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Treks to Passes on India – Burma Border

Hoot Pass, Pangsus Pass and Chaukan Pass

Harish Kapadia

The Patkai range, in eastern India, divides India and Burma, with Pangsus pass as a low point on the ridge. On both sides of the range is thick jungle. The range is much smaller in height compared to the Himalayan range, but it is no less challenging in terms of travel. To the north, the range follows an easterly curve to meet the Kumon range joining it from Burma. This meeting of the ranges near the Chaukan pass has as much historical significance as the Pangsus. The Kumon range continues northwards to meet the Hkakabo Razi group of peaks near the Diphu pass. These two ranges divide Burma (in the east) and India (in the west). Apart from these major passes there are several other passes that allow passage across these ranges; namely Siddi, Hukawng, Shwangshan, Hapungan, Khumjawang and many other known only to shikaris like Hoot, Mugaphi, Gaphuka etc.

Frank Kingdon-Ward undertook many exploratory journeys on both sides of these ranges, crossing and re-crossing passes like Diphu several times. Those days borders between India, Burma and China were not strictly enforced and he happily roamed here in search of new mountains, botanical specimen and detailed scientific observations. We owe a lot to him for the knowledge related to these unknown valleys. He was trapped in the Lohit valley when, in 1950, a major earthquake (9.6 on the Richter scale) cut off these areas. For the first time a renowned scientist was present near the epicentre of an earthquake; who survived to record it for science.

Over the last two years I visited and trekked in the areas adjoining the border with Burma, reaching three passes.

Exploring Lapti Valley near Burma in 2011

The first approach to the Burmese border was through the Lapti valley in October-November 2011.

The trail is located in newly formed Anjaw District (on the Lohit river), Arunachal Pradesh. It is near the Rima-Kahao border with China on

the Lohit river. Hawaii is the new District Headquarter. If the sea and local dances grace the well known Hawaii (USA) in the Pacific, here at Hawaii (Arunachal Pradesh), mountain scenery matches the beauty of the sea and the dances of traditional people are no less attractive.

This area contains the plateau opposite Walong, which is called the 'Burma Hump'. During the World War II several planes crashed on this plateau as old aircrafts could not gain necessary height and malfunctioned after a certain altitude. Remains of many planes lie scattered in the upper Lapti valley too, but now most of these remains have been scavenged by search parties and locals¹.

Ours was a beautiful exploratory trek. We descended steeply to the Lati river valley to reach the village Kamlat. After arranging porters we turned north from village Kamlat to its tributary, the Lapti. The trek was strenuous and the route climbed steeply- and as a result we had to descend steeply on the way back, on wet – slippery ground. But the forest and being on a remote trail to Burma was an inspiration. The immense beauty of the forest in autumn colours made camping grounds of Tafam and Kushok almost a paradise. The trail led us to Hoot pass which crosses into Burma and in few days would have lead us to Fort Hertz (Putao) in the Myanmar (Burma). F. Kingdon-Ward has written about the Lohit valley and the book *The Icy Mountains of Burma*, covers these mountains on the border. A few of these peaks, we observed on our way back. We came across two villages - they were almost a generation behind - and what we call 'progress' had not reached them as yet. No trekkers seemed to have come here though we heard some rumours of a party trekking here before. On the way back I fell almost 50 m (150 feet), on loose wet gravel covered by shrubs/bushes. I just could not hold on to the bushes, falling head first, gathered speed and passed over one slab after the other- all were downward sloping luckily. I then came to a halt on a small grassy patch and finally rolled over gently on a crop of huge rocks. It would have been a different ending if I had reached these rocks even at a slightly greater speed! Though I was bleeding profusely through my nose and was covered with many scratches, except for one sharp hit on my right hip I was saved. Dinesh Purandare reached me in a flash with few porters, and I could get up on my feet in about half an hour. I climbed up the steep slope to reach the

1. *HJ* 65, p. 62, 'Over the Hump' by Wing Cdr V. K. Sashindran.

main trail and then with the help of sturdy Mishmi porters walked down to the camp in a painful four hour trek. Medicines reduced the pain and next day I walked down to the roadhead from where a taxi took me to the Hawaii rest house. A day of rest, two days of a rough car journey, a night on a train and a five hour flight followed before I was home!

