Shilla Nala Expedition in Spiti 2015  
Ashish Chanda
“The final route chosen (taking into consideration the steep and unstable section below the pass) lead us to approx 30-40 m above our intended goal. The altitude, around 5760m. Gusts of cold wind blew from the back (SW) as we trudged up the steep snow to the final mixed section that would lead up the ridge with every step requiring highest concentration and effort in the arid, thin Trans Himalayan climate which turned from sunny to an ominous grey within minutes. The six of us tied to a rope appeared tiny and antlike in the vast Himalayan scale. Lakshman ji leading a few meters ahead had suddenly stopped which must have caught my attention as I remember wondering if it was another rest stop or there was nowhere higher to go, a thought which worked like magic providing an extra impetus for those final few steps. As I reached the highpoint the ridge had started to lower its veil, presenting the mountain vista beyond but not to the extent we wanted. A closer inspection showed the entire ridge to be heavily corniced on which standing could not only be dangerous but foolish as well. The col around 30-40m below which seemed to be devoid of snow/ice provided a ray of hope and some encouragement for an unobstructed view. A scary scramble (avoiding the snow/iced cornices) down loose, layered rock some of which detached and departed with every step was made slightly comfortable by the safety of being belayed, but the thought of a misstep and fall that would render me a huge swinging pendulum crashing on some wall was always close behind. Finally after failed (earlier) attempts, many months of planning and preparation I was standing on Shilla Col (5725m; 18,783ft) with uninterrupted view (NE) along Lakhang Nala towards Rupshu and Tibet. Lined were the peaks of Gyagar, Runse, Gelling, Gyadung and behind them the unmistakable Gya partly hidden by suddenly appearing clouds that played a bit of spoilsport to an otherwise satisfactory venture, an entire exploration of the entire Shilla Nala to its head with (first) ascent of Shilla Col.”
Objective & Background

Objective:

To explore the entire Shilla nala till its head and attempt to climb a 5725m col (from south) which connects Shilla nala to Upper Lingti Basin and thus completing the total exploration of the Shilla - Lingti Rectangle.

Topographic map of 2015 Shilla Nala Exploration depicting:
1. Shilla nala exploration route 2015 (in orange) 2. Shilla nala recce route (in purple)

Background:

By the time I came to know, the seed for exploring Shilla River and its valley had long been planted and cared by Kolkata based veteran mountaineer Debasis Bardhan (D) who earlier in 2012 had attempted to force a route through without much success as the season (August) was late and water level too high to allow river crossings. Incidentally D also happened to be elder brother of a school friend and although out of touch over a decade, the love for mountains coupled with today’s electronic world enabled us to get back in touch and eventually led us trekking the Markha Valley in Ladakh together where D deftly and quietly during one evening of conversation planted the seed in us, i.e Jyotirmoy, Pritam, Anindya and me. The following months saw us growing the seed in to a plant watered and nourished generously by frequent meetings with all the available and procured books, maps, collected information and of course good old Google Earth at our disposal. Reading, discussing, plotting and planning for our venture took most of our spare time.
Two of the earliest known travellers to Spiti were Captain Alexander Gerard and Dr J. G. Gerard. They explored 'Bashair, Spiti and Kanwar' (Kinnaur) in 1817. Though there had been significant geological exploration of Spiti the very first climber to visit the area was J. O. M. Roberts in 1939. He climbed the 20,680 ft peak and preferred the ft/m numerical over its local name of Chau Chau Kang Nilda (CCKN). Roberts also reconnoitered part of the Shilla nala, intending to examine Shilla, supposedly climbed by a Survey of India khalasi in 1861 but bad weather & poor visibility prevented him from getting far. He then intended to ascend the Ratang nullah to examine the northern sides of peaks 21,760 ft and 21,350 ft, but too much water in the gorge forced them to abandon all plans.

J. de.V. Graaff and K. E. Snelson did recce of various peaks in 1952, while P. F. Holmes and T. H. Braham made a number of fine ascents in Ratang nala and of CCKN.

More recently two Himalayan Club expeditions led by Harish Kapadia explored eastern Spiti in 1983 & 1987 following the Lingti river and made ascents of Shilla, Parilungbi, Yangzi Diwan Pass among other exploratory work.

