

The Eastern Himalaya

An Introduction

Michael Ward

Photographs 2-6

The portion of the Himalaya extending from Sikkim to Namcha Barwa is not well known to European mountaineers and travellers. In his book 'Abode of Snow' Kenneth Mason groups the whole into one section terming it the Assam Himalaya. This is an unsatisfactory definition as the Himalayan peaks lie on the borders of three politically distinct regions — the Kingdom of Bhutan, the North-East Frontier Agency of India and Tibet. Namcha Barwa (7756m) is usually considered to be the easternmost peak of the main Himalayan chain but beyond, many peaks lie in Assam, Burma and China. These ranges run usually north-south at right angles to the main Himalaya which generally follows an east-west axis, and are named the Heng Duan Shan.

This is a region of spectacular river gorges and the Tsangpo runs between Gyela Peri and Namcha Barwa, nearly circling the latter peak before changing its name to the Dihang then Brahmaputra and joining the Ganges. The climate varies from the arctic aridity of the Tibetan plateau to the lush wetness of the Tropics and the plant and animal life is unbelievably varied.

For geographical convenience it might be reasonable to divide the Eastern Himalaya into the Bhutan Himal and the Tsangpo Himal.

The exploration of much of Tsangpo Himal was carried out by the Pandits, by Bailey and Morshead as well as by Kingdon Ward, Ludlow, Sherriff and Taylor during their plant hunting expeditions. More recently Chinese scientists have worked in this region from the Tibetan side.

The Bhutan Himal has been visited in addition by Gansser, Tyson, Jackson, Turner, Ward and Steele, usually for scientific reasons, and a considerable amount of topographical knowledge has been obtained.

Existing maps are reasonably good for certain areas but mountain details are almost completely lacking, though travellers' accounts and sketch maps are of use in some cases.

BHUTAN HIMAL

Chomolhari (7314m) This peak on the West Bhutan-Tibet border is a well-known landmark to all travellers who cross on to the Tibetan plateau from Sikkim and was possibly referred to in Hakluyt's book of 1699. Its first ascent was made in 1937 by F. Spencer Chapman and a Sherpa, Pasang. Spencer Chapman was returning from Lhasa after spending six months there on a Trade Commission to the Tibet Government. Starting from Phari the ascent was made by the S ridge and the party were lucky to escape unhurt from a fall on the descent. The Bhutanese consider that Chomolhari is the highest mountain in Bhutan though it is more likely that Kangri and Kula Kangri, which few of them have seen, are

higher. Chomolhari is clearly visible from Soe, a village lying under its E face in Bhutan.

Lingshi — Laya Peaks The mountains of the Bhutan-Tibet border run eastwards from Chomolhari. Most appear between 6000m-7000m high and a number of high passes connecting Tibet and Bhutan have been used for trade and invasion. This region of NW Bhutan is fairly well known and has been described by a number of travellers. The head waters of the Mo Chu probably rise from a peak Gangchentak, around 7000m, in Laya.

Lunana Peaks This refers to the mountains around the head waters of the Pho Chu river. Access is difficult and from the west the Kang La Ka Chu La (about 5200m) has to be crossed. Peak St. George, just to the north of the pass, climbed by Jackson and Ward in 1963, gives excellent panoramic views of the Lingshi-Laya group and Chomolhari as well as the Lunana peaks. Ludlow was probably the first European to traverse Lunana but gives little or no description. Jackson, Turner and Ward carried out medical and topographical work in the area in 1963 and 1964, whilst Gansser visited the area some years later.

Kangri and Kula Kangri Possibly the first account of these peaks to appear in the European literature is given by a Pandit, Rinzin Nimgyal, when talking to Mr. G. W. E. Atkinson of the Survey of India about his exploration in Bhutan and Southern Tibet in 1885-86. The Pandit crossed the Mon La Ka Chung La from East Bhutan to Tibet and mentions the mountain Kula Kangri and several streams flowing from it. In 1922 Bailey visited Bhutan to present the GCIE decoration to His Highness The Maharajah of Bhutan. He was accompanied by a Surveyor, Capt. H. C. R. Meade of the Indian Army. They also crossed the Mon La Ka Chung La into Tibet and from the Drum La had a good view of two peaks about 7600m in height to the west. Their position was fixed by Meade. According to Ward these peaks may correspond to Rinchita and Chomolhari Kangri — Bhutanese names used by the Lunana inhabitants. Gansser gives one of the peaks the name Ganker Punzum.

