

The Eastern Frontier of India

The Lohit Valley

Harish Kapadia

Neither me, nor my husband are economists, but we believe firmly that good memories are the soundest investment. That belief was our justification for setting out in 1950 on a major plant hunting expedition to the borders of Assam and Tibet, on a wicket that financially was none too sound. At the time we started there was a considerable gap between our estimated expenses and the funds we had raised to cover them. When we returned, after ten eventful months the gap was wider. Some would say we were improvident. Perhaps we were, but we have no cause to regret our improvidence, which as long as life lasts will go on paying us rewarding tax-free dividends.

(Mrs) Jean Kingdon-Ward. *My Hills So Strong*, page 13.

(Jonathan Cape, London, 1952)

We were standing in front of what the Mishmis call a 'bridge'. In reality, it was a thin tree log fallen across the Sat Ti river. To cross, one had to jump from one branch to another. To make matters more exciting, the river was flowing above the centre of the bridge. Despite months of planning, excitement and a strong desire to reach the Diphu la, it was impossible to persuade ourselves to cross. If we jumped wrongly or the thin branch broke, we would reach somewhere 'higher' than the pass! To keep the record straight, I, with my age and wobbly knees, was the first to back out. Despite her training and youth, Sangeetha was next (justifying my fears). That left only Sashindran to carry on, but he too decided otherwise.

There were other reasons for our retreat. The porters talked of two more such bridges ahead, one particularly terrifying - almost 100 ft above the river. As we were moving slowly, the porters had less rations than they would need for the next ten days. They were reluctant to go down to ferry rations up, and their leader, GB (*Gaon Bura*), would not assure their safe return. If the unreliable porters did not return with extra rations as intended, we would be stranded in the upper valley with rickety bridges preventing our quick return

The final base camp in the Sat Ti valley was still three days away. From here, we had to climb to the watershed ridge with the Dichu valley to the north. The trail went past a few lakes to reach a high point and then descended to the Taluk pass. The return would be to climb back up to the high point, past the lakes and then finally descend to base camp - about 2330 m (7600 ft) in 20 km - all in one day! There was nowhere to camp near the lakes. We would require at least two camps on the higher plateau before reaching the pass as acclimatisation was also an issue. We were one valley south of the pass and there was no easy route to Diphu la. As the crow flies, we were only 10 km from the pass, but we would have to climb across a high ridge to get there. Such a long day was for a very fit army officer or *jawan* or even our troublesome but fit porters!¹

Discretion is better part of the valour, always, and we decided to return - to be safe rather than have trouble like we had in the Dibang valley, where we were caught in a freak storm.¹

But all was not lost, it never is. We had travelled through a historic area and had been enchanted by lay of the land.

The Lohit valley, in eastern Arunachal Pradesh (formerly NEFA) is deep and thickly wooded. It is the easternmost valley of India. At its eastern extremity the borders of India, China and Burma (Myanmar) meet at what is called the 'Tri-Junction'. North of the tri-junction is Jechep la (pass), which leads to China and to the south lies the Diphu la (also known as Taluk pass) which leads to Burma.

The Lohit Valley and its people

The Zayul chu and Rongdo chu flow from the north into the vast valley which gradually flattens as it reaches Rima.² It is so remote that the Chinese had made Rima a penal settlement. Later, as prisoners married the local Tibetans its population grew. The rivers meet at Chayul and flow past Rima to Kahao. Now in Indian territory, the river is called the Lohit. It plunges down to the plains taking many turns en route.

1. See 'The Promised Land', by Harish Kapadia, *H.J.* Vol. 63, p.40

2. The famous Rima Gap where within 100 kms of each other, three great rivers, the Salween, the Mekong, and the Yangtse flow, is not far from here. It takes its name from this village.



