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The Riddle of Kangto

Harish Kapadia

Traditionally people from the northern villages in the Himalayan range always travelled to the Tibetan plateau, be it for trade, pilgrimage or even spying. This holds true for Kumaun, Nepal, Bhutan and Himachal Pradesh. The tradition in the East Kameng area was no different. They trekked into Tibet for only for one product - salt. The dry Tibetan plateau has plenty of salt while for a villager in East Kameng, the plains of India were, were too far and beyond thick forests. Above all, the plains of Assam also did not produce any salt.

In the East Kameng valley, civilisation was established almost in reverse - instead of people from plains moving upwards, here they moved down the valley. The salt traders from Tibet came across the Tulung la (pass) (on 'the Bailey Trail')¹ and went across the Mago valley to reach the present day Bisal village. Gradually, as they moved south in search of food, villages at lower levels were established. They in fact became traders in this manner - carrying salt to middle level villages and finally to the plains. Slowly villages spread in different forested valleys. This route came to be known to the outside world in 1911-12 when the team of H. T. Moreshead and F. M. Bailey, British military officers, crossed Tulung la to return to India after a long trek along the borders of Arunachal.² Notes and observations from this travel were used to establish the 'McMahon Line' dividing the Indian and Tibetan territories in 1913. And in 1962, the Chinese army used this 'Bailey Trail' to surprise the Indian troops and cut off their rear to inflict a major defeat. Till the 1962 war with China these areas were almost unguarded and now they are most heavily guarded.

After the war was over, a party of Assam Rifles receded the area and a platoon followed the old salt route to reach Bisal. Another platoon trekked from Bomdila to Nofra and reached the lower East Kameng valley. Thus these villages were brought in to contact with people of the plains. Slowly

1. 'A Trek in the Tawang Tract', by Harish Kapadia, *HJ* Vo. 60, p.26

2. *No Passport to Tibet*, by Lt. Col. F.M. Bailey, Rupert Hart-Davis, London, 1957.

the contacts grew and more interactions brought them into the modern day world, in what Verrier Elwin called 'Civilising the Civilised'! However as there are no roads here, many traditions survived.

H.W. Tilman was one of the first explorers to pay attention to the West Kameng valley in 1939. He surveyed the peaks and was intending to cross over to the East Kameng valley when Nukku Sherpa with him died of malaria and he himself barely survived the disease.³

The East Kameng valley has no passes into Tibet in the north as the great Kangto range dominates the sky. Kangto is the only 7000 m plus peak east of Bhutan. Further to the east the range drops sharply near Takpa Siri and the Himalaya literally ends at the 'S Bend' where the Tsangpo enters India, which is only 580 m. Namcha Barwa (7762 m) stands tall but is in Tibet.

The McMahon Line was drawn passing on the crest of these peaks. Starting from (west to east) Gorichen (6488 m), Kangto I (7042 m) and II (6953 m) Chomo I (6878 m) and II (6710 m) and ending at Nyegi Kangsang (also known as Nyegi Kangto) (6983 m). For decades the attempts to find routes to base of these peaks were made. The base of Gorichen was reached first as it is in the sensitive Mago area, visited by the army. To the extreme east, a route to Nyegi Kangsang was explored by an expedition from the Indian Mountaineering Foundation in 1995. The team led by Col. M. P. Yadav reached the base of the peak from Wapriang Bung valley and a team of instructors reached a height of about 6700 m after making a camp across the border into China. The main summit eluded them, which still remains unclimbed.⁴

The Kangto and Chomo remained inaccessible, and even unseen. Two teams from Indian defence forces failed to locate the mountain as thick fog and deep forested valleys do not offer an easy passage. Kangto, locally called 'Sonvu and Gyanvu', rises from valley floor at about 3000 m to a height of 7042 m – a stupendous rise of about 4050 m,

3. 'Assam Himalaya Unvisited', by H. W. Tilman, *Alpine Journal*, Vol. 52, 1940. See also *When Men and Mountains Meet*, by H. W. Tilman, Cambridge University Press, 1946.

