

Secrets of Subansiri

On Pilgrim Trail of Takpa Siri

Harish Kapadia

‘Say hi 2 snakes 4 me’, was a short SMS message on my mobile. Keeping up with modern times, the remote town of Daporijo had a mobile tower even as we were about to give up other comforts of civilisation. But the message was not too wrong for during the next two days we travelled to Tame Chung Chung, *aka*, (also known as) ‘place of snakes’, in short ‘TCC’. These valleys of Arunachal Pradesh are full of snakes, leeches, dum dum flies, if bitten by it, takes fifteen days to heal and leaves black marks for long. However, we were assured that there were no snakes now at Tame Chung Chung and no leeches or dum dum flies would bite us in the autumn season. However, our doctor, Wing Cdr. Sashindran had prescribed malaria pills and like for defence forces in the area, Tuesday was the day to take malaria pills. None of us fell sick.

We had travelled 870 kms from Guwahati to reach the starting point of our trek. (This is no exaggeration and a major achievement in itself, considering poor roads, bad vehicles and sometimes even its non-availability. But we managed.) These road journeys are not without advantages as one can look around at the life of people, pass verdant forest and go through areas which still look like picture postcards from the past. However, it is poor roads and maniac drivers that one has to be careful of. On the so-called National Highway 52, our car was about to ram into a stationery truck. As driver pulled out of line we missed an on coming truck by inches. It is usually dark by 4.30 p.m. in these parts and often we had to trek or travel in pitch dark. But nothing that we were about to do in the mountains matched this miss. It was the scariest experience of our trip.

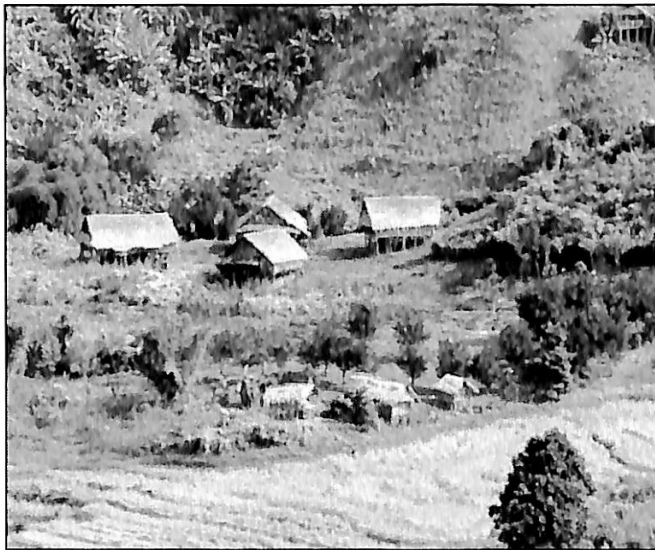
We travelled from Itangar (where we collected our inner line permits) to Kimin, Ziro and Daporijo.¹ Small towns en route, we noticed, were

1 Daporijo, ‘a flat land, ringed by mountains’ was situated in a large valley. In a corner of the bazaar were figures of two Mithuns (local bulls) carved out of stone. This was erected as an agreement of truce between two warring tribes where many tribals were killed. A foundation stone, laid by the then Governor, B. K. Nehru marked the site for a Gandhi Ashram. Today only an electric pole and some garbage surrounded it. In this land of Tagins, who kill and eat everything, the non-violence theory of Gandhi doesn’t seem to hold water.

expanding quickly and in a bizarre fashion. Ahead of Daporijo was a small village Talliha. The Indian army had withdrawn till here from the border when the attack from China was launched in 1962. On the opposite bank was the village of Achingmori.

Achingmori Incident

As the British left India, this area was largely left alone until October, 1953, when an infamous incident of massacre occurred at Achingmori at the Siang Frontier Division (now known as Upper Subansiri). A party of Assam Rifles was resting here with their weapons stacked at one side. They were unarmed and were distributing salt as a gesture of goodwill. All of a sudden, Tagin villagers attacked them and they were massacred to a man. 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 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 and villagers were quite surprised when this did not happen. This allowed for the first inroads of acceptance of Indian officials in the area.² Six culprits were arrested and each was sentenced to life imprisonment as per law. The last surviving prisoner died in 2001.



12. Achingmori village today.

At present, the road ends at Limiking. Fourteen kilometres ahead, our trek began near the grave of Shere Thapa, a valiant soldier of the Indian army who held back a major assault by the Chinese in 1962. Alone, with only a light machine gun, he killed several Chinese soldiers as they tried to come

² See *Enchanted Frontiers*, by Nari Rustomji, p. 128 for details.



13. Grave of soldier Shere Thapa.

down the steep slopes in front. Though Shere Thapa was killed in the battle, he was buried respectfully by the Chinese who left a small note praising his bravery.