6. A Mishmi lady at Hayuliang. (Harish Kapadia)



7. Heroin inhaled by Mishmi porters every morning.
(Harish Kapadia)

It takes an almost 90-degree turn westward, starting at Minozong (present day Samdul) and ending at Changwity. Not many major rivers are known to take such a bend. With many twists and turns it emerges into the Assamese plains at the holy site of Parshuram Kund. At Hayuliang, two major tributaries, the Delei and Dau, both originating near the Tibetan border, merge with the Lohit. From the east, the Sat Ti merges with the Lohit at Dong and Ghalum (at Samdul) flows from the watershed and the border with Burma. Each of these valleys leads to a pass, which crosses into Burma.

Once in the plains, the Lohit spreads out and is a robust river, especially in the monsoons. It meets the Dibang and the Siang rivers near Sadiya, from where it is called the Brahmaputra.

The lower valleys are inhabited by the Mishmis, a troublesome, fearless and often violent tribe. They are thought to have killed Christian priests and brought slaves from the Assam plains to be sold at Rima. Situated on the northwest extremity of the infamous Golden Triangle they have easy access to opium. As there were no roads in the upper Lohit valley (till the early 1970s), they were isolated and a law unto themselves.

Some settlers crossed the Diphu pass from Burma into the Lohit valley and settled in its upper reaches. They are called the Meyors. They are quiet farmers, a gentle tribe. Unlike in other border areas,

the Meyors and Mishmis do not have much contact with the Tibetans at Rima or elsewhere. Theravada Buddhism flourishes in the village of Chonkham, which is in the plains. Chonkham, reputed to be one of the richest villages in the northeast, boasts a unique cultural mix that has kept their religion alive so far away from home.³ When we passed through, the village it was in a festive mood celebrating Thadinyut.⁴

Exploration

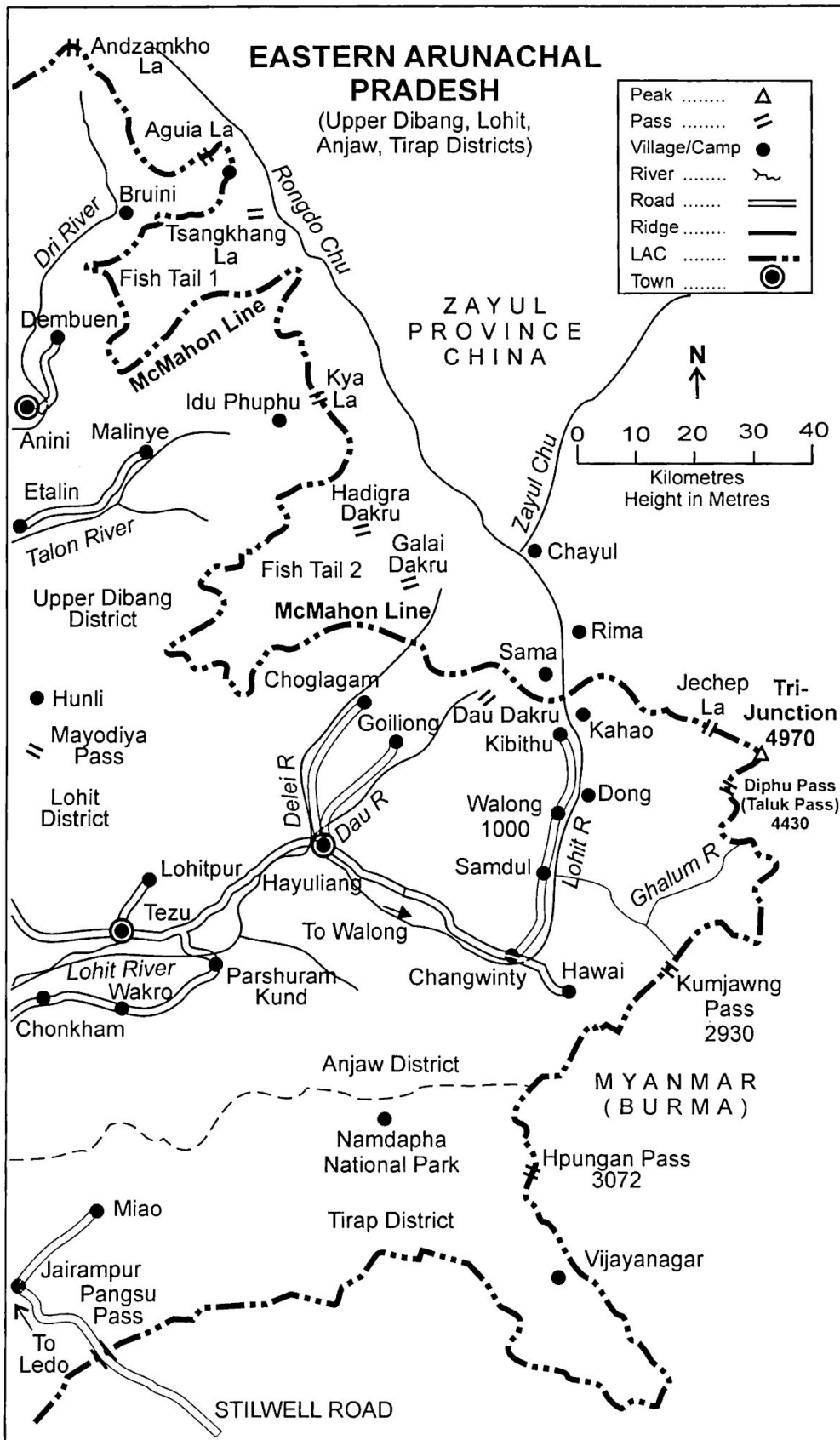
The Lohit valley is of historical significance for many reasons. Many famous names of exploration visited the valley for its natural wealth, but more to discover the path to the Zayul province, north of here and now in China. The Zayul is easily approachable from here as the track is along the river and no high pass needs to be crossed.

