

# 5

## The Plateau

### *Mountains of Sikkim-China Border*

---

Harish Kapadia

This was my fifth visit to the mountains of Sikkim. The first was as a young student, where I was part of the training course at the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute in 1964. The mountains of west Sikkim like Kabru, Rathong, Pandim and host of others were attractive to my young eyes. I returned in 1976. No sooner Sikkim became a state of India, Zerkis Boga and I obtained permits and roamed the valleys for more than a month in northwest Sikkim, covering Zemu glacier, Lhonak valley, Muguthang, Lugnak la, Sebu la and returned via the Lachung valley.<sup>1</sup> I returned a few times to Darjeeling and Sikkim valleys visiting the Singalila ridge, lakes of lower Sikkim and surroundings of Gangtok and Kalimpong. In Sikkim the approach to different valleys is so varied that it gives a feeling of trekking in different Himalayan zones.

In no other country on earth can one find such a variety of micro-climates within such a short distance as Sikkim, declared the eminent English botanist and explorer Joseph Hooker in his *Himalayan Journals* (1854), which documented his work collecting and classifying thousands of plants in the Himalaya in the mid-19th century.

*In the shadow of the Himalayas*, by John Claude White, 1883-1908. (Reprint, Mapin Publishing, Ahmedabad, 2005, p. 50)

But one prized area had escaped me - the northern-most valley of Sikkim near the China (Tibet) border. Known as 'the Plateau', this area contains some of the highest (after the Kangchenjunga group) and most beautiful peaks. This area was visited by several early explorers but after the 1962 India-China war it was highly restricted, especially as in later decades Chinese tried to assert themselves in these valleys. To its east lies the Chumbi valley which drains the Amo chu. It was through here that much trade with Tibet was carried out. The Younghusband

---

1. *High Himalayan Unknown Valleys*, by Harish Kapadia, p. 156. (Indus Books, New Delhi, 2001). Also the *Himalayan Journal*, Vol. 35, p.181.

Mission to Tibet passed through this valley in 1903-1904. The early Everest expeditions either passed through the Chumbi or across the high passes of Naku la or Karpo la on the west of the Plateau. These early climbers, with spirit and stamina, climbed few of the high peaks on their way back even after months spent on Everest.