The first challenge we faced was the near vertical slope on which Shere Thapa had stopped the Chinese. No sooner we started than we were introduced to foot suspension bridges (FSB), a bridge hanging on steel wires with wood and bamboo spread as footholds. We were to cross such FSBs at several places, each one of different sizes and quality, some with tilting sides, making it difficult and dangerous, while some with bottom planks missing so if you were not careful, your leg could slip through it. Ahead, the trail climbed almost vertically at first, but there were wooden ladders, the first of many that we were to cross. Some of them were 60 m high while some were erected traversing across a rock face with the river flowing dangerously below. Many FSBs and ladders were crossed with adrenalin flowing. Up the steep slope we reached TCC (1835 m – 15 km).

Ancient Trails

We were here in search of the ancient pilgrim trail of Takpa Siri. There are three main 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 is lined with many gompas (monasteries) forming a circuit, which devoted Tibetans undertake. It

extends into the Yang Sang chu valley near Tuting in India. The third major pilgrimage is a *Kora* around Takpa Siri peak, north of the Subansiri valley. Both the latter pilgrimages routes extended south into the Lopa country (North East Frontier Agency or the present day Arunachal Pradesh). The Kailash pilgrimage was undertaken by hundreds of Hindus from India as well. Earlier both Tibetans and Indians undertook these pilgrimages freely across borders. Artificial lines were drawn later. Political upheaval stopped the Kailash pilgrimage for Indians (and to some extent for Tibetans) between 1959 and 1982. Chinese forbade Pemako and Takpa Siri pilgrimages even for Tibetans. Since 1956, the tradition of Takpa Siri pilgrimage has stopped. After the Indo-China war of 1962 the pilgrim route is divided between India and China so it now remains forbidden. It is hard to imagine what faith had driven them to such an arduous pilgrimage, as the Tibetans were not well versed with movements in jungles, facing the dangers of animals, snakes and insects. Though they employed Tagins to accompany them and use them as guides, this journey of faith was remarkable. We were to trek on this pilgrim trail, in the east along the Tasari Chu and in the west along the Subansiri, the areas south of the present border.