The earliest traveller was the Pandit explorer A. K. (nicknamed 'Krishna' or Rai Bahadur Kishen Singh). The British, unable to enter Tibet, had trained and sent native explorers to these forbidden areas. They brought back a wealth of information for the empire. AK entered Zayul province from the north, having crossed Tibet for many miles. He halted at Rima and finally went down the Lohit to the Assamese plains. He calculated the altitude of most places, from the boiling point of water that he measured on his thermometer. As later explorations confirmed, these were very close to the accurate heights. F.M. Bailey, who had been with Sir Younghusband on the great Tibet expedition, (1903-04) was in the Lohit valley in 1911-12.⁵ He entered the Dichu valley near

3. Theravada (literally, 'the Way of the Elders') is the oldest surviving Buddhist school, and for many centuries has been the predominant religion of Sri Lanka (about 70% of the population) and most of continental Southeast Asia (Cambodia, Laos, Burma, Thailand). It is also practised by minorities in parts of southwest China (by the Shan and Tai ethnic groups), Vietnam (by the Khmer Krom), Bangladesh (by the ethnic groups of Baruas, Chakma, and Magh), Philippines, Malaysia, Nepal (amongst the Newari people) and Indonesia, whilst recently gaining popularity in Singapore and Australia. Today Theravada Buddhists number over 100 million worldwide, and in recent decades Theravada has begun to take root in the West and in the Buddhist revival in India. (source: Wikipedia website)

4. The place is at its liveliest during the great Burmese festivals - Thingyan, the water festival that inaugurated the Burmese new year; Waso, which marked the beginning of Thadin, the annual three-month period of fasting and abstinence, and Thadinyut, the festival of light, which celebrated its end. (*The Glass Palace* by Amitava Ghosh, p.384)

5. *China-Tibet-Assam*, by F. M. Bailey



Kahao and stayed at the Hot Springs. His accounts of shooting *takins* in the valley are hair-raising. He also explored the Delei and Dau valleys, reaching the head of the latter and crossing the Dau-Dakru pass. The race to find the best route to China brought the next few explorers here. T. T. Cooper, William Griffith, Mr Williamson, Dr Gregorson (the last two were murdered by the Abors, a fiercely independent tribe), to name a few.

