

A TREK IN TAWANG TRACT

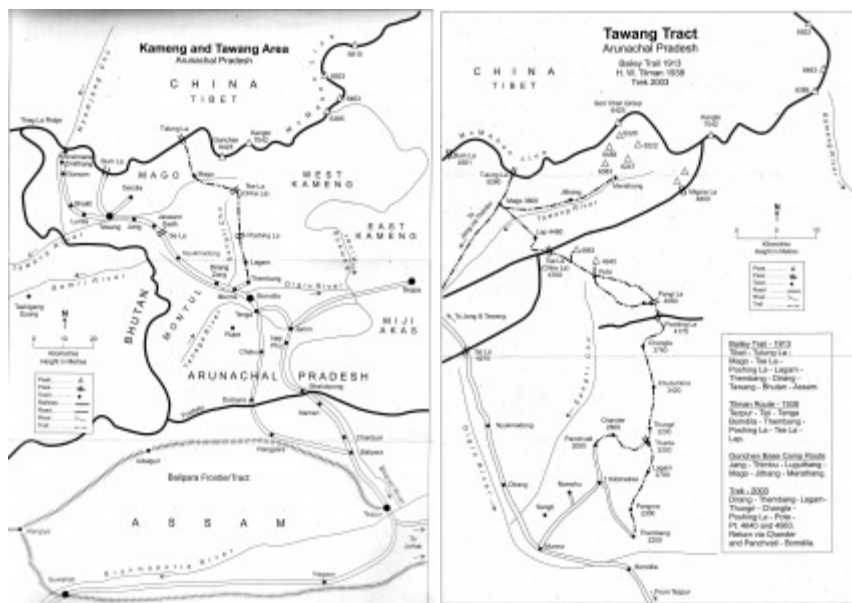
authored by **HARISH KAPADIA** | published in **2004**

Western Arunachal Pradesh, the Eastern Himalaya

Whenever I am visiting New Delhi, I love to spend an afternoon with the famous writer Bill Aitken over a lunch. We go to our favourite restaurant, watch cricket and spend a leisurely time with this master who knows Himalaya well and writes about them with deep affection. An afternoon with him can leave you with ideas for a year ! ‘Harish you must now visit the east’, he told me, almost like Horace Greeley’s advice to young investors.^[1] ‘You have gone to many valleys in the central and western Himalaya but it should not happen that you miss the eastern Himalaya like Arunachal Pradesh and Bhutan’. That was the germ that he planted in my mind a few years ago and I decided to act on it in the year 2003. No sooner, I started planning for a trip to Arunachal Pradesh the first person that came to my mind was Romesh Bhattacharji, a retired government officer who had spend several years in the northeast. He was an authority on these areas having travelled extensively there, observed well and finally had written a book on the northeast.^[2] So armed with suggestions from these two gentlemen I was set to enjoy the east.

Mountains of Arunachal Pradesh

This part of Arunachal Pradesh from the border of Bhutan till Tsangpo (Brahamaputra) gorge, where it enters India, is the easternmost part of the Indian Himalayan range. It was classified as the ‘Assam Himalaya’. Most high peaks here lie on the McMahon Line, the international border, or little to the south of it. The valleys towards north across the border are flat leading to the Tibetan plains while valleys to the south fall steeply towards India into thick forest of Arunachal Pradesh. Some of the well-known peaks are Gorichen group – a group of six peaks, Kangto 7042 m, Unnamed peaks around 6400 m and Nyegi Kangsang 6983 m. The peak of Takpa Shiri, around which both Monpas and Tibetans performed a circumambulation, *Kingkor* or a *Ringkor*, (a wider circle), lies entirely in Tibet and both this circumambulations have now been stopped by the armies on both sides. A loss of a fine tradition! ^[3]



Gorichen II was first climbed in 1966 by an Indian army team. Peak Kangto was climbed by the Japanese in 1988 approaching it from the Tibetan plateau in the north. Nyegi Kangsang (6983 m) was attempted in 1995 by a team from Indian Mountaineering Foundation which mistakenly claimed an ascent, proved wrong later. Today on the latest maps, Kangto (locally known as Sher Kangri, the ‘eastern mountain’) is 7042 m and stands as the highest peak in Arunachal Pradesh (and on the McMahon Line) and the only peak above 7000 m in the eastern Indian Himalaya, east of Bhutan. The Himalayan range east of the Tsangpo gorge, where it enters India, peters out into smaller mountains.

