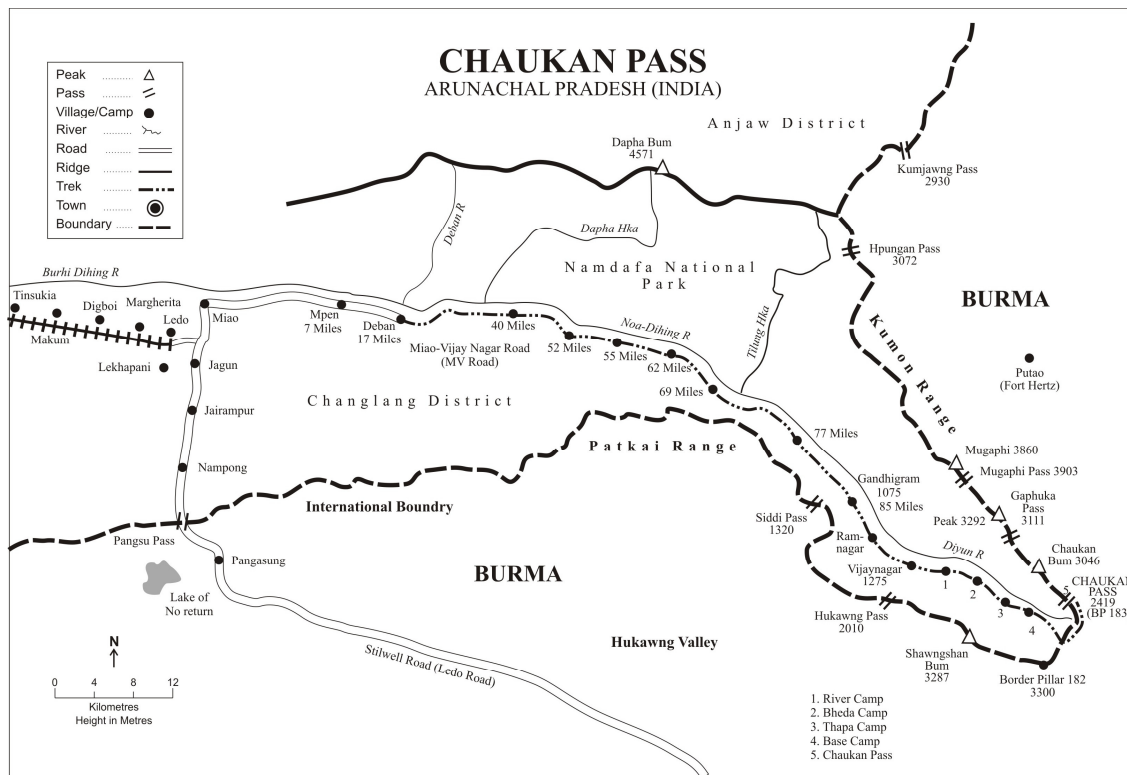


TREKS TO INDIA – BURMA BORDER

Hoot Pass – Pangsus Pass - Chaukan Pass

Arunachal Pradesh

D E A T I L E D R E P O R T



The areas on Eastern India were fully embroiled in the Burmese operations during the Second World War. Some of the place names are part of the legendary but cruel history. The allied troops drove and marched into Burma to fight the advancing Japanese troops. At first the Japanese beat them back in 1942, forcing the soldiers and civilians to a retreat, which was through Pangsus Pass and many areas in Manipur. But uniformly it was cruel and devastating as the journey was through knee-deep sticky mud. Many lost their lives and barely survived. Today legends of these areas are almost forgotten but history still hangs in the air.

The 'Burma Hump' operations were conducted by air which supplied material to China. The planes flew over these valley, many crashed and remains were not always located.

We decided to visit and trek in the areas adjoining the border with Burma.

Exploring Lapti Valley near Burma. 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 Headquarters. If the sea and local dances grace the well known Hawaii (USA) in the Pacific, here at Hawaii, mountain scenery matched the beauty of the sea and traditional people and their dances were no less attractive.

