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Pemako

A trek in the Yang Sang Chu Valley

Harish Kapadia

For centuries the forbidden gorges and inaccessible ravines served as an ideal refuge from invasions and wars which shook Tibet. This was perhaps the starting of the legends of Pemako.

According to ancient prophecies attributed to Padmasambhava (8th cent.), the patron saint of Tibetan Buddhism, somewhere in this untamed wilderness Tibetans believed they would find an earthly paradise; a pure realm abounding in fruits and self sown crops which would provide a sanctuary during the Buddhist dark ages.

(Hamid Sardar-Afkhami. 'An Account of Padma-Bkod: A Hidden Land in Southeastern Tibet'. Harvard University)

One of the greatest explorations of the past two centuries was to locate the course of the Yarlung Tsangpo in Tibet, in India named the Siang and later Brahmaputra. During its course, the river passes between the high mountains of Namcha Barwa and Gyala Peri, where it flows through one of the deepest gorges and drops through as a waterfall.

Whenever man comes across such a powerful natural phenomena, he is bound to attribute supernatural feelings to it. A vast area in southeastern Tibet extending across political boundaries, now into Arunachal Pradesh in India, is hence called the *beyul* of the Tsangpo, (god-protected holy land of Tsangpo). The legendary English plant collector Frank Kingdon-Ward¹ attempted several times to inquire whether waterfall on the Tsangpo existed. Once he turned back barely five miles short of the 'Great Bend' of Tsangpo. During these journeys he was introduced to the concept of Pemako. He observed that many Tibetans from Kham were coming in search of the Promised Land.

1. Francis Kingdon-Ward, (1885-1958) was an English botanist, explorer, plant collector and author. He published most of his books as Frank Kingdon-Ward and this hyphenated form of his name stuck, becoming the surname of his wives and two daughters.

He wrote:

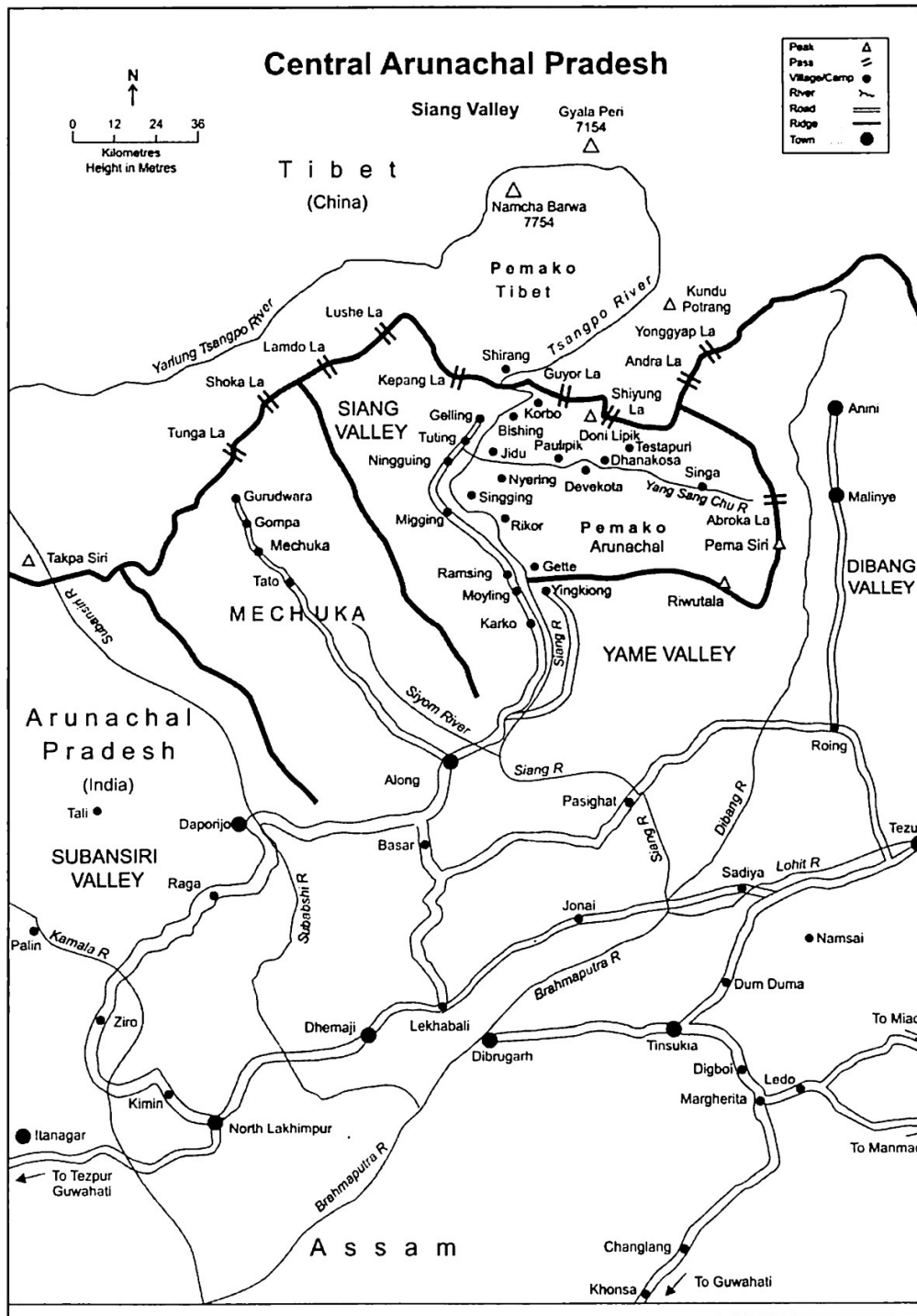
....the only thing common to the whole region being perpetual rain; snakes and wild animals, giant stinging nettles and myriads of biting and blood sucking ticks, hornets, flies, and leeches....Why, it may be asked, this anxiety to settle in Pemako? It is because of this promised land of the Tibetan prophecy. This prophecy was to the effect that, when their religion was persecuted in Tibet, the people should go to Pemako, a land flowing with milk and honey, where crops grew of their own accord. Most races have their promised land, and such legendary places must necessarily be somewhat inaccessible, hidden behind misty barriers where ordinary men do not go.