Both Kangri and Kula Kangri were possibly seen by Ludlow and Sherriff from the Monda La at the E end of the Pomo Tso in Tibet in 1933. It is also possible that they were identified by Steele from the Southern, Bhutanese, side of the Mon La Ka Chung La. When leaving Lunana both Ludlow and Gansser crossed the Gapoo or Gyophu La pass reaching Central Bhutan at Dur Chutsen. In 1964 Jackson and Ward climbed a peak of 5500m to the north of the Gyophu La and took a 360° round of photographs which gave an excellent view of the peaks in this region of Central Bhutan.

EAST BHUTAN

South and East of Lunana lies the Mon La Ka Chung La, lying at the head of the Bumthang Chu. East of the Mon La Ka Chung La is the valley of the Kuru Chu and Kama Chu and the village of Lhuntse. From here the Po La leads into Tibet. Further east again is the valley of the Kulong Chu with the Me La — a pass wholly within Bhutan connecting with Monyul and the Nyam Jang Chu. The Me La



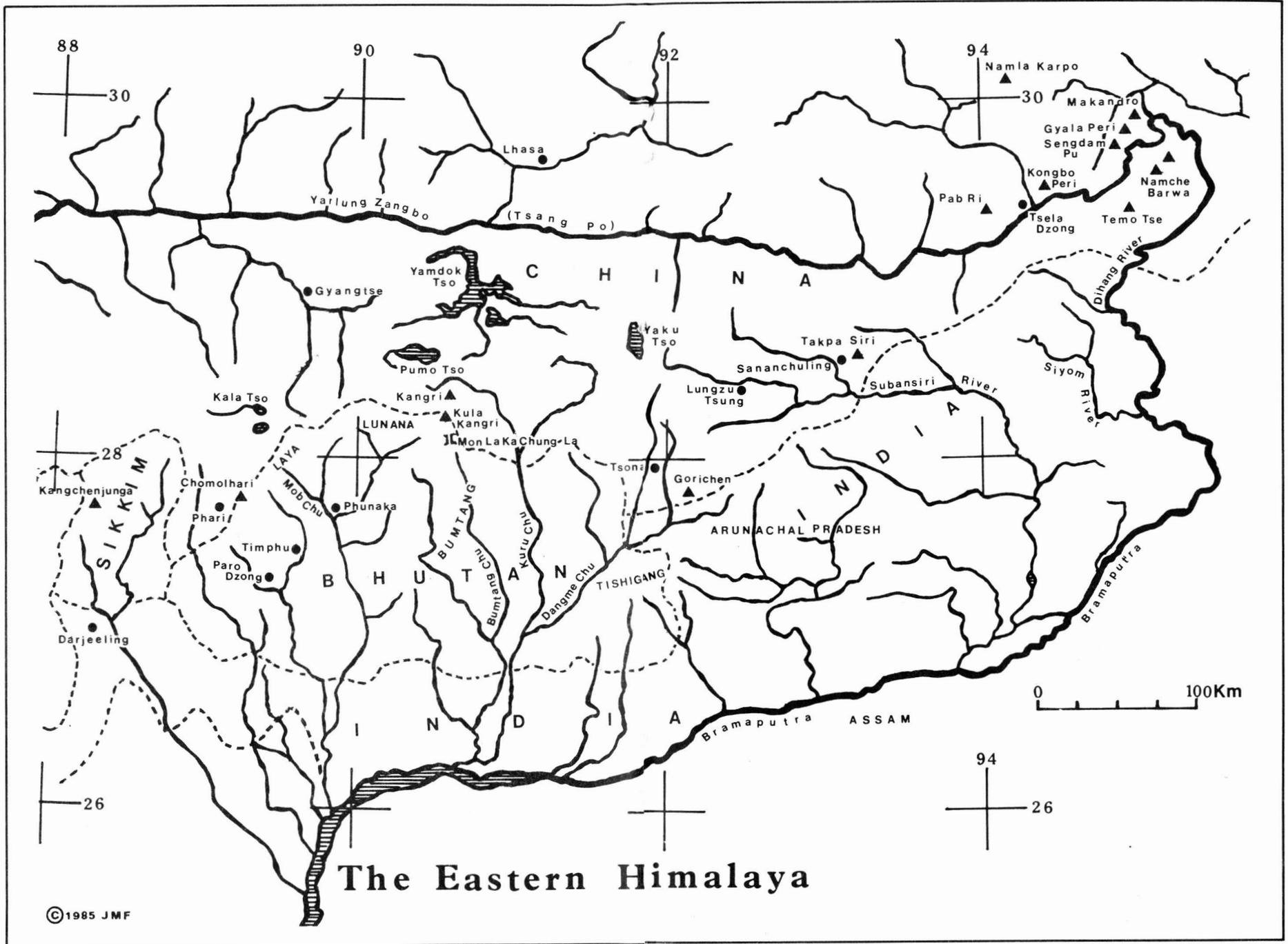
2 *The holy mountain of Takpa Siri in Tsari*

