great bend of the Tsangpo as it enters India. After their energetic efforts, we were now eager to reach our destination.

That evening, a full moon night, we sat around campfire and *apong* (local beer) was served freely. The local ladies after a hard day's work came out in their finest dress and were singing songs, which we did not understand, but appreciated. As the wood turned to ambers, a great bonhomie prevailed among this variety of people, which represented almost all of India. Our porters from lower areas of Arunachal were Adis, people of Bishing were Monpas who had migrated from Tibet. My staff was from Kumaun, far away in Uttaranchal, our friends were from Assam and member Motup Chewang was a Ladakhi, (short, stout and strong), Wing Commander V. K. Sashindran, a Brahmin Iyengar from Chennai in south India (providing intelligent talk and medical care) and me, a Gujarati from Mumbai thrown in (like a good pickle) for good measure . Plenty of fruits

were served for our pleasure and we ate oranges like never before. Although close to the Tibetan border, we were at lower altitude, as the plateau of Tibet did not rise for several kilometres ahead.

### **To Guyor La, on the Line of Actual Control (LAC)**

Two local guides were engaged to accompany us on the next leg of the journey. The river takes a southerly turn below Bishing. It is probably 4 –5 km as the crow flies from this bend to the point where the river enters India. We descended to the river, passed Korbo and then skirted up the ridge on the northern bank of the river. The dense forest and ensnaring vines made the going tough. It took four hours to reach Kasi nala (1220 m)- our campsite for the next two nights.

Trekking in the forest was a novel experience. Our guide Yonton would walk in front preparing a trail by hacking vegetation. The other guide Shering would be clearing thick branches above. The branches were in the habit of dropping leech snakes or other insects on the encroaching travellers. This was despite the fact that this was the best season (without rain), to be trekking in these forests. In the rains or in any other season, we would have been filled with leech and attacked by snakes. There are several legends about snakes, enough to scare anyone. For us the only saving grace was that many snakes do not appear in winter.

Ngarba or Russell's Viper is found here over 6000 ft. height. It had two long fangs and anyone bitten would not expect to survive. Shimongs eat the snake when it is caught in Eda – a stone trap. Khambas believe that some people who indulge in black magic and sorcery extract poison from the fangs of the Ngarba and mix with rotten eggs. If a victim swallows the poison he or she would die a slow death and sorcerer would get wealth.

(Bhattacharyya T. K.)

To camp in the forest, one had to pitch tents in a clearing or make a clearing. A Fire was kept burning all night to keep the area warm and keep insects and snakes away. Members of the group slept at different locations, for there never was a clearing large enough to accommodate all of us. It got dark by about 4.00 p.m. Rice and lentils were cooked and each porter could polish off a quantity that some of us would eat in a week. We would start at about 4.00 a.m. when there was adequate light. We were in the eastern India and the time zones were different.

From this location we climbed up to Guyor la (1760 m) another pass on the McMahon Line. Unfortunately it was located in a heavily wooded area and offered no views. A metal plate nailed to a tree trunk bore the India Lion insignia and marked where our territory began. The porters had been vexed by the climb up to Kasi nala and were determined not to return the same way. While we were away at Guyor la some of them charted a trail to the riverbank. The next day we descended steeply to the river and camped on the bank of the Siang (the Tsangpo). There was no dearth of firewood as the riverbank was strewn with driftwood. We were reminded of the remarkable effort by Kinthup to throw marked wood in the river. The open space was a welcome respite from the claustrophobic campsite at Kasi nala.

### **The Final Exploration: To the Tsangpo – Siang Bend**

The next day we set off on our final objective – the bend in the river. The trek involved walking across boulders strewn on the riverbank by a landslide in the past followed by an ascent to traverse a cliff. The winding Siang touched the rock cliffs at several places and all these have to be surmounted with difficulties by climbing along the cliffs, traversing in the forest above and then descending on the other side. The traverse was 1.5 km long and through thick foliage. A descent followed by a few kilometre's walk brought us to a point on the river bank from where the bend on the Tsangpo can be clearly seen. Huge rocks offer vantage positions for photography. Steep slopes covered with impenetrable forest make the 'Spur Tip', the border point, inaccessible, though only a little away.



