

Hidden Land of PEMAKO

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The journey of the river Tsangpo as it weaves its way through the Tibetan plateau is as fascinating as the story of its exploration. Originating near Mt. Kailash, it flows close to Takpa Siri (Crystal Mountain) and enters India near the Kundu Potrang (gathering place of gods). The uniqueness of Tsangpo lies in the fact that it drops more than 8000 feet over a mere 150 mile stretch carving a deep gorge called 'Great Bend' along its way. The average depth of this gorge is almost thrice the depth of the Grand Canyon, USA and numerous enthralling waterfalls complete this phenomenon. Still at a height of 1900 feet, it enters the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh forming a spectacular S-Bend, which was the purview of my exploration in 2004.

A few kilometres into India, Tsangpo is joined by river Yang Sang Chu. This river is accessible only over a long wire bridge from Tuting and is surrounded by a quiet and serene valley, grasslands in the lower reaches and thick forests in the upper half. A cursory glance and one is unable to fathom how different this is from other valleys and why Tibetans have accorded it the special status of a sacred region, namely, Pemako.

Crossing this long bridge, we arrived at the Jiddu village, on the outskirts of which is 'Jachong', a highly revered site. In the centre, under a canopy of trees stands a huge boulder resembling 'Garud', a celestial bird, surrounded by prayer flags and venerated with vermilion clearly demarcating it from the others rocks. It is believed that this bird is the harbinger of the Age of Truth and will bring to life all animals whose foot imprints are found on the nearby rock 'Semachan Bhilang'. The tradition of worshipping rocks is prevalent among both Buddhists and Hindus, and these rocks represent various deities depending on their shape.

True to its name, Pemako, which essentially is a valley of refuge. Tibet, with its forbidden gorges and inaccessible ravines has for centuries served as the ideal sanctuary against invasions and wars that shook Tibet time and again. Rimpoche Padmasambhava (8th Century) devised many hidden lands or 'beyuls' that Tibetans could seek shelter in during times of strife. These lands were essentially 'heaven on earth', beyond incomparable beauty and filled with inner peace and power. The Rimpoche safeguarded directions to these 'beyuls' in hidden scrolls which only the devout would discover and the hardships along the path would strengthen one's faith. 'Pemako' is spread across southern Tibet and the Yang Sang Chu valley across the Line of Control in India.

Devekota

We started walking along the ancient pilgrim trail lined with prayer flags, passing Jiddu and Mankota villages. Close to the last village, the river traverses around a hill where the Devekota monastery is located. A lone lama greeted us and beckoned to us to stay in the monastery. It was a grand experience, and, unperturbed by our presence, he went about performing his rituals.

Coincidentally and completely unaware, we had arrived on a full moon night. Circumambulating the monastery on such a night is regarded as a blessing equivalent to 100 koras (circumambulations) of the Potala at Lhasa. 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'. We were captivated by the great view of surrounding forest as Yang Sang snaked around. By evening, a few villagers had arrived and they carried a round heavy stone from the monastery on their shoulders; they believe that, walking thus seven times around the temple would purify them. I observed these with the curiosity of a reluctant pilgrim, but I have learnt never to doubt the simple faith of these people and their strange rituals.

Yang Sang Pemako

The famous explorers, Lt. F. M. Bailey and Capt. H.T. Morshead, were the first westerners to enter the Tibetan Pemako in 1913. While in the Dibang valley, they encountered a group of Tibetan refugees searching for the hidden land. Similarly, in 1959, when Tibet was subjugated by the Chinese Red Army forcing the Dalai Lama to flee, thousands of impoverished Tibetans reinitiated the search for Pemako. Even to this day, the treacherous gorge and the landscape, in addition to hostile tribes and border guards, continue to act as a major deterrent towards settling in Pemako.

With Tibet under permanent Chinese control, the search for Pemako turned out to be essential. A Rimpoche's (senior lama) account claimed that he had entered, through a waterfall, a valley filled with 'songs of dakinis' (fairies). This was widely interpreted as the 'innermost secret place' or Yang-gsang-gnas. This hidden dimension was never traced and his followers settled at Tuting near the Yang Sang Chu valley.

Upper Pemako

The pilgrim trail climbed steeply to Trashigong, a Tibetan village connected to Dhanakosha, located on a high ridge brimming with several lakes and overlooking the S Bend. Four years earlier, I had reached the S Bend where Tsangpo enters India as the Siang. Early explorations were unable to permeate this treacherous region and later, the Indo-China hostilities ensured stoppage of even military approaches. As civilians, we acquired the requisite permissions to arrive close to the boundary where one can view the Shugden monastery in Tibet and the Dhanakosha in India.

The concept of Pemako is akin to paradise on earth or Shangri-la (Tibetan for 'sun and moon in the heart'), which was popularized by the British writer James Hilton in his 1933 book *Lost Horizon*, and also made into a successful movie

Pema Siri

We proceeded towards the easternmost hill in the valley, called Pema Siri, a prayer station on the kora or pilgrimage. In spite of an overgrown trail, it is believed that even an illiterate devotee can find his way using a 'prayer map'. Some Tibetan prayers, describe a physical reality with ways to navigate to reach them. Modern cartography includes social maps, mathematical maps and also electronic maps with complex computational systems to navigate. But ancient cultures had systems in the form of prayers and scriptures to facilitate the same.

Mundama

The Pema Siri kora can neither be categorized as spectacular nor challenging, a clear implication that one has to look inwards and concentrate on reaching the depths of one's innermost self. But, on the second morning, we witnessed the rare phenomenon of the *Mundama* (Monpa dialect) also known as the famed 'Brocken Spectre'.

Traversing a ridge north to south, the early morning sun casts a shadow towards the west. Projection of one's shadow on the damp mist clouds. many a times, creates a colourful rainbow around it.. This is considered to be the projection of one's soul in space . And if a wind moves the clouds towards you, it simulates the merging of the shadow and self, like merging of the body and soul.

The search for a religiously significant region like Pemako is rather a spiritual endeavour than just an area survey. Its mystical attributes coupled with powerful natural phenomena like *Mundama*, is bound to invoke supernatural feelings.

A Tibetan yogi residing near Singa had completed a seven-day meditation in an enclosed room and agreed to meet us. A middle-aged man, he was physically very strong, and wore his hair long. There was something in his eyes and demeanour that was impressive. We interacted with him through his wife, as he spoke only Tibetan. During his visit to Pemako he had stayed 13 days each at Pema Siri, Riwutala and Dhanakosha. He narrated his travels in Tibet and the entire stretch of Pemako.

As I was about to leave, he gesticulated to me and said; 'You have travelled wide and for many years. What preparations you are now making, to meet your creator in a few decades?'

I was speechless and confused.

The yogi slowly spoke; 'May be this was the reason why you were called to visit Pemako'.