Later expeditions led by Romesh Bhattacharya and Tapan Pandit also followed the Lingti River in eastern Spiti.

It is interesting to note that almost all the exploration till date has been concentrated on the Eastern Spiti region crossing over two passed following the Lingti River basin which when/if connected to the Shilla Nala and Spiti river forms a neat rectangular (round) route that had one major caveat i.e. Shilla nala was yet to be explored to be able to link all the dots thus completing the rectangle. Our objective stood clear and steep in front of us.

J.O.M Roberts 1916 - 1997
(Photo: John Cleare)
Spiti – A Geographical, Historical & Geological Perspective

Geography:

Spiti, Pronounced ‘Piti’ which literally means the ‘middle land’, lies on the Indian border with Tibet across the main range of Himalaya, also known as the ‘Trans-Himalaya’. Spiti is bounded on the east by Tibet, on the south by Kinnaur, on the west by Kullu & on the north by Ladakh and is surrounded by mountain ranges with an average elevation of 19,500 ft or more.

Route with high mountain passes, such as the Kunzam La, provides a seasonal link with the outside world apart from the long, strenuous and treacherous all season Shimla - Reckong Peo – Kaza road. The 160 kilometres-long Spiti valley is split by the Spiti river which originates at a height of 15,700 ft. on the eastern side of Kunzam La, and flows rapidly into the Spiti valley with its broad, flowing and deep bed settled almost sixty metres below the average level of the valley. In its somewhere raging to meandering flow down the Spiti valley, the river attracts several tributaries namely, Pin, Gyundi, Lungze, Mamdang on its right bank, and Shilla, Hanse, Tagling, Tabo, Gimdo, Lingti, Pare Chu on its left. The elegant race of Spiti River comes to an end near the Shipki La, in a grand finale as it forces its way through a narrow gorge finally submitting to the mighty force of raging Sutlej river. Even at this point, the Spiti valley is more than 10,800 ft high.
**History & Legend:**

After the first formation of the kingdom of Ladakh, Spiti appears to have now and again been separated from it for a time. It was perhaps independent for some time, as it is mentioned in the records procured from the lamas by Cunningham, but was conquered by Singhi Namgyal, king of Ladakh, in about AD 1630, and was allotted with Zanskar to his third son, Tenchog, in about AD 1660. Soon after, it was incorporated in the Guge principality, which lay to the east, and was not restored to Ladakh till about AD 1720, when the king of Ladakh, at the conclusion of a war with Guge, married the daughter of the Lhasa commander and took Spiti as her dowry. After this, Spiti remained a province of Ladakh, but because of its remote and inaccessible situation, the country was always left very much to govern itself. An official was sent from Leh as garpon, but he generally disappeared after harvest time, and left the real administration to be carried on by the wazir and other hereditary officers of Spiti, who again were completely controlled by the parliament of *gatpos* or *lambardars* of villages and *tappos*. This was the state of affairs in the early nineteenth century, as described by Cunningham, who drew from Moorcroft's notes on his travels in Ladakh.

![Upper Spiti valley](image)

(1864 Journal of Tour Through Spiti to Frontier of Chinese Tibet by Egerton)

Being left to fend for themselves, Spiti was always liable to be worried by forays. Gerard mentions that in AD 1776 or whereabouts, the Basharis held the fort of Dankhar for two years; and in Moorcroft's notes, Trebeck gives an account of a foray, which had been made just before his visit, by a large body of armed men from Kulu. The Spiti people were not a war-like race and paid tribute or protection money to all the surrounding states in order to escape being plundered.
After the Sikhs had annexed Kulu in 1841, they sent up a force to plunder Spiti. The Spiti men, according to their usual tactics, retreated into the high uplands, leaving their houses in the valley and the monasteries to be plundered and burnt. A few straggling plunderers in the Sikh force, who ventured up too high were surprised and killed. The Sikhs retired, and did not attempt either to annex the country to Kulu or separate it from Ladakh. The separation from Ladakh was done by the British in 1846 on the occasion of the settlement of the trans-Sutlej states after the First Sikh War, in order to secure a road to the pashmina wool district of Changthang. In the autumn of 1846, Captain Cunningham and Van-Agnew fixed the boundary between Spiti and Ladakh.