Brief History of Tawang Tract

To begin my affair with the east I decided to trek in the Western Arunachal Pradesh, areas near Tawang.

The ‘Tawang Tract’, as it was known during the early days, was a remote unknown area till middle of the last century. It was a thinly populated area with Monpa tribes and was known as the ‘Monyul’. For centuries Monpas travelled to Tibet for supplies and trade and the area was administered by the monasteries in Tibet or by the Tibetan kings. The head lama of Tawang monastery was appointed by the Tasilumpho gompa, Shigatse, in Tibet and the sixth Dalai Lama, who was born at Tawang, travelled from here to Lhasa .

Nain Singh

Though Monpas and Tibetans travelled across the passes from earliest years the first known detailed account of travel and its mountains was brought by Pundit Nain Sigh. He was working *incognito* for Survey of India and had travelled from Leh to Lhasa in 1874 –75. He was surveying the area and taking notes for the British. His intention was to proceed to Peking, but fearing detection he changed plans and turned south. Crossing Brahmaputra at Chetang in Tibet he crossed over to Tawang Tract via the Karkang pass and reached Tawang on 24th December

1875. Local traders wanted to monopolise trade with Tibet and generally did not allow people arriving from across the border to proceed to the Assam plains. Nain Singh was forced to stay at Tawang till 17th February 1876, but during his stay he continued the survey work around the Tawang Tract. Only after depositing all his goods in Tawang he was allowed to proceed and reached Udalguri in the British territory of Assam on 1st March 1876, completing an exploration of 1405 miles (2250 km) between Leh-Lhasa-Tawang and Assam.[4]

During the British rule in India closer relations were established with this area. Several surveyors and British officers travelled here. Taking advantage of this ultimately the British established their administration and rule over the Tawang tract as on the entire North East Frontier Agency, NEFA, (as Arunachal Pradesh was earlier known). In 1913, in a conference at Shimla where Indians, Tibetans and Chinese participated, what is now known as the 'McMahon Line' was drawn on maps under Sir Henry McMahon, demarcating the boundaries between NEFA and Tibet. This line was not recognised by the Chinese though Indians and Tibetans signed it in presence of the Chinese officials. This became the bone of contention and led to conflict later.

Bailey and Morshead

To draw the line on the map government required details of this area. Lt Col. F. M. Bailey and Capt. H. T. Morshead, two British officers were deputed by the Government to survey the Tibet-NEFA border. The route from the south was bounded by thick forest and hostile tribes and hence it was difficult to approach from the British territories. These officers crossed the Yongyapp pass east of the Tsangpo gorge and travelled from village to village through some very forbidding country in Tibet, along the Tsangpo (Brahamaputra) to Chayul and Tsona Dzong. From here they turned south to cross Tulung la (pass] into what is now the Indian territory. They travelled southwards via Mago, Lap, Pota, Poshing la to Thembang. Descending to Dirang Dzong they again turned north across Sela to Tawang. Finally they crossed westwards into Bhutan to reach the Indian plains. During this long great journey they undertook a detailed survey of the terrain and H. T. Morshead, who was a qualified surveyor, climbed several points, erected cairns and took large number of readings. This became the basis for Sir Henry McMahon, Defence Secretary, to draw the famous border line known after him, the 'McMahon Line'. [5] Their route was called the 'Bailey Trail'.



Tawang monastery seen from army memorial (Harish Kapadia)



Army war Memorial at Tawang. (Harish Kapadia)



Ancient travellers house at Thembang village. (Harish Kapadia)



Dirang Fort, occupied by the Chinese troops in 1962. (Harish Kapadia)



The Bum La (pass) on the McMahon Line. (Harish Kapadia)



Tawang monastery. (Harish Kapadia)



Gorsam chorten near Tawang. (Harish Kapadia)



Poshing la (pass) on the 'Bailey Trail'. (Harish Kapadia)

