

## A Peak, a Pass and a Monastery

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Harish Kapadia

### A Winter Journey to Hanle and Chushul

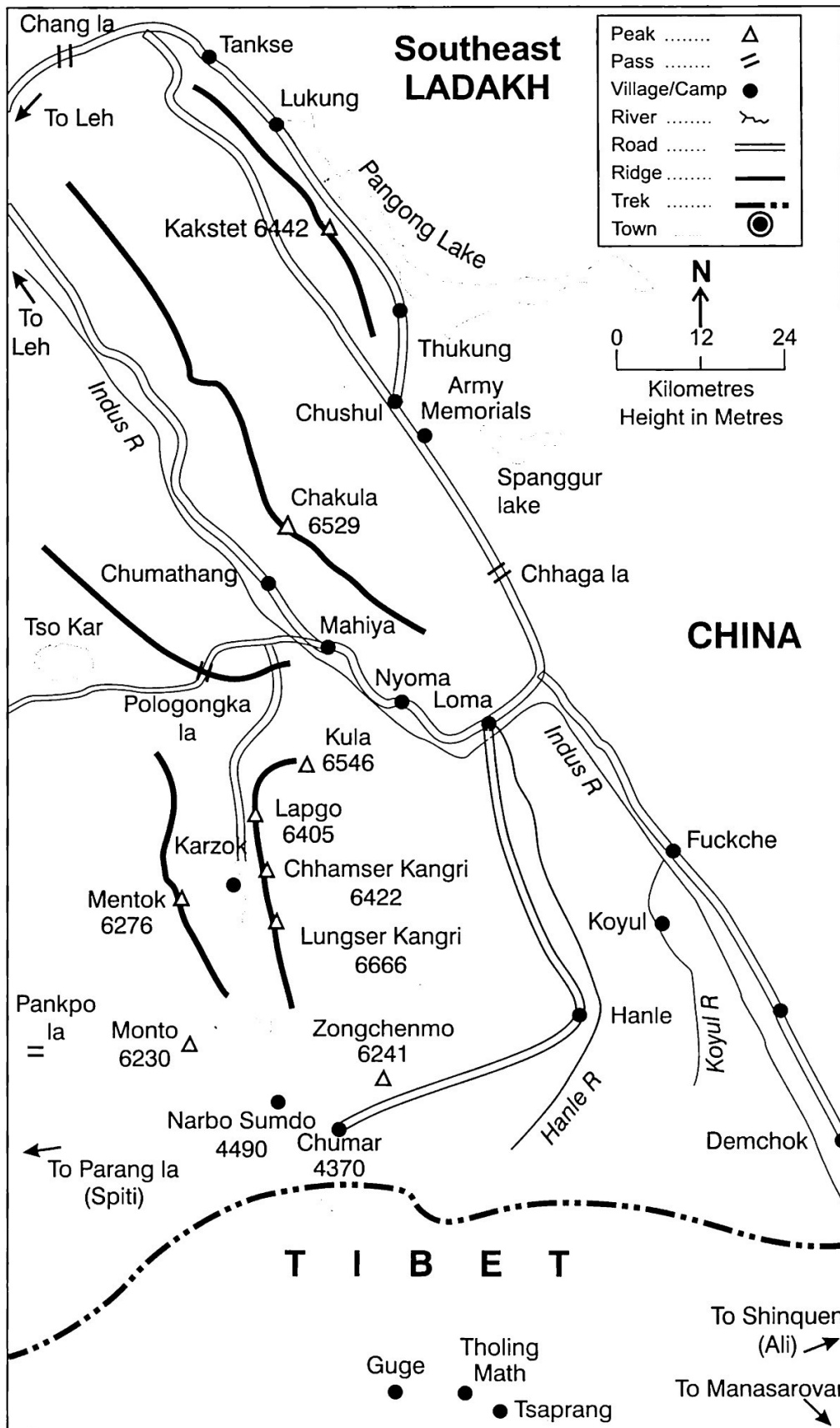
‘We have landed at Leh airport. For your kind information, the outside temperature is minus 10 degrees centigrade’. This was the customary announcement by the air-hostess. Passengers rushed to their baggage to put on warm jackets - without hearing anything further. This was in first week of April (2011) and it was an exceptionally cold day with strong winds despite bright sunshine outside.

