

# **THE REPORT OF THE BRITISH GORAKH HIMAL EXPEDITION 2015**

(MEF reference 01/15)

**Grant aided by:-**

**The Mount Everest Foundation  
Shipton Tilman Award (Gore-Tex)  
The Alpine Club**

**plus personal contributions from the expedition mountaineering team:-**

**Ed Douglas  
Nick Colton  
Phil Bartlett  
Crag Jones  
Skip Novak  
Julian Freeman-Attwood**



**View north east from summit of Saipal 7031m**

The objective of this expedition was to make the first ascent of any 6000m peak in the previously unvisited Gorakh Himal. This range lies in the Far West region of Nepal between the Changla Himal and the Kangla Himal. The attempt followed a reconnaissance in 2013 to a base camp site in the Bholbihan Khola. The team obtain the first permit issued for this range by the government of Nepal.

As will be described later in this report, two factors greatly affected the expedition and indeed stopped it in its tracks. The first was the exceptional amount of snow that fell in late winter and very early spring over all the Nepal Himalaya. This also manifested itself in heavy and unprecedented rain on the

Gangetic plains of India causing huge damage to farmland and crops. The second was, of course, the devastating 7.8 Richter-scale earthquake centred near Manaslu in the Gorkha Himal (not to be confused with Gorakh Himal) on 25<sup>th</sup> April 2015.

The team flew up with our three Nepali staff from Nepalgunj on the Indian border to Simikot on 20<sup>th</sup> April. This is the same time of year we had flown up to the north on all previous expeditions to west Nepal but we were immediately aware of the unusually large amount of snow above 3500m. With 900kg total baggage and food, the first flight comprised myself (JF-A) and sirdar Prem Gurung, as we were right on the weight limit for a Twin Otter aircraft. The weather just held and the others came up two hours later in increasing cloud. By early on 22<sup>nd</sup> April we were ready to go with our six muleteers, one porter and 20 caparisoned mules. In general it is hard to get any strong or well-equipped porters in this part of Nepal.



**The inside of the Twin Otter**

To get to the Gorakh Himal from Simikot requires a huge loop to the south then to the east and finally back north. From the airstrip at 3000m we dropped the best part of 1000m to the true left bank of the Karnali River whose source is Lake Manasarovar, just to the south of Tibet's holy Mt Kailash. We followed the river for a day to the village of Pius and camped. The following day found us crossing a bridge only just wide enough for the laden mules and we stuck to the true right bank for another day as far as Utopani village. The third day saw us crossing back to the true left bank and camping beyond the larger village of Sarkeghat where there is a police post.





**Pack Mules at Piplan**

The fourth day got us past the confluence of the Loti Karnali Nadi with the main Karnali, and following this lesser yet substantial stream, we arrived in Piplan village with another police post, to where the track goes south across the Loti Karnali towards the town of Gamgadhi. We were surprised to see that there was the start of roadbuilding at Piplan. We assumed this road would eventually link Gamgadhi to Simikot. Having followed the Karnali downstream for most of these four days we found we were at the absurdly low altitude of 1700m. Needless to say it was uncomfortably hot.

At this point a river from the unexplored Mimiban Khola to the east joins the Loti Karnali Nadi. Now at last we would be gaining altitude up this latter river whose source is the Gorakh and the Kangla Himal on the Tibet border. The river also draws water from the Bhandur Lekh country to the east.

On day five we immediately ran into problems with a narrowing path through a gorge section of the valley, which leads up to Nepka village. (Nepka is the only village in the entire valley system, a total of six days' travel in length to the Tibet border.) The first 'constriction' within half an hour looked difficult and we feared we'd have to unload the mules but to our surprise, and the muleteers got all 20 of their animals through without mishap. We were already impressed.

The next problem was narrow ledges above the river where it was imperative to unload the mules and carry through for several hundred metres. It was a place we had been aware of during the 2013 reconnaissance and might have halted the expedition entirely. Some local repairs had been made to a particularly bad spot



but we made it though. Reloading took up a lot of time and consequently we stopped to camp at a settlement at Challa, still some distance from Nepka.