The person, who paid the most attention to the Lohit and its surrounding valleys, was Frank Kingdon-Ward. He was a naturalist of great repute, who was usually sponsored by the Royal Geographical Society, London. He explored the Lohit and Zayul valleys, and crossed the Dichu valley and Diphu pass (Taluk pass) to Putao (Fort Hertz) in Burma three times. Much of the information we have about the flora and fauna of the area are thanks to him. His observations and plant samples were faithfully recorded in books and stored in the archives of the RGS. His wife, Jean Kingdon-Ward, accompanied him on one of his later trips. Walking from Tezu they reached Kahao, where they spent some delightful days in the Dichu valley at Hot Springs. They also visited Rima from where they obtained supplies from very troublesome and opium-fed porters. While they were at Kibithu the giant earthquake of 1950, which destroyed much of eastern Arunachal, hit the area. They had a harrowing time retreating through broken trails with no supplies and no porters willing to accompany them. It is not often that a scientist as highly trained as Kingdon-Ward has been involved, in such a calamity – and lived to tell the tale. His writing on the effects of the earthquake, are a fine record for science.⁶

1962 – Indo-China War in the Lohit Valley

The 1962 Chinese invasion was a tragic watershed in the military history of India. It exposed an inept Indian state, both militarily and politically. For most of the war, the fighting qualities of the Indian jawans and young officers remained unchanged. No story of the 1962 war is complete without a mention of the heroic resistance offered at Walong.

At midnight on 22 October 1962, the Himalayan calm was shattered as the Chinese attacked Indian posts. Till 13 November, fierce battles

6. 'Aftermath of the Great Assam Earthquake of 1950' by F. Kingdon-Ward
(*The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 121, No. 3 (Sep., 1955), pp. 290-303)



1. Parshuram Kund (near small rock), as the Lohit river emerges in the plains of Assam. (Harish Kapadia)



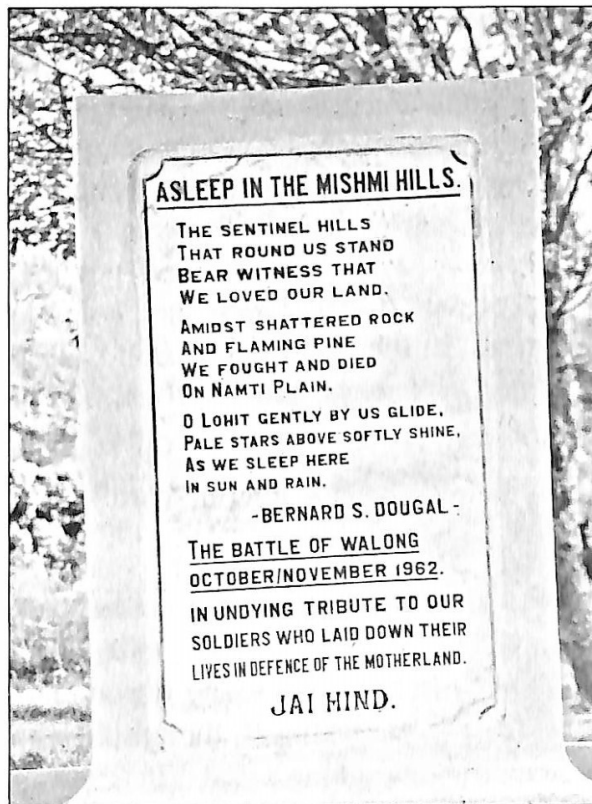
2. Crossing a single log bridge across Sat Ti, Dong valley. (Harish Kapadia)