(Kingdon-Ward, Frank. *The Riddle of the Tsangpo Gorges*. Edward Arnold & co., London, 1926)

The Pemako is consecrated as the female divinity of Dorje Phagmo and its sacred geography is mapped as the body of this sleeping Goddess. Her head is the Kangri Kangpo, her breasts are Namcha Barwa and Gyala Peri respectively. The lower part of her body lies in Yang Sang or the innermost Pemako which is the upper Siang region of Arunachal Pradesh. At the confluence of Siang (Tsangpo) and Yang Sang is the sacred triangle which is now open to the world to discover and marvel.²

Every year pilgrims traverse the area for a Kora (circumambulation) covering the sacred Devekota, the gathering place of Dakinis, the holy Teetapori (or Testapuri) mountain, Pema Siri and Riwutala (Eko Dumbing for Adis).

2. This beyul, forbidding area, is Pemako (the Secret Land shaped like a lotus), in southeastern Tibet. It is south of the dramatic Tsangpo river gorge known as the 'Great Bend', where the river curves sharply into the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh at 'S Bend'. The Tsangpo gorge is three times deeper than the Grand Canyon, with enormous waterfalls in which the river drops more than 8000 feet in a 150-mile stretch. These waterfalls, where several explorers have lost their lives, are said to be a gateway to a secret inner part of Beyul, Pemako. The Tsangpo river, like a spine, connects Pemako to some of the Tibet's most sacred mountains, originates near Kailash, passes near Takpa Siri (the crystal mountain) and enters India near Kundu Potrang (gathering place of gods). The last two mountains lie on the border with Arunachal Pradesh, India.



It is always difficult, if not impossible to define an area of religious importance such as Pemako. It is more about a spiritual quest rather than just a ground survey. Moreover Pemako is a vast area, covering several valleys and now across international borders between India and China. Apart from Buddhist pilgrims, travellers were visiting the area since

early times, for example, George D-S-Dunbar in June 1913. Looking at the richness of the monasteries of the Gelugpa sect here he wrote; 'the monks wear reddish-coloured robes and, in addition to their prayer wheels, have rosaries of wood, glass, crystal, coral, wax or amber beads with leather tags at intervals to which four-leafed shamrocks of silver or brass are attached.' He 'most regretfully' recorded his impression 'that in Pemakoichen "the world forgetting" seems less applicable than "by the world forgot".³

Bailey and Morshead

The famous explorer pair of Lt. F. M. Bailey and Capt. H.T. Morshead was the first westerners to enter Pemako in 1913. They started their journey at Mipi, at head of the Dibang valley. They met a group of frightened Tibetans searching for the hidden land.

Here in Mipi we had come upon these seekers for the promised land. But they had not found it. The exact geographical position of Pemako was imprecise. All that was known was that somewhere on the Dihang-Lohit watershed there was holy mountain of glass and around this holy mountain lay fertile valleys.