**A view in the section below Nepka**





**Inhabitants of Nepka village**

**Day six saw us arrive in Nepka village having bumped into the headman, Mr Lal, a few hours below. He was on his way down and we were not too unhappy about that; he had been less than helpful in one way or another in 2013. Nepka is one of the most remote villages in Nepal and probably the Himalaya as a whole. Land available for cultivation is very limited and the bad practice of burning forest for more grazing ground was evident. We camped beyond Nepka.**





### **Crossing avalanche debris**

Day seven required two traverses across snow avalanche debris. These slides, which had emanated from large gullies in the rock walls to the north had travelled as far as the river and bridged it entirely, with the river water disappearing below as if into a crevasse. It had of course obliterated the usual track. We cut steps across this 35-degree slope. The mule men were happy enough for the animals not to be unloaded but it was hard to watch as each made their way across. One slip and it would have been a slow-motion slide into the maelstrom below. We travelled through old-growth oak forest and across a second avalanche shute an hour later. At the end of a long day we camped at 3000m.



**Forest in Loti Karnali Nadi**

Day eight was even harder for the mules and put their owners into a bad mood. The unprecedented amount of snow was deep in the birch forest we had now entered, and the mules were struggling among the snow-covered boulders. This sort of ground could easily break their legs and after two hours of it we were thankful to reach the grazing area at Bholbihan, although with the late snow precious little grass seemed available for the mules.





**Crossing the Loti Karnali Nadi on day seven.**



**Mules bogging down in birch forest**

Excessive snow was now a serious cause for concern. If it was this bad here at 3500m then there was little hope of getting further with the mules. We knew for certain that it was impossible for the mules to get into the Bholbihan Khola for the first mile and we had no idea of conditions above. The main valley, the Take Khola, as it was now named on the map, carries on to the Tibet border at the Kangla and so I now thought it might be best if we tried to get into the Kangla Khola and see if we could reach Gorakh Kang – also named Absi – from there. A Google Earth picture we had with us showed it might ‘go’. Of course that would be the wrong valley for Assajya Tuppa but we were now in such a position that to get to any of the mountains would be a result.

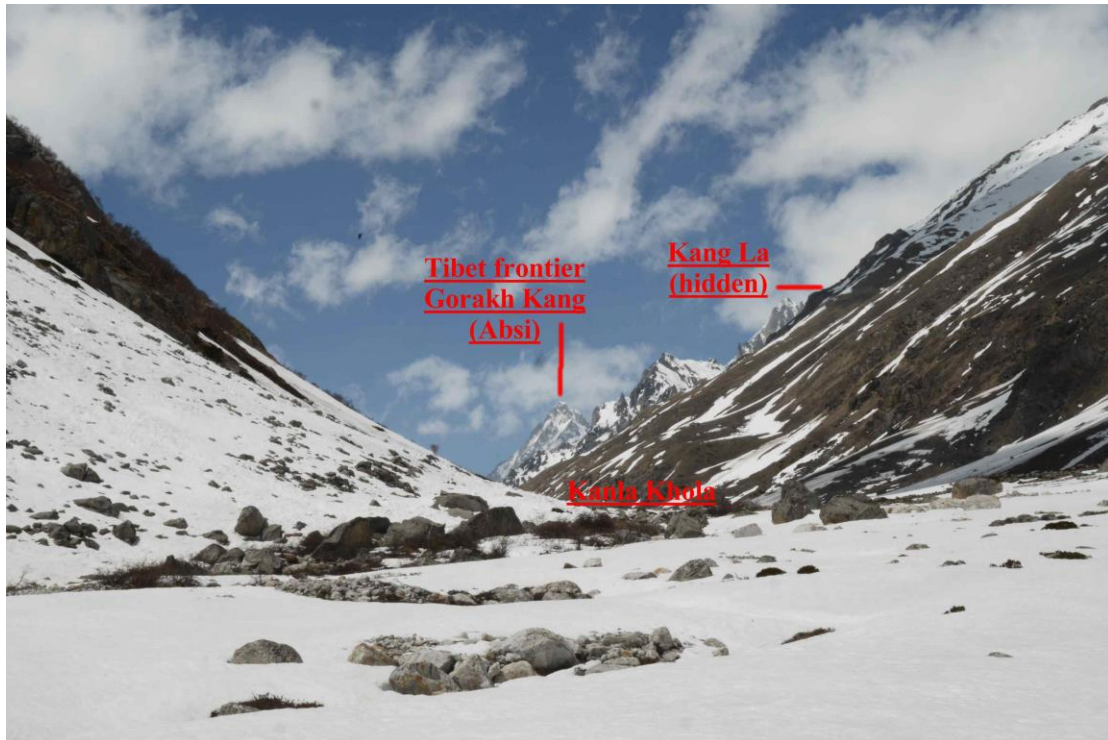
To try and get into the actual Bholbihan Khola would have required porters from Nepka two days away. This option, we knew, would be almost impossible; there is no tradition of commercial portering hereabouts and any men of working age who haven’t gone abroad for work are ill equipped. With snow condition so bad and base camp still 12km away, it would have risked anyone not properly clothed with injury. We also had 40 loads, so at least 10 men relaying over a week would have been necessary.