For the first three years, the collection of revenue was farmed out to Mansukh Dass, wazir of the Raja of Bashahar. In the autumn of 1849, Major Hay, assistant commissioner of Kulu, went to Spiti and took charge. He spent the best part of the winter there in Dankhar fort and submitted a valuable report, which was printed by the government. The report contained a full description of the Spiti area by Egerton, Deputy Commissioner of Kangra, who toured the area in 1846.

Legend of Mount Shilla:

This small peak on the divide between Lingti and Shilla nala was first reported to have been climbed in 1860 by an unnamed khalasi of the Survey of India, who erected a pole on the top. This was reported in 'The Synoptical Volume XXXV of the Trigonometrical Survey of India' published in 1910. It referred to it as peak 'Parang la No. 2' and later the name was changed to Shilla in the Survey Office. The peak appears as 'Parang la No. 2 S' with height of 23,064 ft on SOI Sheet 64 SW, published August 1874 (Gyah is mentioned as GUA Snowy Peak, 22,309 ft on the same sheet). Thus Shilla remained with a dubious altitude record for 47 years till Dr Longstaff climbed Trisul 23,360 ft in 1907. Later when checked and confirmed, Shilla stood at a firm and fixed altitude of 6132m; 20,118 ft, and famous for its previously held dubious altitude record.
Geology:

The geological history of Spiti Valley dates back 500 million years with a remarkable plethora of Precambrian/Cambrian era fossils many of which according to a recent study by the Geological Society of America are of marine origin.

These Paleozoic Era fossils represent some of the earliest legged creatures, relatives of crabs and spiders. The abundance and variety of fossils has led to Spiti being known as the fossil park of the Himalaya and is often the hunting ground for many researchers few of whom according to some in the villages have collected and returned with trunks full of fossils.

The valley forms a part of the Spiti - Zanskar Basin that belongs to the geotectonic zone of the Tethyan Himalaya. The basin is bounded by the Indus - Tsangpo Suture Zone (ITSZ) in the north and metamorphic basement of the Central Crystalline in the south. Structurally, the elongated Spiti Valley strikes parallel to the general trend of the Himalaya which is northwest-southeast.

The Spiti Valley in geological literature was first referred by Gerard, A. (1827, 1843). Since then this valley, which exposes more or less an uninterrupted Eocambrian to Cretaceous sequence became stratigraphers' delight. The geological details of the Spiti Valley in earlier years were furnished by Gerard (1833), Hutton (1839, 1840, 1841), Everest (1841), Cunningham (1854), Theobald (1862), Blanford (1863, 1864), Stoliczka (1864, 1865, 1868), Davidson (1864), Godwin-Austin (1864, 1865, 1866), Mallet (1865), McMahon (1879), Greisbach (1889), Diener (1895,1897, 1903) and von Kraft (1899, 1900). It was Hayden (1904) who mapped and presented an account of various formations establishing the complete sequence from Cambrian to Cretaceous in this area which till this day provides a sound edifice for any detailed work.
A closer (terrain) view of our route to Shilla Col

Our 2015 Expedition followed Shilla Nullah/nala till its head.

GE (Google Earth) Route Elevation & Distance

Total route dist. (approx): 27 km (one way)
Min elevation: 3736 m
Max elevation: 5725 m
**Expedition Team, Dates & Duration**

Dates: 26th May 2015 – 17th June 2015 (Kol to Kol)

**Team:**

1) Debasish Bardhan *(Team Leader)*  
   Veteran trekker, mountaineer & explorer with ascent of Mt Kamet among many other climb and exploration

2) Ashish Chanda  
   Trekker & rookie mountaineer with BMC certification from HMI

3) Jyotirmoy Chakraborty  
   Enthusiastic trekker & veteran of two climbing expeditions

4) Pritam Deb Burman  
   Trekker & rookie mountaineer with BMC certification from HMI

5) Anindya Kanjilal  
   Enthusiastic trekker

6) Snehes Chatterjee  
   Trekker & rookie mountaineer with BMC certification from HMI

7) Lakshman Ji  
   Friend & HAP, a veteran of many expeditions including Mt.Shivling

To assist the team with porterage and supplies, an additional support staff of seven members were hired under the leadership of Sheroo Negi affiliated by the Manali Muleteers Association that included all (ex Manali) travel, stay, food and (accident) insurance costs for the support staff who were: Padam Bahadur (leader), Bal Bahadur, Sanjay Singh, Rajesh Thapa, Mahinder Singh, Pradeep Raj and Mahesh Rana.