Bailey, F. M., *No passport to Tibet*.
(Rupert Hart-Davis, London, 1957. P. 35-37)

The Tibetans Bailey had met were a wave of refugees from various parts of the eastern Tibet escaping one of the many wars between Tibetan and Chinese warlords in 1902. These Tibetans settled down in the valleys, buying land from Chulikatta Mishmis. They talked of 'Padma-shel-ri', described as a 'snow mountain like a heaped mandala'. But there is no paradise if its seekers are not worthy of it. These Tibetans soon started stealing grain from Mishmi stores and a battle ensued. Bailey explains that 'although the Tibetans were armed, the reflections off their matchlock rifles made them easy targets for Mishmi archers who picked them off with poisoned arrows. Experts at jungle warfare, the Mishmis laid ambushes and set traps on the jungle paths and attacked the Tibetans at every opportunity. They also set fire to Tibetans' houses and crops.' Thus ended the first attempts to settle in the Pemako.

3. 'Abors and Galongs', Part III. The personal narrative of a visit to Pemakoichen by George D-S-Dunbar, p. 98.



22. On pilgrims trail at Mankota. (Harish Kapadia)



23. Devekota monastery. (Harish Kapadia)



24. Bhut Jaloka chillies - possibly the hottest chillies in India. (Harish Kapadia)



25. Mud Chorten offerings at the monastery. (Harish Kapadia)



26. The holy lama at Singa. (Harish Kapadia)



27. A camp in the forest. (Harish Kapadia)

Yang Sang Pemako

Another dark age for Tibet arrived when the Chinese Red Army forced the Dalai Lama to escape from Tibet. As he entered India from western Arunachal at Tawang, thousands of Tibetans again started their search for the hidden land of Pemako. In the ravines and gorges of Tibet they were faced with many hazards, many were disillusioned and headed south to India, which is also part of the wider Pemako. Soon Indian borderlands were swarmed by thousands of hungry and starving Tibetans, relating tales of the search for Pemako. However interpreting hardship as the true test of human spirit, many Tibetans remained in upper Pemako.

The narrative of Chogyam Trungpa in *Born in Tibet*, is replete with narratives of how the difficulties of the Pemako brought out best in them. The occupation of Lhasa by the Chinese army is well written about, but the Chinese also spread across every part of southeastern Tibet, rampaging villages, destroying monasteries and forcing people to migrate to south and to India. They *had* to search for Pemako, the question is, did they find it by settling in India?

A Rimpoche (senior lama) reported that he had entered a waterfall emerging into a valley filled with 'songs of dakinis'. This was interpreted as the 'innermost secret place' or *Yang-gsang-gnas*. May be this was an imaginary dimension as his followers were unable to 'enter' this hidden land and settled at Tuting in upper Siang valley.

The few Tibetans who settled in the southern valley of Yang Sang chu (chu-river) herded cows and yaks and successfully cultivated barley. After three years they were spotted by an Indian helicopter on border patrol. Some of them were forced to move down to Tezu. But a few Tibetans, expert in art of moving in mountains, escaped towards the eastern head of the valley to cross Abroka pass.

From the Yang Sang chu valley, Abroka pass is the gateway to the Dibang valley from the upper Siang. The river Ahi originates at the pass and drains east into the Dibang river. Idu Mishmi elders say that a number of Tibetans reached the middle belt of the Dibang valley through Abroka pass. They would have been killed but some good souls among the Idu Mishmis later moved the Tibetans to Tezu (Lohit

district). Perhaps the blessings of Pemako and Pema Siri, the holy ridge that they had crossed, saved them.⁴

Shangri-la

The concept of Pemako is quite close to the concept of paradise as imagined by human beings. But this concept was made popular and acceptable after British writer James Hilton published his book *Lost Horizon* in 1933. He popularised the word Shangri-la, which is said to be the Tibetan term for ‘sun and moon in the heart’, or an ideal, enchanting wonderland. This novel and the film based on it perhaps contributed maximum to the concept in the English language and in the West, as we understand it today.⁵

In a rather innovative study, Toni Huber discusses how a Tibetan devotee, who could be illiterate, would find his way to the Pemako, using a ‘prayer map’.

Alternative maps

In the last few decades a large Western literature has developed on the concept of ‘map.’ Our notion of map has been extended from paper maps of classical Western cartography, which represent the earth’s surface, to include, among others, cognitive and social maps, the complex electronic maps of computer systems, and mathematical maps for navigating the multiple dimensions of hyperspace. Like many other cultures, Tibetans have used a variety of mapping systems for navigating their ‘world-space’ (*shingkhām*).

4. Most probably this was during the time when Idus had begun to be hostile against the Tibetans. Abroka is about a ten-day walk at normal pace from Anelih in Dibang valley. It skirts the holy mountain of Pema Siri.