Day nine. Whilst musing over our unfortunate position we decided to leave the mules here and recce.

Crag and Ed would go up into the Bholbihan Khola to see if there was any way through on the true right bank for mules since it was the true left bank we ascended in 2013. I would go with Nick, Phil and Skip further up the main valley towards the Kangla Khola and see if there was an alternative available to us. We took the muleteer Ngutubes Lama to make his own assessment. The problems started almost at once. More snow-covered birch forest, with trees laid flat by avalanche, was the fare for the first hour or two. Then we came into more open ground where things looked hopeful, only to be dashed a mile or so on where more snow slides, on much steeper country this time, meant the end was nigh for mule travel. I went on to the entrance to the Kangla Khola some five hours away and looked around into it, seeing Gorakh Kang tantalisingly there at the right-hand head of the valley. A lower ridge obscured the Kangla side-valley, leading to the actual pass.

In ANY normal year we would have got mules into this khola which is, in any event, a pack horse route. But the state of it now was such that I could not blame the mule men, who had been the best we had ever had in many years travel in Far West Nepal. That day we had travelled 18km over 4000m often in soft snow. Back at Bholbihan we were all somewhat downcast.





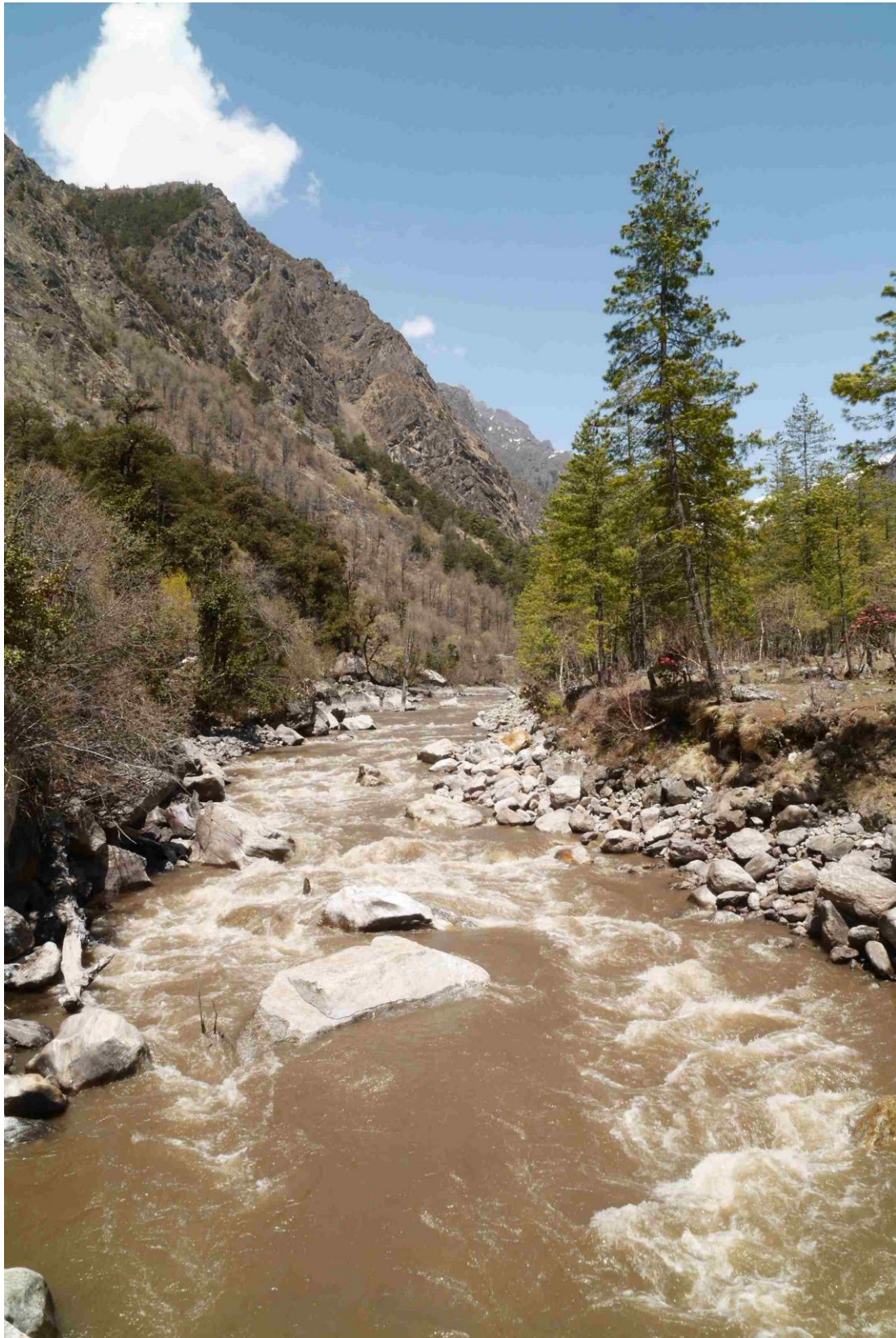
Crag and Ed had not found a way through into Bholbihan but had seen a huge rock avalanche scar beyond the forest on that side. That was to tell a tale.