3. The ancient Chinese inscriptions discovered below Walong. (Harish Kapadia)



8. Army memorial at Walong. (Harish Kapadia)



9. Tribute at the army memorial, Walong. (Harish Kapadia)

raged in many places including Dong Hill, east of the Lohit; the Ladders area; and the Lachhman Ridge. After paying a heavy price in terms of men lost on the Namti plains, the Chinese made a diversionary move to reach the western side of tri-junction, above Walong. Indian troops were ill-equipped and ill-prepared for such battles and finally had to withdraw, having paid a heavy price.

Some managed to get back through the treacherous terrain. But

many never got the orders. They slugged it out to the last man, to the last bullet. In the words of Brigadier N.C. Rowley, 'the 6th Kumaon at tri-junction fought and fought and fought till there was nothing left. After this there was an eerie silence.' Sikhs, Kumaonis, Gorkhas and Dogras fought shoulder-to-shoulder to the bitter end. Two months after the cease-fire, when the Indians returned they found that the Chinese had marked the positions of the dead. Many of the bunkers showed the dead where they had last manned their weapons. The best tribute to the Indian soldiers was paid by *TIME* magazine, which wrote: 'At Walong, Indian troops lacked everything. The only thing they did not lack was guts'.

The Burma Hump

The area between the Ghalum valley and the Dichu pass is a high-altitude plateau with several lakes. This plateau was nicknamed 'the Hump' by pilots in the Second World War. The rickety transport planes, flying from Chabua, Mohanbari and other airfields in Assam, were supplying material to Kunming in China. They had to rise above the Hump to clear it, which a few of the old machines failed to do and crashed. As per official records, 706 planes crashed in Burma, China and on the Hump. Of these, 324 crash sites have not been located. There are stories of pilots who survived and walked down from the Hump to Changwity village on the Lohit and lived to tell the tale. Today expeditions are organised from Burma to climb the Hump and locate the crash sites. (*See letter from Nicholas Clinch in Correspondence section of this issue.*)

Walong Inscriptions

The British developed an interest in the Lohit valley. They knew its importance for trade and defence. Hence, administrators and later, road builders were sent here.

Ronald Kaulback, who was a member of F. Kingdon-Ward's 1932 party, had written about markings on a big rock.

Next morning (March 29, 1934) we passed the Boundary Stone, on the right bank of the river, 2 miles south of the village Tinnai. The stone has an English inscription marking the end of the road built in 1912 by Sappers and Miners, though the road itself has been swallowed by jungle long since. There is also a Chinese notice on the rock showing the limit of their claims when they overran Tibet in 1910. I say "Boundary

Stone”, but no one seems to have any clear idea as to where the boundary is actually is in the Lohit valley.

‘The Assam Border of Tibet’ by Ronald Kaulback, *The Geographical Journal*, (Royal Geographical Society, London, Volume LXXXIII, No 3, March 1934, p.180).

Almost a century later, we tried to locate this very rock. We visited Tinnai, a village on the left bank, but found no such stone. In the Walong bazaar late one evening, we met Bamphak Meyor lama who talked of such a rock in the thick foliage near his fields. Muttering to himself in the deteriorating light, inebriated but sure footed, he led us down a steep hill tract and pointed out a rock. It had several Chinese letters written in red! Again to keep the record straight, one must give credit to Bamphak Meyor, his drink and opium for this discovery!

The huge rock, situated near the helipad, was covered by foliage. We returned the following day with some equipment and porters, and on clearing the surroundings the red lettering of the Chinese markings (made before 1910) were clearly visible. We took many photographs.^A (see end-note).

The beginning

It was time to start on our trek. Our aim was to reach the Diphu la (the Taluk pass), which stands at the head of the Dichu valley. This pass leads to Burma to the south and the tri-junction of the borders of India, China and Burma to the northeast. Many explorers, including Kingdon-Ward, had travelled this route. Apart from early difficulties, the Dichu valley follows the natural line to the pass. However current political conditions dictate that the Dichu valley could not be approached. We thus had to follow the Sat Ti valley to its south.



