

One Fine Autumn

Treks to two monasteries

Harish Kapadia

An autumn trek to Tholung monastery

Lepchas, the original inhabitants of the valleys in North Sikkim, are known by different names; Rong (tribe name), Rongkup (children of Rong) and Mutanchi Rong (beloved people of God), and their land was called Mayal Lang (hidden land or the land blessed by God). These nature worshippers continue to possess a vast knowledge of the flora and fauna of their land and traditional medicine, accumulated over many generations. These people also built several monasteries.

Their population, once estimated to be about 50000, has considerably dwindled and only a few are alive today. They live in Dzongu, a valley west of Mangan in North Sikkim, which has been declared a restricted area, but permits to visit it are easily obtained.

Four of us arrived at Mangan (via Gangtok) in early October 2015. The view from the home stay opened to Siniolchu and surrounding peaks. In the crisp autumn air, the snowy ridges looked resplendent. This made one appreciate why Douglas Freshfield in his book *Round Kangchenjunga* called it the most beautiful peak in the world. Though he did not enter Dzongu, he was at its foot on the Zemu glacier which lies to the immediate north of the Dzongu valley. From Mangan, we proceeded on rough roads to the Teesta river at Sangkalang (19 km) and reached Passingdang, the first large village in the valley. Similar rough roads lead in various directions to beautifully situated villages. Lingthem (10 km) and Tingvong (eight km from Sibim) are a couple of larger noteworthy villages.

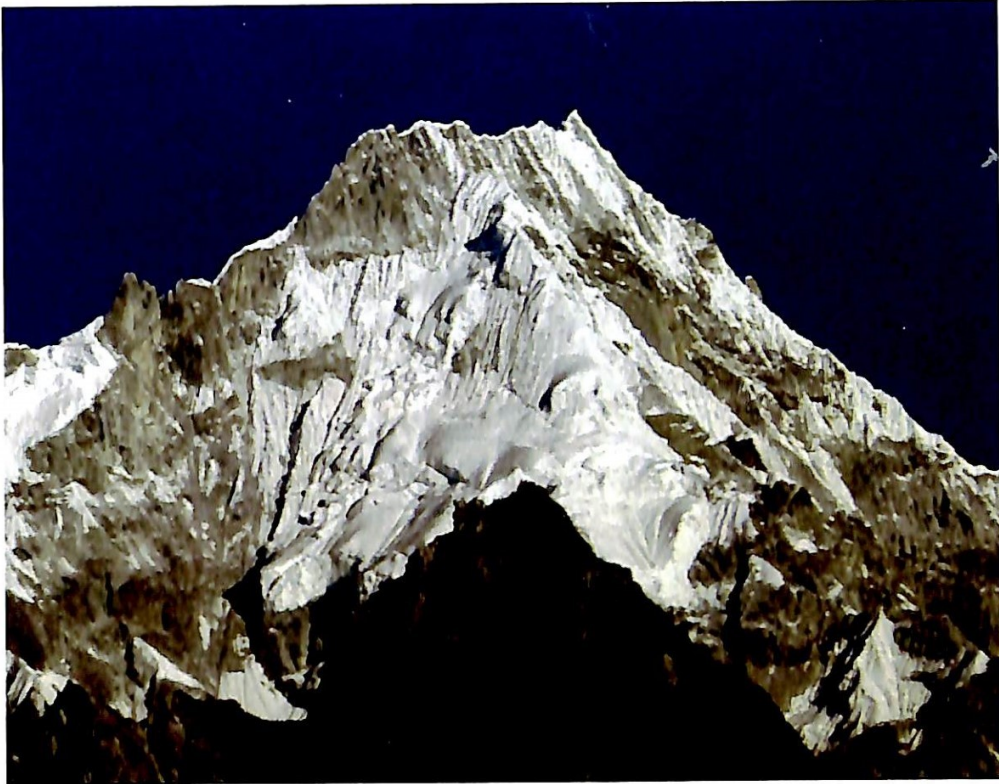
We drove on to Lingzya (10 km) which is marked by a huge waterfall. The village was lined with white prayer flags and mani walls. Our drive ended at Be (six km) and we settled at a comfortable home stay. Our hosts produced wonderful meals from different vegetables available in the forest nearby and revealed indigenous knowledge on how many of



Kangchenjunga massif and Zemu peak in foreground (Harish Kapadia)



Simvu twin peaks (Harish Kapadia)



Siniolchu (Harish Kapadia)



Pandim (Harish Kapadia)



Tholung monastery (Kartik Bhagat)



Kishong waterfall in autumn (Kartik Bhagat)

these vegetables could combat lifestyle-related diseases like high blood pressure and diabetes.