These areas are wonderful, not visited by trekkers and have some of the finest virgin rain forest, leading to Alpine forests in the upper reaches. The high altitudes lakes are an attraction. It offers the most exhilarating experience and - not everyone has to have a fall.

Journey in 2013

In January 2013 I returned to the area with a different group of friends. We proceeded to the eastern-most point of India and along the India-Burma border. First was a ride on the oldest and eastern-most train route in India from Guwahati to Ledo, now a modern but deserted train station. Trains end here, but used to go up to Lekhapani a few kilometres ahead. Two kilometres ahead of Lekhapani, at 'Burma camp', began the famous 'Ledo Road' or 'Stillwell road'.² This road was built at great cost and labour across the Pangsau pass to Burma. It was named after



Deserted Lekhapani railway station. Most returning soldiers from Burma during the war finished their horrifying journey here and caught train to safety. (Lakshmi R.)

Gen. Stilwell who was instrumental in its construction. The goods to support the war in Burma were loaded on trucks from here and were carried to Kunming, China - then an ally of the British. A lot has been written about this road so it was a nostalgic place to be and recall history.³

2. There is confusion in names. Lekhapani is the name of the last railway station, starting point of the Ledo road and home of army camp from where the Burma war effort was helped. Likabali is an army station, north of Brahmaputra, across from Dibrugarh. Both are in Assam.

3. *The Burma Road*, by Donovan Webster. (Pan Macmillan, Oxford, 2003)



Second World War cemetery at Digboi. (Harish Kapadia)

From Ledo, at first we drove back to Margherita, also with nostalgic mentions in history. Now it is a sleepy little town which has no charm except its catchy name. Ahead was Digboi, where the first oil well in India was discovered. As the story goes, when the well was being dug a British officer riding a horse encouraged the workers by shouting ‘Dig boy, dig’. This was changed to Digboi, the present name. Oil was struck on 19 October 1889 and the well was abandoned in 1932. An oil museum and a well kept war cemetery nearby are worth a look.

We spent a night at Jairampur (named after Jairamdas Daulatram, former benevolent Governor of Assam, which included Arunachal Pradesh



The first oil well in India at Digboi. It functioned from 1890 to 1927. (Harish Kapadia)

then). Nearby was a cemetery recently discovered in the forest, containing many graves of the allied soldiers. It had remained hidden in thick foliage. After another night at Nampong, we drove to the Pangsung pass, on 10 January 2013 to cross into Burma.

Pangsung Pass (1136 m)

During the Second World War, the Japanese advanced into Burma in 1942. They overran the allied forces, forcing them to retreat in a hurry. It was a very disorderly retreat in face of the fast advancing enemy.

To reach the safety of British India, refugees and the retreating army had to cross the Pangsung pass, on the Patkai range, which divides India and Burma. It was a hard and disastrous journey. Soldiers and several civilians had to trudge through deep sticky mud, a curse of this frontier. Many times they sunk till their waists in the soft mud, going on without much food, ravaged by malaria, lashed by the monsoon and a variety of ailments. The rain forest was dense and the rivers were flooded. A large number of refugees came across the Pangsung and though it was a lower pass, it was a steep climb through knee-deep mud. This historic gateway was nick named the 'Hell gate' by soldiers.



Pangsung pass at India-Burma border. After long arduous trek the British soldier escaped from the pursuing Japanese army through this pass. This board was the site of their cry of freedom. (Harish Kapadia).

The Pangsung village was about three km inside Burma.⁴ The road was atrocious and one is not allowed to drive on the Burmese side. Burmese boys were ferrying goods from the Pangsung pass to the village on fast moving motorbikes. We enjoyed Burmese food and saw the small bazaar that had sprung up for this day. Burmese military boys (yes, they were very young) checked our permits and ensured that no camera or mobile phone was carried inside their territory. Now the road is being widened to a four lane highway and is intended to

4. Indians are allowed till Pangsung on 10, 20 and 30 of every month. Burmese are allowed into India till Nampong on every Friday.



