

On the Apatani Plateau and in the Subansiri Valley

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We were standing on a small hill overlooking the valley of Ziro, home of the Apatanis. Fields stretch out on all sides of a flat valley surrounded by forested mountain ridges. At different corners of the plateau were seven villages, large and small, where the Apatanis lived. They have inhabited this area for several centuries. No one knows their exact lineage - did they arrive from Tibet? Many of the buildings are now cemented structures with tin roofs, unlike the earlier bamboo houses with thatched roofs. At the centre of the valley is an airstrip and a helicopter is waiting to take off. This airstrip acts as a supply route to the remote villages and army posts in the north towards the border with China.

Apart from the electric wires that were stretching out in front of us and obstructing a clear view, nothing much has changed here perhaps for a century. The valley is only a hundred kilometres from the plains of Assam and is not very high in terms of altitude; yet, it was left untouched until the last decade of the nineteenth century. The Apatanis, a gentle tribe, were wary of travelling south into the country of the Nishi tribe, who were extremely hostile and aggressive towards outsiders. Thus, the Apatanis evolved into a self-sufficient tribe and their only external need, salt, was sourced from Tibet. In the year 1889, H.M. Crowe, manager of the Joyhing Teas Estate in Assam decide to explore this plateau in the hope of finding land to expand his growing tea business. He reached here on Christmas Eve and was impressed by the wealth and demeanour of the Apatanis. This visit has been established as one of the earliest contacts by outsiders with the Apatani plateau. Starting the following year, large groups of Apatanis started arriving at North Lakhimpur (NLP)



Trekking through thick forest in Tale sanctuary



Mithun - the Apatani's most precious possession

for trade. They began travelling in large groups to protect themselves from the Nishi tribe.

Unfortunately, these innocuous trade exchanges came along with their fair share of trouble. A Hill-Miri contractor was killed by the Apatanis, and they burned his house in 1896. It was a small skirmish but, as it happened in the British territory, an army unit was dispatched to the plateau

in 1897, under the command of Captain McCabe. The locals surrendered immediately and a final settlement was arrived at in the form of three Mithuns, priceless for Apatanis, and a Tibetan bell. The Army was unable to drive the Mithuns to Assam and they were returned, but the precious bell was carried to Assam. Subsequently, a formal trade route was established in 1912 and it continued till the 1940s.

Edward Tuite Dalton, who served as Junior Assistant Commissioner of Assam in 1845, wrote a book *The Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal* which became a standard reference for the British officers on how to deal with the tribal people.

R. B. McCabe's chronicles about the prosperity of this region remained unmatched by other colonial descriptions. He was successful in reaching the plateau only in 1897, and he "was swept away in the rhapsody of personal observation"

The sight is one I shall never forget, as we suddenly emerged on a magnificent plateau...Our hearts warmed up at the sight of primroses, violets, wild currants, strawberries and raspberries, and I felt disposed to almost believe some of the wonderful stories we had heard of the fabulous wealth of this country.

(McCabe, R.B., 'Report on the Apa Tanang Expedition of 1897')

This view was validated by Haimendorf in 1944 when he called the Apatani valley as an "incipient civilization in miniature."

By 1944, the Japanese were pushing north through Burma and Nagaland and Tibetans were eying the south. This made the British take much interest in the Apatani plateau. A government outpost was established and an airstrip was constructed. By this time, the valley was conveniently annexed by the British.

J.P. Mills, advisor to the government, planned to study tribes of the North-East. He invited the well-known anthropologist Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf to India. On his arrival in India in 1938, Germany was declared an enemy nation and war was proclaimed in Europe. He was arrested as a 'German Enemy Alien'. However, through his connections, he managed to get himself located at Hyderabad from his open prison in Nagaland. In 1944, he unexpectedly received a telegram from Mills summoning him to Shillong. He was asked to go to the Apatani valley as 'Special Advisor, Subansiri'. His assignment was to study the locals and the Chinese influence on the local tribesmen. By being stationed there he was meant to assert British control in this contested region.