This area, along with the plateau opposite Walong, is the 'Burma Hump'. During the World War II several planes crashed on this plateau as old aircrafts could not gain height and malfunctioned at the altitude. Remains of many planes lie scattered in the upper Lapti valley too, but now most parts are taken out by search parties and locals.

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 to its tributary, the Lapti from village Kamlat. Trek was strenuous and the route climbed steeply- and as a result was descending steeply on the way back, on wet – slippery ground. But the forest and being on an remote trail to Burma was an inspiration. Beauty of 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*, cover these mountains on the border. A few of these peaks we observed on our way back. We came across two villages and they were almost a generation behind and what we call 'progress' had not reached them as yet. No trekkers seems to have come here though we heard some rumours of a party trekking here before. People of the Burmese origin cross the Hoot Pass (3570 m) into India to collect herbal plants every year. Overall communities across the borders interact peacefully even today.

On the way back I fell almost 150 feet, on loose wet gravel covered by shrubs/bushes. I just could not hold on to the bushes falling head first, and gathered speed, passed over one slab after the other- all were downward sloping luckily. 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 little speed! Though I was bleeding profusely through my nose and was covered with many scratches all over the body, except for one sharp hit on my right hip I was saved. Dinesh Purandare reached me in a flash with other porters, and I could get up on my feet in about half an hour. I climbed up the steep slope to reach the 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 road head from where a taxi took me to the Hawaii rest house. A day of

rest, two days of rough car journey, a night in the train and a five hour flight followed and I was home !

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

Trip in 2013 -Ledo-Lekhapani-Pangsu Pass

In 2013 January we started our trip to Arunachal Pradesh by flying to Guwahati. We were to proceed 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 to Ledo. Ledo was now a modern but deserted train station. Trains end here now, but it used to go till Lekhapani a few kilometres ahead. Two kilometres ahead of Lekhapani, at 'Burma camp', the famous "Ledo Road" or "Stillwell road" starts. The goods for the war in Burma 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.

From Ledo, at first we drove back few kilometres towards Tinsukia. Margherita has many nostalgic mentions in history, but now it is a sleepy little town which has no charms except this catchy name. A small coal museum exists here. 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 Daulatram Jairamdas, former benevolent Governor of Arunachal Pradesh). Nearby was a new cemetery recently discovered in the forest, containing many graves of the allied soldiers. It had remained hidden in thick foliage. We spent another night at a 'home stay' at Nongkey near Nampong. We drove to Nampong the next day from where the approach to the Pangsu Pass starts. On 10th January 2013 we were across into Burma through the Pangsu Pass, the historic gateway to and from Burma.

Pangsu Pass

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 safety of the British India from pursuing Japanese troops, the refugees and returning army had to cross the Pangsu Pass, on the Patkai Range, which divides India and Burma. It was a disastrous and hard 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 rainforest was dense

and the rivers were flooded. A large numbers of refugees came across the Pangsung Pass and though it was a lower pass, it was a steep climb and through knee-deep mud. This historic gateway was nick named 'Hell gate' by soldiers.

We reached the Pangsung village, about 3 km inside Burma. Indians are allowed till here on 10th, 20th and 30th of every month. Burmese are allowed into India till Nampong on every Friday. We enjoyed Burmese food and saw the small bazaar that has sprung up for this day. The Burmese military boys (yes they were very young) checked our permits and ensured that no camera or mobile phone was carried inside their territory.

Lake of No Return (Nawng Yang in Burmese)

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. During monsoon vast 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.

Few more stories 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 it is called the Lake of No Return. According to a third story, US Army soldiers, working on the Ledo Road, were sent to examine the lake and got trapped by the undergrowth and perished trying to escape. 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 claims he has encountered the name on a document written by one of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel, which he claims still hides out in the area. The lake still maintains its reputation; the Indian newspaper 'The Telegraph' reported, in a story on the possible reopening of the Ledo Road in 2007, that "close by [Pangsung] 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.

By late afternoon we returned to Nampong and drove a short distance to Miao (via Jagun) to start preparing for our venture to another historic pass, the Chaukan Pass.