4. 'The First Ascent of Nyegi Kangsang', *HJ* Vol. 52, p. 9. This claim was disputed and a detailed enquiry proved that the summiters were 300 m below the summit. 'False Claim on Nyegi Kangsang, 1995 : Correction', by Jagdish Nanavati, *HJ* Vol. 55, p. 308.

perhaps one of the maximum in the Himalayan range.⁵ A team from the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute, Darjeeling, led by Dr P.M.Das in 1994 spent a month trying to locate the approach and to photograph the peaks, all in vain.⁶ They had an excellent team of qualified Sherpa instructors and fanned out in different directions. Finally they made an ascent of Gorichen. Kangto kept its secrets.

The Japanese took on the challenge of Kangto in 1985 but from the Tibetan plateau to its north from where it was more accessible. They paid a large sum as royalty to the Chinese and drove from Chengdu to near the base of the peak, almost a four-day drive across the Tibetan plateau. Using yaks, the base camp was established at the junction of the north Kangto glacier with Lhhanga Chhu. Overcoming ice walls and braving cold and strong Tibetan winds, they reached the main summit. This summit juts out to Tibet from the main crest.⁷ Kangto II on the other hand, can only be climbed from East Kameng. But from where and from which base?

After one of the many exploratory trips we had made to different valleys of Arunachal, we were at a small restaurant in Tezpur. In the late evening, a small speck of a red mountain was seen in the distance. It was only with binoculars that one could trace its shape. It was Kangto. I knew that we would return someday soon to trace a way to the foot of it. My first attempt to reach the base was across the plateau below Poshing la and to cross the Tse la. We failed as it was a long route and we had to cross another pass at Bishum to the Wada nadi (river valley) in to the East Kameng. There was no reference in the Gazetteer. No explorers visited this area of East Kameng and the British had no interest so there was no literature available.

In October 2010 four of us were heading to Seppa to explore the route to Kangto. We reached Guwahati and drove to Tezpur across the Brahmaputra. The Kalia Bhomora bridge across the river is one of its

5. Other local/Tibetan names for these peaks are: Kangto -Gravo; Chomo-Chinsai; Nyegi Kangsang- Chinzen Byonvo.

6. 'Explorations and Climbs in the East Kameng, 1994', by P. M. Das, *HJ* Vol. 51, p. 181

7. *A long tempting and enchanting summit*, by Doshisha University Kangto Expedition. (Mainichi Shimbun, Osaka Japan, 1989). See full details of the climb at the end of the article.

kind with a length of over three kilometres.⁸ Soon we were driving up the road to Tawang (west Kameng) to bifurcate at Neichi Phu to Seppa, the district headquarters of the east Kameng district. The British had formed districts in each valley (administered by District Commissioner; DC) and in each district were smaller 'Circles' (administered by Circle Officer'; CO). Everyone talks in these short forms for officials. Both wield enough power to control the areas.

After arranging LCs (Load Carriers) we were to drive to Baming, situated on an intervening ridge to the Pachuk river basin. Midway at Paked, Pake and Pachuk rivers meet to form the Kameng river which flows south to merge with the Brahmaputra.