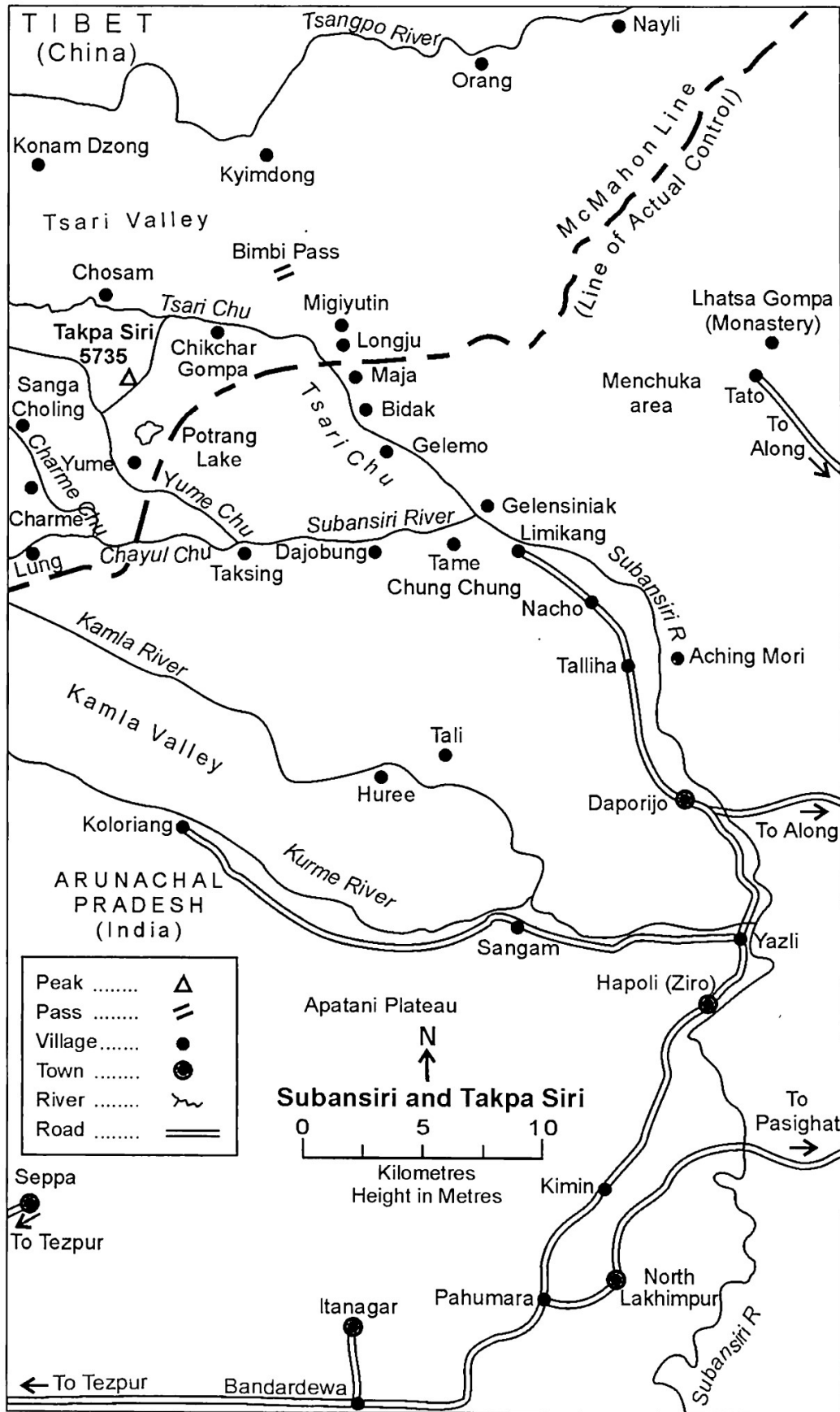
Along the Tsari Chu

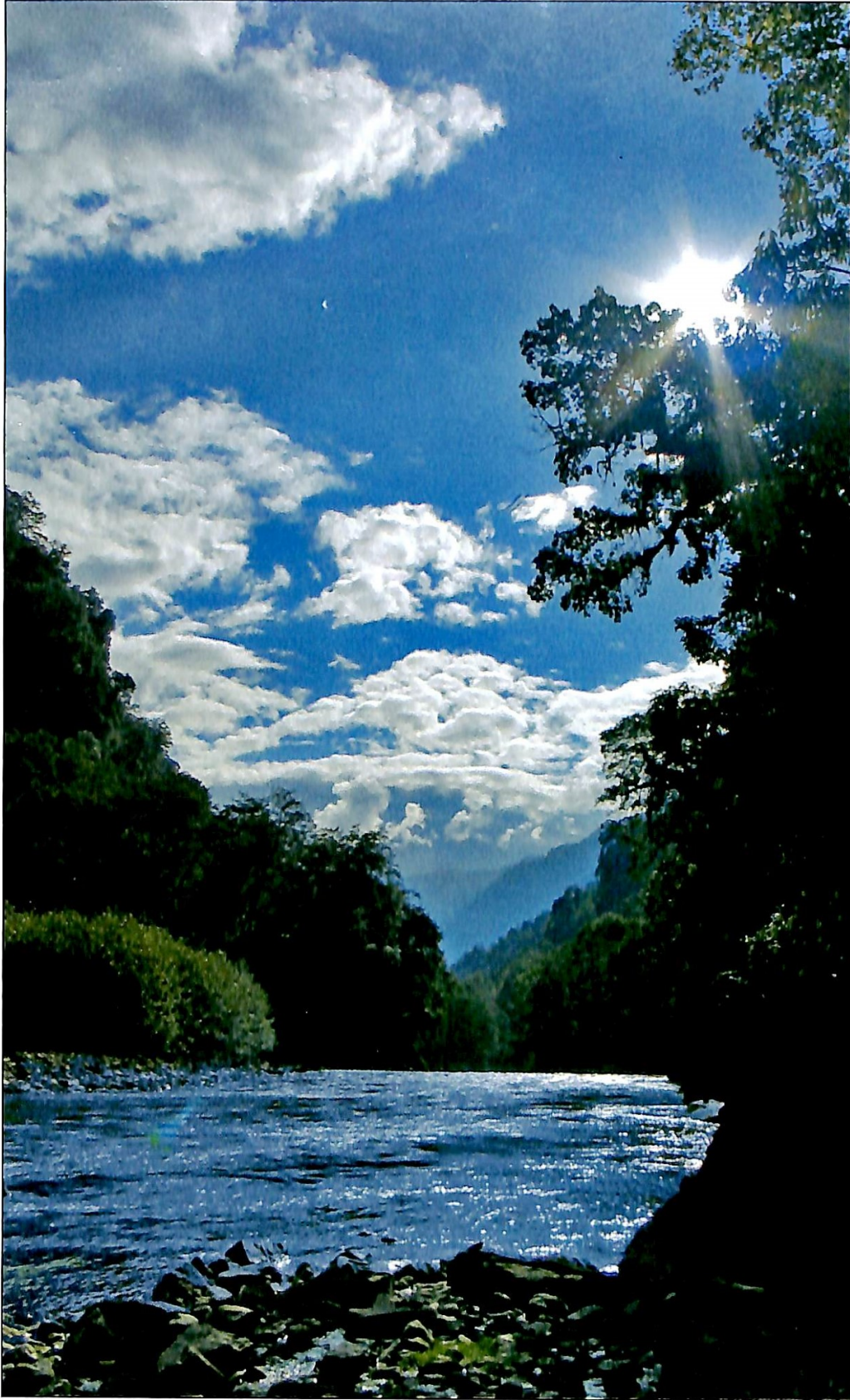
First we were to trek along the Tsari chu (Gelen bung), which followed the pilgrim route to the northeast. The trek started with descent of 1585 m to the banks of the Subansiri. Arunachalis have one peculiar habit, may be because of thick forest, all trails they make are near vertical. There