The Epic of Chaukan Pass

One of the little known groups 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 if they waited till the monsoon period passes. So in heavy rains they left Putao with Mishmi guide and porters to cross the Chaukan Pass, which at about 8000 feet was a low pass by Himalayan standards.

They had to come across the Patkai range through dense forest in heavy rains. More than 230 Britishers crossed over here with Sir John Rowland including a three

month old new born child. They had to flee in June, when it was warm but at the height of monsoon, with flooded river and leeches, snakes and malaria mosquitoes. Once across the pass their progress was almost reduced to a crawl, covering just about 2-3 kilometres per day. There were no villages and the trail almost unknown. Finally they turned south-west but were stopped by Tilung Hka, the first major tributary of Noa Dihing.

A party of two persons had gone ahead and reached Miao. They alerted the authorities about the plight of the trapped party, and a rescue was organised. Food was airdropped 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 Dapha Hka. Elephants with the Mackrell party, surrounded the island and rescued all of them on the backs of elephants. The island was soon washed away. This rescue saved many lives. As they neared Miao ground support increased and food was sent by porters and progress to safety was faster.

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.

In 1961, a year before the Chinese invasion, Indian army mounted 'Operation Srijitga' to reach Chaukan Pass. They too encountered many difficulties and the party led by Maj.Gen. Guraiya finally reached the Chaukan pass on 27 November 1961 and planted the Indian flag. After joint discussions with the Burmese authorities a Border Pillar No. 183 was erected here in 1971 with the Watershed Principal being followed. All rivers from this horse shoe basin flow west-southwest 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 strengthen the Indian claim 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 functioning even till today). Several native Lisu tribal families, who were originally migrants from Burma settled here over decades, much before India-Burma boundary demarcation.

During Feb –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.

After almost 70 years from the first crossing by the Burma refugees and 52 years after 'Operation Srijitga', we were to follow this trail, and experience the difficulties

they had faced. Little did we know that the difficulties had multiplied many fold due to floods, landslides, non-use and erosion.

Our Epic of Chaukan Pass

We drove to the Deban tourist lodge located in the Namdafa Sanctuary. Facing Namdafa river and on banks of Noa Dihing it was well situated to observe birds and wild life.

On 13th January 2012 we drove on the "Miao-Vijaynagar Road" or "MV Road" for a short distance. We stayed at 40th Mile- all stops are named as such. We met our Lisu porters here and we had to now walk about 117 kilometres to Vijaynagar. The first taste of this road was enough to send the weak-hearted back home. It was a hell road, with deep sticky mud everywhere. Powerful four wheel drive 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 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 can ever be.

On the second day we went down to the river and crossed the 'Burma nala' on a swinging bridge. The route ahead was a delight to walk on, along the river, passing the Lisu village of Ngawazah where we tasted the local fruit Thazi (Persimmon or Sharon). Crossing the Noa Dihing on a couple of scary stilt bridges called dahlongs 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 entirely 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 local persons 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.

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 funny looking small statute of 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. Finally another statue was flown in with words 'Gandhiji' written on the back, which can still be seen. This village, originally named 'Shibudi or Shidi', was now named as 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 villages of settlers- Nepalis retired from the Assam Rifles, who were assisted to settle here. The villages, Ramnagar and others were well kept, clean and looked prosperous, a pleasant surprise as the only contact with civilisation was through irregular helicopter

flights. 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 changed in honour of Maj.Gen. Guraiya's son Vijay. On east was the Kumon range and west the Patkai range, and almost where both these ranges meet was the Shawngshan Pass (and peak) (3287 m) the south-easternmost pass from Vijaynagar, leading to the Hukwang valley of Burma.

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!

Then began the real stuff- the 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 a strong heart. To avoid regular crossings we constructed about 16 small bridges to cross the river between different banks and avoid serious climbs. Our Lisu porters, specially Gisa was the chief engineer! 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 Bheda, Thapa and finally at the Base camp, all names given by the Assam Rifles patrols, the only ones to visit here 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 a joy and fear both combined. No animals or birds were seen here – Lisus had ate them all over many generations ! However we could hear calls by Gibbon monkeys, saw few hornbills and much fish in the river. The advantages in this cold season were evident: no leeches, no snakes, dim dim flies and low water level.