We started our trek to Tholung monastery from here. Our guide Mingtu, with a thin beard on his chin, looked a traditional Lepcha. He is very familiar with the terrain as he has explored different areas along with Anindya Mukherjee of Kolkata. Mukherjee has written about his trek looking for 'Bon Manchi' a local name for the elusive Yeti, which Lepchas believe exists here.¹ The valley to the east of Lingzya leads to the foot of Guicha la (pass) in the south. In the north is Zemu gap leading to Zemu glacier. The former is visited by hundreds while the latter is rarely visited, let alone crossed. At the head of the valley, on the border with Nepal, stands Talung peak.

After a leisurely trek followed by a camp at Dijim next day, we reached Tholung monastery. The place was deserted as the lamas had moved to lower altitudes. A major earthquake in 2011, with Tholung as its epicentre, had partly destroyed the monastery. A new monastery is being built next to the existing one. There were several old wall paintings and a stupa studded with jewels, also said to contain bones of earlier kings. Despite the damage, it carried an air of serenity.

It is said that the monastery was established in 1789 and is considered to be the most sacred in Sikkim. Following a Gorkha invasion of Sikkim by adjoining Nepal during the reign of Chhogyal Tenzing Namgyal, all precious collections, write-ups, religious objects from large monasteries like Dubde and Sanga Choling were brought here to upper Dzongu. After a few years, a monastery was built at Tholung and all the items were stored here under the charge of the family known as Tholung Nangpa. They were in charge till 1940, when the Ecclesiastical Department of the Government of Sikkim took over, though the Nangpa family continues to be the chief patron of this gompa. These treasures are aired and displayed to the faithful once in three years. A new monastery was built in 1980, which the earthquake destroyed and now another new structure is under construction.

1. Recent articles by Anindya Mukherjee on his treks in the Dzongu valley are as under : 'The Land of Mythical Paradise', *HJ* Vol. 67, p. 30 'Zemu Gap from South', *HJ* Vol. 68, p. 37 'Quest for the Bon Manchi : The Wildman of Sikkim'. *HJ* Vol. 70, p. 1 See 'The Curious Case of De Nga' on exploring high altitude lakes in Dzongu in the present volume.



Lingza waterfall (Harish Kapadia)



Tholung monastery (Harish Kapadia)

Upper Valley to Kishong Lake (By Dr. Kartik Bhagat)

With a group of selected porters we left for the upper valley on a short trek. This was an uphill route for the faithful leading to various holy sites. At first, we crossed the Rimbi river through rocky and slushy terrain with fallen trees across the path at various places along the route. The route gradually climbed up to a cave known as Thugong (locked box of treasure). We continued along the valley to Ritzim Ferong and finally to Themrong, at the junction of Zumthul chu meeting with Rimbi chu which we were following.

On the second day, we progressed uphill through small nalas. At Thinsung, we saw the Kishong waterfall with a small meditation platform for Guru Rimpoche. From Lapyok, the trail climbed steeply through shrubs with mulberries and blue berries. We walked through thick fog, light rain and cold wind so camping at Tholukpe was a relief.

The next morning, we had some views of the upper valley with Lama Angden seen rising above Kishong lake. As we were exhausted from the previous day, instead of proceeding to Kishong lake, a mere three hours away, we decided to return. Though the porters were in good spirits, we could see plenty of snow ahead of us. We stuck to our decision and completed our descent in two days to join the rest of the party.

On the way back we halted briefly at Passingdang to meet a young Lepcha scholar. He had studied in different parts of India but chose to settle in his ancestors' valley. After trekking to most parts of the valley



Lama Angden from plains at Tholukpe (Kartik Bhagat)

and studying its traditions and mythology, he published a book with historic photos. As long as young, motivated people live in Dzongu, the area is safe for posterity. As we sipped tea, he enthralled us with his amazing collection of folklore. What better way to end a trek to a beautiful valley?