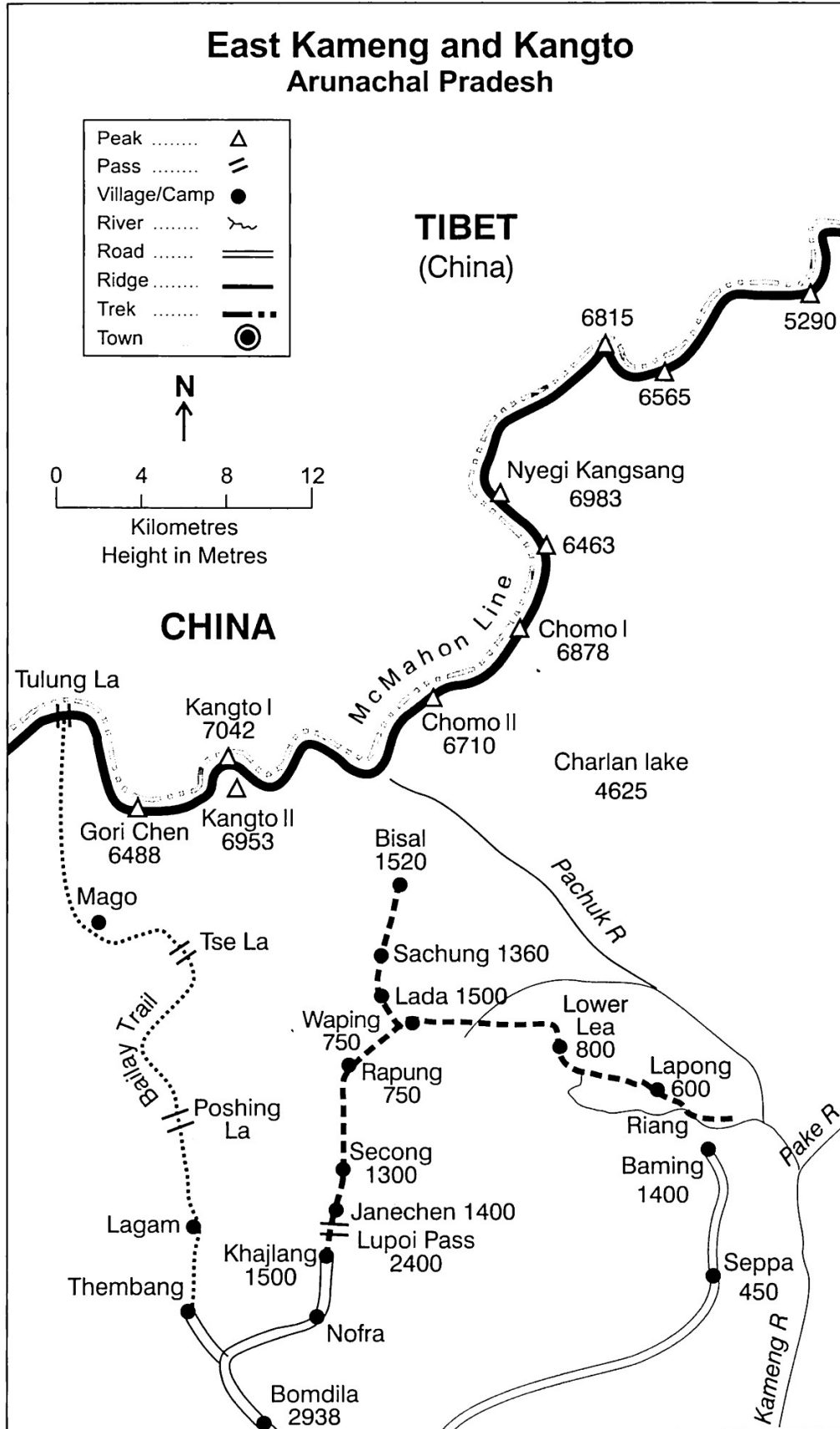
At the Tajo village in the Pake valley villagers had killed a CO in the late 1950s. An expeditionary force of Assam Rifles was sent; the killers were arrested and later hanged. But the village was not burnt as it was customary during the British period.

The first three days of the trek was punishingly hot as the altitude was low and river basins were humid, filled with rice fields and thick vegetation.⁹ As we climbed steeply to Lada, temperatures cooled off. Lada is a beautiful village with supplies sent by government agencies. Its only claim to fame is that post addressed to 'Lada' is often delivered to 'Ladakh' instead! Once, late in the afternoon, all the pigs in the village suddenly began rushing up the slope. A plane was to make air drop of rice, salt and other items of food, and as some of the grain would naturally spill, this would be good enough for these pigs! Air drop was a major activity for most government officials here.