5. *Lost Horizon* is a fictional story of how Britain sends a diplomat, Robert Conway, to rescue 90 Europeans, who were trapped in war-torn China, from a fictitious place called Baskul to the coastal metropolis of Shanghai. But Conway is able to get only four Europeans into a plane, which flies them to Shangri-la instead of Shanghai. He later finds out that the plane had been sent by Shangri-la’s high lama to kidnap him so that Conway would take over the leadership of Shangri-la. After living in Shangri-la for some time, Conway and the other Europeans became homesick and flee Shangri-la. After reaching civilisation, Conway realises he has abandoned something dear to him and returns to Shangri-la.

The word ‘Shangri-la’ has brought huge profits to the Himalayan region by its usage in many aspects like hotels, etc. (*Lost Horizon*, By James Hilton. (Macmillan, London, 1933, film by Frank Capra, 1937)

(Huber, Toni, *The Cult of Pure Crystal Mountain*. 58,
(Oxford University Press, 1999).

Huber talks about various types of maps used in Tibet since ancient times. Painted maps are used to locate a region and features, like the famous mountain of Gurus. The 'narrative maps' are passed on as stories of travel, interpretations of travel and contain features like marked rocks leading to a place. The most innovative is a 'prayer map' which as part of prayer describes features and locations of hundreds of deities in a vast landscape. Thus by praying while on a pilgrimage, the devotee will be led to different stages by this map and will finally enter Pemako.

Ian Baker, a Kathmandu-based writer, explorer and Tantric scholar, first learned of beyuls in 1977, while studying Buddhist scroll painting in Nepal. It soon became an obsession, and in subsequent audiences with Buddhist high lamas, he refined his understanding of how one might reach them.

In his introduction to the Ian Baker book *The Heart of the World*, the Dalai Lama writes, 'From a Buddhist perspective, a sacred environment such as Pemako is not a place to escape the world, but to enter it more deeply.'⁶

Beyul Nature Reserves

As if taking a cue from the Dalai Lama, the great naturalist George Schaller expanded the thought and principles of Pemako and beyul to the modern day world, to study and save its environment and wild life.

The Indian sage Padmasambhava visited Tibet in the eighth century and established Buddhism by converting belligerent deities and demons into protectors of the new faith. During his wanderings he created hidden lands or beyul, sanctuaries of inner peace and outer tranquillity, earthy paradises filled with mysterious power. He wrote guidebooks to these hidden lands and secreted them, knowing that those of faith would

6. The Dalai Lama, in one of several audiences, assured Baker that it would take more than a good compass to reach Pemako. Only after mastering their inner most depths, could Buddhist practitioners gain entrance to these hidden realms. Beyuls do exist on earth, but lie beyond the range of our ordinary senses. 'It's a bit like quantum physics, which recognises parallel dimensions and multiple universes.'

ultimately find them. Dechen Pemako, The Lotus of Great Bliss, is one such beyul, not identified until the 17th century. Is wildlife thriving in this land of peace and purity?

We hurry on, away from the desolation of rock and snow, toward a basin with stands of fir and birch where we will camp. Two monal pheasants glide down slope and we record their presence in our notebooks. The region had been given protection as the Yarlung Tsangpo Great Canyon National Reserve, 9168 sq. km in size, the previous year. About 15,000 people, mostly Tibetan, Monpa, and Lhopa live in scattered villages throughout the reserve. Many practice agriculture, converting forest to field, and many hunt wildlife such as takin, goral, muskdeer, macaque monkeys, and black bear for meat, hides, and other products. We have come to assess the impact of such activities.

(George Schaller, *The Tigers of Pemako*)

With the efforts of environmentalists like Schaller, many beyuls in the Himalaya are designated as a park or reserve by their respective governments today. In the process, the centuries of protection that the beyul concept had provided is being forgotten, and regulation and policing are taking precedence over the communities' faith-based conservation. Many beyuls are no longer so isolated because of modern modes of transportation and communication. 'Education in outside languages often erodes local cultural values and traditional knowledge. When children adopt cultures that are alien to their own land, traditional concepts such as the beyul begin to lose their grip on people's minds'.⁷

Many things changed in 1962 when the Chinese army attacked the Indian borderland near the Yang Sang Pemako. The Chinese soldiers descended from Kepang la and upper ridges, to reach Tuting and little beyond. The region of Lushe la and Mechuka were also attacked and another dark age engulfed the area. Luckily the Chinese soldiers did not stay long and retreated across the ridges. This anyway changed the entire 'landscape' of the area which was now well-guarded with many soldiers, roads were built and, like the Himalayan mist, the area was put down as restricted, closed to visitors for several decades.