The famous 'Lake of No Return' in the Burma plains, seen from Pangsung village in Burma. (Dr Nanak Bhagat).

be the Asian Highway connecting India with southeast Asia. Looking at its state today this is a far away dream.

Lake of No Return (Nawng Yang in Burmese)

It was nostalgic to see the 'Lake of No Return', in the plains of Burma from here. It was a vast lake, the only clearing in thick forest. During monsoon surrounding areas would fill up with water too, making it a giant lake. When they developed engine trouble, the planes flying across the 'Burma Hump' tried to land on these waters, their best chance of survival amidst thick forest all around. Most of them did not return to tell the story.

Other stories also explain the name of 'Lake of No Return'. The second has it that a group of Japanese soldiers returning from battle lost their way and ended up at the lake. There, they were stricken by malaria and died and hence the name. According to a third story, US army soldiers, working on the Ledo road, were sent to examine the lake, got trapped by the undergrowth and perished. A fourth story says this is the 'lake of no return', because retreating British troops in 1942 got lost in quicksand. Adding myth to legend, one author claimed he had encountered the name on a document written by one of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel, which he claimed were still hiding out in the area.⁵

By late afternoon we returned to Nampong and drove a short distance to Miao (via Jagun) to prepare for our venture to another historic pass, the Chaukan pass. Miao is a major administrative centre with government and Namdafa National Park offices. Permits had to be obtained from here. It has rather mixed population as Chakma refugees (Bangladesh refugees) had settled around Miao since 1971.

The Epic of Chaukan Pass

Wild elephants are known to have used Chaukan Pass as an ancient migration route linking populations in Assam and Burma. The giant footprints of the pachyderm are still more likely to be spotted in stream side mud than those of homo-sapiens. This is

5. An Indian newspaper *The Telegraph* reported, in a story on the possible reopening of the Ledo road in 2007, that 'close by [Pangsui] is the Lake of No Return — the local Bermuda Triangle. According to folklore, aircraft that fly over the lake never return.' The lake's reputation is advertised in hopes of making the area more attractive to tourists? Who knows, the 'Indian' Bermuda Triangle might just turn out to be the next tourist-puller of the region!

one of the areas of the world in the twenty-first century, which can claim to be largely unexplored. As one of those who survived the desperate journey of 1942³¹ wrote afterwards:

‘Now we know why this stretch of country is uninhabited for 100 miles. Not only there is no trace of men, but mammal and even bird life is conspicuous by its absence: truly a forgotten world, where solitude reigns supreme.’

Diary of Millar IOR/M/3/1180

Exodus Burma by Felicity Goodall, p. 214

One of the groups fleeing the Japanese army consisted of the British who were trapped at Fort Hertz (now known as Putao) in north Burma. Advancing Japanese troops may have overrun Fort Hertz if they had waited till the monsoon period passed. So in heavy rains they left Putao with a Mishmi guide and porters to cross the Chaukan pass, nearest to their location.

They had to come across the junction of the Patkai and Kumon range through dense forest in heavy rains. More than 230 British people crossed over from here with Sir John Rowland including a three month old child. They had to flee in June, when it was warm but at the height of monsoon, with flooded river, leeches, snakes and malaria mosquitoes. Once across the pass their progress was almost reduced to a crawl, covering just about two / three km per day. There were no villages and the trail almost unknown. Finally they were stopped by Tilung Hka, the first major tributary of Noa Dihing.