F. Kingdon-Ward

Around same time (1909-1922) F. Kingdon-Ward, a noted British botanist and naturalist, undertook several journeys for surveys of flora of Burma and Assam. He traversed areas north of Arunachal Pradesh into Tibet and entered the Indian territories from Bum la (pass) surveying the forest wealth of the areas near Tawang, Tenga and south till the foothills. His was a pioneering work in this field. His books and articles about the Tsangpo gorge, explorations in the Irrawaddy basin and others are the best source of references on the natural wealth in the eastern Himalaya.[\[6\]](#)

H. W. Tilman

The first mountaineer to arrive in the Arunachal Pradesh was H. W. Tilman in 1938. He wanted to remain, what he called, 'nearer to civilisation', around if called by the British army to serve in World War II. Accompanied by four Sherpas, Tilman walked from Tipi[\[7\]](#) to Bomdila through thick forest and humid weather of April 1938. Quite possibly it was in these forests that the Sherpas and he himself contracted malaria. He crossed Bomdila and reaching Thembang followed the Bailey trail. From Poshing la, he could not get any views. He went ahead via Pota and Tsela to Lap where he made a small base camp. As he went around suddenly one of his Sherpa died of malaria. And Tilman himself suffered severely from regular bouts of malarial fever. He and the remaining Sherpas forced themselves back across Poshing la which was at that time snow-bound. From Thembang they were carried on horses and helped by the British Government to reach civilisation. They barely survived.[\[8\]](#)

1962 Indo-China War

The war between India and China in 1962 in the mountains of NEFA brought this area, specially the Tawang tract to notice of the world. As the Chinese had not recognised the McMahon Line, which divided Arunachal Pradesh and Tibet, the seeds of conflict were sown early. The Chinese declared their own claim line which ran almost near the Brahmaputra river in the Assam plains, thus claiming the entire Arunachal Pradesh as their own.

When the Chinese occupied Tibet in 1959 the present Dalai Lama fled from Lhasa and entered India from Khinzemane near the Thagla ridge on the McMahon Line, reaching Shakti and Tawang. He was welcomed by Indian troops and ultimately escorted to the Indian plains and he settled in India. This created more tension between two neighbours.

After 1959 the Chinese moved troops till the border. The Chinese government appealed for settlement of the border dispute in the west in Ladakh and along the McMahon Line in the east, but their main aim was to retain large parts of Aksai Chin in Ladakh, through which they had built a road. The Chinese were using the dispute in the east as a *quid pro quo* for the territories to be gained in the west. The situation became tense by early sixties.

In response to aggressive movements of troops by the Chinese the Indian Government, against the advice of the Indian military, ordered establishment of forward posts in what was known as the 'Forward Policy'. Many posts in both the sectors were established facing the Chinese in an eyeball confrontation. All the diplomatic efforts to bring a political solution to the border problem failed. Finally on the night of 19 and 20 October 1962, the Chinese attacked the Indian forces both in the eastern and western sectors. In a swift move they overran Indian posts. The Chinese forces suffering heavy losses came through the Thag la ridge, Bum la and Tulung la passes across the border in large numbers.

One contingent of the Chinese soldiers came down the Bailey trail from Tulung la, Mago, Pushing la to Thembang, thus cutting through to the rear of the Indian garrisons stationed at Dirang Dzong. This resulted in fighting and heavy losses to the Indian forces. Later after a gap of two weeks, towards mid November, the Chinese forces ran down till foothills along the Tenga river and almost reached Tezpur, causing a major panic in the city. Treasuries were evacuated, records and food stocks were burnt and many fled across the Brahmaputra.

With poor political and military leadership Indian soldiers, poorly equipped and armed, paid a heavy price and many were killed or taken as prisoners and the loss of morale and prestige was high. Villagers fled from their houses. On 19th November 1962, exactly a month after the invasion began, the Chinese Government declared a unilateral ceasefire and in next few months they withdrew back across the border. They remain across the McMahon Line, which they still do not recognise. Indian army slowly moved up the valley, at first establishing posts away from the border and today all the points on the border are guarded by well-equipped and well-trained Indian soldiers. [\[9\]](#)

Later Years

After the Indo-China war in 1962 the entire area remained out of bounds for mountaineers or any visitors for a long time. The first expedition to this area was in 1966 from the Indian army to peak Gorichen II (6488 m) which they climbed. Since then Gorichen II and Gorichen East (6222 m) has been attempted and climbed by several teams.