Darkness arrives in the Arunachal hills by 4 p.m. in October (as it is almost 2.5 hrs east of the Indian Standard time but follows the national time). We were sound asleep by 7 p.m. when I heard a commotion outside. We could hardly understand the language but there was a group

8. Kalia Bhomora Setu is a pre-stressed concrete road bridge over the Brahmaputra river near Tezpur in Assam (India). It is named after the Ahom General Kalia Bhomora Phukan. This bridge connects Sonitpur on the north bank with Nagaon District on the south bank. The length of this bridge is 3015 m. The construction of the bridge took place from 1981 to 1987. 'American Concrete Institute' awarded the construction company of this bridge, the Hindustan Construction Company, the Certificate of Merit for the 'Most Outstanding Concrete Structures' (1988). (From Wikipedia)

9. First three days of trek were: From Baming 1400 m; to Lapong-Paksa 600 m -14 km; to Lower Lea 800 m- 12 km; to Waping 750 m – 8 km and to Lada 1700 m – 8 km.



of ladies in their local dresses laden with ornaments. They had cooked chicken and brought cold drinks with them. They wanted to sing and dance for us. The dances were based on traditional songs and rhythm.

You have come to our home
 You have added to our forest
 You have added to our water
 You have added to our beauty

It was a good experience and after about an hour we gave them some money and they disappeared to the village. It sounded all romantic but we soon learned that this was to happen at every village! At this rate we would never sleep and we would be quite broke by end of the trip. This dancing has become a ruse to make money and entertain themselves, more than guests. When a politician arrives to ask for their votes, people dance, drink till late and they are offered a large amount of money to vote favourably! So now they expect money from all travellers. We were probably the first trekkers here but all government officials visiting them would sit for the dances, eat chicken, drink and in return offer favours such as development projects. After that first experience, we had to firmly reject any offers to dance for us, sometimes rudely.

It was on the second morning at Lada, at about four a.m. that we had to run to a vantage point - for the Kangto range was seen in its full glory. We were certainly lucky for most often in this sultry valley, fog, if not the usual thick clouds, mars a clear view. Before us was one of the most magnificent views of the Himalaya. There were unknown peaks and rising steeply from the valleys. If Gorichen was in the west, it was dwarfed by Kangto but still its sharp flutings stood out. Kangto was the centre piece, red with the rising sun and later glimmering white and towering above all. To its east were conical peaks of Chomo, as shapely and difficult to climb as any other peaks in the range. Finally to the east was Nyegi Kangsang with its glittering ice-flutings and lovely conical shape. In between these major landmark peaks were several small mountains rising till 6400m and a jumble of valleys, jungles and ridges.

Christianity

East Kameng valleys have four major tribes; Meiji (in majority) Nishi (who administer most of areas today), Bani and Sulungs. The Sulungs are sort of 'informal' slaves for they must work for the owner when required and get paid for it. At other times they are free to work on

their own. Now all these tribes are taking to Christianity which has formed deep roots in this area. Most of the villages have a Church, sometimes two; Baptist and Catholic. Priests are from the plains. Songs and sermons are in the local language - only oral. Though we did not actually see, I think that the holy Bible is also translated in the local language although most people cannot read.

One person especially responsible for the spread of Christianity in this valley was a Catholic priest from Mumbai named Prembhai (brother of love). We could see his picture on an old calendar; short in frame with a long beard. He spoke the local language and trekked to all the interior villages spreading knowledge about Christianity. I enquired about him in Mumbai - apparently he belonged to a Church in the suburb of Bandra which has many Churches. He died about five years ago. However the purists may object one could see benefits of Christianity in these villages. Villagers were clean, polite and they did not drink (at least on a Sunday!) and Sunday Church services were well attended by women and children. They travel a long distance to attend a sermon in a major village and occasionally when there is festival. Christianity is also acceptable as it allows the people to eat meat which they love



A Meiji villager weaving basket. Note the hairstyle.
(Harish Kapadia)

and there is no caste system. Christian fathers run schools where teachers come to teach, unlike in government schools where a teacher is rarely seen due to the distances and heavy rains for most of the year. Most importantly, no other religious group has ever contacted or connected with them.

