

## **TREK TO CHAUKAN PASS**

In the Second World War, during the Japanese advance in Burma in 1942, two major retreats were most disastrous and hard. In both cases several civilians had to trudge through deep sticky mud, a speciality of this frontier. Without much food, ravaged with malaria, monsoon and a variety of ailments they had to cross the Burmese frontier into the British India to safety from pursuing Japanese troops. The rainforest here was thickest and rivers flooded in rains. A large numbers of refugees came across the Pangsus Pass, which was a steep climb and through knee-deep mud.

### **To Pangsus Pass and Lake of No Return**

We started our trip to Arunachal Pradesh by flying to Guwahati. We were to proceed almost to the eastern-most point of India and along the India-Burma border. At Pangsus Pass we had crossed into Burma and at Chaukan Pass we slept near the border pillar !

First was a ride on oldest and eastern-most train route in India to Ledo. The train ends here now but it used to go till Lekhapani a few kilometres ahead. From here the famous "Ledo Road" or "Stillwell road" starts. The goods for the Burma War effort were loaded on trucks from here and were carried to Kunming, China- then an ally of the British. It was a nostalgic place to stand at and recall old history.

We spent a night at Jairampur and later at Nampong from where the approach to the Pangsus Pass starts. Next day we were across into Burma through the Pangsus Pass, the historic gateway to and from Burma, which was nicknamed as "Hell Gate" . During the Second World war returning survivors across the Pangsus Pass paid a heavy price in terms of health, sickness and death, due to deep mud, malaria and exhaustion. It was nostalgic to see 'Lake of No Return' , in the plains of Burma from here. It was a vast lake, the only clearing in thick forest. When they developed engine trouble, the planes flying across the "Burma Hump" tried to land on these waters. Most of them did not return to tell the story. We had Burmese food and then walked back.

### **The Epic of Chaukan Pass**

The second group fleeing the Japanese army consisted of the British who were trapped at Fort Hertz (now known as Putao) in north Burma. They too were fleeing the advancing Japanese troops who may overrun Fort Hertz. They had to come across the Patkai range through dense forest in heavy rains. Nearest pass was the Chaukan. More than 230 Britishers crossed over here with Sir John Rowland and even a 3 month old new born child. They had to flee in June- warm but at height of monsoon, with flooded river and leeches, snakes and malaria mosquitoes. A small party went ahead to reach Miao and alerted the authorities who mounted a rescue. They covered about three km per day, stopped at various flooded rivers like the Tilung Hka and Dapha Hka. Food was airdropped to them and a party led by Gyles Mackrell, from Tea Association of Assam, mounted a major ground rescue with several elephants. This efforts by men and animals saved many though about two dozen perished. This was the Epic of Chaukan Pass. After almost 70 years we were to follow their trails into India, and experience some of the difficulties they faced.

We spent a night at Miao, starting point of Vijaynagar road. Another two nights were spent at Deban or Namdafa Sanctuary Guest House. Then the trail began in the earnest. First was a drive on “Miao-Vijaynagar Road” or “MV Road” for short. We stayed at 40<sup>th</sup> Mile- all stops are named as such. Our porters met us here and we started trekking. It was a hell road- deep sticky mud everywhere. Powerful four wheel trucks had to be pushed by bulldozers to proceed. While walking if you get off the road you can slip in a culvert and if you slip it was in knee-deep mud all around. On the second day we went down to the river and it was a sheer delight to camp and walk along the river, passing a village. But in two days we had to return to the MV Road and its mud. At last, after three days, the valley opened up and we were at Gandhigram, named after a funny looking small statue of Gandhi installed here. It was a peaceful village and with friendly Lisu villagers. Ahead there were villages of settlers- Nepalis retired from the Assam Rifles, who were assisted to settle here. Last 18 km road travel to Vijaynagar was relatively pleasant. We spent a night at Vijaynagar, at Assam Rifles post near the airstrip.

Then began the real stuff- trek on thin trail along the Noa Dihing river (here known as the Diyun river). Nothing had changed here 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 strong heart. We also had to construct about 10 small bridges to cross the river between different banks and avoid serious climbs. It was tiring and tense all along as we had to climb and descend regularly, Many places trails had to be cut, log bridges installed at sides to cross along the bank and crossing on many fallen tree trunks were a challenge. We stayed at Bheda, Thapa and finally the Base camp. It was cold at night but with so much wood around and supported by strong, extremely helpful and energetic Lisu porters nothing can stop you. The forest was a joy and fear both combined! No animals and even birds here – Lisus ate them all over many generations ! However we could hear calls by Gibbon monkeys, saw few hornbills and much fish in the river.

On the 27<sup>th</sup> January 2013 we left early and climbed almost a 1000 m to top of a ridge. Then we descended along the forested ridge more than 500 m and traversed through Burma. Finally after a 10 hour day we descended to the historic Chaukan Pass (2419 m) and camped near the Border Pillar no. 183 which marks the border between India and Burma. It was from the Chaukan Pass that in 1942, a party of Britishers had crossed over to India. We were next civil party reaching here- after a gap of 70 years!

Next day we reversed the trail from the Chaukan pass, climb up 500 m and descend 1000 m! Then 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 materials here. It was a 60 minute ride to Mohanbari /Dibrugarh, which otherwise would have taken us at least a week to cover. Next day we were on a flight to Mumbai.

Members: Harish Kapadia, Rajendra Wani, Ms. Lakshmi R. and Nanak Bhagat.  
Period: 7<sup>th</sup> January to 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2013

**Harish Kapadia**