

## THE PROMISED LAND

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An exciting trip to the Dibang Valley, Arunachal Pradesh

As it is said in every news bulletin, first the headlines. We trekked in the upper Dibang valley, eastern Arunachal Pradesh (formerly NEFA). We followed in the footsteps of F. M. Bailey and H. T. Morshead to Yonggyap la and in the Dri valley. Due to five days of unexpected storm our in the Dri valley could not be completed, while the Yonggyap la party was caught in the same storm with heavy snow blocking the return route. They were trapped without food and barely survived before helicopters rescued them. Now for the full details !

The Dibang valley, in the eastern Arunachal Pradesh (formerly NEFA) is deep and thickly wooded. To its north and east lies Tibet (China) and to its west is the Siang (Tsangpo) valley. Having visited the Kameng,[\[1\]](#) Siang[\[2\]](#) and Subansiri[\[3\]](#) valleys, in past three years we turned to the Dibang, further east.

On the northern border with the Dibang valley (the McMahon Line) lies the Yonggyap la. This pass, with the adjoining pass Andra la, leads to the Chimdro area of Tibet. The holy mountain Kundu Potrang lies across these passes, almost due north of the Andra la. Pundit explorer Kinthup had made a pilgrimage to this mountain during his search for the passage of the Tsangpo into India. Many Tibetan pilgrims visit this place and perform circumambulations now that the Chinese have restored religious freedom. In last decade a party led by Ian Baker made a visit to this peak from the Tibetan plateau.[\[4\]](#)

### Early History

The British since 1820's were trying to open trade routes through upper reaches of NEFA into Tibet and China. However, they were stopped by the hostile Mishmis. It was mentioned in the report *Mishmah Hills* by Lt. Burlton that the areas were inhabited by tribes 'who were very averse to receive strangers'. In 1827 Lt. Wilcox travelled deep into the Dibang valley but on being refused further passage, had to return. The other travellers into the Dibang and the Lohit were Dr. Griffith (1836) Capt. Hannay (1840) and Lt. Rowlett (1845). However the Mishmis who lived in seclusion for centuries were suspicious of the motives of the foreigners travelling through their territories. Early in 1848, a fakir named Parmanand Acharyya met his death at the hand of the Miju Mishmis on his way from Assam to Tibet. One of the villagers involved in the incident was the leading Mishmi Chief Jingsha. In 1851 M. Krick, a French missionary reached the Tibetans village at Qualong on the Mishmi Tibet border safely. Going further into Tibet he found extensive cultivation and a settled population along the open valley. He returned again in 1854 with a colleague M. Bourri. During this journey they met an independent Mishmi chief named Kai-ee-sha who escorted them. However, due to a misunderstanding and angry at killing of a mithun he killed both the French missionaries. The British government took a serious view of the assassinations of Krick and Bourri who were French citizens. Lord Dalhousie ordered an expedition to be sent to the Mishmi hills to punish the murderers. Accordingly in February 1855 a small party of 20 men of the Assam Light Infantry and other hill-men marched from Sadiya under the command of Lt. Eden. They surprised Kai-ee-sha and his three elder sons were killed in the fight. Kai-ee-sha was tried and hanged in a jail at Dibrugarh but not before he had killed two of the prison guards. After this incidence, the area slowly opened by visits of different government officials and surveyors. R. G. Woodthorpe, penetrated into the Dibang valley via Nizamghat in 1877-78

and chief commissioners of Assam deputed many representatives from 1883 to 1899. There were some killings and punitive expeditions all starting from Nizamghat. As Verrier Elwin wrote 'nearly all the early visitors came away with the lowest opinion of the Mishmis'. Lt. Wilcox wrote that 'they were excessively dirty and as rude looking as could possibly be imagined.' Similarly all other travellers wrote about the hostility and dirt of the Mishmis. The exploration and the conflicts continued till 1930 when the Idu Mishmis committed their last raid on a British territory near Nizamghat. The British Officer J. H. Carce made a punitive expedition and restored peace.

### **F. M. Bailey and H. T. Morshead**

Though the first forays into the Dibang valley were made by the early British punitive expeditions it was two British officers, F. M. Bailey and H. T. Morshead who made an extensive travel. On 14 May 1913 they reached the village of Ilupu at the confluence of the Dri and the Mathun rivers, below the present day Anini. They travelled further up to Mipi, to a small Tibetan settlement there. The Tibetans were shocked and surprised to see them and ran away to forest at first, looking at perhaps the first white man in their lives. However, after a day or two their confidence returned and they met up with Bailey's team. Their leader Gyamtso became friendly with them during month long stay. They learnt a lot from him and he decided to accompany them for some part of the journey.