On the 27th January 2013 we left the base camp early and climbed almost 1000 m (3300 feet) to the top of a ridge. Then we descended along a forested ridge for more than 500 m (1600 feet) and traversed through Burma in the east. 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. In 1961 the army team during Operation Srijitga had reached the pass and now we were the next civil party reaching here- after a gap of almost 71 years (from the epic crossing) and 52 years (from Operation Srijitga) years! Over the decades except for an annual patrol of Assam Rifles no party visited the pass.

We camped on the pass, some tents in India and some in Burma, but just a few feet apart. On 28th 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 10,000 feet 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 materials here. It was a 60 minute flight to Mohanbari /Dibrugarh, which otherwise would have taken us at least a week to cover. Next day we were on a flight to Mumbai /Bangalore.

Members: 2013 party : Harish Kapadia, Rajendra Wani, R. Lakshmi and Nanak Bhagat. Period: 7th January to 3rd February 2013

Members: 2011 party: Dinesh, Nandini and Uttara Purandare, Atul Rawal and Harish Kapadia. Period: 25 October to 6 November 2011

References

1. Forgotten Frontier, by Geoffery Tyson
2. History of Upper Assam, Upper Burmah and North-eastern Frontier, by L.W. Shakspear
3. Lands of Early Dawn, by R. D. Bhattacharjee
4. Children of the Dawn, by Dipti Bhalla and Kunal Verma
5. The Burma Road, by Donovan Webster
6. Flight By Elephant, by Andrew Martin (expected June 2013)

Movies

1. The Elephant Man (rescue of Chaukan Pass refugees, Cambridge University)
2. The Old Elephant Route (Anne Mane Foundation)

Sincere thanks are due to

1. General J.J. Singh (retd.), H. E, Governor of Arunachal Pradesh
2. Lt Gen S.K.Singh, Vice Chief, Indian Army
3. Lt. Gen. Rostum K. Nanavatty (retd)
4. Phupla Singpho, Miao
5. Brig. Ashok Abbey, President, The HimalayanClub
6. Brig. Sodhi, Sector Commander, Assam Rifles
7. Maj. Yayati Watve and Capt. Akshay Kumar and Officers and Jawans of 18 ASSAM RIFLES.

Distances

Road Distances: (2013)

Place	Km
Dibrugarh-	0
Tinsukia	47
Makum	10
Digboi	23
Margherita	14
Ledo	6
Lekhapani	11
Jagun (from Tinsukia central point. Road bifurcates to Jairampur and Miao from here.	12
Jairampur	12
War Cemetery	6
Nampong	12
Pangsu Pass	12
Pangasu Burma Bazaar	3
Lake of No Return	8

Lapti Valley Trek (2011)	
Hawai (1320 m)	0
Kamlat (915 m)	4
Laprong (1430 m)	4
Pathar Camp (1950 m)	6
Shikar Camp (2480 m)	6
Nagrong Bridge (2850 m)	6
Tafam (3065 m)	4
Kushok (3400 m)	4
Hoot Pass (3570 m)	4
Return to Hawaii	42
Total return km trekked	84

Trekking Distances : (2013)

Jagun	0
Miao (by road)	35
On Miao-Vijaynagar Road (MV Road)	
Deban (17 mile) (by road)	26
40 Mile (by road)	37
Nibodi 440 m	12
55 Mile 560 m	10
62 Mile 710 m	12
69 Mile 830 m	16
76 Mile 920 m	12
Gandhigram (85 Mile) 1075 m	15
Vijaynagar 1275 m	18
MV Road from Miao	156 km

CHAUKAN PASS TREKKING ROUTE (2013)	
River Camp 1290 m	8
Bheda Camp 1500 m	8
Thapa Camp 1600 m	8
Base Camp 1920 m	10
Chaukan Pass 2419 m	12
Return to Vijaynagar	46
Total Chaukan trek	92
Walked on MV Road	93
Total trek	185 km