The bazaar was empty, and so were the hotels. One cannot imagine that in two months it would be crawling with tourists and there would be no place to stay. But this late winter season had its charms. Very clear views, sharp light, yellow poplar trees swaying in the air and the cold made it enjoyable to walk fast in empty streets.

After acclimatisation, the three of us (Harish and Geeta Kapadia and Aparna Joshi) left by a sturdy car towards southeast Ladakh. The first stop was at Nyoma for lunch. Life here was as usual with children going to school as if it were summer. These areas are often in the news as borders with China are not properly defined here and there is always talk of intrusions by the Chinese. The airstrip at Nyoma was recently made functional. We bypassed the bifurcation to Chumar and after two hours of driving reached Loma which is situated on the Indus and is a major bifurcation. The road proceeding along the Indus on the left bank leads to the last Indian village on the Chinese border at Demchok. Across the Indus there is another Demchok in the Chinese territory, which is allowed to be approached by tourists with permits.

Across the Indus to the south led a good tar road to the vast Hanle plains. We saw quite a few skyangs (wild donkeys), unperturbed by our intrusion. Finally we turned south skirting a hill to reach the small and scattered Hanle village. The only place to stay is the Astrophysics Laboratory guest house. This is a major study centre and has scientists staying here round the year.

In the morning we looked back and saw the magnificent site of the Hanle monastery perched on a hill. It was an imposing structure but



later as we found out it was empty inside and crumbling. Hanle has a long history.

There is a fine monastery here (*Hanle*) built on a summit of a steep hill which rises abruptly out of the plain. The Hanle plain is about 6 or 8 miles in diameter. Several streams, very tortuous and sluggish, wind over its surface. These were frequently three feet or more in depth, and contained multitudes of small fish, a species of carp.

The streams all converge to a point at the north-east end of the plain, and, uniting into one continue their course down an open valley in a northerly direction towards the Indus. It can scarcely be doubted that it (the plain) has at one time been a lake, which gradually silted up.

*(Gazetteer of Kashmir and Ladak, p. 354)*

Alexander Cunningham called the Hanle Plain as the Hanle Tso (lake) and described it as the ‘largest sheet of fresh water in Ladak.’<sup>1</sup> These wetlands were full of birds and wild life. According to Rishad Naoroji, a wild life expert, the wetlands have now dried up and hence there is huge depletion of wild life. During his several visits Naoroji found birds disappearing (luckily not by hunting, as Ladakhis respect non-violence).<sup>2</sup>

Hanle will always hold a special place in history, due to its location.

To the south of Hanle lies the Guge kingdom, with its fort and the area of Tsaparang. Tholing Math, established by Adi Shankaracharya is also situated here. This kingdom and travellers from here had distinct influence on the monastery of Hanle. The first Christian Church in Tibet was founded at Tsaparang on 12 April 1626 and it flourished for four years. Several Jesuit missionaries travelled between Agra to Tasparang across the Mana pass during the next 16 years. In 1630 the king of Guge converted to Christianity and that led to a revolution. The Church was ransacked by the lama clergy and four hundred Christian converts were reduced to slavery. Many rushed to Hanle and finally to Leh. The Jesuits sent Francisco de Azevedo in 1631 to Tsaparang and onwards

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1. *Ladak*, by Alexander Cunningham (1853)

2. *Birds of Prey of the Indian Subcontinent*, by Rishad Naoroji (2007)

to Hanle. With help from the Lamas at Hanle he finally reached Leh on 25 October. 'In spite of Azevedo's efforts the Tsaparang mission never fully recovered'.<sup>3</sup>

Around the same period, in about 1616 Sengge (Lion) Namgyal, the popular and powerful king of Ladakh, ascended the throne as a minor. As he grew up he devoted himself to religion and retired to Hanle where he built one of the most famous and largest monasteries of Ladakh. It also acted as his fort and palace. When the revolt against the Christian missionaries in Guge was at its zenith, 'the Guge king was carried off into honourable exile' to Hanle. Later Guge was under influence of Hanle as it was handed over to a younger son of Namgyal. Sengge Namgyal died at Hanle in 1642, aged 40. The kingdom was divided, in 1647, into three parts, between his sons and Hanle was ruled by his eldest son Deldan Namgyal.