The Tibetans had reached Mipi across two different passes Andra la and Yonggyap la in search of the holy land Pemako which they believed to exist in the upper Dibang valley. Few of them died on the way and those who reached Mipi faced hostile and agile Mishmis. Tibetans were regularly attacked and the Mishmis, who were expert in living in jungles, disappeared too fast. Thus disappointed and in trouble most of the Tibetans returned leaving a handful of families led by Gyamtso at Mipi. In his book *Le Tibet*

*Revolte*, the French author, M. Bacot, wrote about an old prophecy which said that 'when the Tibetan religion was persecuted in Tibet, people should go to a country called Pemako, a sort of promise land. Pemako was on the frontiers of India and here they would find a land good to live in, their religion would revive and eventually spread throughout the world.' This was the belief by which these Tibetans, in search of the promise land, had settled at Mipi. How prophetic, in 1959 the Dalai Lama fled to India for the same reason and now India is their 'Pemako' to spread and revive the Tibetan religion!

The exact geographical position of Pemako was imprecise. All that was known to them was that 'somewhere on the Dihang-Dibang-Lohit watershed there was a holy mountain of glass and around this holy mountain lay fertile valleys.' This was the mountain of Kundu Potrang, which is one of the three holiest places in the Tibetan religion (others being Kailash and Takpa Siri). The first wave of settlers established friendly relations with the Chulikattas<sup>[5]</sup> (Mishmis) from whom they bought land but soon there were conflicts between them. The Tibetans found it difficult to hold their own against an elusive enemy. They seldom saw the Mishmi though they were frequently shot at with poison arrows from hides in the jungle. Tibetans also suffered from sickness owing to low altitude to which they were not accustomed, to the excessive rainfall and vast number of blood sucking flies. In 1909, convinced that this was no Pemako, majority of the settlers returned to Tibet. Capt. Neville deputed by the British Government prepared *Report on the Debong Survey and Exploration Expedition* which narrated much of the above history.

In an earlier survey team under Maj. Gunter was Capt. Morshead of the Royal Engineers. He had worked for six years under Survey of India and was keen to survey and explore the valleys with Col. Bailey. Finally when they put up the project to government, the answer was 'Approved, but the party

should not enter Tibet'. Moreover, World War I was developing in Europe and the British Government was not ready to depute two of its soldiers to an unknown land and invite retaliation from the Tibetans. When Bailey and Morshead reached

Mipi, a message arrived that they should not go ahead 'without further orders'. They should return with Neville's party in case they were called back. Keen to undertake this historic journey which no one had done before, they discussed a plan of action, if orders came countermanding the expedition. Some 30 kms south of Mipi, facing the present day Anini, there were two small mountains Karundi and Deshindi, the tops of which were visible from Mipi. Morshead was to climb these heights and use it as survey stations. If a message came through countermanding the expedition he was to light a smoke signal, on seeing which Bailey would immediately depart for Tibet. This would give at least one of them the chance of getting away in time. Their idea was to cross over into Tibet from either of the passes i.e. Andra la or Yonggyap la go further to cross Pungpung la in four days and reach Chimdro which was in the wide open valley. However many Tibetan parties in the past were trapped between the Yonggyap la and Pungpung la which were four days of marching apart. In case of bad weather and storm there was no escape between those two passes and the party could starve. At first Bailey proceeded with Gyamtso on a trail towards Andra la. They found the going tough and trying to look for a trail some remnants like vessels, clothes and camping places of the Tibetans were found. This pass would have taken them to Kundu Potrang, the holy mountain which is located to the north of the pass. They retreated to Mipi. After few days Bailey proceeded toward the Yonggyap la. He reached Basam, stayed in a cave and survived by killing a takin and other meat. Once joined by Morshead, from 16 May 1913, they proceeded along the Yonggyap nala and on 27 May crossed the pass into Tibet. According to them the pass was

12,020 ft (3665 m) in height. After crossing the Yonggyap la they travelled west towards the Tsangpo gorge and travelled from village to village and some very forbidding country from Chayul to Tsona Dzong. They turned south to cross the Tulung la into what is now the Indian territory. They came down via Mago, Lap, Pota, Poshing la to Thembang. Descending to Dirang Dzong they again turned north across to Sela and to Tawang. Finally they crossed westwards into Bhutan to reach the Indian plains.<sup>[6]</sup> During this long journey, they undertook detailed survey of the terrain and H. T. Morshead, who was a qualified surveyor, climbed several points, erected cairns and took many readings. This became the basis for Sir Henry McMahon to draw his famous 'McMahon Line', demarcating the borders between the British India and Tibet.