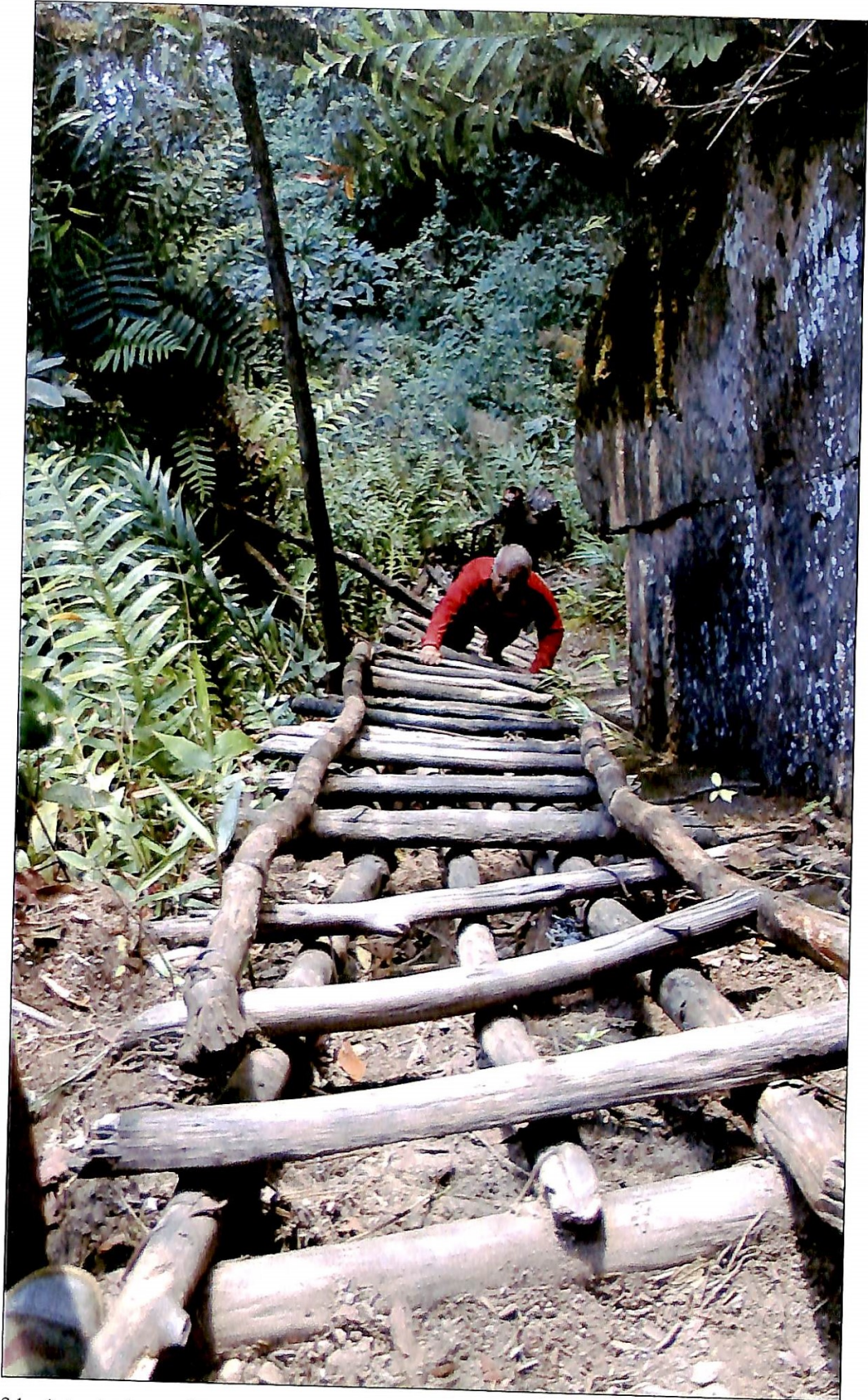
14. A renovated ancient temple on pilgrim trail.

are no zig-zags, like in other parts of Himalaya. Thus though the heights are covered quickly, it becomes challenging for knees while climbing down and for the heart while climbing up. As we passed the small village of TCC, we could see ladies nodding their heads, murmuring 'you will never reach down and if you do, you will never come up, at least not easily.' And how right they were. That steep descent was one of the hardest one





30. The Subansiri river near Taksing.



31. A typical wooden ladder in the Subansiri valley.



32. Trekking through bamboo forest.



33. Crossing steep terrain along the Subansiri.



34. Mithun.

can experience, holding on to roots of trees, slipping down steeply. Once on the banks of the Subansiri, we reached at Gelensiniak (830 m – 4 km), where Tsari chu was merging with it. Across the first FSB on this route, stood a small temple, though in traditional style, it was not more than few decades old. The local defence units who had stayed here had renovated it. Now we were on the ancient pilgrim trail. Though we were never much above the river, the trail constantly climbed up and down through thick forest, making it very tiring in humid climate, as we never climbed above 1000 m.