Photo: Taylor (R.G.S. Collection)



3 *Namla Karpo in the Yigrong range*

Photo: Sherriff (R.G.S. Collection)



(Pass of Flowers) was visited several times by Ludlow and Sheriff and also by Mrs. Sheriff and Dr. Hicks. The area was particularly rich in primulas and a new species was named after the Maharajah of Bhutan.

The first sizeable village in Tibet, Tsona, is reached from Monyul and the Tawang Chu. From here the valley of the Tsangpo could be reached easily. In 1934 on their return to Tsona from SE Tibet, Ludlow and Sherriff travelled by a circuitous route to Dongka in Tibet and then by the Cha La and Cho La into Bhutan. The interest in their route lies in the fact that it was used by the Saint Lapon or Guru Rimpoche who entered by this route from India bringing Buddhism to Tibet.

Gori-chen (6532m) in the Se La range is south east of Tsona in Monyul. This peak was clearly seen by Kingdon Ward from the Chera La above Mago and an attempt was made by Tilman to visit the region in 1940. Close by are two other peaks Kang To (7090m) and Nyegi Kansang (7047m).

NORTH-EAST FRONTIER AGENCY AND TSANGPO HIMAL

The Holy Peak of Takpa Siri (c. 5500m) Situated in the Tsari region of Tibet, this group though not particularly high is regarded as very holy and its circumambulation an act of great piety which attracts pilgrims from every part of Tibet. The local inhabitants subsist on the money that they can earn by providing transport for the pilgrims. There are two pilgrimages — the short, Kingkor, and long, Ringkor, and until Sheriff completed the shorter circuit in 1936 the only European to have done so was Bailey in 1913.

This whole area of the Himalaya has many formidable peaks, the vast majority unknown and unexplored. There is also an extremely abrupt climatic change on the summit of passes, and down the southern slopes rain can be incessant yet on the N slopes 200m away butterflies float in warm sun. This change is reflected in the vegetation and plant life and a close relationship has been noted between the flora of Western China and the Himalaya.

Namcha Barwa and Gyela Peri Namcha Barwa was 'discovered' in 1911, when as a result of a survey by Lt. J. A. Field and Lt. G. F. T. Oakes, members of the Abor Expedition 1911-12, its position and height were fixed from the south. There is little doubt, however, that the mountain must have been seen by the Pandits, Nain Singh in 1879 and Kintup in 1881. It is likely too that Capt. C. L. Robertson saw it from the Mishmi Hills. The identity and topography of Gyela Peri and Namcha Barwa are inextricably linked with the identity and course of the Tsangpo River which is now known to flow between the two peaks.

For many years in the 19th century geographers were puzzled as to where the waters of the Tsangpo ended. One of the largest rivers in Central Asia — rising near Mt. Kailas in Southern Tibet and flowing east through the most populated part of the country, it seemed to disappear in the tangled and inaccessible gorge country of the Eastern Himalaya, and it could eventually join one of a large number of rivers flowing through China or SE Asia.

To follow the river from its source was impossible both politically and practically. Politically because the Chinese who had a precarious hold on Tibet were eager to prevent foreigners from entering, and the Tibetans though friendly



4 *Namche Barwa seen from the Karina La in the NE*

Photo: Sherriff (R.G.S. Collection)



5 *Namche Barwa*

Photo: 'Glaciers in China'

by nature were also intensely suspicious. The practical difficulties were those of access from the north, and to approach from the south meant travelling through areas on the S Himalayan slopes where a number of tribes lived who were savage, quarrelsome and also intensely suspicious.