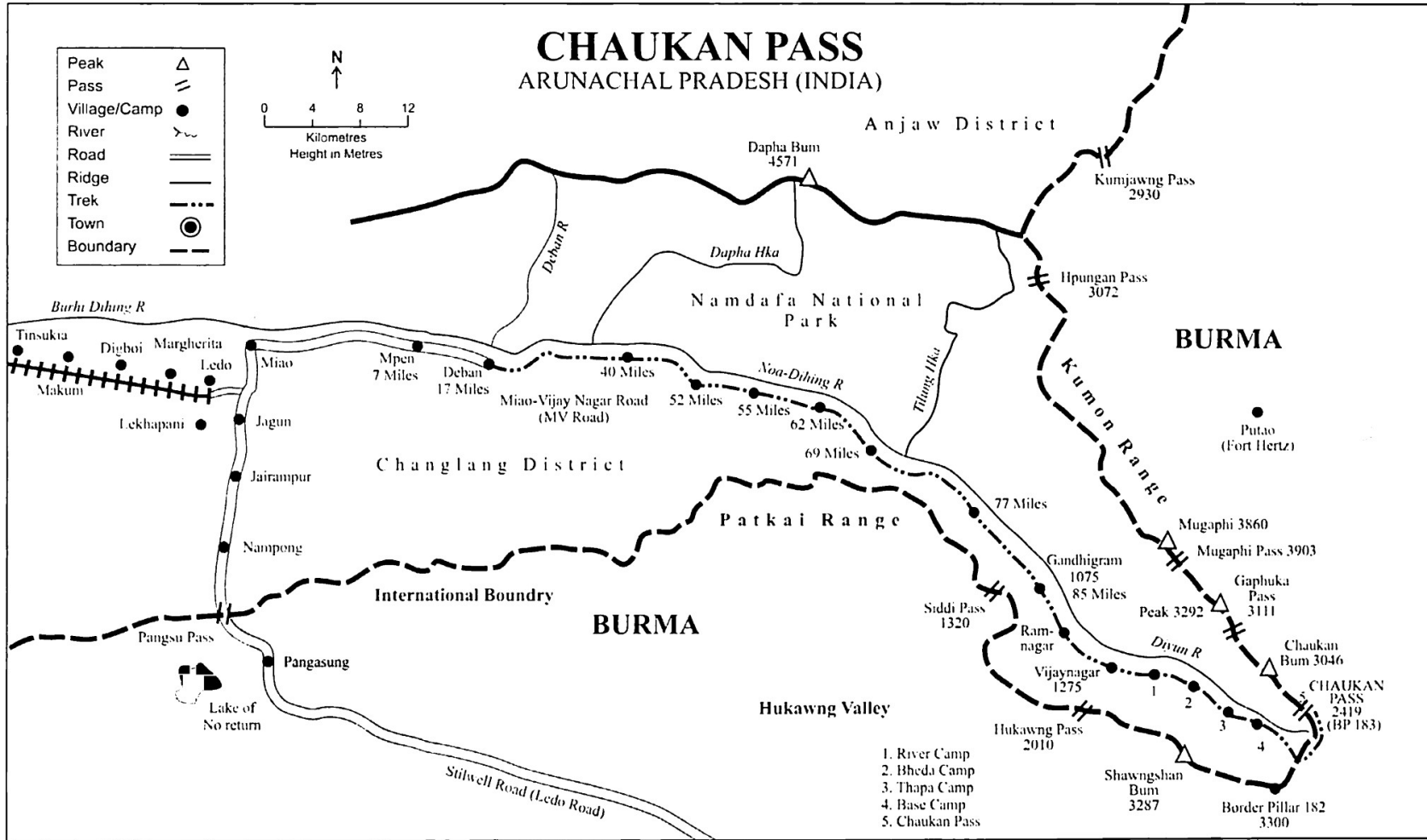
A party of two persons had gone ahead and reached Miao, to alert the authorities about the plight of the trapped party, and a rescue was organised. Food was air dropped to them whenever the weather was clear. A party led by Gyles Mackrell, from the Indian Tea Association of Assam, mounted a major ground rescue with several elephants. He was accompanied by troops from Assam Rifles, all sturdy Gorkhas who excelled in helping the rescue efforts. At one point the refugees were stranded on an island near the Dapha Hka (river). Elephants with the Mackrell party reached the island and rescued all of them. The island was soon washed away. This rescue saved many lives. As they neared Miao, ground support increased with food sent with porters and progress to safety was faster.



Army team to Chaukan Pass, 1961. Route is more difficult in 2013, due to floods and erosion.