We crossed FSBs with regularity hearing stories of crossings in rainy months, when the rivers are in spate, almost on level with slippery planks, an experience that no weak hearted person can undertake. As it was dark by 4 o'clock, we got into one large cave to spend the night. Such caves or bamboo shelters near clearings were called *Tsukang*. The local Tagins built them during the pilgrim season. They were stocked with wood, which was in plenty, and food so that the pilgrims could travel light. During the three-month season, thousands used these trails. Galemo (1790 m – 17 km) was only few hours away and the route ahead to Bidak (1800 m – 6 km) was flatter. The trail went ahead to Maja, which was the last point approachable from India and it crossed across the McMahon line or the 'Line of Actual Control' to Bissa and finally to Longju and Migyitun, now in China.



15. Traditional bamboo houses.

Indo-China War, 1962

The Indo-China war in 1962 changed everything for NEFA, now known as Arunachal Pradesh. The Chinese had never accepted the McMahon Line as drawn in 1914 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 theirs. When the negotiations about demarcating the international boundary failed, on 20 October 1962 the Chinese attacked the Indian army at several points, the major thrust being at Tawang in the west.

In the Subansiri valleys the main Chinese thrust was from Longju. In 1960s, the road had reached only until 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, near Chinese garrison town of Migyitun. 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'. At start of the conflict, 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 proceeded further down reaching Nacho village. The Indian forces had withdrawn till Talliha.

From Menchuka valley, to the east of Tsari chu valley, a party of Indian soldiers tried to flee down on an unchartered forest trail into the Tsari chu valley. They were trapped in the forest and four



16. Stone erected to mark tribal peace treaty.

officers from their party died of exhaustion, including their Commanding Officer, Lt. Col. D. A. Taylor.

People

We met one shikari, the lonely occupant of a hut at Galemo. Named *Bandar Mara* ('killer of monkeys'), he was building an intricate bamboo hut almost similar to ancient *Tsukang*. As we entered his residence, we were in a primitive world. There were skulls of many animals that he had killed, particularly monkeys. He literally lived on forest produce and killed animals for survival. He set up traps to catch rabbits, rats and snakes. We had to be careful of these traps, as some of these traps shoot off arrows to kill an animal. In fact there is a tradition wherein a young Tagin boy must catch a snake, which is then cut open, and the almost live throbbing heart is put in his mouth to make him brave. It is said that a Tagin will eat anything that walks except human beings and anything that flies, except aeroplanes! They do not milk cows, as milk is considered an inferior product and cows are reared for meat. Forest give these people everything. When they were first offered sugar, they were suspicious as it dissolved in water, while a cake of soap was boiled to eat. Salt was the most important commodity and as the nearest source was Tibet, this became the main reason for interaction and trade with Tibetans, and visits to Tibet.



17. A Tagin Family.



18. Shikar trophies hanged on a door.

The best gift to locals is to distribute salt, as for them other items like cloth, fresh vegetables or milk have little value. At Galemo, I inquired whether we should hang up all our food items, as it was quite common for such precious cargo to be eaten

by rats. 'There are no rats at Galemo. Locals have nearly eaten them all', the caretaker explained. They eat birds and kill snakes by a catapult. The only time we saw a snake on our trail, the Tagin porter with us literally jumped ahead with his *dah*,³ which every Tagin carries and gladly butchered it, for it meant food. However it was thrown away, as only the meat of a poisonous snake is delicious. Sometimes, we wonder and call them primitives for eating such food, but are not monkey head, snake soup and raw fish, delicacies in restaurants in Hong Kong, Japan and almost all over South-East Asia? It is only that their culture was so different that we from the plains of India found it difficult to understand or accept. But it seems alarming, the rate at which species are being killed in these areas.

Along the Subansiri River

After some rest at TCC, we were ready to embark on the second part of our trek following the Subansiri up to Taksing village. The pilgrims from Gelensiniak proceeded along the Subansiri to the frontier village of Taksing. To catch the pilgrim trail we had to descend steeply to the Subansiri river again. Crossing FSBs the trail went up and down with regularity. This section was full of wooden ladders and bridges across rocky slopes with river flowing below. After about nine hours of walking we reached Dajobung

3 A long sharp knife essential in forest. All carry it, from young to most elderly, from daybreak till night, and for killing an animal or cutting wood. It is covered by sheath made of bamboo, decorated with wood or animal skin (we saw one made of skin from the foot of a bear) and is carried at the hip.