Gone are the days when in the evenings, children used to flock around the elders, to listen to the stories, sitting around the fire place in their small, warm and cosy kitchens. The elders also got an occasion to share their day to day sweet and sour moments with the young ones. In this age of technology where the younger generation remains attracted to various modern gadgets and social networking sites, this beautiful evening ‘past time’ is fast disappearing.²

An autumn trek to Bangajang monastery

We were standing at Chomjuk lake. It was surrounded by flora, impressive in its stunning autumn hues and the lake’s water reflecting

2. *The Myths of Mutanchi*. By Sonam Wangchuk Lepcha, 2015. Foreword to the book has been reviewed in this Volume.



Panorama from Sangey GG : L to R : Gori Chen peaks, twin peaks of Kangto, Chomo II and I peaks. All peaks are located on the McMahon Line (Harish Kapadia)

an intense blue colour in the bright sunlight. We were in Bhutan, just across the border from India. In fact, only an unmanned stone wall demarcated the border. Shepherds and pilgrims from both countries regularly continue to cross over reminding one of happy days when there were no boundaries. We felt free and full of life just like the prayer flags set up on top of the ridges fluttering in the air and taking prayers written on them to heaven.

Our group was one of a kind, with people of various ages and backgrounds, the only common thread being our yoga class. My interactions with Aarti Mehta, our accomplished yoga teacher, were an eye-opener. For a person who strongly believes in yoga as a way of life, she taught me how I could effectively use yoga to survive at high altitudes the way yogis must have done eons ago.

Tejas, fresh out of school and the youngest of the lot, was very excited about his first high altitude trek. Mihir, another young and accomplished

yoga practitioner, has been my companion on other treks. Finally, the last person of our group, Smruthi, with her thin wiry frame looked every bit a person who would shiver all the way up but it turned out that she had the intellect to face challenges of weather and terrain. Looking at these youngsters revelling in the natural beauty of their surroundings, I felt a deep sense of satisfaction that I had managed to motivate the youth of today to enjoy nature – I now have hope that the future of this beautiful planet is in safe hands.

We travelled by road to Dirang (1600 m) from Guwahati via Tezpur. We arrived at this remote place in just one and a half days from Mumbai, thus needing to acclimatize. We spent the day visiting the mountaineering institute that has recently been set up. The weather was pleasant and welcoming, and we were hopeful that we had left behind the inclement weather of the previous week (as it turned out, the gods had other ideas). We hired a taxi and drove up to the ridge above Dirang. The road led to 'Naga GG' (3660 m) in about two hours. This

curious name stands for 'Naga Regiment Garrison Ground', which was once stationed here. It resembled an outpost straight out of a World War II movie, completely desolate. A rough road continued to climb up and traverse the ridge to cross Dongchingpo la (3992 m) and finally to 'Sangey GG', (3920 m) - Sangey Grazing Ground! We were at the border with Bhutan and these outposts were established to protect any intrusions from Bhutan.

We reached a small settlement at Sangey GG late in the evening and gained access into one of the huts and made ourselves comfortable. The hut had wooden panels with gaps allowing the freezing wind to blow in and chill us to the bone. The morning was a delight as we rushed out to get fantastic views of peaks like Kangto (7022 m), Gori Chen (6488 m), Chomo (6878 m) and Nyegyri Kangsang (6983 m), some of the high peaks of Arunachal Pradesh. To their right, in the far east, the faint outline of Namcha Barwa (7754 m), the eastern limit of the Himalaya, was visible on the horizon. To the west of Kangto were peaks of Tawang, above Gerzila. The historic Sela pass spread out in front of us. With the forest covering the ridges and valleys, it was magical moment. To the west were the hills of Bhutan, thick forest of pines, deodar and many colourful fungi. We soaked in the sun till the afternoon and pitched tents on a ridge to enjoy the evening and possibly the next morning. In hindsight, it was a good decision as it gave us a chance to acclimatize better.