Haimendorf reached NLP in February 1944. Unable to find porters, he hired a few Apatanis who had come down for trade. The journey proved difficult as the Apatanis weren't habituated to carrying heavy

Ziro town and air strip



loads. He spent eight months in the valley and established an external governing authority in the valley for the first time. Subsequently, an 'Inner Line' was set up by the British to prevent outsiders from entering the tribal area and proceeding towards Tibet.

After he left the valley in 1945, a British administrator F.N. Betts was deputed here. He was accompanied by his anthropologist wife Ursula Betts (formerly Ursula Graham Bower) who studied the lifestyle of the Apatanis and recorded it in various journals and a book. When these administrators left the valley in 1948, true to the British practice of annexation, they followed the old dictum, 'first send explorers, then Administrators and finally the army'. A platoon of Assam Rifles was permanently stationed here (premises still exist) and it was supplied by air. This was the time when the World War II had just ended and the military was very much in command in the North-East.

With all this influx, over the years, the authority of the local *bulyang* (village council) whom the Apatanis respected and obeyed was completely eroded. In frustration, they attacked the government outposts after the Betts' had left. The Assam rifles retaliated and the bows and arrows of the Apatanis were no match for the rifles and bullets. Five villages were burnt and some residents were killed after which the government established total control. The Apatanis fled into the hills. In a battle of attrition, the culprits were arrested and sent to a prison at NLP, from where they never returned.

The post-independence churn saw R.G. Menzies, an Anglo-Indian, appointed as the Political Officer of this region in 1952. He relocated all the offices from NLP to Ziro and expanded the airstrip. The entire state was put under the administration of North East Frontier Agency (NEFA, 1954-1972). At the southern end of the plateau, the forest was cleared and a new administrative town called Hapoli was established and the village was called Old Ziro. An all-weather road connecting NLP to the Apatani plateau via Kimin was built. Schools, churches, a jail and a lively bazaar sprang up along this road. In 1987, Arunachal Pradesh was granted statehood and Hapoli expanded into a district headquarters with a large office complex, court house, circuit house and a forest office.

Our Visit in 2016

Five of us arrived at this historic valley in November 2016. It took us just a day and a half to reach here from Mumbai, travelling by

different means; a flight to Guwahati, night train to Naharlagun (near Itanagar), the first and only rail connection in Arunachal Pradesh) and a five-hour drive to Ziro. We could only imagine how things were in the past when the road from Potin to Kimin turned atrocious and tested our nerves. Emerging in the valley at Hapoli was a delight. Many home stay options are now available, which allows one to stay in comfort and interact with the hosting Apatani family. We settled with Hibu Tatu, an erudite school teacher who turned out to be our knowledge guide.

The first day was spent exploring a few villages in the valley. Very soon we realized that the locals probably disliked the presence of tourists. They probably found us prying as even photographs



Apatani elder with traditional hairstyle



Apatani Lady with traditional tatoos

were frowned upon. It's customary for the ladies to wear a nose ring made of bamboo and have a tattoo running down their forehead up to the jaw. This painful and disfiguring act was forced upon young girls even before attaining an age of decision-making. As per local traditions this was an act of disfiguration to protect the women of the tribes from hostile tribes such as the Nishis. With changing times and more exposure and contact with the outside world, the local community has in the recent times, abolished this practice. Thus, what you see today is probably the last generation of ladies with facial tatoos.



Traditional Apatani Market selling live honeycombs



Traditional Apatani Market-selling dry fish and hottest chilly in the world - Bhut Jholakia

It was refreshing to stay in the village and visit the bazaar. The Sunday church service, both Baptist and Catholic, was a unique experience. The service was rendered in the local language with tunes derived from Hindi film songs. The bazaar was the centre of great activity. The colourful and vibrant stalls were full of flavour, selling local delicacies like live or dry rats and fish, and birds. Although this was beyond anything our stomachs could experience, it was definitely in line with the cuisines of the best restaurants further east, like Hong Kong, Seoul and elsewhere. Now they grow Kiwis in this valley which are available in plenty. Several shops selling mobile phones have sprung up

and these are served by three operators. We were witness to a line of seven cobblers along the road, which is apparently a seasonal line up for locals to get their footwear repaired.