---

*Team: (from left) Anindya Kanjilal, Debasish Bardhan, Ashish Chanda, Jyotirmoy Chakraborty, Pritam Deb Burman, Snehes Chatterjee*

*Support Team: (from left) Lakshman Ji, Sanjay Singh, Rajesh Thapa, Mahinder Singh, Pradeep Raj, Mahesh Rana, Padam Bahadur (leader), Bal Bahadur*
Our team of six departed Kolkata on 26th May 2016 and connected with Lakshman ji, who was waiting for us @ Delhi and reached Shimla via Kalka on 28th May. Self funded expeditions are often not purse friendly and with ever increasing porterage costs, hired gears, we were already on the brink of our budget and therefore after jettisoning our luggage on the top we settled with a not so comfy but more economic, state run bus service for the long and arduous journey via Reckong Peo to Kaza, our base.

Lara Tsering our contact and local businessman/owner of a travel agency, hotel and a restaurant greeted us cheerfully as we reached Kaza on 29th evening. The cheer seemed tad odd as the news he gave did not appear good. There was a shortage of electricity in the town as the hotels offered lodging without any guarantee or availability of water. The reason for Lara’s cheerfulness became clear as our expedition luggage was unloaded from the bus on to a mini (10+1 seater) van and we were driven a couple of kilometers arriving in front of a newly built building into which Lara welcomed us and proudly announced that we now were in his hotel ‘Winter White’ in New Kaza with electricity, water and free Wi-Fi!

The excitement didn’t last much long. Our first hurdle came in the form of our hired (Nepali) support staff being stopped by Border Security Force at Khab due to inadequate paperwork (Nepalese being foreigners in Spiti needed an inner line permit). As usual, Lara came to our rescue and coordinated with B.S.F Khab office but not before it consumed an additional day plus extra 10K for permits & car rental charges to bring them to Kaza in order to begin the expedition.
However we utilized this waiting time with last minute shopping of food, veggies, fuel etc and also included a short recce to the confluence of Shilla River with Spiti and follow the nala to ascertain its state and level of water which satisfied us to a great extent, made us hopeful and eager for the start of venture.

![Confluence of Spiti & Shilla River & bridge over Shilla Nala (Recce)](image1)

*Confluence of Spiti & Shilla River & bridge over Shilla Nala (Recce)*

![Water level was low as we found a series of ice bridges a few hundred meters into Shilla nala recce.](image2)

*Water level was low as we found a series of ice bridges a few hundred meters into Shilla nala recce.*
Finally on 2\textsuperscript{nd} June 2015 we loaded all our gear onto a vehicle which drove us to a drop off point we had identified on Google Earth in between Kaza – Langza road. During our research, satellite imagery showed us a steep trail going down to Shilla Nala and in absence of any first person or previous account all we had to rely on was Google Earth data which matched perfectly.
The start of trek was a steep trail down that led to the base of Shilla Nala which petered away after a few kilometers.

The loose rocks slippery and many sections of the trail had washed away by landslides requiring unexpected early step cutting for the safety of our support staff.
An abandoned mill made of rock near the base of nala

Meeting the Shilla River
Seemingly easy start of a daily chore - river crossing!

After six time consuming crossings, found this newly constructed bridge (not in GE)
Camp 1 - readymade shelter used by the villagers across the valleys.

Camp 1
Day 2 start by each making his own way along the Shilla Nullah.

First sight of plain ground which was a welcome after the boulder & landslide hopping.
Flat ground, a respite for the feet

Crossings continue some aided by big boulders
Strange phallic shaped towers

A Reconyx RM45 trail camera setup by someone/group... it has our faces recorded now!
Dried pugmarks

A recent kill
Preparing to set up Camp 2

Camp 2
Start of Day 3

Over ice bridges beside shimmering pools
As river crossings continue

First major obstacle which had to be bypassed
A traverse

Then climb up
And step cutting over unstable rocks

Waiting for everyone to cross safely
We had a wonderful meal with these wild garlic

Lakshman ji with his deft skills started building cairns all along the valley (at important places like crossings) which ended up as way markers while returning.
Day 4 morning

Boulder hopping continues
That is the resting position

Carefully negotiating landslides
North Face of CCKN

Along the Shilla nala
First (wide) valley towards northwest. These wide valleys (on our left) acted as markers as we did not have the benefit of a GPS for route finding.