10. The ‘Helmet Top’ above Walong. Memorial to fallen soldiers of 1962 Indo-China War. (Harish Kapadia)

We reached Walong on 17 October 2007 when the festival of Dusherra was being celebrated. This Hindu festival has made inroads into Meyor and Mishmi country - any excuse for a bit of fun, gambling and drinking. The young in the area, some of who later came with us as porters, have little activity, education or income. They survive on wages provided by the army when they work for them. For many months when it rains heavily, they have nothing to do but smoke opium, which is easily available. Many sell opium to make a living.

We spent our time usefully, visiting the army memorial where the names of soldiers, who had laid down their lives in defence of the Lohit valley in 1962, are written. There is an official memorial and epitaph near the helipad. The remains of the gallant Indian defenders are kept at 'Helmet Top'. Such places should be made compulsory visiting for the younger generation of Indians so that they realise the sacrifices our valiant soldiers have made, enabling them to sit peacefully at their computers today.

We walked to 'Millennium Point' at Dong, one of the few places on the Indian sub-continent to see the first rays of the sun on the new millennium. With only a few houses, Dong is well known and considered to be an example of the political division of territories by analysts.

At Dong - that Arunachal Pradesh tourist brochures advertise as the place to see the first sunrise in India but where the Indian Army does not permit anyone to go - it must feel as if this world ends. Less than 50 km away is Zayü, accessible only with a visa and by airplane from Beijing. Correspondingly, the Sakongdan village, Burma can only be accessed via Rangoon. (The militaries of neither country are likely to allow a visit to these places at their border zones anyway.)

(Territorialities yet unaccounted, by Karin Dean)

Porters

It was impossible to hire porters until the festival was over on 21st October. Even later, we never managed to hire enough porters. Loads had to be redistributed and the purchase of some rations left for later in the trip. This was similar to the situation Kingdon-Ward faced six decades ago! In fact Ward had to stay a week in different places to

gather porters and supplies. At one point he even had to time his return journey to accommodate Mishmis returning to their country. Not much has changed in these areas.

Of Slaves and Takins

F. M. Bailey, the British officer who spent a few months in this area, writes about a mysterious Blue Man who was with the Chinese soldiers near Rima. When he finally met him, he discovered the Blue Man was a Bengali from Calcutta. His dark skin so impressed the Tibetans and Chinese that it gave rise to many myths. He had worked in tea gardens near the Mishmi hills and had been kidnapped by the Mishmis 20 years earlier and then sold to Tibetans at Rima. He was released with other slaves when the Chinese arrived. He enlisted in the Chinese army as he was unable to return home. Bailey offered to take him back to Calcutta (now Kolkata) with him but 'nothing would persuade him to go among Mishmis again'. In fact Bailey writes that 'my own position among the Mishmis would, I thought, be so precarious that I did not want to take him unless he himself persuaded me to do so.'

Later, during a Tibetan uprising in late 1910, the Chinese garrisons at Chikong and Rima were eventually captured by the Tibetans and they threw them all into the river. Presumably the Blue Man perished at the same time.

Bailey spent weeks in the Dichu valley on shikar. He shot many takins, 'the largest measured 53 ½ inches in height at shoulder and was 78 inches long from nose to the end of the short tail'. The Tibetans near Rima called takin 'shing-ma', while their Mishmi neighbours call them 'kyen'. Takin is the name given by Mishmi tribes living in the lower forest from where the Lohit river leaves the hills. As these areas were nearest to Assam and civilisation it was through them that takins were first known to the world. The Tibetans of Po-Me and Kongbo call them 'kyimyak' or 'tsimyak' and this is the name more generally used in Tibet. The French missionaries at Tatssienlu used the Latin name and called the animal 'le budocras' (*Bailey-p.137*).