The first batch on the Indian Army which visited the area and reached Chaukan pass in 1961. (From Kunal Verma collection)



These efforts by men and animals saved many though about two dozen perished. Finally a haggard party reached the Lekhapani-Ledo railway line and onwards to safety. This was the Epic of Chaukan pass.⁶

In 1961, a year before the Chinese invasion, the Indian army mounted 'Operation Srijitga' to reach Chaukan pass. They too encountered many difficulties but the party led by Maj. Gen. Guraiya finally reached Chaukan pass on 27 November 1961 and planted the Indian flag.⁷ After discussions with the Burmese authorities, Border Pillar No. 183 was erected here in 1971 with the 'Watershed Principle' being followed. All rivers from this horse shoe basin flow west-northwest into the Noa Dihing, which then flows into Assam as the 'Buri Dihing'. It then merges with the Lohit river and finally into the Brahmaputra.

To occupy the area permanently many Nepali families of retired Assam Rifles personnel were settled here with full government support. Large grants and land was given to them. Food was supplied to them through helicopters and AN 32 planes, (even today) and the Miao-Vijaynagar road was built in about 1972 (not fully functional till today). Several native Lisu tribal families, who were originally migrants from Burma, also settled here over decades, much before India-Burma boundary demarcation.

During February to April 2000, a party of scientists from Anne Mane Foundation, Bangalore wanted to research routes of elephant migration between India and Burma. One of their aims was to reach Chaukan pass. Due to difficulties they stopped at least three days before reaching the pass.⁸

Our Epic of Chaukan Pass

We drove to the Deban tourist lodge located in the Namdafa Sanctuary. Facing Namdafa river and on the banks of Noa Dihing it was well situated to observe birds and wild life. Dapha Bum peak (4570 m) is seen towering over the river valley from here.

6. *Forgotten Frontier*, by Geoffrey Tyson. (Spectrum Publications, Guwahati, 1992) and *Flight By Elephant*, by Andrew Martin.(Fourth Estate, London, 2013). See the movie 'The Elephant Man' (rescue of Chaukan pass refugees, Cambridge University), on YouTube.

7. *The Children of the Dawn. Northeast Trilogy*, by Dipti Bhalla and Kunal Verma. (Kaleido India, Gurgaon, 2011).

8. See the film 'The Old Elephant Route' by Anne Mane Foundation.(YouTube)



The Noa Dihing river from air. (Kunal Verma)

The Noa Dihing was a beautiful river, now serene and blue, surrounded by forest. In monsoon it must be a terror with flooding water and crumbling sides. The valley is adjoined on three sides by the Burmese territories and for generations it was ruled by the Ahom kings of Assam. This land was occupied by the Singhpos, who were akin to Kachins of the Hukawng valley of Burma.

In May 1825 Burmese forces advanced through the pass to re-conquer it from Assam. The Singhpos who dealt in slaves, a policy not tolerated by the British, feared that they may be expelled from land they owned in the Brahmaputra valley, so they turned against the British and joined the Burmese forces. The invaders had reached lower Noa Dihing and built defences there. They were met by Captain Neufville with 300 Sepoys and two gunboats at Dapha. A strong stockade position was held by many Burmese soldiers and few cavalry. Capturing these positions the British force proceeded upstream. They met a larger force of Burmese and Singhpos at Bisa, about two miles upstream on a tributary of Noa Dihing. In a brutal fight Burmese were defeated and Singhpos scattered. For next decade the British held all the passes on the Patkai range and cleared the valley from occupation by the Singhpos and Burmese.

Later Daphna Game, one of the four prominent Singhpo chief crossed the Patkai range from Hukawng valley and attacked Bisa. The British reacted

strongly and repelled the rebel after a stiff fight and losses on both sides. A permanent British post was now created at Bisa. Most of the Singhpos returned to Hukawng valley in Burma where slavery was prevalent.

A detailed survey for an India-Burma railway line was undertaken in 1896. A strong force with the surveyors crossed the Patkai range to the Hukawng valley and joined it with a similar survey party in upper Burma. However the survey for a railway line remained on paper only.⁹ The Noa Dihing valley remained part of the British Empire and later became part of India.