Close up of the wild terrain
First patch of snow/ice

Camp 4
Day 5 morning; North Face of CCKN in full glory

Marching on
Landslide zone everywhere

Geological wonderland all around
Second (wide) valley towards northwest our next marker

Close up
Finding way through a maze of icefall blocking the narrow passage

Shilla nala snout & terminal moraine
Climbing up over the terminal moraine

First sight of the elusive Shilla (the main summit hidden behind the pyramidal projection on the ridge)
Day 6: march continues over dunes of moraine

First sight of Shilla nala head & basin (extreme back)
Climbing up

Full face of Shilla from west; probably never seen & certainly not photographed from this side.
Preparing the ground for establishing Base Camp

Base Camp (Camp 6; 5400m) at the head of valley with Shilla Col circled in red)
Day 7; Lakshman ji setting up a temple for customary puja before the climb

The temple with our goal Shilla Col visible behind
View of Shilla from our Base Camp

Mt Lekhang though in front us was hidden behind this rocky spur from Base Camp
We utilized this day for a route recce & equipment dump at a higher point.

Route recce
Day 8 morning Mt Shilla

Detailed diagram of our route to the col
On the morning of 9th June, four of us i.e Debasish, Jyotirmoy, Pritam and me alongwith Lakshman ji and Balbahadur started the climb to the col.

Members departing for the col summit

Initial climb to the traverse
Up and away

Reaching the traverse point
Climb continues

Mt Lakhang (6250m) and South Lakhang glacier comes into view
Fixing ropes for safety

Base Camp circled in red
Lakshman ji preparing a dependable anchor

Waiting for everyone to join
Climbing on

As the weather suddenly turned bad (Base camp below circled in red)
Almost on top of the ridge with Shilla on left

The first view towards Upper Lingti Valley northeast, blocked by corniced ridge
Carefully climbing down avoiding the corniced ridge with the Col below us

The ridge above
Finally on Shilla Col 5725m
Climbing over rocks for photography (notice the huge cornices)

Lakhang nala flowing down to the Upper Lingti Basin
Gya (6759m) the highest peak barely visible towards northeast in the poor weather

Panorama from Shilla Col with Upper Lingti Basin in the centre following route to Yangzi Diwan on left and peaks from Gyadung (6160m), Geling (6100m), Runse (6175m), & Gyagar (6400m) on the right

Panorama from Base Camp with Shilla Col on left & Mt Shilla on the right
Expedition Summary, Observation(s) & future scope(s)

Summary:

- Though a part of Shilla Nala had been explored earlier (1939 by Jimmy Roberts), the 2015 expedition was the first ever exploration & documentation of the entire Shilla Nala till its head with (first) ascent of a 5725m col (Shilla Col) which connects Shilla Nala to Upper Lingti Valley.

- The 2015 Shilla Nala expedition was conceived planned & led by Kolkata based veteran mountaineer Debasish Bardhan & the team consisted of seven members (including our old friend/partner/HAP/Guide from Uttaranchal) with an additional support staff of seven, assisting the team with porterage of expedition supplies.

- The route (marked in orange on the map) for 2015 Shilla Nala expedition covered a distance of 27 km (one way) to the col with approx 2000m of altitude gain. (Min elevation: 3736m & max elevation: 5725m)

- The often narrow & landslide prone terrain, frequent river crossings and makeshift traverses over landslides/obstacles halted our hopes of covering the approach distance (of approx 26km) within a couple of days. The team finally took 6 days (along the Shilla Nala) to establish base camp at 5400m, below the Col.

- The team spent 2 full days at BC (base camp) for:
  a) route recce & rope/equipment dump (day 1)
  b) climb to the col & back to BC (day 2)

- Snow & climbing conditions were almost perfect saving some delicate rocky (patch) traverses and the weather playing a spoilsport as we neared the top.
• Four members of the team along with Lakshman ji reached a highpoint some 30-50m above the col and had to climb down over mixed ground avoiding the corniced ridge to reach the col which was also corniced. Teams planning a traverse of the col need to be extra cautious while negotiating a crossing.