We arranged a different set of porters to move ahead. Two young boys appeared and we thought they were too young carry heavy loads. Life for youngsters

starts early in these hills and they start hunting, helping their family to build a house, bringing forest products and earning money working as LCs. One of the boys Govind, was smart, clean and very polite. The other Subba was small in frame but wild in spirit and both carried huge loads with others. Govind was the son of a 'Gaon-Burra', (traditional village headman) and was saving money for his future education. Geeta spent lot of time talking to them and other villagers. They were very keen to learn and had not been to the plains. Most of the ladies were dressed in latest designer clothes and traditional jewellery, in a way, defying the small villages and the surrounding forest.

Sachong village, (1360 m – 9 km) where we camped next, was far smaller. There were stories of wars fought here between early settlers and people from the north. Of course, according to locals, their ghosts still haunt the place! The same terrain continued ahead till the Wada nadi (river), at Papiang village (1720 m). The traditional trail leads along this river to Bishum and finally across the Tse la to Mago and Tibet. At the head of the valley were Bisal (1520 m) and the Charlarn Lake.

Charlarn Lake

We neared the unknown Charlarn lake at 4625 m. We had heard many legends and stories about it, the most common being, people who reach there never return. While we were in the area few hunters (shikaris) were on their way to the lake to hunt 'shukpan', a huge animal with rounded horns though we could never find out the exact nature of this beast. Unfortunately about seven of these creatures were killed in one week alone. The hunters create animal traps, especially for 'Kasturi' (musk deer) as they sell kasturi, animal skins and other animal products.

Below Bisal the Pachuk river had to be crossed on a thin rusted wire set up about two hundred feet above the river. It looked dramatic but far too risky for trekkers like us even though we had carried ropes. So our northward trek ended here, and quite wisely I am sure.

We returned to Lada and descended to Waping. Our return route was planned through the forest to the southwest. This route would lead us to Khajlang and the Nofra circle. The walk was through wonderful forests and again through remote villages. At Janechen village as we refused to come out of the tent for the dancing, these jolly people sang on their own.



Chomo peaks from Kameng valley. (Harish Kapadia)



Neygi Kangsang 6983 m. (Harish Kapadia)

There is no water without fish
 There is no sky without storm
 There is no girl without a boy
 There is no forest without animals

There was no escaping them and on this, our last night in the jungles we joined them.

A wide forest trail led from Janechen (1400 m) to the Lupoi pass (2400 m) a small gap in the forested ridge. After that it was all the way down. After a long and hot descent from the Lupoi pass we arrived at Khajlang's newly built rest house (1500 m). It was heavenly for us with attached toilets and hot water. On the slopes opposite there were white scars and much machinery was in operation. A mini-hydel project was coming up here and one dam to be built was leaving ugly marks and destruction of forests. Almost 600 such dams are to come up in the Arunachal state. The state has the maximum water resources anywhere in south-east Asia but villages have no electricity and they want development. They want electric water pumps, television, roads and all the benefits of a modern day world. Again the same conflict; development vs environment, where is the golden mean?

We said farewell to Govind and Subba. Like all hill people they were quiet suddenly and kept a distance. They knew that our association was largely over and we may not meet ever again, so why be attached and suffer the pain of separation? Our hearts were still in the Kameng valleys when the transport arrived to take us to Bomdilla and back home. We had experienced unknown valleys, simple people and some of the finest but unseen mountain scenery. Even in 21st century where the village girls were singing wishing for progress as their elders had done for so many generations.

Show me the place to earn
 Show me the place to learn
 Show me the place to beauty
 Show me the place where you come

'Everybody come looking, looking, but nobody see', goes a Sherpa saying - in a philosophical sense that all tourists are rushing by, but not enjoying the mountains or the village culture. We can state this in a physical sense. We came looking for the unseen Kangto range. We saw it and also enjoyed the ancient culture.¹⁰

10. Galen Rowell used this saying as title of his photographic book

Members: Harish and Geeta Kapadia, Vijay Kothari and Atul Rawal.