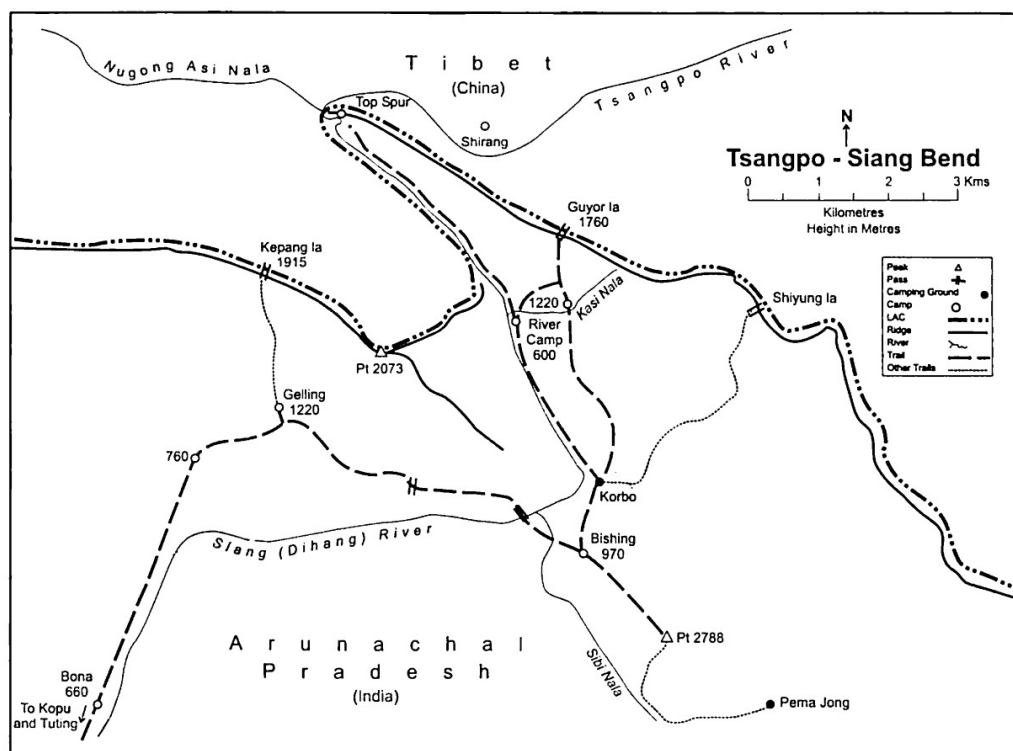
20. Bishing village with the Tsangpo (Siang) flowing in the background. (Motup Goba)



The river made a 'S' shaped bend as it entered Indian territories. The top spur projects into the concavity of the second bend. At the opposite end of the second bend along its right bank is the mouth of Nugong Asi nala which today marks the official boundary between India and China on the river. The snow-capped Dapang peak (5570 m) in Tibet, near Shugden gumpa reached by F. M. Bailey, was visible at the head of the valley. The Tsangpo entered India at 580 m. The altitude at our camp, four kilometres downstream was 568 m. This gradient is maintained all the way to Pasighat and this explains the velocity of flow. Watermarks on the rocks and cliffs show that it rises by 5 to 15 m during the summer months.

The return journey was made along the river to the nala below Bishing village. Two difficult cliffs had to be crossed on the way. Exposed rock faces extending to the river necessitated fixing rope on both. Beyond the nala below Bishing, the trail soon joined the trail from the FSB to Bishing. The distance to Tuting was covered in one and a half days.

In India the Tsangpo, called the Siang (or Dihang), flows past Tuting to meet the Siyom at Pangin and flows down to Sadiya in the Assam plains. Here, joined by the Lohit and the Dibang, it becomes a large river and is called the Brahmaputra. It flows





21. Tsangpo-Siang 'S' Bend at border. Dapang peak (5570 m) in left background. Bailey had reached foot of this peak on Nugong Asi nala. (Harish Kapadia)

through the Assam valley to Bangladesh, now called Meghna. Finally it merges into the Bay of Bengal. The small rivulet originating near Manasarovar lake thus completes its journey in eastern India, as a large river thousands of miles away. It is a river, which posed several riddles since 1715.

We drove back to the Assam valley. Now

we looked at the forest not only for its beauty but also with a healthy respect and some fear. We knew what was inside and how it could trap you if you are not careful. But there was a deep sense of satisfaction and the prophetic words of Charles Allen were now fulfilled.

On the return the cassette player in our new taxi was playing at full blast, but at a proper speed. But in our minds, those Bollywood heroines were still dancing faster. Our imaginations may have been running wild but our dreams were fulfilled.