In the 1860's the Survey of India set about collecting information about countries lying north of the Himalaya and a number of agents, mainly from Tibetan speaking communities on the Indian side of the Himalaya were trained in Survey (The Pandits). These extraordinarily capable and brave men travelled usually alone and often for years before bringing back information that gradually helped to outline the vast unknown Central Asian plateau. One of the best known — A. K. — in the course of a journey through Tibet to Mongolia and thence south east to China and back to Darjeeling established that the Tsangpo could not flow into the Mekong, Salween, or Yangtse Kiang. The question remained whether it flowed into the Dibang, Dihang or Irrawaddy. In 1885 R. N., a Sikkimese Pandit, was dispatched with orders to follow the Tsangpo. In this he failed for political and tribal reasons though he brought back useful information about Bhutan. Eventually measurement of the flow of water from Dihang and Dibang rivers established that the Dihang discharged twice as much, thus almost certainly establishing that the Tsangpo was the same as the Dihang.

However, when the Tsangpo was last seen in SE Tibet it was known to be at about 3000m, whereas in Assam — 190km to the south — it was at 150m — and a large falls similar to Niagara was postulated. Eventually through the efforts of further Pandits and in particular K. P. — Kintup — much of the course of the Tsangpo was described including the Kintup or Rainbow falls, which were more like rapids than falls having a relatively small drop.

Kintup who had previously accompanied the Pandit Nem Singh to Gyala was sent with a Chinese monk to trace the course of the Tsangpo from below Gyala to the plains of India, or failing this to throw marked logs into the river. Though not a trained Pandit, Kintup's account of his subsequent travels and adventures spread over four years proved to be remarkably accurate and provided the first reasonably concrete evidence about this geographically important part of SE Tibet.

During the Mishmi Exploration Survey of 1912-13 a party of Khambas were encountered at Mipi in the valley of the Mathu, an important tributary of the Dihang (Brahmaputra). They volunteered a considerable amount of information about their own part of E Tibet and offered to provide guides for members of the Survey to travel to Pemako and Po Me, the country in which the then unknown Tsangpo Gorge lay. Further travel to Tawang and E Bhutan through SE Tibet along the unexplored Himalayan frontier also seemed possible. At the end of the Mishmi Survey operations, therefore, F. M. Bailey and H. T. Morshead returned to Mipi and travelled north in the Tsangpo (Dihang Valley) but crossed to Showa before the main gorge was reached. They discovered Gyela Peri (7150m) seeing it from the village of Gyala on the Tsangpo — though in fact they had almost certainly seen it from the Mishmi hills some months previously. Only 21km north of Namcha Barwa (7756m) and with the gorge of the Tsangpo running between these two peaks this must be one of the world's most spectacular mountain regions. They commented that the ground leaked sulphur which came from a hot

spring with gas bubbling from the rocks depositing sulphur all around. Further down the gorge they saw the Sanglung glacier, one of five glaciers which descended from the N slopes of Namcha Barwa. They noted a sixth on the S side. They also described the Rainbow or Kintup falls near the village of Pemako Chung. Bailey was able to confirm his observations of these falls with those of Kintup to whom he talked some months later.

In 1924 Kingdon Ward and Cawdor descended a little further down the Tsangpo gorge to Payi, and they confirmed the findings of Bailey and Morshead. They also noted a range of mountains with a prominent peak Namla Karpo, running north-west from Namcha Barwa — but south of the Po-Yigrong river which entered the Tsangpo as it turned south around Namcha Barwa and Sanglung Peak. North of the Po-Yigrong River another parallel range of peaks named the Po-Yigrong range was noted by Kingdon Ward. This seemed separate from the Nichin-thangla range which the Littledales crossed north of Lhasa. Nain Singh had previously traced this range which tended to run north east and found that it formed the watershed between the Tsangpo and the Tibet Lake Basin area; it was obviously further north than the Po-Yigrong range.