• Though the team had plans to explore an unnamed col (blue dot between peak 1 & 2 on the map) located in a side valley which connects to Pakshilamur glacier & eventually exiting via the Pare Chu/Parang La route, our time consuming approach march & dwindling supplies forced us to abandon any/all further plans post ascent of Shilla Col.

• Rising water of the river rendered the return equally slow spanning four days.

Observations

• Several of the side valleys (depicted by different colors on the map) remain virgin waiting for the first human footprints.

• Since Spiti nals have precipitous sides, it is almost essential to use the stream-beds for stretches along with innumerable river crossings, of which many are only accessible/penetrable when the river’s water level is low. Though the 2015 expedition was held during May-Jun, the water level rose drastically during the span of a week barely allowing us a safe return with rope assisted river crossings a mandatory while returning. Therefore the ideal time to explore the valley would be during Apr-May (pre monsoon); Sept-Nov (post monsoon) and beyond that for those who don’t mind bearing the torturous Trans-Himalayan winter.

• Foreigners require permits to enter Spiti which can/should be obtained before the journey. As finding local support staff for any other route than Parang La is difficult in Spiti, we employed Nepalese support staff from Manali and them being foreigners were stopped at Reckong Peo resulting with an additional day wasted/spent arranging for permits. Even a few years ago the Nepalese were exempted from such permits. As it appeared such rigorous checking in recent time is due to various incidents involving looting & theft of ancient artifacts from the historically & culturally rich monasteries of Spiti.

Future Scope(s)

• For the explorers, several side valleys (depicted by different colors on the map) remain virgin waiting for the first humans to set foot, while, linking Shilla Nala route with Pakshilamur glacier & eventually Pare Chu/Parang La via an new unnamed & unexplored col should be quite a satisfying exercise.

• For the climbers, the region is a virgin playground offering a minimum of 5 unclimbed peaks above 6000m (1-5 as depicted on the map) and multitude of peaks above 5500m.

• For the seasoned alpinist, a new approach (NW) to Shilla peak opens the possibility of a few new lines to the summit along with the challenging never approached SE ridge of Mt. Lakhang.

• And finally for the super elite climbers there stands perfect a rarely seen, unclimbed, vertical, menacing, north face of Chau Chau Kang Nilda (CCKN) at their service.
References: Books, Journals & Web Information services

- Observations on Spiti Valley by Gerard; 1833
- Trip through Kumawur Hungrung and Spiti in 1838 by Hutton; 1840
- Geological Report on Valley of Spiti by Hutton; Journal of Asiatic Society, 1841
- Report on the Valley of Spiti by Hay; Journal of Asiatic Society, 1851.
- Trip from Simla to Spiti Valley and Chomoriri Lake by Theobald; Journal of Asiatic Society, 1863
- Gerard’s Fossils from Spiti Valley by Blanford; Journal of Asiatic Society, 1864.
- Journal of Tour Through Spiti to Frontier of Chinese Thibet by Egerton, 1864
- On the Himalayan Valleys--Kooloo Lahoul and Spiti by Harcourt, 1871
- Gazetteer of Kangra District--Kulu Lahoul and Spiti, 1897
- Geology of Spiti-Kinnaur Himachal Himalaya by Bhargava, 1998
- Himalayan Wonderland: Travels in Lahaul and Spiti by M.S. Gill, 2010
- Stratigraphy & Palynology in Spiti Valley, Tethys Himalaya; vol 40 The Journal of Paleontological society of India.
- Unknown Spiti: The Middle Country by Harish Kapadia; Alpine Journal, 1989, Pg 52-56
- A Return to Lingti, 1987 by Harish Kapadia; Alpine Journal, 1989, Pg 57-62
- Across peaks and passes in Himachal Pradesh by Harish Kapadia
- Lahaul and Spiti (GROUND WATER INFORMATION BOOKLET)
- GSI & Defense topographic maps of different scale(s)
- Google Earth
- Mapverte
- ESRI web Global Information System & geodatabase management system