Some army officers and security personnel undertook treks on several trails along the border and their articles and notes are useful for future trekkers. Now trekkers and climbers are welcome

though the rules of the ‘inner line’ are to be followed and fees are charged to foreign trekkers.[\[10\]](#)

Our visit, October 2003

This was area which we had selected to trek and visit. The approach to Tawang starts at Tezpur and three of us flew there on 2nd October 2003, where we met our four Kumauni porters who were waiting for us at the railway station. The day was spent to look around the historic town of Tezpur on the bank of the mighty Brahmaputra river.

Next day early morning we started for 343 km journey to Tawang. The road initially passed through the plains of Assam and at Bhalukpong we entered Arunachal Pradesh, and our ‘inner line’ permits were checked. We passed Tenga, Bomdila and Dirang. Ahead were two army memorials on either side of the Sela pass. First was at Nyukmadong south of the pass and in the north at Jaswantgadh, so named after the valiant fighter Jaswant Singh. Sela pass (4270 m), was a historic and important landmark on this route. A major battle took place here and several memorial standing around here tell a grim story. By evening we were settled in Tawang.

Tawang has an army memorial in the centre of the town, beautifully constructed in the style of a Buddhist chorten and with names of every soldier who laid down his life in the fight in the 1962 war inscribed. Tawang monastery is dominating the entire landscape and has a huge statue of Buddha and a small museum.

We visited Bum la (4501 m) and Gerzila by road. Former is on the McMahon Line overlooking the Tibetan areas while the latter has a great view of peaks on the line. We drove to Zimithang. west of Tawang passing Gorsam chorten, an ancient *chorten* constructed in similar style as Bodhnath chorten near Kathmandu. Ahead of Zimithang lies Hathung la and the Thag la ridge which was the scene of conflict between the Chinese and Indian forces.

Trek along the Bailey Trail

On 13th October with all preparations for our trek completed we drove back to Dirang across Sela pass and turned eastwards to drive up to the old village of Thembang (2250 m). We contacted *Gram Bara*, ‘GB’ for short, a ‘villager elder’, as it is a tradition in Arunachal Pradesh that every village has a GB, who not necessarily be old or elderly person, but certainly someone influential and rich. He would arrange porters, mules, food, stay and look after all your facilities and requirements on payment.

Thembang was a dilapidated and poor village, all the rich having moved to Dirang. There were two gates surrounding the village, north and south, former gate still intact. During the era of Tibetan Kings, this was a prosperous village and headquarters for the entire area. A huge wall surrounded the village and when these giant gates were closed the village turned into a fortress. A loud shout was given as a warning every evening before the gates were closed. Thembang had some old houses and we were shown some of them. During their visits all British officers, including H. W. Tilman in 1938, had stayed in Thembang.



Pan A: The ridge of the McMahon Line and peaks of Gerzila. (Harish Kapadia)



Article 6
A. View from Chander Village. Peaks on the McMahon Line. Gorichen group (left), Kangto (center), unnamed peaks (right). (Dr. Kamal Limdi)

Pan C: View from Chander village: peaks on McMahon Line. Gorichen group (left), Kangto (center), unnamed peaks right). (Dr. Kamal Limdi)



Article 6
B. Kangto (7042 m) from Poshing la on the Bailey Trail. (Dr. Kamal Limdi)

Pan B: Kangto (7042 m) from Poshing la on the Bailey Trail. (Dr. Kamal Limdi)

Our trek began on 15 October from Pangma village as the arrangements for mules had to be made there. The climb to Lagam, a holy monastery, began by passing through village of Semnak and then traversing through thick forest. The entire trek was through finest rain forest, so thick that routes traversed ridges, never descending to the valley. As the ridge went up and down the trails also followed its contours. This was quite different than in the other parts of the Himalaya like Garhwal or Ladakh, where villages are at sheltered places in the valleys and the trails generally followed the valleys. The exquisite forests and its varieties would require almost a separate chapter in any visitor's logbook to Arunachal.

The trail climbed steeply again to a disused army road which led us to Thunla, and to Thungri a vast open ground where on our return we obtained some magnificent views. All these places were camping grounds for shepherds, locally called as *Chaurikong* ('chauri' is female yak and 'kong' their places to stay). The weather had settled down to a pattern with views up to 6 or 7 a.m. With the rising sun, the clouds will rise from the valleys and covered the entire surroundings for rest of the day. This too only in autumn months, otherwise it will be either raining or foggy all along. In fact Tilman, who was looking for Kangto and Gorichen, could not get a single view of these mountains during his travels in 1938.