For the next 200 years Hanle was left in peace and became rich. All that changed in a week when the great Dogra General Zorawar Singh camped at Hanle and plundered the monastery. He went past Guge and Tasparang to Taklakot, where he was killed in battle with the Chinese. At the foot of Hanle, is a statue of Mahakala that grants any wish you may make. It was believed that the prayers of villagers at this statue led to the killing of Zorawar. Many still come to make a wish at Hanle. The main monastery is now dilapidated and as we walked past the ruins we were reminded of the past. The sight of the vast plain was magnificent. To its southeast were several high peaks – the Zongchenmo group, rising above 6000 m, with the highest one marked at 6232 m. With a series of intervening hills and valleys it was an inspiring site as far as the eye could see.

After two days at Hanle and a leisurely visit to the monastery, we drove back to Loma. After crossing the bridge over the Indus, we proceeded north on the road to Chushul. This road goes all along the Chinese border to its east and has recently been opened to visitors. The famous land marks relating to the 1962 India-Chinese war appeared one after the other. We went over Chhaga la, a gentle pass overlooking the border to its east. On the descent from this pass we entered the Chushul plains. We halted at the army memorial a few kilometres before Chushul. Here

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3. *Abode of Snow*, by Kenneth Mason, (1955) p. 57



the memories of many soldiers who laid down their lives during the 1962 war with Chinese forces are enshrined. The Gurung and Magar hills in the east saw maximum casualties while the plains saw a valiant fight by Major Shaitan Singh who incapacitated several Chinese tanks with a frontal attack. A three summit hill is named 'Trisul' (three pointed weapon of Shiva) and several skirmishes took place across valley here leading to Spangur lake in Tibet.

The last part of our journey took us along the Pangong lake, now made more famous by a recent Bollywood film. It is certainly reeling under the 'attack of tourism'. The Indian territory starts at Thukung (originally Thorung, 'spiralling winds/clouds'). The drive along the lake is a pleasure in any season as peak after peak of the Pangong range emerges on the west. The blue waters of the lake and, even in this season, some nangpas (Brahmni ducks) swimming in the lake, made it an attractive place. From Lukung at the northern end, soon Tankse is reached. The ancient inscriptions made by the early Jesuit travellers are still etched on the rocks. As we crossed Chang la to the Indus valley, our winter journey was over.