We then went on to view the Shiva stones above the valley. Two high vertical stones were discovered a few years ago, and due to their shape they were named Shiva. The Apatanis believe only in Donyi-Polo (Sun and Moon), so the proposed road and temple and the piles of garbage are probably signs of increasing religious tourism in the area.

Tale valley

About 15 km away, along a very rough road is Pange, located at the entrance of the newly created Tale Game Sanctuary. Soaking up the warm sun, while being comfortably settled in a forest rest-house, we watched a family of Mithuns playing around. These large bulls are the real wealth of the tribal community. The next day, we proceeded to



Newly found Shiva stones at Ziro

the top of Tale. It was an exhilarating walk, on a wide trail, that gently climbs up amidst some of the finest forests. The trail was lined with large ferns and a variety of orchids. We camped on the trail itself as the dense forest did not allow us any camping ground.

On the last day on the trail, we were presented with a view of the high mountains. These are the unknown peaks in the range of 6800 m in the North West, in line with the known peak of Nyegyri Kangsang. A high peak in the range, 6655 m, it is erroneously named 'Takpa Siri'. Takpa Siri, though only 5735 m, is one of the most revered peaks in Tibetan Buddhism. Tibetans and Monpas of the upper Subansiri perform a major kora, 'Ringkor', (circumambulation) of this peak every 12 years. As this peak is located on the present Line of Control (McMahon Line), a complete circumambulation is impossible as it requires one to pass through both Indian and Chinese territories, forbidden by both powers, a loss of a fine tradition. I had previously trekked in the valley at foot of Takpa Siri, reaching extreme points in the Indian territory on both sides of the peak.

Peak 6655 m, that we were currently viewing, was attempted by an Indo-British expedition in 1999, led by Col. Balwant Sandhu and

Doug Scott. Suffering from shortage of porters, malaria and other sickness they could only reach the base camp before being rescued by a helicopter.

To the north of the Tale valley, the peak of Pij Cholo (2565 m) offers a good view of these peaks and overlooks the Kamla valley. The Khru river, joins the Kamla, and they finally merge with the Subansiri river flowing from Tibet into India. Khru and Kamla are both relatively unexplored areas and the earliest account of any visit is by Haimendorf in 1945. In 1989, a bureaucrat T. K. Bhattacharjee roamed in the Kamla valley and crossed over to the Khru before exiting. Their accounts are a major reference source for future visitors.

Our time in the valley was over rather soon. But we had a lot to look forward to in the future. We enjoyed the hospitality of these wonderful people, observed a developing culture and a very different life style, enjoyed the walk through the forests and saw grand snow peaks. In all, a very satisfying experience.

We live in a wonderful world that is full of beauty, charm and adventure. There is no end to the adventures that we can have if only we seek them with our eyes open.

Jawaharlal Nehru

We collected information on the various trekking trails:

- (1) Old trade route to Lakhimpur via Haging Pudu (5 days)
- (2) Old Ziro (Supyu) to Palin (3 days)
- (3) Mai Pudu Ziro to Yachuli along the Kley river (2 days)
- (4) Ziro to Dusu Katu peak trek (2 days)
- (5) Yazali to Deed (2 days)
- (6) Yazali to Sagalee (4 Days)
- (7) Ziro to Pange (12 km) to Tale Top (15 km)
- (8) Pange col (3600 m) to Hong village of Ziro (10 km)
- (9) Pange to Old Tale village (3 days)

There are several day walks like Hakhe Tari (7 km), Pumu-Yalang (5 km) on ridge above Hapoli and more. For longer trips there are Khru and Kamla valleys.

There is much to do in this virgin valley for trekkers.

Apatani valley anyone?

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Summary

Harish Kapadia travelled to the historic Apatani plateau in November 2016.

About the 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. He is Editor Emeritus of the Himalayan Club.