EAST OF THE BEND OF THE TSANGPO

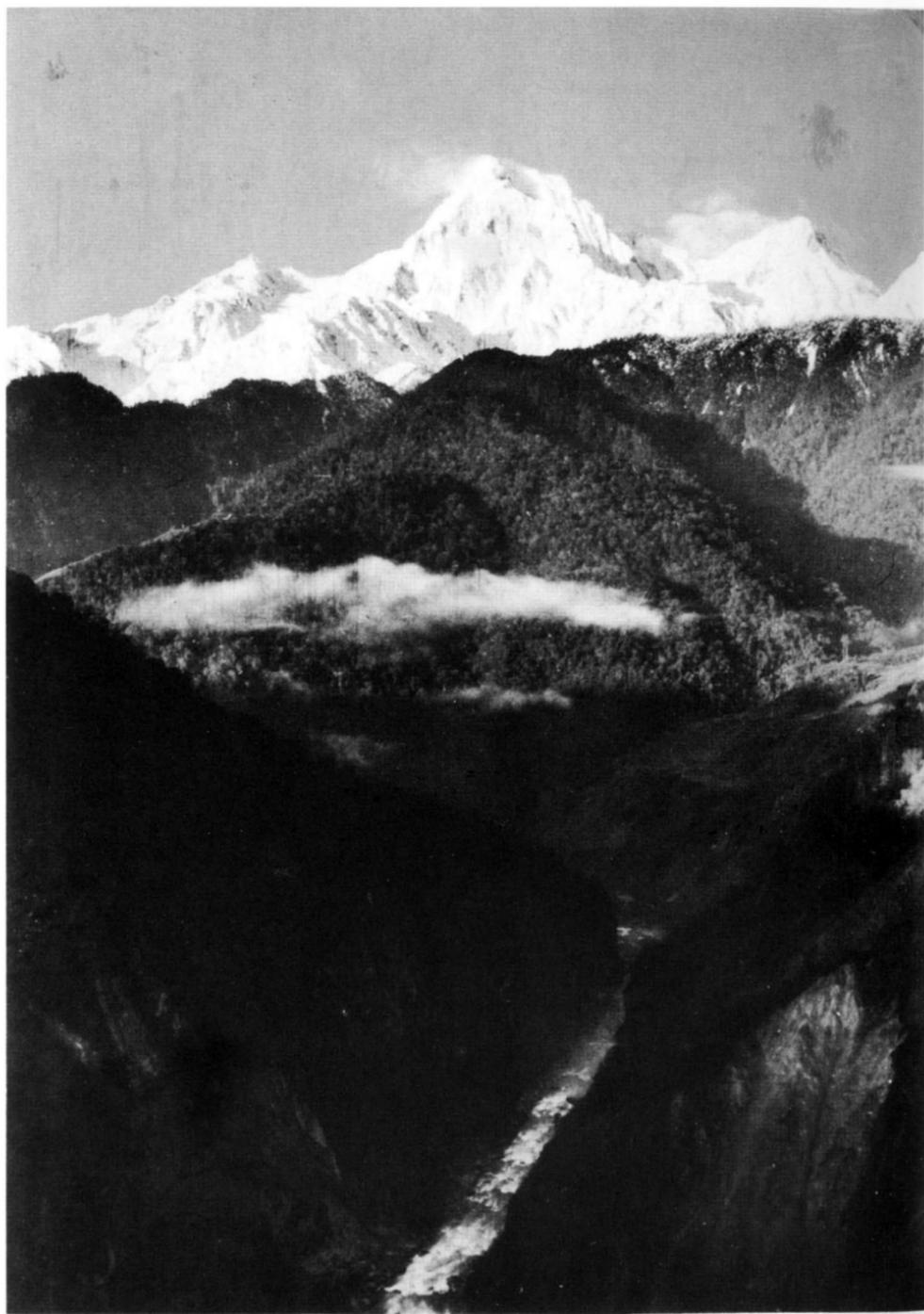
In North Assam and Burma there are a number of ranges described by Kaulback, Kingdon Ward and others.

The Ata Kang La (4880m) in North Assam was visited by Kaulback and crossed by Kingdon Ward. A new peak to the West — Chompo (7000m) — indicates a considerable number of peaks in this region. Many of the routes followed had previously been traversed by the Pandit A. K. in 1883.

Further East in North Burma, Kingdon Ward explored the range containing Ka Karpo Razi (c. 6700m).

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6 Gyela Peri seen from Tsakchugong in the NE

Photo: Sherriff (R.G.S. Collection)

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