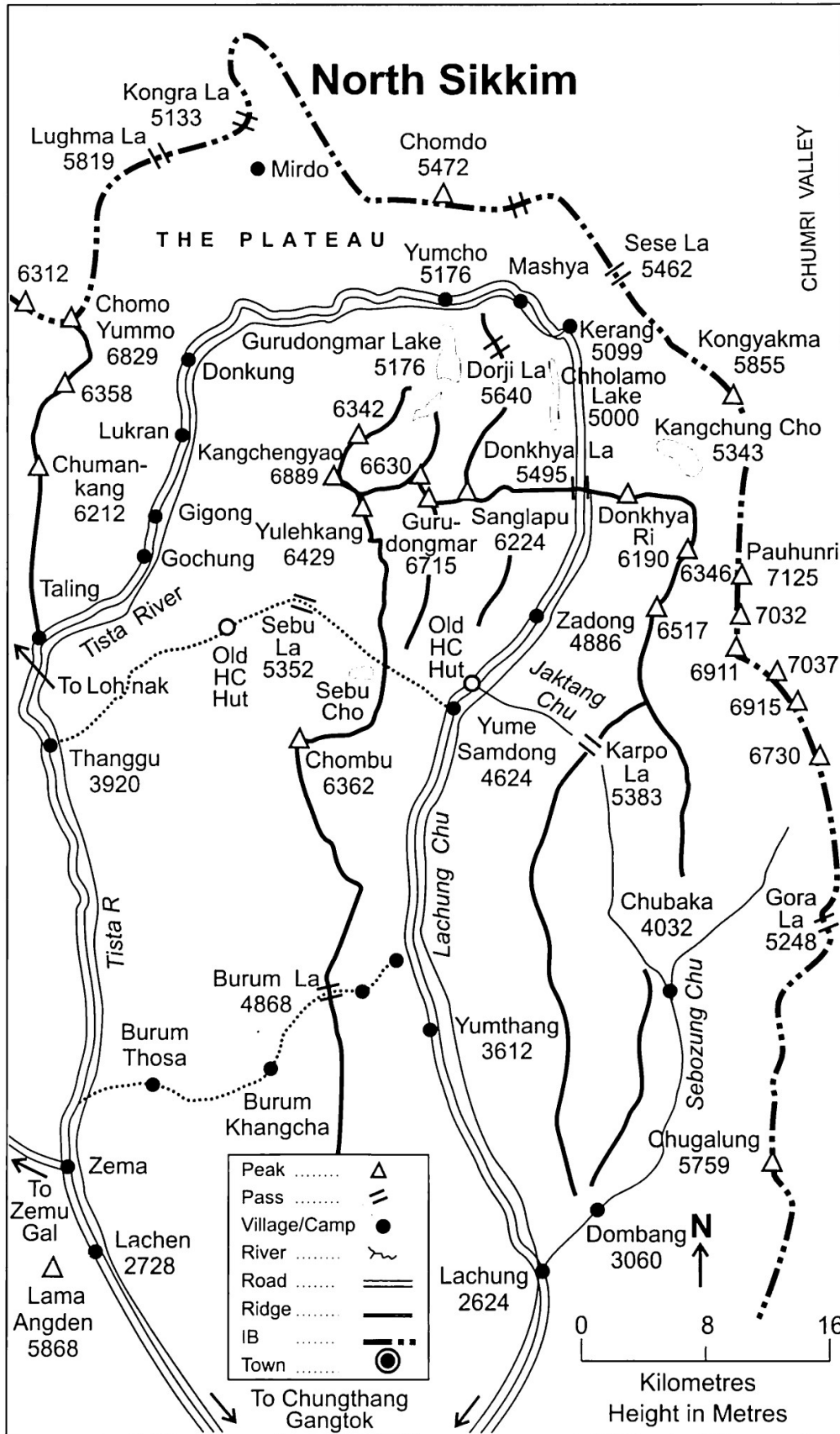
It was a few political officers, posted to the Durbar of the Chogyal in Sikkim by the British, who travelled to remote parts and recorded their journeys. Claude White at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, was a well travelled man. F. M. Bailey and F. Williamson explored the area between the two world wars. Experienced botanical explorers and naturalists F. Kingdon-Ward, F. Ludlow and George Sherriff added much to the knowledge of northern Sikkim. Amongst the climbers Dr A. M. Kellas stands out. He made six expeditions to Sikkim between 1907 and 1920 and made many first ascents. He was especially active on the Plateau, and in 1910 alone he climbed 10 peaks above 6000 m, all first ascents. He had special attraction to the highest peak on the Plateau, Pauhunri (7125 m).

In August and October, 1909, Dr Kellas attempted Pauhunri in two separate attempts, reaching within 100 m of the summit. Not to be defeated, he returned in May-June 1910 and Pauhunri yielded to his efforts and was climbed in a five day struggle from 13 to 17 June. All these efforts were on the northeast face, approached from the Chumbi. His route was repeated by C.W.F. Noyce (24 September 1945) and French climber R. Walter (24 September 1949). After three decades an Indian army team (Col. V.Y. Bhave) made an ascent from the Plateau and northwest face (20 September 1983) and this was repeated by a team of para military forces (Sonam Wangyal) on 1 November 1989.

Three of us, Atul Rawal, Vijay Kothari and I arrived in May 2012 to trek in the north Sikkim area and the Plateau. We were all above 65 years of age and were supported by three of our dependable Kumauni porters. At first we had to acclimatise to the altitude to reach the Plateau, as the average height is almost 5700 m. However, with such strong winds, it is not possible to stay long enough to acclimatise. Hence we entered the Lachung valley first.