We continued on the trail along the ridge following a broad path. Staying at Khudumbara (3420 m) we finally climbed to Changla an open grazing ground on a broad ridge. We were camping here on 19th October 2003, exactly 41 years to the date when Chinese had attacked the Indian forces in 1962. It was intensely cold and looking at those bunkers where Indian army soldiers had stayed with simple pullovers, small amount of ammunition and long march till Tipi behind them, one could sympathise with these brave defenders. Army had stayed in these bunkers for several years after the war braving the isolation and the cold.

From Changla the trail steeply climbed to Poshing la (4170 m), a major pass en route surrounded by abandoned army bunkers. Next morning it offered us a clear view of mountains: from Gorichen, Kangto, unnamed peaks east of Kangto to possibly till Nyegi Kangsang. The forest and mountains with the rising sun made it a romantic point except that it was too cold and of course the view was ours only till 8 o'clock.

We descended via Pang la into the valley of the Sangti river and established ourselves at Pota, a lovely camping ground ablaze with autumn colours. In next two days we climbed two high points; easy walk to top of the ridge at 4640 m (Kapadia and Limdi) and in an energetic push, Huzefa with Puran Singh, reached point 4983 m which was in line with the Tse la (Chhe la)[\[11\]](#) and Migme passes. He could obtain closer views of the glaciers and the Gorichen massif. From Tse la the trail descends to Lap and leads to Mago and Tulung la. We receded route to the east which led across a pass to the valley leading to the base of Kangto.

The traditional trail for Gorichen base camp runs from Jang, Mago to Chokersham. We had decided against following it as it followed the valley all along and would not have offered us the views, which we had enjoyed. Now it was late October and the first snows arrived at Pota overnight. With Poshing la, which we had to re-cross, behind us, we quickly had to decide to return as we were warned by GB that too much snow on the pass would prevent horses re-crossing it. Hence in next two days we crossed Poshing la to Changla and reached Thungri.

From Thungri we followed abandoned army road and in a march of 18 km reached Chander

(2800 m). It was a small and primitive village but with the best views that the entire trail had to offer. The morning of 28th October was clear and magical; villagers went about their normal work, shepherds were walking towards the forest, goats were grazing around and in backdrop was the entire mountain range of the Tawang Tract and with the distance Kangto was towering over every other peak.

Finally we descended to the picturesque Panchvati village, home of our companion Lopsang. We had arranged for transport, to drive us to Bomdila and civilisation.

Mundama

One of the advantages of trekking in such a damp area in early winter or late autumn is the phenomena of the *Mundama*, which is the name in Monpa dialect for the famed 'Brocken Spectre'.[\[12\]](#)

The Bailey trail traversed from north to south along the high ridges with valleys dropping steeply on two sides. Standing on the ridge we were exposed to the early morning sun. Our shadows falling on the damp mist clouds towards the west many times created a colourful rainbow with our shapes and movements reflected in the centre of it. This was the Brocken Spectre at the best, the *Mundama*. One was lucky (as villagers told us) to see *Mundama* or the Brocken Spectre, and these Arunachal valleys are blessed with this spectacular site during autumn months.

On one of the last days of the trek, we got up early in the village of Chander. As we walked on the edges, a beautiful sunrise from the east greeted us. Our images were reflected in centre of a lovely rainbow to the west. Soon several rainbows were created one after the other and we waived our hands, which were clearly seen, making different shapes. I had seen such a phenomenon of the Spectre of the Brocken, only twice before in my life. It was on a hill near Mumbai, a week before the approaching monsoon, I stood at the edge of a fort on the Western Ghats with my son, Lt. Nawang Kapadia and as we saw our imprints in centre of the rainbow on clouds we waved out. Nawang soon joined the army as a Gorkha Officer and made the supreme sacrifice in line of duty. As I looked at myself in the *Mundama* at Chander I waived my hands and gave a salute to those brave soldiers of the 1962 war who had defended this area for us to enjoy today and to my son Nawang. It was a fitting ending to a great visit to these unknown valleys.