Summary :

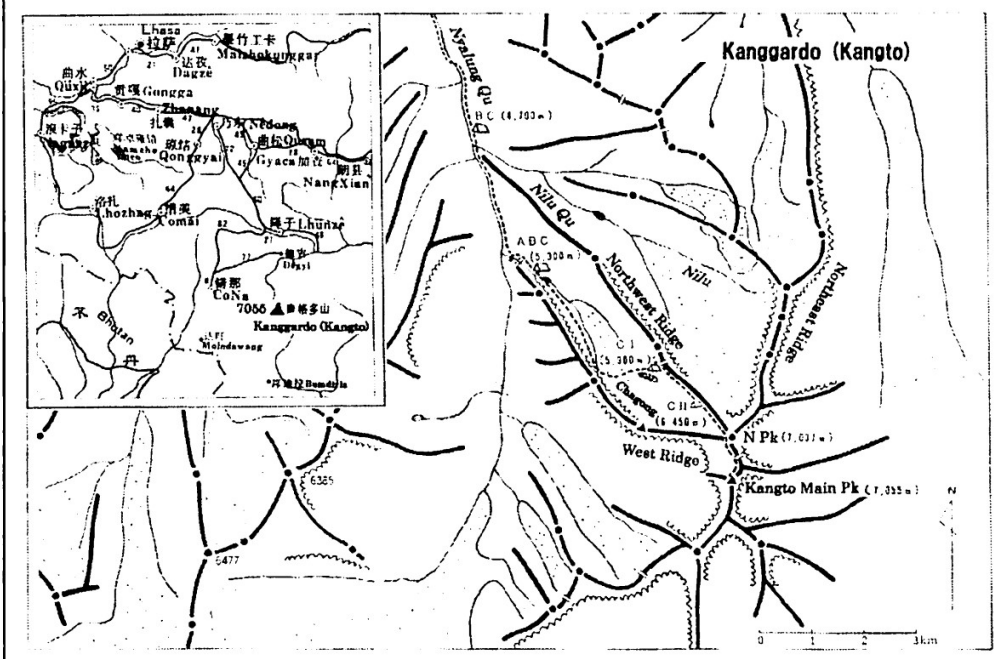
An exploratory trek to the East Kameng, Arunachal Pradesh, in October 2010. The team recced the route to the base of the Kangto group of peaks.

Reference from *Japanese Alpine News*

Kanggardo (Kangto) 7,055m—Himalaya (China 27°54'N-92°32'E)

1. Date of First Ascent: March 24, 1988
2. Climbing Route: Northwest ridge
3. Member of First Ascent: Takafumi Miyazaki (35), Kosuke Takano (23)
4. Expedition Team: Doshisha University Alpine Club, Leader Shinichi Naito (44) and 12 members with three HAP.
5. Camp Sites (Date): BC (4,700m March 5), ABC (5,300m March 8), C1(5,900m March 15), C2 (6,450m March 22)
6. Summary of Activities:

In 1913, a British and Indian expedition explored this region. In 1930, a British party attempted on climbing but it ended in failure. After more than a half century, Doshisha University AC made the first ascent. An access to this mountain is a drive for some 400km from Lhasa down southward to Ziwu and then to a site for BC. On March 3, they started caravan from Kata after passing Zetang and Tsona villages. On March 5, BC was established on the right bank of the Nyanglung River. They entered a glacier that flowed northwestward from the north peak. Climbing route was on the northwest ridge. They traversed the glacier at 5,600m to climb the ridge. C2 was set up on the ridge two steps above the glacier. On March 24, Takano and Takasu departed C2 at 07:50 and 30 minutes later Miyazaki and Mase departed. A route to the summit was rather easy as a whole though there was a steep place partly. At about 6,850m Mase and Takasu retired, but Miyazaki and Takano first reached the north peak (7,037m) and reached the main peak further 800m away at 14:25. On March 26, other two members and a HAP also stood atop.





Kangto 7042 m. South face rising from Kameng valley. (Harish Kapadia)



THE HIMALAYAN JOURNAL

Volume
67
2011