19. Wooden ladder on steep sections.

(1640 m - 14 km) late in the afternoon in darkness. Next day (30 November) the trail started with a steep climb to the top of a ridge and then proceeded along the river with many ups and downs. It was late in the evening when we reached Dadu (1650 m - 18 km) after a 10-hour walk. A steep climb ahead led us to Reding after which we drove on a newly constructed motor road to Taksing (2450 m - 18 km).⁴

Taksing was a large village mainly consisting of Monpa community (more akin to Tibetans) and the people seemed to be relying on supplies



20. A Post Box.

from Government as very little agriculture could be seen. The Tibetan frontier was only a short distance from Taksing. Little ahead of Taksing, the Chayul chu (Nyarshi river) flowing from southwest, Charne chu from northwest and Yume chu (Hari Siko) flowing from north merge 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 and proceeded to their respective villages at the end of the pilgrimage.⁵

We spend the next day at Taksing, gathering information about the ancient Takpa Siri pilgrimage, looking at various local customs, visiting a church and the foot imprints of Guru Padmasambhava in the village. We met the elders, the last of the people who have undertaken the pilgrimage of Takpa Siri.

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- 4 Taksing literally means the 'place of tiger'. This is a well-known concept in Buddhism like the Takstang monastery in Bhutan where it is believed that a lama riding on a tiger flew up a cliff to establish a monastery high up on rocks. It is now visited by thousands of tourists.
- 5 An Indian air force plane had crashed in the Yume chu valley on 3rd January 1960 killing all nine occupants. The other major face-off at the otherwise quiet border was at Asaphila ridge in June 2003.



41. Weaving a 'galu', traditional wear.



42. Erecting traditional bamboo hut.



21. Taksing, last village on the border.

Takpa Siri Pilgrimage

Takpa Siri is a massive ridge running north to south approximately 20 kilometres north of village Taksing. The highest point is P. 5735 m. 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.

As per Tibetan belief, a mountain with four hills/passes and four water bodies is considered sacred. Takpa Siri ridge, consists of four hills/passes and 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. There are three lakes. Purang, or Potrang is called the 'Husband' lake, Kyomu is called the 'Wife' lake and Umbare is called the 'Son' lake. Out of the three Potrang or Husband lake is considered most sacred, and is worshipped by pilgrims from all over Tibet. Female worshippers can go around Kyomu lake only.

Ringkor, called 'Logar' by the locals of Taksing, is the longest, with a frequency of once in 12 years.⁶ However, there are no records of this pilgrimage after the 1962 Sino-Indian conflict and last it was performed in 1956. As per tradition, only male members participate and people from all over Tibet carry out the pilgrimage. The route followed is Chosam, Tsari chu, Longju, Bissa (from here it enters Indian territories) Maja, Bidak, Gelemo, Gelensiniak and along Subansiri to Taksing and thence to Yume in Tibet. Pilgrims undertaking the *Ringkor* were afraid 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 buy 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, ahead of Taksing in the northwest, where a feast was organised prior to the departure of the pilgrims. They were seen off with *Apong* (local brew) and other food items. The Subansiri flows from Chayul, a large town, and is also joined by Charme chu, a nala flowing south of Sanga Choling, one of the holy places. From this junction, the pilgrim route followed Yume gompa, a monastery of a great holy stature where prayers were offered and the pilgrimage was over. From Yume gompa villagers went in different directions towards their home.

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 Potrang. The return route 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 of the pilgrimage for this circumambulation. Toni Huber in his book, *The Cult of The Holy Crystal Mountain* published a detailed study of this pilgrimage.⁷

6 Raj Jat or Nanda Jat pilgrimage of Nanda Devi also takes place every twelve years at same time as both Buddhists and Hindus follow moon based calendar. Both pilgrimages have many similarities in the high trails that they follow and the fact that no women are allowed.

7 Refer *The Cult of the Holy Crystal Mountain* by Toni Huber, Oxford University Press, New York, 1999.

The early travellers to this area followed part of the Takpa Siri pilgrimage. F. Kingdon-Ward, the famous botanist who studied the forests of Tibet and Burma, visited this area and has written about its flora. F. Ludlow, another botanist, followed in his footsteps and photographed the various faces of Takpa Siri.⁸ F. M. Bailey with H. T. Morshead was deputed by the British Government to survey the northern ranges 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 1914. F. M. Bailey and Morshead undertook the *Kingkor* or the shorter pilgrimage around Takpa Siri, which allowed them to see all the sides and crossing of Dorlma la.⁹