SUMMARY:

A trek along the Bailey Trail, in the Tawang district, Western Arunachal Pradesh, in October 2003.

Members: Harish Kapadia, Dr Kamal Limdi and Huzefa Electricwala.

Sponsored by: The Mountainers Bombay

[1] Horace Greeley, 'Go East, young investor or old investor!' he advised, which started the boom in the southeast Asian economy.

[2] Bhattacharji, Romesh, *Lands of Early Dawn, Northeast of India*. (Rupa, New Delhi, 2002)

[3] Refer *Himalayan Journal*, Vol. IX (1937), page 145, 'The Sources of the Subansiri and Siyom', by F. Ludlow.

[4] For his explorations of 1867 and 1874 -1875 Pundit Nain Singh was awarded the 'Patron's Gold (Royal) Medal' by the Royal Geographical Society, London, the first Indian to receive this honour which no other Indian or Asian received for next 125 years.

[5] Refer to books, Bailey, F. M. (Lt. Col.), *No Passport to Tibet and China-Tibet-Assam*. (Rupert Hart-Davis, London, 1957).

[6] Kingdon-Ward, Frank, *Himalayan Enchantment, an anthology*. (Serinda Publications, London, 1990). He made botanical explorations in these areas from 1909 to 1953.

[7] Nowadays spelled as 'Tipi', it was originally known as 'T.P.' short for 'Transit Point' as the road ended near a bridge on the Kameng river. In the early days luggage was transferred on the other bank, mules were arranged and everyone had to walk from T.P. Now the place has resulted in another settlement.

[8] Tilman's expedition is covered in detail in the books: Tilman, H. W., *Where Men and Mountains Meet* and *The Seven Mountain -Travel Books*. (Diadem books, London, 1983)

[9] For details of this war refer to Maxwell ,Neville, *India's China War* (Natraj Publishers, Dehradun, 1970)

[10] For Indian trekkers a small fee for the inner line permits are to be paid. For foreign trekkers, at present, US \$ 50 are charged for 10 days (renewable) and party has to be of minimum four persons.

[11] Not to be confused with Sela pass on the motorable road. This is a pass near Mago on the Bailey Trail, pronounced as 'Chhe la'.

[12] This spectre is named after [Brocken](#), also called Blocksberg, highest point 1142 m (3747 feet) of the Harz Mountains in the Alps, lying 13 km (8 miles) west-southwest of Wernigerode, Germany. A huge, granite-strewn dome, the peak commands magnificent views in all directions, and a mountain railway (12 miles [19 km] long) reaches the summit. When the sun is low, shadows cast from the peak become magnified, and seemingly gigantic silhouettes are cast on the upper surfaces of low-lying clouds or fog below the mountain. This effect is known as the Brocken Bow, or the Brocken Spectre, and is given a mystical significance in the mountain's folklore. Long after the introduction of Christianity, traditional rites continued to be enacted there annually on Walpurgis Night, or Witches' Sabbath (April 30). The peak is represented in a famous scene in J.W. von Goethe's drama Faust.



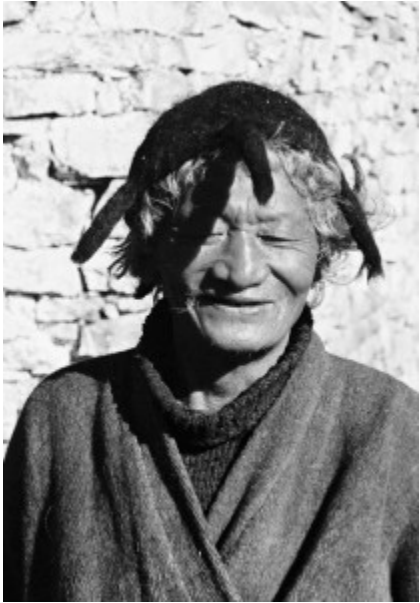
Thickly wooded 'Bailey Trail', Arunachal Pradesh (Huzefa Electricwala)



sela (pass) on way to TAWANG (Dr. Kamal Limdi)



Gorichen peaks from Poshing la. (Dr. Kamal Limdi)



Typical headgear of an Arunachal Tribesman (Dr. Kamal Limdi)



Ancient gate at Thembang village. (Harish Kapadia)



Mundama the Brocken spectre in Arunachal. (Harish Kapadia)