Finally on 13 November 2015, we commenced our trek. On the first day, we followed a long trail to eventually climb up to a high ridge which formed the border with Bhutan. A step across a stone wall and you cross the international border into Bhutan - how civilized! The leading trail traversed wide slopes with the peak of Pema Korsam rising above us. This peak is highly venerated, as from its top one can look across to the Tawang monastery and into Tibet. We passed the hut of a Drokpa (Bhutanese shepherd) at Jobor, the only people we met on the trek. That night we stayed at Nogor (3850 m) near a river. Our three horsemen were mountain people, blessed with a store-house of traditional knowledge and were immensely devout in their faith in nature. Every morning, they would seek blessings for the safety of their horses with incense sticks lit near their saddles, and for the travelling party.



Gorichen I from Sange GG (Harish Kapadia)



Chomo II and I (right) from Sangey GG (Harish Kapadia)



Gorichen range in the evening (Smruthi R.)



Kangto peaks in the evening (Smruthi R.)



Bangajang monastery (Harish Kapadia)

joins Sangey GG with Bangajang. We walked two km on the road and camped between two lakes, at Chirigap (4240 m). Next day we continued for eight km, passing Zambala Lartso (lake) and reached Chandezi Lartso at the foot of the Bangajang monastery (4230 m).

Bangajang is a small monastery, situated in a vast valley. There was not a single soul as we spent the day at the monastery. Inside were several Buddhist paintings, thankas and lamps to light. The monks had moved to lower ground for the winter. But these thoughtful monks had left behind enough food and prayer paraphernalia for devotees or visitors stranded in these remote parts. Bangajang is a stone that represents the Tibetan goddess Dorje Lhamo, signifying fertility. This monastery is thus visited by women hoping for a child - they undertake a seven hour kora (circumambulation) on these slopes as an offering. The kora also has many lakes en route and a lama usually accompanies visitors as a guide of sorts.

A taxi picked us up from the monastery on the 18th. We drove for 19 km on the road to Sela pass, crossing Chendre la (4175 m). As we were arriving at the gate of the pass, we could see the narrow valley below, which had witnessed the fierce war between the Garhwal battalion of the Indian army and the Chinese in 1962. Subedar Jaswant Singh fought valiantly against the Chinese army here, holding them long enough to allow the rear forces to be more organized. He was assisted by two Arunachali girls, who were later captured by the Chinese and hanged



Chirigap lake (Mihir Gandhi)



Chomjuk lake (Harish Kapadia)

on a tree nearby. The Subedar was killed in this battle and a memorial dedicated to him has been erected on the main road. This memorial is revered by all in the army and one believes that ill-fortune strikes people who don't pay their respects.

Back on the road, we drove back to Dirang. Next day, on the way to Bomdila, we had one last view of the mountains and then it was a long drive to the plains and Guwahati for a flight back home.



Lake near Merathang (Tejas Mehta)



Lake near Tse la road (Harish Kapadia)



Chendre la lake (Harish Kapadia)

Summary

Two relaxed treks to Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh in October and November 2015 respectively.

Members :

Tholung monastery trek : Geeta Kapadia, Sandhya Apte, Dr Kartik Bhagat and Harish Kapadia. (October 2015)

Bangajang monastery trek : Aarti Mehta, Tejas Mehta, Mihir Gandhi, Smruthi Ranganathan and Harish Kapadia. (November 2015)

Note

Lakshmi Ranganathan had trekked to Bangajang in 2009 (*Himalayan Journal*, Vol. 66, p. 213). She trekked in October, in better weather conditions than ours. She undertook a day trek from the base at Chomjuk lake to visit Orka lake via Orka la (4072 m) passing Sakteng view point to observe villages in Bhutan. This was in the 650 sq km 'Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary' established in 2002. She also suggested a long high level route to Bangajang from Chomjuk lake. Chomjuk to Sugang (3870 m) crossing two passes Bukchung la (3992 m) and Gyapchung la (4054 m). The following day, one can trek to Luguthem la (3720 m) and Jangachen la (3962 m) to Bangajang.

Author

Harish Kapadia is a well-known Himalayan explorer who has regularly contributed to the *Himalayan Journal*. He is the past editor of the *HJ* and has written many books. He still explores new areas.



Lama Angden close up (Kartik Bhagat)



Kangto peaks from Sangey GG (Harish Kapadia)



Bangajang valley and Chandezi Lar lake (Smruthi R.)