### **Lachung, Dombang and Borum la**

Half a day of travel on a rough road from Gangtok brought us to Lachung which was at grips with tourists, or what they call 'Package



travellers'. A group is offered a 'package' to start from Kolkata, travel overnight by train to Siliguri and drive to Gangtok. The following day is a long drive to Lachung. On the third day this horde drives up to what is known as 'Zero Point' (at foot of Donkhya la), rambles for half an hour on snow, returns to Lachung, and remarkably, ahead to Gangtok same evening. On the fourth day they drive to the railway station and return by night train to Kolkata. In between they see a monastery or two and do some shopping! We were amazed at their stamina, lack of time and lack of curiosity to see anything more.

Lachung was a small village, now with a few hotels and many guest houses. It was well spread out and with strong army presence as several routes from here lead to the border between Chumbi valley and China. There was no trace or memory of the Scottish missionary Miss Doig, who had spent decades here and was well known to the early expeditions.

After about five kilometres a road bifurcates east to the Dombang valley. It is a long valley, almost parallel to the main Lachung valley. On one side are the steep slopes to the border with Gora la (5248 m), once an easy pass to the east. The ridge between the Dombang and Lachung valley, 'the Dombang ridge', contained several peaks, not higher than 5800 m but attractive. The Dombang valley was thoroughly explored by Trevor Braham in 1949 with M. Hruska, a Czech climber. They selected to go in November, facing the cold but hopefully enjoying clear weather, a rarity in Sikkim. With them was the famous Sherpa Ang Tharkay. 'Ang Tharkay's reputation was founded, I think, not on his natural qualities as a mountaineer, but also on his ability as a manager. The confidence and trust which he inspired gave one the comforting assurance that if a solution to any problem existed he would find it.'<sup>2</sup> After reaching the foot of Gora la, they followed a smaller tract to the northwest over the Karpo la (5383 m). They followed the Khangkyong glacier and found a way to the Plateau via Donkhya la. 'The Plateau was almost two miles deep, it was surrounded by a row of five peaks, two over 23,000 feet and the remainder over 22,000 feet.....' .<sup>3</sup> This was a fine exploration of an alternate approach to the Plateau. We were to see these peaks and the 5700 m pass reached by him from the north soon.

---

2. *Himalayan Odyssey*, by T H Braham, p. 54-55. (George, Allen and Unwin, London, 1974)

3. Braham, *ibid.* p. 56



Our association with the journey of Trevor Braham continued. We spent two delightful days at the forest rest house at Yumthang, after passing the rhododendron sanctuary. This vast open ground is surrounded by sharp rocky mountains to the west and the Dombang range to the east. If developed, this ground can challenge any climbing centre in the world.

The trek to Borum la (4883 m) starts about three kilometres ahead of Yumthang. A board had been put up at the junction with Lako chu, encouraging tourists to walk, '1.5 km to Hot Springs'. We went up a well made path which soon disappeared and, for at least 15 km where the valley ended, there were no hot springs. After a camp the trail entered a narrow valley and led to the small lake near Borum la, fed by the Borum glacier. In 1949, Braham could not cross the lake and we were confronted with the same situation.<sup>4</sup> We were well advised by the army not to cross Borum la as the trail on the west, towards the Lachen valley, was destroyed by the earthquake in 2011. The earthquake was about 10 km below the surface and the areas, even ancient monasteries, near the epicentre were left relatively untouched. But it was far away areas like Lachung-Lachen ridge that bore the full force. Anyway reaching the pass was all that we desired and an acclimatised party now returned to Lachung and thence by road to Lachen for the second part of our trek.

### **The Plateau**

(The Giagong Valley) is a desolate, windswept spot lying in the centre of a gorge between Chomoioimo (*Chomo Yummo*) 23,000 feet on the west, and Kangchenjhu, 24,000 feet, on the east, and is a veritable funnel up which the wind is always howling. I managed, however, to find a fairly sheltered spot for my camp and stayed a few days. One day I climbed a hill to the west called Tunlo, and from the top I had a magnificent view to the north Sikkim up to the rounded hills forming the watershed and the true boundary. Looked at from this elevation, the scene is a most desolate one truly typical of, and only to be found in, Tibet: with the exception of the valley immediately below me, nothing was under 18,000 feet, without shrub,

---

4. Braham, *ibid.* p. 60

much less a tree, to be seen, and the wonder was how the large flocks of sheep scattered about, numbering perhaps 10,000 or 12,000, found enough grazing to keep them alive.