Later, Bailey caught two live takins in Bhutan and with the kindness of the Maharaja, took them to England. The London and Edinburgh zoos got one each. One takin died soon after arrival, while the other lived in the London zoo for 12 years and died only in 1935.⁷ (*Bailey-p. 137*)

7. *China-Tibet-Assam*, by F. M. Bailey.

The Bridges

On 23 October, we started the trek from Dong, 6 km north of Walong and on the left bank of the Lohit. The trail began with a single log bridge across the Sat Ti, and about 40 m above it. We had crossed many bridges on previous treks to Arunachal ('Foot Suspension Bridges'), which were scary enough, but in this less trodden valley such 'single log bridges' were singularly dangerous. Kingdon-Ward has written about the dangers of such bridges, particularly when the upper bark had worn out due to usage. They are slippery as hell!

The trail ahead was through thick jungles, with the usual steep ups and downs. The first day we camped at the 'Slip Camp' on a moraine slip which had reached the river. The vegetation in these valleys was thick and unique as surveyed by Kingdon-Ward. In one sweep near our camp, we could see banana trees, palms (both found at sea-level), the Indo-Malayan forest (found at about 200-600 m) and pine (generally at 1800 m)!

Near the camp was another single log bridge. It was very slippery because its bark had been worn out by use. Also, it was at an angle. We fixed ropes and managed to go across with great care but it was a scary affair. The Mishmis, even while high on opium, go across easily, others have to do it carefully.

Bees

As it was autumn, dim dim flies, snakes, leeches and malaria bearing mosquitoes were less of a worry. We occasionally saw huge, but abandoned, nests of bees. Bailey had written about such nests of different types; rock honey and wood honey (tree honey). Rock honey is poisonous unless cooked. 'This honey is mixed with tsampa (parched barley flour) to give it substance and solidity, and when cooked, forms a delicious kind of toffee which besides being eaten as a sweet was very useful in the absence of sugar for sweetening food.' Sir Joseph Hooker (*Himalayan Journals*) writes that such nests looked like huge bats suspended by their wings and that they were poisonous in summer as bees suck some rhododendron flowers growing there. Kingdon-Ward had a similar experience, and his companion, Lord Cranbrook, went off into a trance when he had some poisonous honey.

On the 25th after five hours through the forest and sometimes on boulders near the river, we reached the Patta (leaves) camp. It could have been named the 'scorpion camp' for the original inhabitants of this forest camp. Next day, 26 October, after an hour of trekking we reached the 'Final Bridge' and our trek was abruptly over. If you pardon the paradox, too much water was flowing over the bridge to go over it! However short the trek, our 'investment' was safe and the returns just beginning!

The area has much promise for future exploration. The Delai valley, north of Hayuliang has many villages. It has no record of present day visits by trekkers or explorers. Similarly the adjoining Dau valley leads to the Dau Dakru pass, which descends to Kibithu, perhaps making it difficult to obtain permission. The Dichu valley, which is very steep at the beginning, leads to Hot Springs and naturally to the Diphu pass, the old gateway to Burma. Proceeding along the McMahon Line, the Dichu valley will remain sensitive for decades. The long and deep Ghalum valley starts from Samdul and leads deep inside. A branch turns south to Khumjwang pass on the Burma border while the main branch leads to some lakes.

However one will have to wait till the political situation allows for such a free movement, but it will be worth a wait for the future explorers. For the present we returned with memories of this great valley. Maybe this is the beginning of further explorations in the Lohit valley.

'We can't always cross a bridge until we come to it; but I always like to lay down a pontoon ahead of time.'

Bernard Mannes Baruch (1870 - 1965)

Summary:

A trek in the Lohit valley near the tri-junction of India-China and Myanmar.

Area: The Lohit Valley, Eastern Arunachal Pradesh.