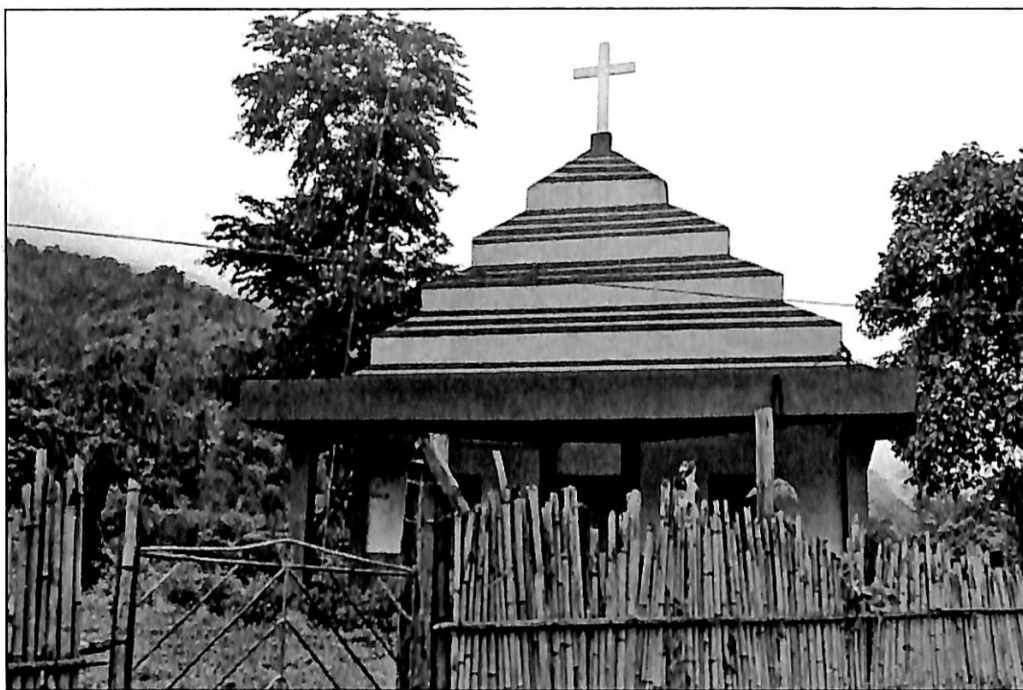
Christianity

At Taksing within few kilometres of the Tibetan frontier, the bastion of Buddhism, there was a small church, keeping up with the spread of Christianity in the valleys of Arunachal Pradesh. In the plains historically, conversion efforts by Christians and Muslims are frowned upon, as there is no concept of conversion in Hinduism. However, in such primitive valleys things appeared different, almost akin to the spread of Christianity in the African sub-continent. What different shapes of development these people would have taken if there was no Christianity here? Their early role of education, medical help and social support has now been taken over by government agencies but attraction to Christianity remains strong. There are Baptist, Revival and Catholic churches. The usual questions: conversions vs. old religion - was Donyi Polo better and should be left alone? Have the Christian fathers taken advantage or led them to changes that are modern? What is “modern” and should they be allowed a generation or two to change their own religion? Or they should be brought to modern day beliefs now? All these points will never be fully answered.

On the return, we trekked shorter distances to make it less strenuous and more enjoyable. We stayed extra nights at Reading and camped on the banks of the Subansiri. On 7 December we climbed back steeply to TCC (mercifully for the last time!) (1835 m – 8 km). Our time in the Subansiri valley was over but we had learnt some of its secrets.

⁸ Refer in References at end of article.

⁹ See *No Passport to Tibet*, by F. M. Bailey, Rupert Hart-Davis, London, 1957.



22. One of the several Churches in the area.

Arunachal: Three Valleys

Over the years, I have now visited three valleys of Arunachal Pradesh where the rivers, which were originating in Tibet flow into India.¹⁰ The western-most is the Kameng river valley with Namka chu, a complicated valley, many criss-cross rivers, wild terrain and many intervening ridges. It was from here that the Dalai Lama entered India and in 1962 Chinese attacked India and massacred many. The second valley was of the Tsangpo (Brahmaputra) which falls steeply from the Tibetan Plateau and with great force flows into India, a terrifying, mysterious river you cannot but be afraid of. Tsangpo river has had a long history of exploration and mystery which took a long time to solve.

In the middle valleys between these two rivers, flows the Tsari chu river, emerging from the Crystal mountain, Takpa Siri, a gentle, serene river, with wonderfully clear waters. It feels peaceful to sit on its banks. From the west flows Yume chu and Chayul chu forming the Subansiri (the 'hidden river'). All these rivers flow into the Brahmaputra in the plains of Assam. The holy Tsari chu washes the mud of the Subansiri, meets the force of the Tsangpo to wash the 'blood' of Kameng.