*In the Shadow of the Himalayas*, by John Claude White, 1883-1908. (Reprint, Mapin Publishing, Ahmedabad, 2005, p. 63)

We were heading to the Giagong valley, described by White. In fact we were to make a sort of base camp at Giagong to visit the Plateau twice. But first we spent two days at Lachen, which I had visited in 1976. It had changed completely and all my enquiries based on old memories bore no fruit. The old monastery, now fully renovated, stood next to a modern hotel.

There was no sign of the family of the famous guide Kondup lama who had accompanied me. He was as legendary as Tenzing Norgay Sherpa, undertaking several journeys to Everest via Tibet with him. No one remembered the Scottish Mission at Lachen. The old forest bungalow where I had spent wonderful days was surrounded by hutments and was ugly, and now turned into a non-functional radio broadcasting station. Here I had seen the log book that most early Everest team members had signed, and some signatures were missing on return entry, of those who had



Lama Angden peaks (5868 m) above Lachen. (Harish Kapadia)





Kangchenjau (6889 m) from the Plateau. (Harish Kapadia)

perished on the mountains. There was no sign of this log book at any forest establishments till Gangtok. The system of 'Phipun' (village headman) was prevalent but now it was an elected post within the village.

Mountain scenery was to change rapidly over the next two days. Driving to Thango we had first views of twin Lama Angden peaks, 5868 m, first climbed by A.J.M. Smyth and Wing Commander Ford in September 1942. Soon the southern view of the peaks on the Plateau emerged, a huge block of snow clad peaks of Gurudongmar and Kangchenjau. Both these peaks have a long history.

On his return from Everest in 1936 Eric Shipton and E.G.H. Kempson separated from the main party to enter the Plateau from Kongra la (5133 m). On 1 July, in a long day push, two of them made the first ascent of Gurudongmar (6715 m), by reaching a col from the shores of the lake to climb the steep west ridge. The second ascent was made only in 1991 when a para-military force team (G.T. Bhutia) climbed it on 3 October, along with nearby Sanglaphu (6224 m). Kangchenjau (6889 m) was Dr Kellas' territory. In August 1912 he reached a col from Sebu la and reached the upper rocks. He turned to the north ridge from here to reach the summit plateau and the top. The other creditable attempt was made by



Chummankang (6212 m) from north. (Harish Kapadia)

Trevor Braham in 1949. The mountain also killed four Indian climbers in an avalanche in 2005. Dr P.M. Das a well known mountaineer died on these slopes.<sup>5</sup>

We spent the first night at the Giagong camp of the Indian army. In fact winds were so strong that it would be a major effort to set up our small mountain tents. Next morning we walked towards Tunlo, a small hill in the west, which was mentioned by White. Some yak herders were camped there and the view of the vast plateau was rewarding. In the distance we could see remains of a *sangar* (rock wall) built by Tibetans to protect themselves against any invaders. We passed this wall next day.<sup>6</sup>

---

5. While attempting the summit, the party was hurled down in an avalanche and got entangled in the ropes they were tied to. In all five climbers died on the spot and two survived with serious injuries. Those who died were Dr Paras Moni Das, Inder Kumar, Ms. Nari Dhami (these two had summited Everest recently), Dawa Sherpa and Dawa Wangchuk, instructors from mountaineering school at Gangtok. Dr P. M. Das was a high ranking police officer and a well-known climber. Obituary of Dr P. M. Das: the *Himalayan Journal*, Vol. 62, p. 270. Also see details in the *Himalayan Club Newsletter*, No. 59 (2006), p.7.

6. 'About a mile north of this camping ground (Giagong) are the remains of the wall built by the Tibetans as an obstruction to the British Mission to Tibet in 1903-04.' *Tours in Sikkim* by Percy Brown, p.128 (W. Newman and co., Ltd., Calcutta, 1944).