7. Ibid. Schaller, George.



30. Crossing Bramaputra in a ferry. (Harish Kapadia)



31. Rail cum road bridge built by the British on the northern bank of Brahmaputra valley. (Harish Kapadia)

Even in the age of satellites and explorations many parts of the wider Pemako remain hidden. Many Tibetans believe that the time to open the ‘innermost secret place’ of the hidden land has not yet come. The only easy access is from Indian Siang valley but border guards will stop you soon thereafter preventing you from crossing over into Tibet. ‘This is the land situated where two of Asia’s most powerful armies, India and China, confront each other in a long running border dispute. But then as

some may argue, Pemako, the hidden land, could not be more ideally located’.⁸

To Pemako, October-November 2009

Mumbai, where I live is far from Arunachal, almost a different world. The direct flight to Dibrugarh takes almost four hours though you are compensated by magnificent views of mountains in the later part of the flight.

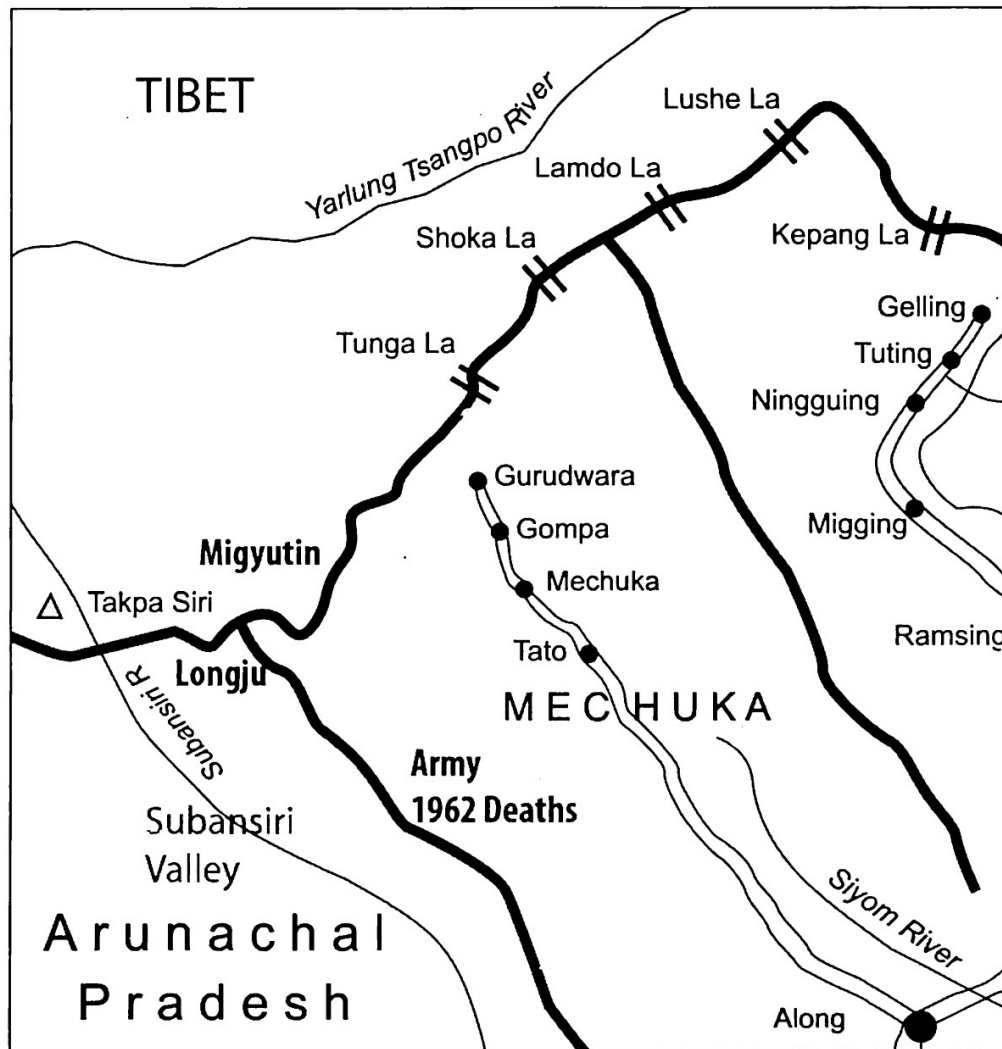
The first thing we had to do was to cross the Brahmaputra river, wide and fast flowing even in October. It was the ritual we had followed earlier: we drove two hours to Bogobil ghat, loaded ourselves and our

8. Ibid. Hamid Sardar-Afkhami

taxi on the ferry which took us across the river in another two hours. On the north bank we got off at Kareng Bali ghat and drove via Pasighat, spending a night there - a miserable night, at a miserable hotel, in the miserable town. We drove to Along the next day. This travel takes two days and lots of patience as anything can go wrong and one can be stuck for a day or more. But still, it is an experience and an inevitable part of the journey to the upper valleys. From Along, we took a diversion to visit Mechuka.