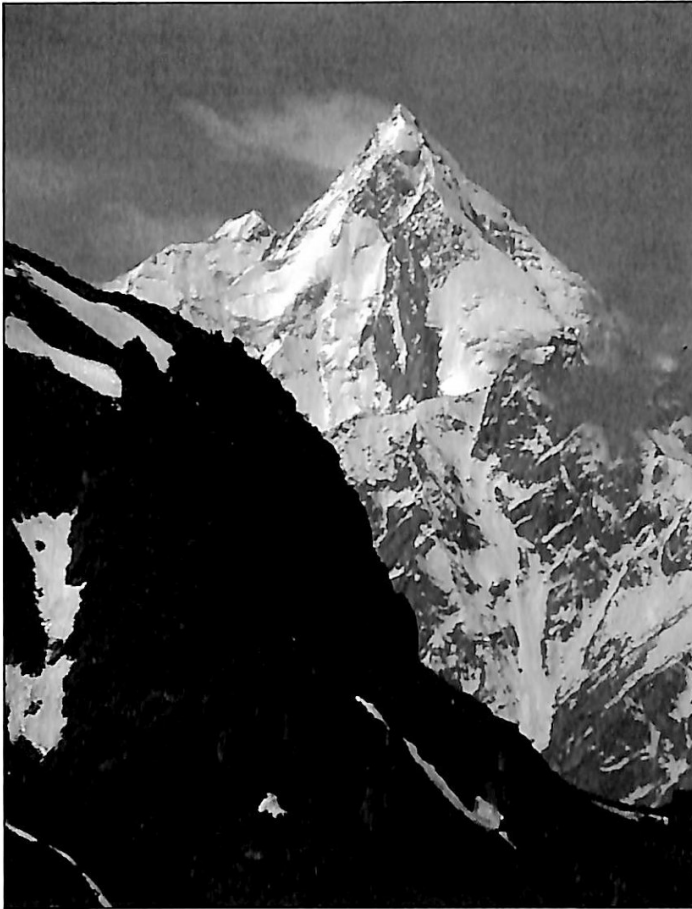
### **A Forgotten Pass – the Hangrang**

The Hangrang ridge, as we may conveniently call that mountain range on which the pass of Hangrang is situated, forms the boundary between the districts of Kunawar (*Kinnaur*) and Hangrang. As this range terminates at or close to the point where the Satluj is joined by the Piti river, this division is geographically convenient.

(Thomas Thomson, *Western Himalaya and Tibet*, 1852, p.96)  
(*italics mine*)

The powerful Rampur Bushaihr kingdom extended till the Shaikhhar fort at the edge of Spiti. The British built the famed Hindustan-Tibet road through this kingdom. It was built mainly for trade and was made immortal by Rudyard Kipling in his book *Kim*. Apart from this fictional hero most early explorers travelled on this route. The trail followed on the right bank of the Satluj till Pooh village.

From Pooh the H T road crossed the Satluj to the eastern side and climbed to Namgya, and finally crossed the Shipki la into Tibet. From here it traversed the areas in Tibet to reach Gartok (a trade centre) or



Kinnaur Kailash from Hangrang pass. (Harish Kapadia)

Tsapanag and Guge kingdom. Early travellers proceeded to Hanle and to Leh via this route as it avoided Spiti and higher passes. Often, parties crossed the Satluj near Khab, instead of climbing to the Shipki la. The trail then climbed steeply to Tashigong before entering Tibet, a short cut. The part of Hangrang (district of same name) on the left bank of the Spiti river belonged to the Chinese and

was transferred to the Kinnaur kingdom about 200 years ago.

A trail from H T road continued further north on the right bank, from Pooh to Spiti. As the Satluj gorge blocked the way along the river, the trail crossed over the Hangrang pass (4425 m) from Sannum in the Ropa valley to the Hango valley. This pass was regularly crossed by caravans and famous travellers like Moorcroft, Thomas Thomson, Gerard Brothers, Andrew Wilson and many others.<sup>4</sup> But again route ahead to Tibet was not simple. It crossed the river near Chango and a trail led them to Tibet along the Pare Chu river, to Ladakh via Hanle. These became the two major routes for travellers and traders who were proceeding to Ladakh and Central Asia. Many detailed and sometimes exciting descriptions are narrated in books, of crossing rickety bridges, meeting Drokpas and into Tartar village (the way Tibetans were called by them).

4. *Abode of Snow*, by Andrew Wilson (1840), p. 159 ; *Western Himalaya and Tibet*, by Thomas Thomson (1852), p.96 ; *Tours in Himalaya*, by Alexander Gerard, (1886) p. 14.

After the Chinese aggression in 1962, a road was blasted through the Satluj gorge at Khab. What took days was now covered in matter of few hours. The road was improved further and new bridges were built. Now it is a popular 'Jeep safari' route where tourists stop on the Satluj bridge to photograph Reo Purguil.

The Hangrang pass fell in disuse and was forgotten. Hardly anyone has crossed it in past few decades, as villagers also use the road. Moreover the villages of Hango district had relations with either people in the east towards Nako or to the north at Shaikhar. Thus there was no necessity for them to cross this pass.

Our visit to the pass began with confusion, I dare say, caused by writings of the explorers.<sup>5</sup> They all mentioned starting from 'Sugnam' which is now a famous village in Spiti, starting point of a popular trek in the Pin valley. The porters as per our instructions reached 'Sugnam' while we reached the original village which is now called 'Sunnam' (only Deepak Sanan in his useful guide book mentions this correct name).<sup>6</sup> Moreover we had difficulties with porters in Sunnam and so we decided to approach the pass from the north, from Leo. The road from Leo now extends to Hango, which is situated in a green bowl and is a very welcoming village. Many explorers have passed this village.