Kangchenjau rose fearfully in the east with huge blocks of ice hanging on its face. On the west was Chomo Yummo (6829 m). Both these and their surrounding peaks were to be seen all along till we turned east on the Plateau. Chomo Yummo straddles broadly on the ridge between the Giagong valley and the Tibet border. The attempt by T. H. Tilly with Ang Tharkay in 1945 from Donkung, and the northeast approach, failed. Then came Dr. Kellas! In 1910 he climbed the northwest ridge to make the first ascent. In 1986, this peak was to suffer an assault by 39 summitters from an army team (Maj. Gen. P.L. Kukrety). They fixed ropes till the top and all climbed up - a far cry from the ascents by Dr. Kellas.

To our west was Chummankang (6212 m) earlier known as Laschi. Leaving luggage with the legendary Karma Paul, Bill Tilman and his Sherpas climbed this rather gentle peak. It was rainy season so route finding was complicated and they could hardly see any view. But Tilman turned that to virtue and wrote: 'The great disadvantage of the monsoon period of seeing neither where one is going nor the surrounding scenery is compensated for in small degree by the surprises and shocks occasionally administered by a momentary lifting of the clouds, and by the fun of guessing where one is. A journey in this season can also be recommended to those who enjoy discomfort'.<sup>7</sup> We were soon heading for the Plateau. Little ahead at Donkung a bifurcation led to Mirdo, which is known as the 'Finger area' due to the border jutting out like a finger on the Tibetan plateau. This was the route of early expeditions to Tibet, going across Kongra la (5133 m). But then this area was declared 'sensitive' due to the Chinese designs. We were fortunate to be permitted to spend some wonderful time on the Plateau which is strictly regulated after the India-China War of 1962.

The Plateau was vast and wild, more than anything we had imagined. As we passed Yumcho plains (with a small lake), winds, which explorers had called 'a veritable curse', were starting to build up. Travellers were glad to lie down in some hollow or crouch behind stones so as to be out of wind even for a few minutes! The Gurudongmar lake (5176 m) was sublime with deep blue water and white peaks of Gurudongmar and Kangchenjau formed the backdrop. There were tourists visiting fleetingly and praying at the temple built by the army, this was the grand finale of their 'package'! Our next aim was the high Dorji la (5640 m). Vast number of peaks opened to view from here and the

---

7. 'Laschi and the Zemu Gap' by H.W.Tilman. the *Himalayan Journal*, Vol. XI, p. 148.



Unnamed 7000 m peak seen from the Plateau. (Harish Kapadia)

scene was best described by White. ‘There is something exhilarating in these high altitudes, the tremendous expanse of snow around gives a feeling of freedom not experienced at lower elevations, while there is always a fascination in arriving at a summit of a mountain, (*or a pass*) particularly when the unknown is on the other side.’ (*Italics mine*)<sup>8</sup>

As we turned south, looking towards Kerang, the mountain scene that we had come looking for opened in front of us.