Mechuka

I had first read about Mechuka in the brief army history of the 1962 Indo-China war. A battalion of Gorkhas (2/8 GR) was trapped in this valley when the Chinese attacked. The battalion was ordered to withdraw but it was too late. As the Chinese pursued them a party led by its Commanding Officer Col. D. A. Taylor was entangled in the





32. A typical large tribal house. (Harish Kapadia)

jungles, trying to cross over to the Subansiri valley. The jungles of Arunachal are unforgiving and not suitable for a quick march. Four officers, including the Commanding Officer with 39 soldiers died of exhaustion while the Chinese took 10

others as prisoners. In fact between the Chinese fire and the jungles, 162 soldiers were killed in two days (18 and 19 November 1962). This episode placed Mechuka firmly in the army defence plans and it was out of bounds for decades.⁹

In the hilly terrain of Arunachal, Mechuka is a rare exception. After a long drive, ahead of Tato, the valley flattens out, allowing fixed wing aircrafts also to land. On the drive we passed many large houses, especially at Kamba. People were rich and lived well in traditional houses.

Mechuka (1890 m)

The valley is guarded by Damjen range to the north, Singjong range to the south, Lola range to the west, and Yargab-chu gorge to the east. The Yargab-chu originates from Lola lake and by puncturing the high hills in narrow gorge, it enters Mechuka. On all three sides are high snow covered ranges and in their middle grows a fine coat of shrubby and dwarf alpine trees, then followed by deodar pine trees. Mechuka, so far as its natural beauty is concerned, can match any beautiful hill station in the entire Himalayan belt.

(*Encyclopaedia of the North-East India*, by Bareh, H.M., Vol. I, p. 93).

Mechuka is a Memba village, and the Siyom river originates from this valley. Siyom, a major tributary of the Siang, joins the main river

9. Shorey, Col. Anil, (retd), *The Fantastic Fifth*. p. 97-99, (Force Multipliers, New Delhi, 2005).

near Along. In the centre of Mechuka is the ancient Samden Yancho monastery, located on a hill. It was founded, as the lama said, 'eight generations before' by Taksin Ringzen Dorje and a monument to him stands here. Few kilometres ahead is a Sikh Gurudwara where Guru Nanak had stayed - this place is near a beautiful waterfall. The surrounding ridges are thickly forested and pass to the north leading to Chinese territories. But closer at hand quite alarmingly, we observed heaps of garbage near the airstrip and dirty rest houses.¹⁰

Mechuka area is also home to 'bhut jalokia' (red chillies), which grow in the middle and upper Siang valley. On several rooftops in this and adjoining valleys, red chillies are dried. These are the hottest chillies the world has ever seen and are locally known by names such as 'Bhut Jalokia' or a colloquial name 'Mithun mirchi' – a chilli as strong as mithun or hot enough to tame a mithun (local strong bull). Now the 'heat' in these chillies has been scientifically measured, patent has been applied for and they are being exported.¹¹

Tuting

We returned to Along and soon went up the Siang valley, and after a night stay at Jengging, reached Tuting. This was to be our starting point. Since my visit in 2003 the place has grown and shops seemed to have more supplies. The main valley, along the Siang, led to Gelling and ahead to the 'S Bend' – the point at which Tsangpo enters the Indian territories and is christened as the Siang.¹² It flows to Assam and is rechristened as the Brahmaputra. We were to trek in the Pemako, along the Yang Sang chu valley in the east. There were only few scattered villages and no supplies were available. We stocked up and arranged porters.

10. Mechuka has been known by different names. It means - 'Me' is medicine, 'chu' is a stream and 'kha' is snow; therefore, 'a place on the side of a medicinal water-stream. Secondly, another name for the valley was 'Banja Singri' – which is 'hidden heaven'. And lastly, the area was also known as Ne-nan, 'a place of pilgrimage' after the ancient goinpa in the centre of the valley.

Gazetteer of India, Arunachal Pradesh, East and West Siang Districts, p. 320 and *The Ramos of Arunachal*, by M. M. Dhasmana, p. 18, (New Delhi, 1979)

11. 'Heat Wave' by Kushalrani Gulab in *The Hindustan Times Brunch*, 20 June 2010.