### **Tea at Hango**

Alexander Gerard who crossed the Hangrang pass in 1818 spent few days at Hango and described its beauty. He describes brewing of the Tibetan salty tea.

The tea is procured from Garoo (*Gartok*) but it has no flavour, and is otherwise very bad. They prepare it by boiling water and infusion, as we do, but substituting for milk and sugar, salt, ghee and ata (*butter and flour*).

*(Tours in the Himalaya, by Captain Alexander Gerard,  
1840, p.211)  
(italics mine)*

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5. We were a group of about 15 persons, many young first timers to the Himalaya, including Gujarati Non-Resident Indians from the USA wanting to know the country of their families.
6. *Exploring Kinnaur and Spiti*, by Deepak Sanan, 1998



Fluted Peak. (Harish Kapadia)



Hanle Monastery. (Harish Kapadia)





Karcha Parvat. (Harish Kapadia)



Leo Pargial (left) and Reo Pargial. (Harish Kapadia)

With tongue firmly in cheek, he describes the method of preparation in detail and points out how ‘the kettle was wiped clean with a horse’s tail’, or how ‘the mistress prepared a paste of meal and fresh butter, which was taken out of a clean sheepskin’. He approved the usefulness of the tea but added that he ‘should have liked it much better had it been prepared in a manner a little more cleanly’. And he adds, whether seriously or in pun; ‘I have given this receipt with a view that some European ladies may improve upon it.’

(Gerard has quoted the above passage from  
*Bell’s Journey from St. Petersburg to Peking*, vol 1, p.269.  
(Glasgow by R. and A. Foulis, 1763)

From Hango village we reached the Hangrang pass in a leisurely two day trek. The pass offered the most magnificent view of Leo Pargial (6791 m) and the Reo Purgyl (6816 m). The first was climbed by Marco Pallis in 1936<sup>7</sup> and the latter stands as the highest peak in Himachal Pradesh, towering over the Satluj gorge. To the south Jorkanden, Kinnaur Kailash and Phawararang stood tall, making Hangrang one of the finest passes to reach for views.

As mentioned above, there were two routes to Tibet from this area. It is believed that Guru Padmasambhava had meditated at a cave below Hango before he started for Tibet along the Satluj to spread Buddhism. This cave known as the Urgen Cave (or Tirasang Cave), is about 500 m below the road to Hango almost on the banks of Spiti river where it is joined by the Tirasang river. It is believed that one of his disciples built this cave after a few centuries when he was attracted there. There are stones with markings and footprints. Several legends are associated with it and it is great testimony to the simple faith of simple villagers that had kept the tradition alive. As usual apart from surrounding villages, the cave was not much known.

Finally we reached the Bushaihri fort at Shailkhar, where now a monastery is built. The fort, if you call it that now, was a small building perched on a high ridge. It was certainly located at advantage as one could see far away ranges. In the dilapidated fort wall was a statue of a goddess covered in red cloth. Only women can lift that veil, a great custom showcasing women’s liberation of many ages ago! Nearby at Giu village a mummy

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7. *Peaks and Lamas*, by Marco Pallis, 1939

of a lama, believed to have come from Tibet, was discovered in the last decade. It is preserved and considered a rarity in dry Spiti area.

Thomas Thomson wanted to follow a route to Hanle, linking the Bushaihri kingdom outpost of Shaikhar with Ladakh.

A little way above Shaikhar and Chango, two very considerable rivers unite to form Piti river....The other, which flows from the north-east, may be called the Parang river (*now Pare Chu*), by which name it is known in the upper part of its course.... The direct road from Hangarang to the Indus lies up this river, which unfortunately flows for several days' journey through districts which are included within the Chinese frontier. It was our wish to proceed by the most expeditious route, at the same time that nearest line of boundary to Hanle.

(*Ibid.* p. 113)

(*italics mine*)

However he was stopped at the frontier like the party of Captain Gerard and M. Jacquemont little before him. Now with borders sealed completely these old trails from Shipki la and Pare chu to Hanle are forgotten too.