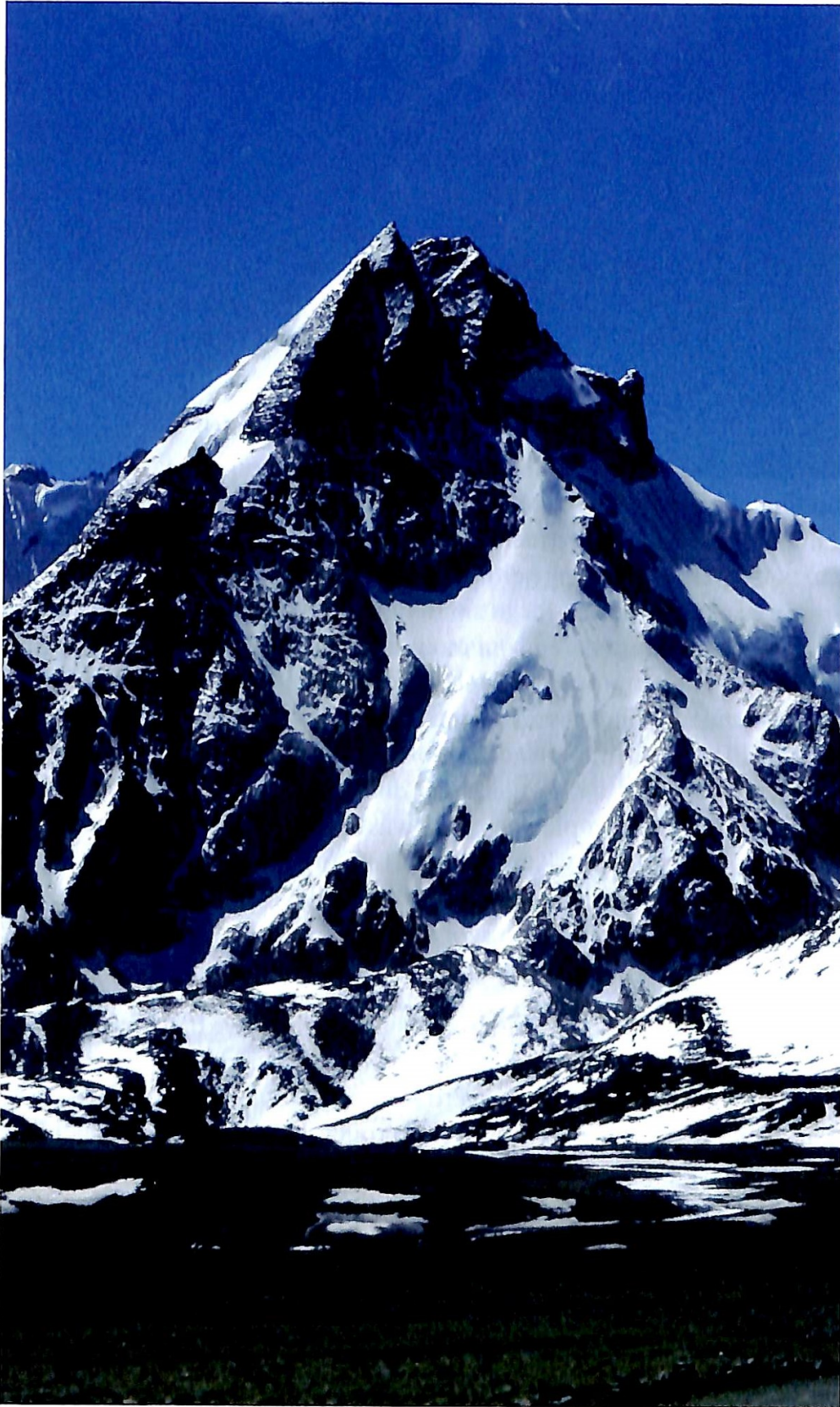
It is one of the most remarkable landscapes in the world, and alone worth the journey to see it... Cho Lhamo is in front, beneath the feet of the spectator, beyond is a desert with rounded hills. Further away, range after range of mountains, some of them covered with snow, extend to a distance the eye cannot appreciate. The total change of colour and form from the valleys of Sikkim, the utter barrenness, the intense clearness of the atmosphere, produce such an effect as if one were grazing upon another world in which the order of this is no longer preserved, where a tropical desert is seen amongst snow-capped peaks, beneath the unnaturally clear atmosphere of the arctic regions.

(Blanford, *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, 1871, p. 407)

---

8. *In the Shadow of the Himalayas*, by John Claude White, 1883-1908. (Reprint, Mapin Publishing, Ahmedabad, 2005, p.69- 70)





Dongkhya Ri 6190 m. (Harish Kapadia)





Pauhunri (7125 m), highest peak on the Plateau. (Harish Kapadia)



Unnamed 7000 m peak seen from the Plateau. (Harish Kapadia)

scene was best described by White. ‘There is something exhilarating in these high altitudes, the tremendous expanse of snow around gives a feeling of freedom not experienced at lower elevations, while there is always a fascination in arriving at a summit of a mountain, (*or a pass*) particularly when the unknown is on the other side.’ (*Italics mine*)<sup>8</sup>

As we turned south, looking towards Kerang, the mountain scene that we had come looking for opened in front of us.