Day ten. Since it was impossible for the mules to go any further north, the Bholbihan Khola was the only hope. Our last chance was for Crag, Ed and Nick to attempt a one-off push with huge sacks to see if, in the space of a week, they might get to climb Assajya Tuppa on which Crag had seen a good line during the 2013 recce. It was a very long shot, which myself, Skip and Phil decided against.

Even if the large distance, huge loads and lack of acclimatisation were not enough, none of us knew the condition of snow in the khola, let alone on the mountain. But at that moment we had no alternative since no other mountains were accessible from here. We had 20 mules standing around at some cost to us and a decision needed making. We decided to leave the sirdar, Prem Gurung, with a camp, tents, fuel and three mules so that there was some support for those attempting the mountain. It was a bold enough plan as it was, let alone striking camp behind them and leaving no back-up.

The other three of us were to go off back down valley with mules. And at this point all bets were off because Skip got on his satellite phone – an item never before taken on any Himalayan expedition of ours and from which emanates only bad news. While phoning his family to say we might be back early, we heard of the huge earthquake of 25<sup>th</sup> April, some five days previously. We had felt nothing that day at Piplan – in fact at the very time of unloading the mules through the difficult ledges – but when mentioning this to the mule men, who are used to many small shocks in the area, they said they had indeed felt something evidently too small for them to mention. In retrospect we remembered that day the clear river went muddy brown for hours before clearing again. This was

possibly the fresh debris from the rock avalanche that Crag and Ed had seen in the khola set off by the quake.



**The Loti Karnali Nadi turned brown from debris on 25<sup>th</sup> April, Earthquake day.**



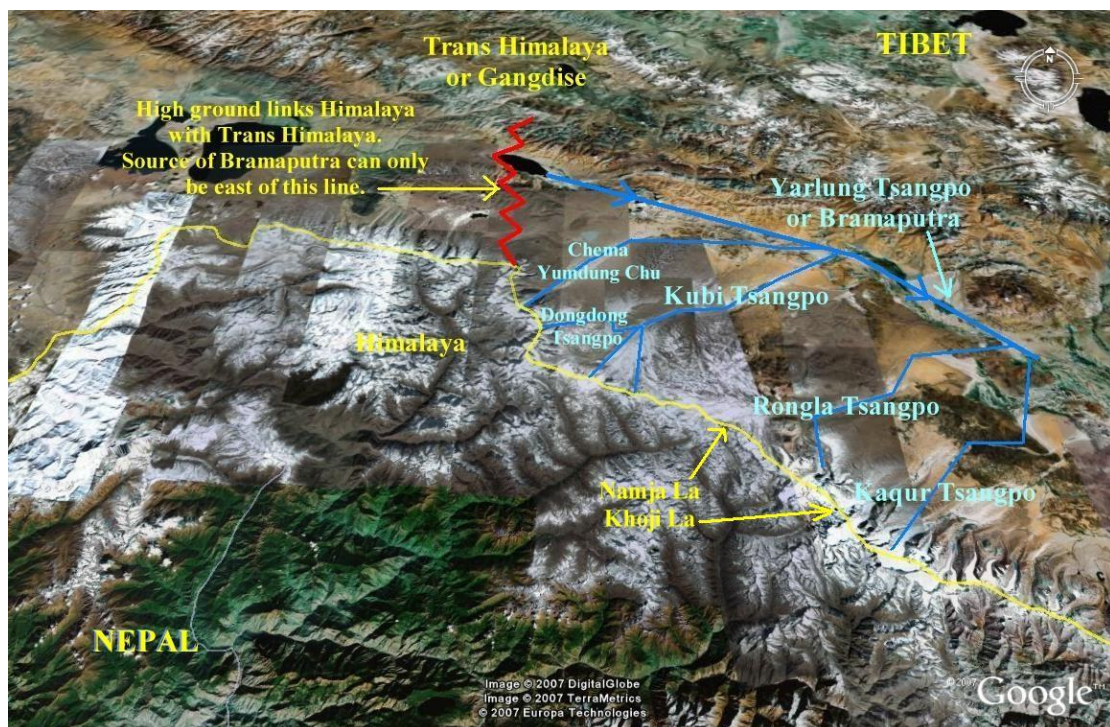
This news had, of course, to be given to our three Nepalis. They were naturally very worried, especially the sirdar who was from Barpak in Gorkha near Manaslu, which was at the epicentre. We later heard his house had been completely demolished. Kancha Gurung had his house which he shared with a brother destroyed in Kathmandu and Prem Tamang (cook) was unsure as to damage in Helambu, in one of the most badly affected districts.