When the McMahon Line was agreed to at the Shimla Conference in 1914, Indian and Tibetan delegation signed the agreement. China, which attended the conference as an observer, later refused to recognise the agreement. The McMahon Line was disputed by them and the India-China War of 1962 was fought on this issue. Since then the borders are well –protected by the Indian army.

While we were trekking news on the radio announced a renewed claim by China on the Arunachal Pradesh, coinciding with visit of their President to India. At the time a retired army General (Gen. Nanavatty) , a cloth merchant from Mumbai (Kapadia), a velvet manufacturer (Kothari) and an Air India Security officer (Wani) were near the McMahon Line at Yonggyap La. Mishmis spoke Hindi with us, many were working in the plains of Assam and Indian administration at Anini was actively functioning. What more proof is required, if any, of peaceful possession and complete control of India of Arunachal Pradesh. ?

## **River Valleys**

It is said that to understand a region well, one must understand its river systems. The Dibang valley has several rivers of different names to make it confusing enough. From the north-west flows the Mathun river which is soon joined by the Yonggyap chu and Andra chu at Basam and Mipi respectively flowing in from west to east. While on the eastern side the two rivers from Adjankho la (Adzamkho river) and Tsang Khang la (Ekka pani) meet at Brueni. Thus the Dri river is formed and it flows south to merge with the Mathun little below Anini.

The Mathun meets the Talon river near Etalin and loses its identity. The Talon originates near the holy site of Idu Popu, a nature God worshipped by the Mishmis. Flowing south, the Talon is joined by the Emra, Ahi and Sesseri rivers on the western bank. From the east it is joined by Ethun river and finally by the Deopani. This large river body flows south and is called the Dibang river giving the valley its name. It merges with the Lohit river to flow into the Assam plains. Later the Lohit is joined by the Dihang river (also known as the Siang or Tsangpo) to form the Brahmaputra. One can say what's in a name. But in case of rivers there is certain confusion in these names if one doesn't know it.

### **1950 Earthquake**

A giant earthquake of more than 8 on the Richter scale caused havoc in the lower Dibang valley and changed the course of several rivers. Nizamghat and Sadiya, two major towns and entry points to the upper valley, were literally wiped out from the map during this earthquake. The Dibang river changed its course and many of the lower tributaries merged at different points. Today there is Sadiya district, but no Sadiya town. Nearby a small settlement of Roing barely managed to survive. The residents heard a rustling sound after the earthquake and fearing flood, they climbed up a small hill. In front of their eyes they saw their homes being destroyed by

floods. They were rescued. after several days spent in hunger. The majority of paths, trails and roads were destroyed. The trail, now a motorable road, was rebuilt by a different alignment from Roing across the Myodiya pass to Anini. Further east the earthquake shook up and destroyed the famous holy site of Brahmakund and Parshuramkund. The fakir's rock where many pilgrims took a holy dip was obliterated and the Lohit river now flows into the Kund which has remained only a holy name.[\[7\]](#)

### **Trek November 2006**

We reached Anini, at the head of the Dibang valley, on 10 November, having travelled 445 km from Dibrugarh, via Chappakhowa, Roing, Hunli and Etalin. On return we were to follow a circuitous route which avoided the ferry crossing. This was across a new bridge, called the 'Brahma Kund bridge' which passed the famous site of Parshuram kund. Parshuram was a saint known for his anger. Once he killed his own mother in a rage. Due to the grave sin he had committed the knife would not come off his hand. Finally in the lower valley he banged it on a rock and water flowed and washed his blood to release the knife. This was the 'luit', the red blood river, later known as the Lohit river.

As per the legend river Brahmaputra originates from Brahma kund. In fact the kund is on the Lohit river and the Brahmaputra is formed later by the merging of the Dibang and Siang rivers with the Lohit. Perhaps Parshuram kund and Brahma kund are same.

As we entered the Sadiya district a place named Kundil Bazar (or Gomli) was passed.[\[8\]](#) From here the road was on a mountainous terrain and interesting board appeared to caution against rash driving. Our favourite was 'Drive with Safety to have a safe – tea at home'. The National Highway 52, was an amazing site. It was loose gravel, lots of sand flying with cars driving on it and huge potholes. I inquired with my driver whether there are always such



huge holes. 'Ahead this there are deeper holes. In the rain they get filled with water and small children learn swimming in them !', was his stern reply. We spent two days at Anini looking at this modest town and farthest district headquarters of the upper Dibang valley. From Anini we followed the Mathun valley at first and reached Mipi.