Period: 14th October to 2nd November 2007

Members: Harish Kapadia, Wing Cdr. V.K. Sashindran and Ms. Sangeetha Sashindran.

References to the Inscription of Stone at Walong

By the end of 1913, the British had explored much of the Assam Himalaya. The British had inspected the Chinese boundary markers near Walong and put up British markers beside them. In the eastern Lohit Valley, the boundary retreated northwards from Walong (where both Chinese and British markers had been placed) to Kahao, 20 miles north. It simply appeared that the British wanted the boundary alignment northward to permit good defensive points in ranges far enough north to eliminate any Chinese influence into Assam.

In January, 1914, T. O'Callaghan, assistant administrator of the Eastern Sector of the North East Frontier, was sent up the Lohit valley. Just below Walong, he found both old Chinese boundary markers, writing on a huge rock and a new marker placed in 1912 by the Chinese Republic. O'Callaghan removed some of the markers which were loose, took them upstream, and simply replaced them near Kahao, just below the McMahon boundary! He then went to Rima, conferred with Tibetan officials, and found no Chinese influence in the area. O'Callaghan proposed a road to, and a post in, Walong; but his superiors showed no interest in his proposal.

The serious fighting of the 1962 China-India Border War extended from October 10, 1962, until November 20, 1962. While the entire border was the issue, the actual fighting occurred in three widely separated areas: Walong, Tawang, and Aksai Chin. It is significant that while over 47,000 square miles of frontier were in contention between China and India, that the fighting was confined to areas where the Chinese felt that they had legitimate claims. In Walong, the British (O'Callaghan, in 1914) had moved the previously agreed British and Chinese border markers northward.

(From *The China - India Border War (1962)*, James Barnard Calvin, Lieutenant Commander, U. S. Navy, publisher: Marine Corps Command and Staff College, Quantico, Virginia USA, April 1984).

Deciphering the Walong Inscriptions (see photo)

One of the important discoveries on this trip was finding of the rock with Chinese inscriptions. The antiquity of the figures on the rock, what it represents are important. Kaulback write of a Stone inscription 'two miles south of Tinai, on the right bank of the Lohit' (which is exactly where this rock is situated).

The inscriptions on the Stone were made with a kind of red dye (made out of mineral dyes, probably iron ore) and the pictorial depictions needed to be deciphered. A 1927 edition of the book *Chinese Characters* by Dr. L. Wieger and S.J Darmet (available to researchers at the Bhandarkar Institute of Oriental Studies, Pune, India) provided clues on what the upright characters could have represented. According to the book, such characters were the origin of the Chinese script and the book dates the characters to the pre-Christian era.

The clockwise Eastern Swastika character 'Fang' (right) represents the four regions of space of two dimensions. The extended meaning could be square, regular, correct or a rule. It can specifically mean 'this region'.

The anti-clockwise Western Swastika Character may represent 'Chi' meaning seven, a numerical sign. 'Chi' is a less angular character than the one on the stone. The slanted swastika between the two clockwise swastikas was not found in the book but is similar to 'Chi' as represented in the book.

The man-like character with a shallow bowl-like head (left, top) represents an ancestor and the figure with a circle for the head represents a man (if upright as in figure on left bottom) and a son (if kneeling). If the man is below the ancestor, it represents an offering. The character with a split head and horns (left top on the picture on right) is similar to 'Shu' which represents glutinous grain or rice.

This writing could mean, 'this region is the land of farming of our ancestors'. However the find of this rock is of great significance and opens up exciting possibilities for further research.

(Ms. Sangeetha Sashindran)



4. A Khamti tribal at Chonkham. (Harish Kapadia)



5. The gambling bazaar at Walong. (Harish Kapadia)



6. A Meyor tribal at Walong. (Harish Kapadia)



7. A Mishmi tribal at Hayuliang. (Harish Kapadia)