It was now impossible to ask the sirdar, or any of the others for that matter, to sit around for a week waiting for the climbers. The immediate general consensus was that we should all leave and get these guys back to their families and see what had happened. The mule men themselves were not affected as their home in Simikot was west of here and therefore further away from the epicentre.

It was a sad and frustrating thing to have come this far, got so close to our mountains, and because of snow and a massive earthquake to retreat all those days, another eight, back to Simikot. But this was of course nothing compared to having your home destroyed.

Day 11 to Day 19 was spent travelling back to Simikot the way we had come.

**Note on the source of Brahmaputra:-** The area to the immediate north and East of Langtachen are sources of the Brahmaputra River. Known as the Yarlung Tsangpo whilst in Tibet, the river runs eastward (always north of the main Himalaya) until breaking through the range at Namche Barwa (between Bhutan and Burma), this is the most holy river in all Tibet and, even in India where it assumes the name of Brahmaputra, its sacred status is matched only by the Ganges.



## Source streams of the Brahmaputra

### Earthquake:-

According to the early analysis, a region 120km long by 50km wide uplifted by as much as 1m during the 75 second earthquake. This uplift peaked only 17km from Kathmandu, even though the city was relatively far from the earthquake's epicentre. The ground also shifted 2.5m to the southwest.



Building toppled into each other in Kathmandu



Damage in Durbar Square Kathmandu





**Expedition members back row from left:-  
Skip Novak / Julian Freeman-Attwood/ Crag Jones/ Phil Bartlett/ Nick Colton/  
Ed Douglas.**

