

THE DIBANG VALLEY – 2006

Brief report of an exciting trip to the Arunachal Pradesh – perhaps too exciting !!

The Dibang valley, in the eastern Arunachal Pradesh (formerly NEFA) is deep and thickly wooded. To its north and east lies Tibet (China) and to its west is the Siang (Tsangpo) valley. Having visited the Kameng, Subansiri and Siang valleys, in past three years we turned to the Dibang, further east

On the northern border (the McMahon Line) lies the Yonggyap La. This pass, with the adjoining pass Andra La, leads to the Chimdro area of Tibet. The holy mountain Kundu Potrang lies across these passes, almost due north of the Andra La. Pundit explorer Kintup had made a pilgrimage to this mountain during his search for the passage of the Tsangpo into India. Many Tibetan pilgrims visit this place and perform circumambulations now that the Chinese have restored religious freedom. In last decade a party led by Ian Baker made a visit to this peak from the Tibetan plateau (See his book *The Heart of the World*).

F.M.Bailey and H. T. Morshead, two British army officers, made a journey to these passes in 1913. After trying unsuccessfully to cross Andra La, they crossed the Yonggyap La in May in pouring rain. After descent from the la another pass Pungpung La is to be crossed on the fourth day. Many Tibetans had perished after being caught in storms between these two passes and with their supplies running short. Bailey and Morshead continued their trek in Tibet westwards, visiting the Tsangpo falls and Takpa Siri. Finally they exited from Kameng (Tawang) valley. Based on their survey and report the McMahon line was drawn. It demarcates the boundaries between India and Tibet (China). It is disputed by China and they claim entire the Arunachal area as theirs. This was one of the disputes on which 1962 Indo-China war was fought.

The Yonggyap chu and Andra chu joins with the Mathun river. Mathun merges with the Dri river, flowing from the Bruini valley in the northeast. The Dri flows south with several rivers merging with it. Finally at Etalin it merges with the Talon river which ultimately is called the Dibang and merges with the Lohit river once in the plains.

2006 Trek --- Yonggyap La

We reached Anini, at the head of the Dibang valley, on 10th November, having travelled 445 km from Dibrugarh, via Chappakhowa, Roing, Hunli and Etalin. From Anini we followed the Mathun valley at first and reached Mipi. Bailey had stayed a month at this village making friends with the Tibetans settled here. They guided him further. Following Bailey's route we reached Basam, a lovely place in thick forest. From here the difficulties of the trek started and we had to go through a thick jungle on a faint track, with many steep ups and downs. At many places the trail had to be cleared in thick bamboo forest. The camps were in a small forest clearings and one had to be careful about Dim Dam flies. Mercifully snakes and leeches were mostly absent as it was autumn. From Chapu the route climbed steeply and there were many difficult stages, as the Yonggyap chu (river) was left well below. Camping at four other camps the party reached Pabbow at foot of the Yonggyap La. In deteriorating weather Yonggyap La was reached on 22nd November 2006.

As the party returned to the last camp a freak and fierce storm engulfed the area. For next 5 days it snowed without respite and there was heavy accumulation of snow prohibiting any movement. It was dangerous and even impossible to find a way through thick bamboo growth and rickety log bridges. Rations were running low and soon last of chapattis was eaten. Four porters decided to desert and make a dash back risking their lives, a sure sign

of the grim situation. There was imminent danger of starvation and being overcome by heavy snow. The party was in contact with the army via wireless communication. Luckily on the 27th November there was a break in weather and clouds lifted for 6 hours. During this opening two Cheetah helicopters of the Indian Air Force rescued the trapped party and brought them back to Anini. It was a stunning display of flying in difficult conditions and narrow valley. The helis came prepared with skis to land and a winch to lift trekkers if required. Without this clearing in the weather and brave pilots a disaster was waiting to happen. Four porters also reached back in next 3 days.

The Dri valley

Having separated from the Yonggyap La party on the third day after Basam, a party of two trekked up the beautiful Dri valley. It was some of the most beautiful Indo-Malayan forests full with wild life, and later with tall pine trees. They trekked to Chai Pani and Chigu Pani when the storm caught up with them. It rained, sometimes hailed and snowed, incessantly as they stayed back at Chigu Pani. Ahead was a dangerous bridge across an overflowing side stream. Called 'the Cardien Bridge' (after officer Cardien who first built it) it was slippery wooden logs put across, with a waterfall pouring from above and a fall to the Dri on the other side if you slip. There was no way this bridge could be crossed in such rainy weather.

Moreover all local shikaris were returning home, a sign that one should not proceed ahead. There was no clear communication from the Yonggyap La party. This caused anxiety. As the party returned to Anini they saw three helicopters parked at the helipad and they had already rescued the first lot of trapped trekkers. Soon a happy and revived party gathered at Anini.

Thanks to various factors, specially due to brave pilots, the party returned unscathed. It could have been one of the worst disasters.

Area: The Dibang Valley, Eastern Arunachal Pradesh.

Members: Lt. Gen (retd) R. K. Nanavatty, Harish Kapadia, Vijay Kothari, Rajendra Wani and Captain Sandeep Dhankar.

Dates: 7th November to 6th December 2006

Special thanks to 11 SIKH LI and other army formations, the Indian Air Force and its brave pilots.

The expedition dedicated to the Memory of

LT. NAWANG KAPADIA

of the 4th Battalion of the 3rd Gorkha Rifles. This brave soldier of the Indian Army laid down his life trying to save a colleague while fighting terrorists in Kashmir. His was a supreme sacrifice in defence of the Himalaya in best traditions of the Indian Army.