It was a trek to a forgotten pass as also a visit to a forgotten past.

### **Into the Gyundi – almost**

Gyundi is a relatively large valley, with three glaciers draining in as Gyundi east, central and west. To the east of the Gyundi is Spiti and to the west, the great Bara Shigri glacier. This valley had seen one major exploration by Joss Lynam in 1958.<sup>8</sup> He entered the valley from the Losar pass (in the north) and crossed a pass to the Bara Shigri glacier, both challenging and now more dangerous being broken down. Few parties followed this route but mostly till the Losar pass only, (Arun Samant, 1994)<sup>9</sup> and climbed peaks at the border of these valleys, like Fluted Peak (6139 m).

In 1995, Kaivan Mistry and myself made an attempt to cross into the Gyundi from the Ratang valley to its southeast. We could not cross

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8. *The Gyundi and the Bara Shigri, 1958*, by Joss Lynam, *HJ* Vol. XXI, p. 58.

9. *A Spiti Adventure, 1994*, by Arun Samant, *HJ* Vol. 51, p. 100.



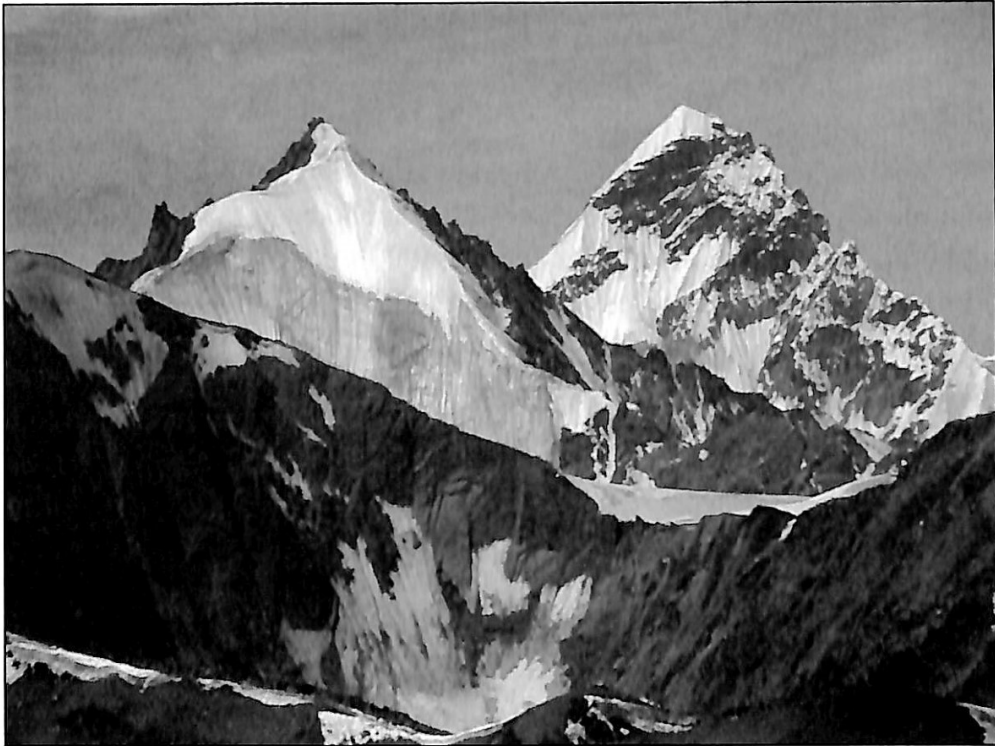
the pass and later in 2010, realised how lucky we were - as the eastern Gyundi, from where we would have crossed, was blocked by steep walls on two sides and it would have been an epic struggle for us to wriggle out of it.

With the Gyundi still at the back of my mind, after 15 years I tried to enter the Gyundi from Spiti in 2010. From the village Hal, the first day was an easy walk till the point where the east and central Gyundi valleys meet. The crossing of the river here was too dangerous and we could not proceed ahead. But we heard that the shepherds enter the Gyundi from the Karcha valley which is to its west. But here too we had to cross the Karcha nala, reputed to be a dangerous one.