It is one of the most remarkable landscapes in the world, and alone worth the journey to see it... Cho Lhamo is in front, beneath the feet of the spectator, beyond is a desert with rounded hills. Further away, range after range of mountains, some of them covered with snow, extend to a distance the eye cannot appreciate. The total change of colour and form from the valleys of Sikkim, the utter barrenness, the intense clearness of the atmosphere, produce such an effect as if one were grazing upon another world in which the order of this is no longer preserved, where a tropical desert is seen amongst snow-capped peaks, beneath the unnaturally clear atmosphere of the arctic regions.

(Blanford, *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, 1871, p. 407)

---

8. *In the Shadow of the Himalayas*, by John Claude White, 1883-1908. (Reprint, Mapin Publishing, Ahmedabad, 2005, p.69- 70)



The Donkhya la (5495 m) was in front of us, flanked by peak Donkhya Ri (6190 m) and Sanglapu (6224 m). The southeast was dominated by Pauhunri (7125 m) and its five satellite peaks were leading to the south on the ridge dividing the Plateau and the Chumbi valley. These peaks were: two peaks of 7032 m, 6911 m, 6915 m and 6730 m, all unclimbed and unattempted. This would be one of the highest walls separating two valleys.

Cho Lhamo (or Tso Lhamo) had many attractions. Birds from Siberia and Russia come here during summer. It is reported that geologically the Plateau is important.

Messers G. B. Gourlay and J. B. Auden spent October and early November 1934 on a visit to north-eastern Sikkim. At a height of about 17,300 ft, they found a series of highly fossiliferous shale and limestone, the preliminary examination of which suggests that these beds are Triassic in age. This find is important in that these Tso Lhamo beds fill the gap between Lower Permian Lachi beds first found in 1933 by L.R. Wagner when on the Everest Expedition, and the Jurassic system which has long been known to cover so much of Tibet.

(Kenneth Mason, Editor, *HJ*, Vol. VII, p. 139-141)



P. 7032 m from south. (Harish Kapadia)

The Tibetan frontier ran to our north for a long distance, a high ridge with passes of Kongyakma (5605 m), Sesse la (5462 m), Chulung la (5447 m) and ending at the 'Finger area' and pass of Kongra la (5133 m). The famous Kampa Dzong, where Dr Kellas was buried, was about 35 km from here. Thus Kampa Dzong was closely related to the mountains of Sikkim.

Just before reaching Kampa Dzong, Dr Kellas died of heart failure. He had been ailing since the march through the Chumbi valley. He had strained his heart during the previous year on Kamet and Narsing (19,128) and in the early spring of 1921 in camps over 20,000 feet on Kabru. The country between Phari and Kampa Dzong, mostly above 16,000 feet was now too severe for him. He was buried on 6 June (1921) on the slopes of the hills south of Kampa Dzong facing the mountains of Sikkim, which he alone had climbed.

*Abode of Snow*, by Kenneth Mason, p. 157 (E. P. Dutton & Co., New York, 1955)

If there was a high, windy and desolate frontier anywhere, it was here. One could see a hint of Tibetan borderland of Chumbi valley. 'It was a magnificent afternoon and the view over Tibet was glorious. The power of sun's rays at this height in the very clear atmosphere was extraordinary, and I have never before or since felt it in the same way' - again to quote White.<sup>9</sup> We were on the shores of the Cho Lhamo lake though it had much snow on it but the location and surroundings were so beautiful that we forgot the strong wind and remained there in silence for some time.

The final word should belong to John D. Hooker, who, having seen most parts of the Himalaya pays the ultimate compliment to the Plateau and Cho Lhamo:

I doubt whether the world contains any scene with more sublime associations than this calm sheet of water, 17,000 feet above sea, with the shadow of mountains, 22,000 to 24,000 feet high, sleeping on its bosom.

### **Summary:**

An exploration of 'the Plateau' located on the borders of Chumbi valley and north Sikkim, in May 2012.

---

9. White, *ibid.* p. 70.