### **Yonggyap la – the Mathun valley**

Bailey had stayed a month at Mipi making friends with the Tibetans settled here. They guided him further. Following Bailey's route we reached Basam, a lovely place in thick forest. From here the difficulties of the trek started and we had to go through a thick jungle on a faint track, with many steep ups and downs. At many places the trail had to be cleared in thick bamboo forest. On such terrain your only friends are a trail in front and a Mishmi behind. If trail disappears you are in serious trouble as it is impossible to walk even a few steps without it in this thick forest. But if Mishmi disappears he will soon emerge almost from nowhere and guide you to the trail.

The camps were in a small forest clearings and one had to be careful about Dim Dam flies. Mercifully snakes<sup>[9]</sup> and leeches were mostly absent as it was autumn. From Chapu the route climbed steeply and there were many difficult stages, as the Yonggyap chu (river) was left well below. Camping at four other camps the party reached Pabbow at foot of the Yonggyap la. In deteriorating weather Yonggyap la was reached on 22 November 2006. Across in Tibet was the holy mountain of Kundu Potrang.

### **Kundu Potrang**

In Tibetan religion a mountain with water body (lakes) around it or near it is considered holy. Thus we have Kailash with Manasarovar and Rakas tal at foot of it and Takpa Siri surrounded by three different lakes. To the north of the Dibang valley lies Kundu Potrang, a holy mountain with lakes on its

sides. Before the Chinese banned religious activities scores of pilgrims visited this mountain and performed circumambulation.

Kinthup, a Pundit explorer, was deputed by Lt. Harman to trace the course of the Tsangpo, whether it flows into India or flows further east. Being illiterate he was sent with a learned Lama, who unfortunately, sold him into slavery at the Shugden gompa and disappeared. After staying for one year, Kinthup requested the head lama of this monastery for permission to perform pilgrimage to Kundu Potrang. En route he crossed the Tsangpo and made his journey around Kundu Potrang and on return prepared small logs with markings to be thrown into the Tsangpo on a given date. If these logs were discovered in the plains of Assam, it would conclusively prove that the Tsangpo flowed into NEFA as Siang (or later called Dihang) and flow into Assam as the Brahmaputra. However, by the time he finished his pilgrimage Lt. Harman was posted out to England and though Kinthup managed to float his logs in the Tsangpo there was no one to trace it in the plains of Assam. The concept of Shangrila as the ultimate place of bliss was written about by James Hilton in his famous book, *The Lost Horizon*. A movie was made based on this book. A plane crashes in this region of Pemako where they find a settlement of lamas who live more than 100 years. The description, location and the situation in the book was somewhere around the region of Pemako and Kundu Potrang. It was the Promised Land or the Shangrila. Recently a British scholar Ian Baker trekking from Kathmandu visited Kundu Potrang. In his book, *The Heart of Tibet*, he narrated his journey and wrote about the legend and the importance of Kundu Potrang. The Mishmis are living examples of a Shangrila. In the management training programs conducted, for the corporate, the executives are left in nature for a few hours, may be at night and they are told that they will be alone, and having never realised what it takes to be 'alone', these few hours make them grow internally. One of my friend's daughters when she heard of this, after

thinking for a while, mentioned, 'how can they be alone, nature would always be with them!' How true these words sound in the remote forested land. The local Mishmis literally talk to forest and live by forest. They are experts, the way they hack a bamboo with *dah*, make everything in their lives from forest products, go hunting and live amidst forest. Not only the nature talked to them, they sing with nature, like being in true Shangrila.

### **Strom and the rescue**

As the party returned to the last camp a freak and fierce storm engulfed the area. For next 5 days it snowed without respite and there was heavy accumulation of snow prohibiting any movement. It was impossible and even dangerous to find a way through thick bamboo growth and rickety log bridges. Rations were running low and soon last of *chapattis* was eaten. Four porters decided to desert and make a dash back risking their lives, a sure sign of the grim situation. The party was in contact with the army via wireless communication. Luckily on the 27 November there was a break in weather and clouds lifted for 6 hours. During this opening two Cheetah helicopters of the Indian Air Force rescued the trapped party and brought them back to Anini. It was a stunning display of flying in difficult conditions and narrow valley. Without this clearing in the weather and brave pilots a disaster was waiting to happen.