12. Kapadia, Harish. 'Tsangpo - the final exploration'. *The Himalayan Journal*, Vol. 61, p. 72

In the bazaar a shopkeeper told us many stories of simple faith and great beliefs. They sounded true and fascinating even though he was narrating them while standing below a poster of Shakira! To the north of the valley is a high ridge, bordering China, with lakes and peaks which are endowed with holy status by local folklore. The lake Dhanakosha is with an island in the centre (it is the ‘centre of Dharma – or truth’), the peak of Chitta Puri is the ‘heart of knowledge’ and so on. It was amazing to hear these stories of simple faith.

We started going up the valley on 30 October 2009. We crossed one of the longest FSB (‘Foot Suspension Bridge’) at the outskirts of Tuting and reached Jiddu on the left bank of the Siang. A stone, ‘Jachhong’, shaped like ‘Garud’ (celestial bird), was surrounded by many prayer flags. It is believed that when age of truth is upon us this bird will fly. A huge stone nearby had foot impressions of many animals, so that these could be recreated when the new age arrived. As this was a very holy land, we were to come across many such local legends. It was hot, very sultry as were only at about 600 m surrounded by fertile valleys and waters of Yang Sang chu which was merging with the Siang here. On the second day we climbed steeply to Nyukong (1100 m). Keeping at same level, but with many ups and downs, we reached Mankota, a village of Khambas.





33. Porter after hunting takin. It was eaten in hours. (Harish Kapadia)



34. A broken foot suspension bridge. (Harish Kapadia)

In the beginning of the 20th century, many Khambas from Tibet made the long, arduous trek to Pemako in quest of refuge and better life. They are one of the major inhabitants of the region, along with the Adis and Mishmis who were the original inhabitants. The region is a melting pot of different tribal cultures, where all tribes exist in complete harmony with themselves and nature. Walking through Pemako one can see Adi, Memba, Khamba and Mishmi villages with their distinctive culture, faith and lifestyle.

Devekota

The centrepiece of the valley or indeed even the Pemako is the Devekota monastery. The Yang Sang takes a wide detour near Mankota skirting three sides of a small hill. The monastery is situated on this hill. As we reached, a lone lama greeted us and beckoned us to stay in the monastery. This was a grand experience as unperturbed by our presence the lama went about performing his rituals and routines at night and from early morning. He was no stranger to visitors as

most politicians of the State visit Devekota to seek blessings to win an election. The last Chief Minister lost as he did not come here to seek blessings. Lama's sons were living in France and foreign visitors were also common. The ancient and the modern merged well at Devekota.

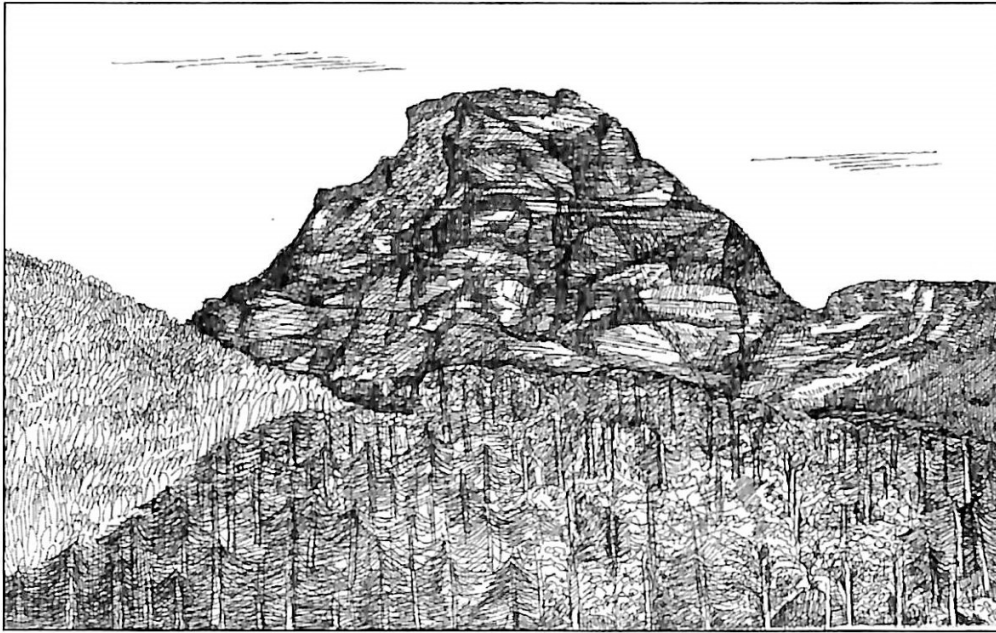
It was a full moon night and undertaking a kora of the monastery on this day gets one blessings equal to 100 koras (circumambulations) of the Potala. The lama despite his age walked briskly and showed us the hidden treasures en route. There was 'thichu', a water source with curative powers, 'Beyul thichu', a bowl of dripping sour water granting long life, 'Dorje Phagmo' a cave with 'sindura' or holy yellow powder. It went on but what was most attractive to us was the great view and thick forest on all sides as Yang Sang twisted and turned all around. By the evening villagers arrived and carrying a round heavy stone on their shoulders, they would walk seven times around the temple to purify themselves. No wonder Devekota is called the 'place of celestial Dakinis'. I observed these with curiosity of a reluctant pilgrim, but I had learnt never to doubt the simple faith of the simple villagers.