On 13 January 2012 we drove on the Miao-Vijaynagar road or ‘MV Road’ for a short distance. We first stayed at 40th mile; all stops are named as such. We met our Lisu porters here and now on we had to walk about 117 km to Vijaynagar. The first taste of this road was enough to send the weak-hearted back home. It was a hell of a road, with deep sticky mud everywhere. Powerful four wheel drive trucks had to be pushed by bulldozers to proceed. While walking if you get



Walking on muddy Miao-Vijaynagar road. (Harish Kapadia)

off the road you can slip in a culvert and if you step on the other side it was in knee-deep mud. Shoes were stuck in, walking poles fell apart and clothes were as dirty as they could ever be.

On the second day we went down to the river and crossed the ‘Burma nala’ on a swinging bridge. The route ahead, along the river, was a delight to walk for few km, passing the Lisu village of Ngawazah where we tasted the local fruit Thazi (Persimmon

9. *History of Upper Assam, Upper Burmah and North-eastern Frontier*, by L.W. Shakspear. (Spectrum publications, Guwahati, 2004).



The 'Burma Bridge' across the 'Burma nala' now and in past. (Lakshmi R.)

or Sharon). Crossing the Noa Dihing on a couple of scary stilt bridges, called dahlons, we reached the village Nibodi ('52 miles'), where we camped on an open ground. Next day we had to return to the muddy MV road. For the next three days we were on the road, camping on clearings (at approximately 55 miles, 62 miles and 69 miles) by the side of the road with a water source nearby. Small thatched huts of locals along the road sold tea, biscuits and some sundry stuff. Large fish were seen hanging in many of these shops available for sale. After 62 miles, a futile attempt to hitch a lift on a truck ended in disaster when the truck itself got stuck and even the bulldozer could not move it. On the fifth day of the trek, we descended from the road to a beautiful campsite right on the river bed close to the village Sichodi through which we walked past the next day. It is a wonder how these remote villages survived with meagre supplies and in heavy rains with such a muddy road.¹⁰

From Sichodi, climbing steeply through the jungle, we were back on the road and back to mud. The valley opened up as we neared Gandhigram, named after a small statute of Mahatma Gandhi installed here. It seems decades ago two or three statues of various leaders arrived for installation. No one could recognise the statue of Gandhi from the lot.

10. These villages are part of Namdafa National Park. This is their traditional home and any suggestion to shift from the area is strongly rejected by them.



The small statue of Mahatma Gandhi at village Shidi. This village is now named as Gandhigram. (Harish Kapadia)

Finally another statue was flown in with words 'Gandhiji' written on the back, which can still be seen. The original name of the village 'Shibudi or Shidi', was changed to Gandhigram. We spent a day at Gandhigram going around the well laid out village and eating some delicious locally grown pineapple and sugarcane.

It was a peaceful village and with friendly Lisu villagers. Ahead there were the villages of 'settlers'- Nepalis retired from the Assam Rifles, with names like Ramnagar. They looked prosperous, a pleasant surprise, as the only contact with civilisation was through irregular helicopter flights. Above the main road seven km to the northeast is Pritnagar, a small village known for its beauty with a small lake.

The last 18 km road travel to Vijaynagar was relatively pleasant. We spent a night at Vijaynagar, at the Assam Rifles post near the airstrip. The original name of this village was Dawodi but the name was



Crossing traditional 'Dahlon Bridge' across the Noa Dihing river. (R. Wani)



Panorama of Vijaynagar. (Dr. Nanak Bhagat)

changed in honour of Maj. Gen. Guraiya's son Vijay. On northeast was the Kumon range and southwest the Patkai range, and almost where both these ranges meet was the Shawngshan pass (and peak) (3287 m). This pass southeast from Vijaynagar, led to the Hukawng valley of Burma while the Chaukan pass led to Putao in the northeast. It was said that relics of a Buddhist stupa and images had been discovered in the vicinity of Vijaynagar. No one had any knowledge of it now. The area was earlier known as Jahu-Natu.¹¹

Final Approach to Chaukan Pass

That night at Vijaynagar we sorted our gear and replenished some of our essential rations. One young guide from Assam Rifles was hired. He knew the route but with youthful energy he always went ahead at 'army speed' leaving us looking for him!