### **The Dri valley**

Having separated from the Yonggyap la party on the third day after Basam, a party of two trekked up the beautiful Dri valley, containing some of the most beautiful Indo-Malayan forest with wild life, and later with tall pine trees. They trekked to Chai Pani and Chigu Pani when the storm caught up with them. It rained, sometimes hailed and snowed, incessantly as they stayed back at Chigu Pani. Ahead was a dangerous bridge across on an

overflowing side stream. Called 'the Cardien Bridge' (after officer Cardien who first built it) it was simply slippery wooden logs put across, with a waterfall pouring from above and a fall to the Dri if you slip. There was no way this bridge could be crossed in such rainy weather.

Moreover all local shikaris were returning home, a sign that one should not proceed ahead. There was no clear communication from the Yonggyap la party. This caused anxiety. As the party returned to Anini they saw three helicopters parked at the helipad and they had already rescued the first lot of trapped trekkers. Soon a happy and relived party gathered at Anini.

As we drove up the Myodiya pass on the return there was fresh snow on the sides and on the road. With passing of vehicles the tyres had cleared the snow on two lanes leaving a thick line of snow in centre. Our driver steered on the lines with care. After quarter of an hour on such a road, he asked, 'What is this white line in centre of the road? Is it white sand?' I looked at him in amazement and said, 'It is snow'. He said, 'Snow?, *Baraf?*' The driver was from lower Assam valley and he had never seen snow, let alone driving on it.

Capt. Sandeep from the back seat murmured, 'He should have been with us on the Yonggyap la to see the real stuff'. We all laughed, we could afford to, having survived the ordeal. Perhaps Bailey and Morshead, whose exploits had lured us here, were having the last laugh.

**Note:**

**Tsang Khang la**

At the top at the head of the northern most valleys of the Dri river, there are three major passes. The northern most being Adzamkho la. This pass from Brueni leads directly to Chimdro and hence was one of the important passes to be used. To its southeast lies Tsang Khang la. It is said that once

this was a very popular and easy route leading to Zayul in Tibet. Several traders crossed from here.

Tsang Khang la or Ekka pani is located at 19,000 ft (5800 m). It is at head of the 'Fish Tail 1' (called so due to fish tail shape of border lines in this area), and is disputed by the Chinese claiming as their own. Tsang Khang is the Tibetan name for this pass. At western foot of this pass Yeh river (a feeder to the Dri river) originates. In Idu-Mishmi dialect *Yeh ka* (Yeh- name, ka-gap) the gap from where Yeh river originates. Thus Tsang Khang la and Yeh ka are same and Yeh ka has been corrupted as Ekka.

This pass was used for barter trade between the Tibetans and indigenous Idu-Mishmis of the upper Dibang valley, exchange of animal skins and red salt. Idus were stealing chicken from the Tibetan villages. To stop this menace the Tibetan priest installed a flag on top of the pass with a curse that any Idu who would cross it will die. Capturing villagers for slavery was common for both sides. Once Tibetans tried to capture two Idus but they were killed by their victims. Thus the Idus were cursed again by the lama. After a few days some Idu-Mishmis died after crossing the pass, may be due to cold, snow or lack of clothing on this snow-clad pass. This was attributed to the curse and locals stopped using the pass since then, the barter trade stopped and there is no communication between two communities, in the Dri and the Zayul valleys. Instead some times the nearby Aguia la was used. Till late 1960s Auchi, Bapa and Alipo villages were seen located close to Aguia la, Tsang Khang la and Kya la respectively.

As Tsang Khang la is not in use and Aguia la, little to its north is used as an easy approach. However, both the passes are located on the McMahon Line, an international boundary. Thus the Lama's curse today is only an academic reality.

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[1] 'A Trek in Tawang Tract', HJ Vol. 60, p. 26.

[2] 'Tsangpo : The Final Exploration', HJ Vol. 61, p.72.

[3] 'Secrets of Subansiri', HJ Vol. 62, p.68.

[4] *The Heart of the World*, by Ian Baker.

[5] This name is given to them due to a special type of hair cut they wear!

[6] *No Passport to Tibet and China-Tibet-Assam*, by F.M. Bailey.

[7] F. Kingdon-Ward was camping in the area when the earthquake struck. He observed the effects with his scientific mind and lived to tell the tale.

[8] Rukmani, the wife of Lord Krishna was once abducted by Shiva for her beauty. As she was carried an earring (kundan) fell on earth. Hence this place is known as Kundil. This gave away the route of abduction and the location of Rukmani to Krishna who with his army fought with Shiva. Finally a ceasefire was arrived at between the Gods and Rukmani was returned.

[9] We saw one long poisonous Russell's Viper. Mishmis soon did him in.