



THE LOHIT VALLEY TREK, 2007

Brief report of a trip to the eastern-most valley of Arunachal Pradesh

The Lohit valley, in the 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 meet at what is called the "Tri-Junction". To the north of Tri-Junction is Jechep la (Pass), leading to China and to the south lies the Diphu La (Taluk Pass) which leads to Burma. Having visited the Kameng valley (Tawang area) in 2003, the Subansiri valley (Takpa Siri) in 2005, the Siang valley (Tsangpo exploration) in 2004 and the Dibang valley (Yonggyap la) in 2006, in past four years, we turned to the Lohit valley, further east - the last of the five major valleys of the Arunachal Pradesh.

This valley is of historical significance for many reasons. There were many early travellers here which approached the route from the Sadiya Frontier district and went on to travel to Rima in the Zayul (now in China). This was the easiest of routes as no high pass is to be crossed and the trail runs along the river. Many parties followed this trail, prominent being F. Kingdon-Ward, Col. F. M. Bailey, T. T. Cooper and the Pandit explorer A. K. (nicknamed 'Krishna' or Rai Bahadur Kishen Singh). Both the Chinese and the British surveyed the area and built a track from their respective areas. En route we saw the village of Chonkham with its Burmese settlers and Pagodas, sleepy village of Hayuliang and the great turn of the Lohit.

In 1962 in a bloody war the Chinese aggressors attacked Indian posts and came down to Walong and little beyond. The heroic battles at the Namti Plains and the (western) Tri Junction are legends. We visited the 'Helmet Top' where the remains of the gallant Indian defenders are kept, and walked to the 'Millennium Point' where, amongst few other places, the receiving of the first sun rays of the present Millennium to the Asian Sub-Continent was celebrated.

The Lohit river consists of the Zayul Chu and Rongdo Chu merging inside the Chinese territories. Once past Kahao/Kibithu in the Indian territory it is called Lohit. As it flows down south it takes a unique and major turn to west (almost 90 degrees) starting at Minozong (present day Samdul) and completing at Changweiti. This is a unique feature of this river and finally taking many twists and turns it emerges into the Assam plains at the holy site of Parshuram Kund. Ahead the Lohit meets the Dibang river, the Siang river and is called the Brahmaputra.

Our Trip 2007

It was our aim to reach the Diphu La (the Taluk Pass) which stands at the head of the Dichu valley. Many explorers like Kingdon-Ward and others had travelled on this route often and apart from early difficulties the valley follows the natural line to the pass. However the present day political conditions dictated that the Dichu valley cannot be approached. Hence as an alternative we had to follow the Sat Ti valley to its south.

We arrived at Walong on 17th October 2007 when the festival of Dusherra was being celebrated. This Hindu festival has made inroads into this Meyor and Mishmi country and people were busy gambling and drinking. It was impossible to obtain porters till 21st October 2007 when the festival was over. However later too we never managed to gather enough porters required for the trip.

We started the trek from Dong, a village 6 km to the north and on the left bank of the Lohit. The first thing on the trail was to cross single log bridge about 100 feet above and across the Sat Ti. We had crossed many bridges in the Arunachal treks in the past ('Foot Suspension Bridges') which were scary enough, but in this less trodden valley such 'single log bridges' were singularly dangerous. The trail otherwise was through thick jungles and with many steep ups and downs. We camped at the Slip Camp on the first night. Next day near to the camp was another single log bridge which had its bark worn-out due to use, making it very slippery, and it was at an angle. With care and slipping we managed to go across to reach Patta Camp. Ahead of this after an hour of trekking was a 'bridge' which was just a tree fallen across the river with water flowing over the bridge. One had to jump across its thin branches to reach the other bank. More such dangerous bridges (2 of them) were promised ahead.

At the same time porters, always on opium, were found to be carrying far less rations than that would be required for our next 10 days, as we were slow. From the final camp in this valley one had to climb the watershed ridge with the Dichu valley in the north, past few lakes to descend to the pass. The return would be to climb back to the lakes and descend to the camp - overall about 2330 m (7600 feet) in 20 km in a day as there was no camping available near the lakes. Obviously there was no easy route to Diphu La from this valley, though were just 12 km short of the pass. If the unreliable porters did not return with extra rations as intended, we will be stranded in the upper valley with rickety bridges to stop our quick return.

It was thought that the discretion is better part of the valour and we decided to return - to be safe rather than sorry and cause a major inconvenience in the area.

Walong Inscriptions

Ronald Kaulback, who was member of the party with F. Kingdon-Ward in 1932 had written about makings 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 Geographical Journal, (of the Royal Geographical Society, London) (Volume LXXXIII, No 3, March 1934, p.180). Article 'The Assam Border of Tibet' by Ronald Kaulback.

After much inquiries we were able to locate this huge rock, standing in disuse inside a forest near the helipad. On clearing the surroundings the red letterings of the Chinese markings (written in 1910!) were seen. No sign of the British marking were observed and will require more time, tools and energy to locate them in the vicinity. It is remarkable that they have survived the giant earthquake of 1950 which had destroyed much of the valley. We are trying to decipher the Chinese inscriptions found.

The vegetation in these valleys is thick and unique as surveyed by Kingdon-Ward. In one sweep one can see the banana trees, palms (both found at sea-level), the Indo-Malayan forest (found at about 200-600 m) and the pines (generally at 1800 m) !

Though we had only a small foray, the area has much promise for future explorations: the Delai valley, the Dau valley and the Dau Dakru pass, the Ghalum valley and the Dichu valley. 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.

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.

Special thanks to the Indian Army for its help and permission.

HARISH KAPADIA

5th November 2007,
Mumbai

Expedition dedicated to memory of



Lieutenant Nawang Kapadia

(15 December 1975 – 11 November 2000)

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 the best traditions of the Indian Army.

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