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## Summary

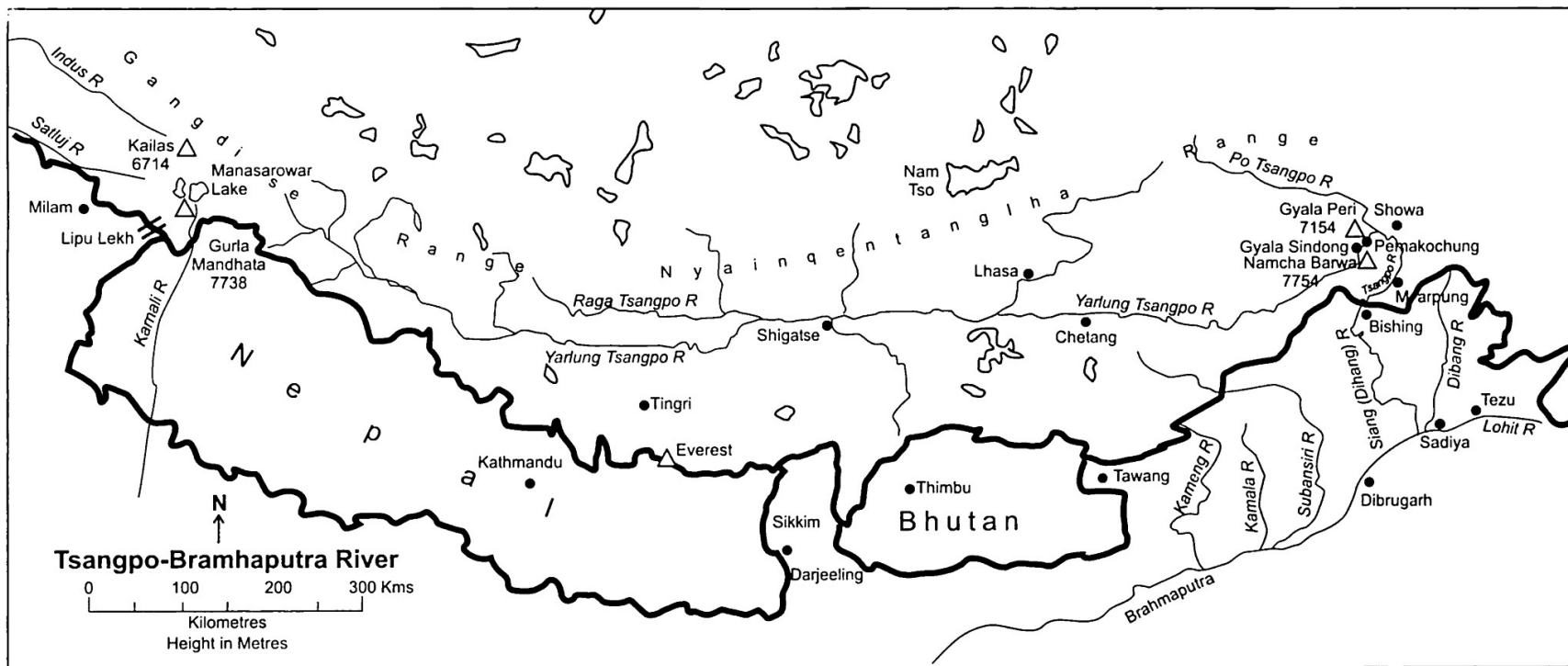
**Members:** Harish Kapadia<sup>14</sup> (Mumbai – mountaineer and author), Motup Chewang (Ladakh - adventure tour professional) and Wing Commander V. K. Sashindran (Assistant Professor, Armed Forces Medical College, Pune).

**Dates:** (2004) 16th November to 5th December.

<b>Date</b>	<b>Place</b>	<b>Height</b>
19th and 26th November	Namcha Barwa sited from Jengging and above Bishing.	Namcha Barwa (7756 m – 25,446 ft). Gyala Peri (7151 m – 23, 460 ft)
28th November	Guyor la reached	1760 m
30th November	Tsangpo - Siang Bend reached	580 m

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14 Harish Kapadia was awarded the Patron's (Royal) Gold Medal of the Royal Geographical Society in 2003, '*as an outstanding explorer in the finest traditions of the great Himalayan pioneers*'. He is the only other Indian after Nain Singh to receive this award, after a gap of 125 years. He lives in Mumbai.





17. Namcha Barwa (right) and Gyala Peri in Tibet, seen from Jengging, en route towards Tuting. A rare view from South, Arunachal Pradesh. (Motup Goba)



18. Namcha Barwa in Tibet, seen from above Bishing village, Arunachal Pradesh. (Motup Goba)





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