In July-August 2011, three of us (Harish Kapadia, Dr. Kamal and Dr. (Mrs.) Nandini Limdi) followed the Karcha valley, always wondering why not many expeditions visit here. At first from the Rohtang pass we drove along the Chandra river, almost till its head at Batal. The river crossing, especially of the Chandra is full of danger and deception. The river looks gentle and its flow appears not too strong in many a season. But it suddenly becomes deep and carries away man or animal trying to go across. It has claimed several lives as people have tried to cross it to approach the Bara Shigri valley, where it spreads out in channels. The bridge is at Batal, about 7 km ahead and by risking a crossing lower down; one could save two days of walking to the Bara Shigri. But alas many have lost their lives here; Mrs. Guha lost her life (see memorial at Batal) and later an army team lost two officers while trying to cross. This is an old story too with early explorers.

One of these bridges – at Kokser on the Chandra river, but now superseded by a wooden bridge – may have accelerated the death of Lord Elgin on his way up to Dharamsala. When crossing it, his coat was caught on the birch twigs; and his progress being thus arrested, he was unable to go over it with that continuous, but not too rapid motion, which is the safest way of dealing with such a passage. To delay on the bridge of this kind, swinging in the wind, is trying to the strongest nerves; and I know, on excellent authority, that the position in which he was thus placed had probably some effect in aggravating the heart disease from which the Governor-General died not many days afterwards.

Andrew Wilson, (*Abode of Snow*, 1885)



Unnamed Peak and Kullu Pumori seen from Thula Peak. (Harish Kapadia)

Except for the first river crossing, the rest of the valley had no difficulties and mules could be used till almost its head.

As we turned the lower Karcha valley, a major peak of the area, Karcha Parvat (6270 m) rose. This peak was first ascended by Trevor Braham and Peter Holmes in 1955 and they gave it this name.<sup>10</sup> Since then this peak has been climbed a few times. Expeditions from Kolkata climbed the peak in 1986 and 1991.<sup>11</sup> The Japanese team (2010) climbed the unnamed peak 6065 m south of Karcha Parvat and while we were there, another Japanese team (2011) climbed Peak 6105 m and named both the peaks as ‘Chemma peaks’ (meaning twins in Spiti language).

In three days we reached the head of the Karcha valley with great views of Karcha Parvat, Fluted Peak and many unnamed peaks around. There were no difficulties till this point except the first river crossing and our mules could reach here easily. The pass to Gyundi was not too difficult except that it required a 12 hour day to cross it as otherwise mules would not find grass to survive. As we were about to do that, a

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10. *Himalayan Odyssey* by Trevor Braham (1974)

11. *HJ* Vol. 44, p. 106 and Vol. 49, p. 229.

freak storm deposited snow on the pass and we would have to wait at least three days to cross which we could ill-afford - Gyundi was still to remain a mystery for me though we know the route now.

Not wasting time we changed valleys and climbed into a valley to the south where the highest peaks of the valley are located; 'Chemma', 6105 and 6065 m and two other peaks above 6000 m. On 6 August 2011 we climbed up steep scree slopes to reach a point 5525 m (18,125 ft) which we named 'Thula' ('great person' after Lynam who was first to explore this area.) From the top we had terrific views and the Limdi couple, who had climbed their first peak in the Himalaya, were moved to tears.

On our return, we were unable to cross the Karcha nala, as all snow bridges which the earlier parties had written about were washed away - another visible effect of global warming. We stayed a night on the left bank of the Karcha nala and next early morning we crossed over to Batal to face our major difficulty - the usual irritating traffic jam on the Rohtang pass (it takes almost 6 hours to cross this small patch) and later, after a torrential downpour, washed away bridges and roads, we spent 15 hours on the drive from Manali to Chandigarh.

Enough excitement for two weeks but there are peaks in the Karcha valley to keep climbers busy for a month or more.

### **Summary :**

Three visits to the Himalaya in 2011; to Hanle (Ladakh), Hangrang pass (Kinnaur) and Karcha-Gyundi valleys (Lahaul).





# THE HIMALAYAN JOURNAL

**Volume**  
**67**  
**2011**