Jungle and a Woman

.....jungles vary so considerably, that it is difficult to give an apt general description. Perhaps the best way is to compare the jungle with a beautiful woman, the pin-up dream girl in full technicolour, cool, alluring, attractive to look at, but, once approached and negotiated with, full of greatest possibilities of danger and death to the unwary. This simile is particularly apt because, like the figure of the pin-up girl, the jungle is never flat.

Lieutenant Colonel O.G.W. White DSO

11. *Gazetteer of India, Arunachal Pradesh, Tirap District*. Ed. S. Dutta Choudhury, Govt. of Arunachal Pradesh, 1980.

True to the above description, the route ahead was beautiful, exploratory and dangerous. This was the real stuff- the trek on a thin trail along the Diyun river (as the Noa Dihing river is known here). Nothing had changed in last seven decades in terms of trail and difficulties en route. Climbing steep ridges, descending wooden ladders, crossing single log bridges required a good balance and a strong heart. We constructed about 16 small bridges to cross the river to avoid steep climbs on either side. Our Lisu porters, especially Gisa as the chief engineer, were marvellous at this local engineering. It was tiring and tense all along as we had to climb and descend regularly. At many places the trail had to be cut, log bridges installed at sides to cross along the bank and cross many fallen tree trunks. We stayed at river camps, Bheda, Thapa and finally at the base camp, all names given by the Assam Rifles patrols, the only ones to visit the pass annually. Being January it was cold at night but with so much wood around and supported by strong, helpful and energetic Lisu porters nothing can stop you. The forest was both a joy and fear. Not many animals or birds were seen or heard – possibly the Lisus had eaten them all for generations! However we could hear calls by Gibbon monkeys, saw few hornbills and there was much fish in the river. The advantage of trekking in winter was evident: no leeches, no snakes, no dim dim flies and low water level. Finally we were at the foot of the pass, which the army had called ‘base camp’. From here the river continued southeast while our trail climbed steeply along the adjoining ridge. Once at height the trail followed the ridge to descend

across two false passes to the pass.



Border pillars at Chaukan pass. (Harish Kapadia)

On 27 January 2013 we left the base camp early and climbed almost 1000 m to the top of a ridge. Then we descended along a forested ridge for more than 500 m and traversed through Burma in the east. Finally after a 10 hour day we further descended to the historic Chaukan pass (2419 m)

and camped near the Border Pillar no. 183 which marks the border between India and Burma, some tents in India and some in Burma, but just a few feet apart from each other!

After almost 70 years since the crossing by British refugees and 52 years after 'Operation Srijitga', when a patrol of Indian army reached the pass, we were the next (civil) party reaching the pass. When we started little did we know that the difficulties had multiplied manifold due to floods, landslides and erosion over these decades.

It is said that the pass was a route that wild elephants used to cross. The pass, where it is marked today, appeared too steep on either side for such a passage. Little before the Border Pillar a wider and gentler crossing point was seen. This appeared to be feasible for such a crossing. Moreover the Diyun river originated near this gentler pass. But only an expert in elephant migration can make accurate judgement. On 28 January we reversed the trail from the Chaukan pass, climbed up 500 m and descended 1000 m. In all we had an ascent and descent of almost 3100 m over two days to fulfil our dreams.

Systematically and with much concentration we carefully covered the return trail over our newly made bridges, muddy forest trails and slippery logs. Finally we were at Vijaynagar. After a two-day wait we were able to catch the helicopter sortie which supplies material here. It was a 60 minute flight to Mohanbari /Dibrugarh, which otherwise on foot, would have taken us at least a week to cover. We flew over many historical places like Hoot pass (to north), Chaukan pass (to southeast), Putao (in far northeast), and Pangsus pass (to south). As the helicopter landed at the modern airport, we stepped out of history into the present.

Summary

Treks to passes on the India-Burma border. Hoot pass (3570 m), Pangsus pass (1136 m) and Chaukan pass (2419 m).

Members: 2011: Dinesh, Nandini and Uttara Purandare, Atul Rawal and Harish Kapadia.

Period: 25 October to 06 November 2011

Members: 2013: Rajendra Wani, Lakshmi R., Dr. Nanak Bhagat and Harish Kapadia.

Period: 07 January to 02 February 2013