Upper Pemako

The trail climbed steeply to Trashigong the next day. It was a Tibetan village and a trail connected it with Dhanakosha ridge. With many ups and downs and passing Simugye, we reached Singa (1540 m), the headquarters of the valley complete with a helipad. There were only few houses and all the officials would go out fishing in the nearby river, early in order to avoid the traffic rush! In fact, fishing was the most common activity and most villagers made a living on it. Our porter, Alo, was an expert and if asked to get a fish, he would fumble in his jacket pocket, pulling out a few! He was somewhat educated, a rarity, and spoke and drank well. He was Christian and had studied at a Baptist school and so, being a religious person would not drink in a Church!

The villagers were friendly and soft spoken. They were a sentimental lot and if spoken roughly to, they could get nasty. It was amazing to see the village girls, all dressed up well in the latest fashion but with no education. Drinking coupled with a lack of literacy is the major bane as winter nights can be very long, with nothing much to do. The Indian Standard Time (based on central India's convenience) is observed all over the northeast and as a result it is pitch dark by 4 p.m. in winter. When they wake up at about 3 a.m., the rest of India is

sleeping. A weekly helicopter sortie and a satellite phone is their major contact with the outside world.



35. Riwutala (Geeta Kapadia)

From Singa, Riwutala was to the south and very steep climb. Our two very fit companions, Group Captain V. K. Sashindran and his wife Sangeetha were old hands at Arunachal and left for this climb.¹³ My wife Geeta and I continued going up the valley towards Pema Siri which was situated on the ridge on which Abroka pass stood.

Pema Siri

We climbed up to Simeuling on a high ridge. A holy lama was residing here for a few days but we could not meet him as he was on a seven-day meditation and enclosed in a room. Descending steeply back to the river we started our trek through a delightful but difficult forest trail. The trail was overgrown and our guide Jimba informed me that all villagers trek here in August, after the rains, to clear the trail of vegetation. We passed spots like Emesha and Along Kulong, built for pilgrims to rest at night and finally reached Alotombo Machi (1980 m). Our luck ran out here on 9 November, as it snowed at night. The trail was lightly covered but ahead on the mountain there was much snow. Our party had once been trapped in snow at the foot of Yonggyyap la in the Dibang valley and the memory of those terrible days made us decide

13. For their account see Note 2, 'In the Footsteps of the Faithful', in this volume.



36. Pema Siri (Geeta Kapadia)

to play safe. We consoled ourselves with the thought that beyul, after all, is in the heart of a person!¹⁴

What we lost due to snow, we gained by meeting the holy lama who emerged from the room for a day. He was middle-aged, physically very strong, long hair, composed and with powerful eyes. We interacted with him through his wife as he spoke only Tibetan. There is a tradition of yogis of Tibet, like him, who travel long distances, stay at different monasteries or inside a cave and follow ritual practices for many hours during the day and

night. During this visit to Pemako he had stayed 13 days each at Pema Siri, Riwutala and Dhanakosha. With a philosophical bend, he talked slowly about his travels in Tibet and the areas of Pemako.

As I was about to leave, he fired his last salvo, looking at my grey hair and tired body at 65. 'You have travelled wide and for many years. What preparations you are now making, to meet your maker in few decades?' May be this was the reason I was called to Pemako?

We ambled back the same route along the river. On the last day we were to camp on the bank of the Yang Sang chu at Horka. Jimba would generally reach much ahead of us and be ready with tea. On that day we waited almost four hours before he arrived, evidently high on *apong* struggling to walk in the dark with a dimmed torch. Sheepishly he went off to bed.

14. Kapadia, Harish. 'The Promised Land'. *The Himalayan Journal*, Vol. 63, p. 40.

Next morning he came to my tent and said that all of them had drinks but somehow it had hit him, 'and I became dim'! You cannot be upset with the truth being told like this, and moreover with his hard work he had ensured that our memories of Pemako will never dim!

Summary :

A trek to the Yang Sang chu valley, upper Siang valley, Arunachal Pradesh. It is also known as Pemako region which extends across borders till the Great Bend of the Tsangpo in Tibet.