¹⁰ See *Himalayan Journal* : Harish Kapadia, 'A Trek in Tawang Tract, Vol. 60, p.26 and 'Tsangpo The Final Exploration', Vol. 61, p. 72.

Or is it that I am playing mind games with my knowledge of the area, and its history?

Finally we reached the town of Tezpur where the first sensible restaurant was situated. We were tired and looking forward to flying home, Sangeetha pointed out a huge mountain rising on the horizon in evening light. It was Kangto and immediately our thoughts and spirits were drawn back to those verdant valleys, the forests and the holy pilgrimage.

We had followed a trek of faith and it had become our God, *aka*, Takpa Siri.

The Subansiri Valley Expedition, 2005

Period : 15th November – 13th December 2005

Members : Harish Kapadia, Wing Commander V. K. Sashindran, Ms. Sangeetha Sashindran and Prateek Deo.



23. Looking towards Takpa Siri ridge from the Subansiri valley.

Route of Travel:

A long journey, of almost 870 kms was undertaken from Guwahati to reach the starting point for the trek, Limikang, towards this holy mountain. Spread over three days we proceeded to Tezpur (202 km), Itanagar (198 km) to collect permits, (Hapoli) Ziro (175 km), Daporijo (141 km) and to Limiking (142 km). 14 kms ahead of Limiking at Orak the road ends at present. Descending to the banks of the river the trek began.

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6. 'The Forests of Tibet', by Capt. F. Kingdon Ward, *The Himalayan Journal*, Vol. VII, p. 103
7. 'The Sources of the Subansiri and Siyom', by F. Ludlow, *The Himalayan Journal*, Vol. IX, p. 144 and Vol. X, p. 1
8. 'Arunachal Pradesh' by Doug Scott, *The Alpine Journal*, 2001, p. 59

11. See book review of *The Cult of the Pure Crystal Mountain*, in this volume.



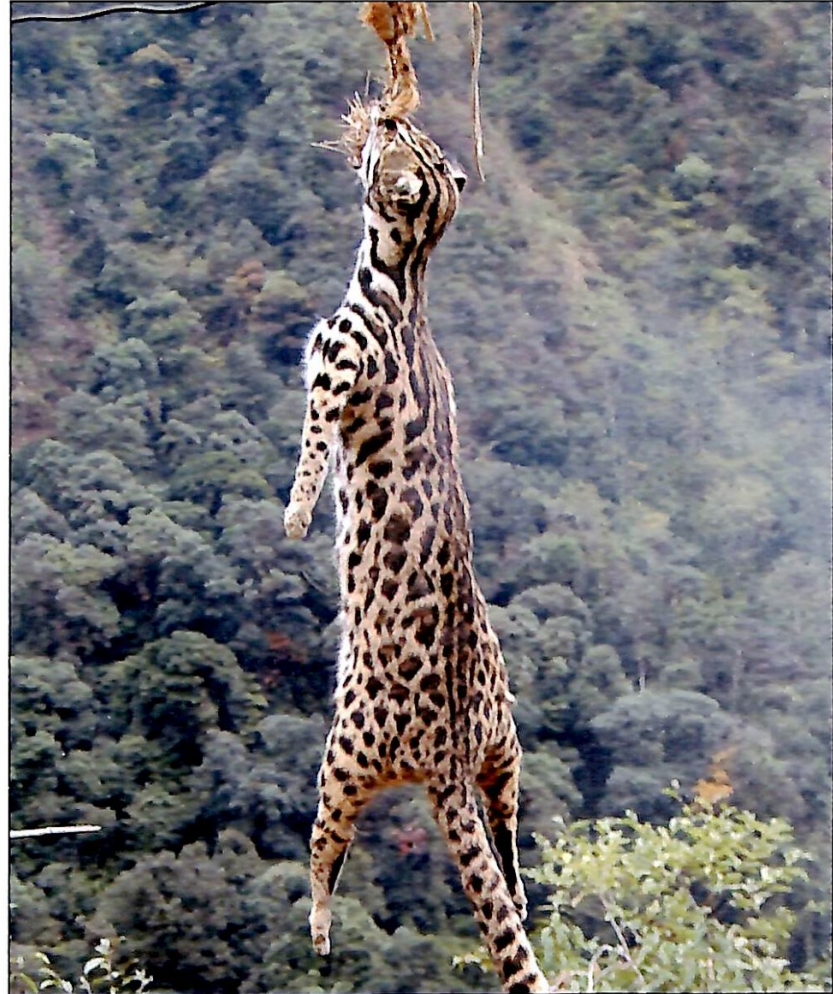
35. Arunachali smoking opium.



36. A hunter with bear-skin sheath.



37. A long 'Foot Suspension Bridge' (FSB).



38. A 'leopard Cat' - *Prionailurus bengalensis*.



39. A traditional priest.



40. Arunachali with cap made from cane.