**Middle row:-**

**Ngutubes Lama/ Denzing Lama / Jage Bahadur/**

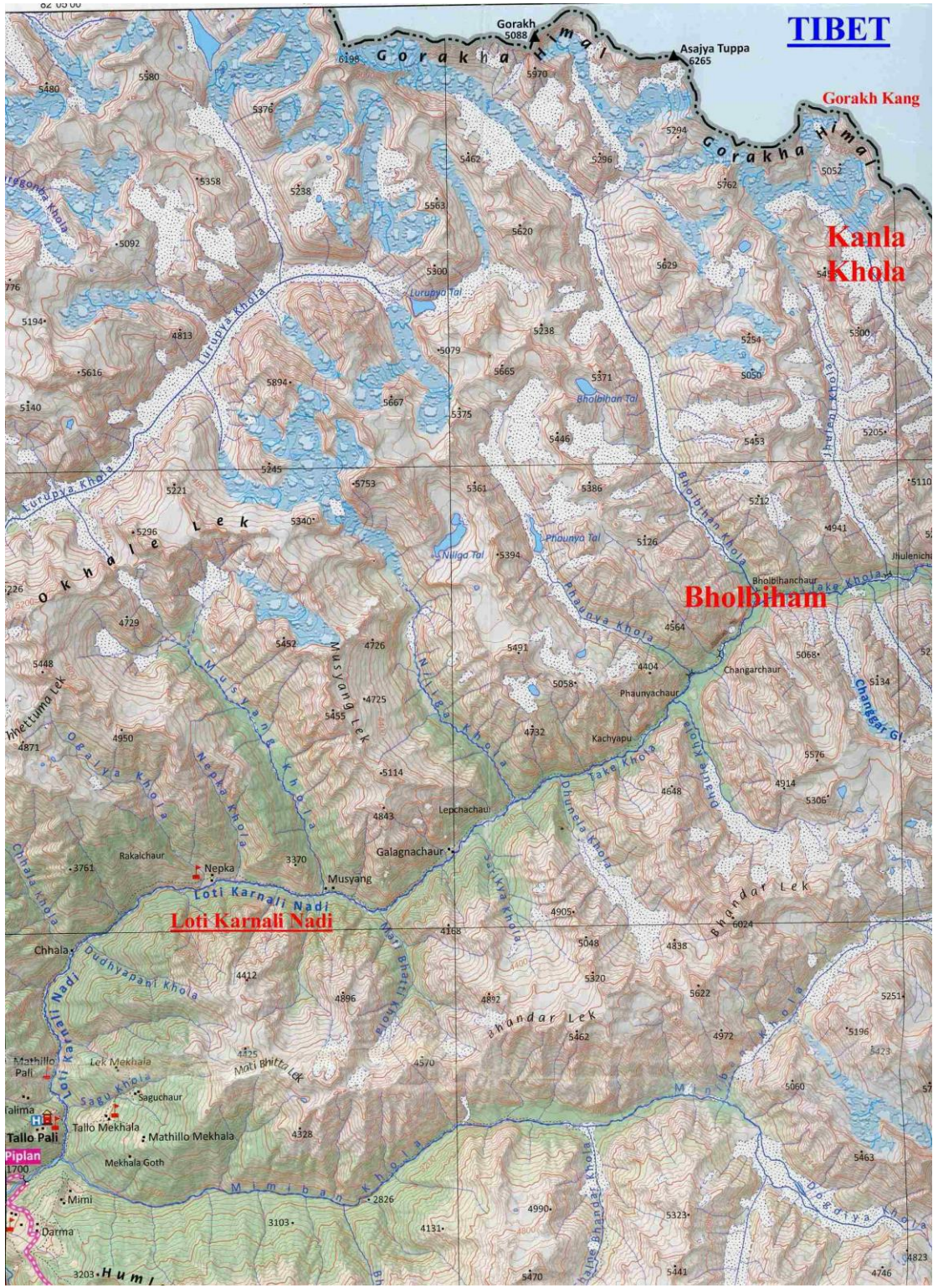
**Ram Lama / ChhiringLama / Dawa Lama / Chhiring Porter**

**Front row:-**

**Kanncha (cook helper) / Prem Tamang (cook)**

**Photo:- Sirdar Prem Gurung.**







## Accounts

*Nepali rupees converted at rate of 145 rupees to £1  
and 100 rupees to US\$1*

### EXPENDITURE

Air flight Manchester – Kathmandu ... 6 x 700.....	£ 4200 (US\$6090)
Mules / porters / camping / staff wages.....	£ 3515 (US\$5097)
Food, kitchen equipment, gas Paraffin. First aid.....	£ 2811 (US\$4086)
Hotels / accommodation .....	£ 1190 (US\$1726)
Permits / agent fee / Porter Insurance / internal air fares/ Excess baggage Nepalgunj to Simikot / Bus Nepalgunj	£ 6094 (US\$8837)
<b>TOTAL expenditure.....</b>	<b>£ 17,810 (US\$25824)</b>

### INCOME

Shipton Tilman Award.....	£ 3800 (US\$5500)
Mount Everest Foundation.....	£ 2400 (US\$3480)
The Alpine Club.....	£ 1500 (US\$2175)

Personal contributions from members in cash and including international air fares:-

Ed Douglas.....	£ 1685
Nick Colton.....	£ 1685
Phil Bartlett.....	£ 1685
Skip Novak.....	£ 1685
Crag Jones.....	£ 1685
Julian Freeman-Attwood.....	£ 1685
<b>Total income.....</b>	<b>£ 17,810 (US\$25824)</b>

Besides our sponsors, also many thanks to those in Nepal:-

Shiva Dhakel (KTM agent)  
Prem Tamang (cook)  
Kanncha (cook helper).  
Prem Gurung (interpreter / sirdar)

The 6 Muleteers from Thehe:-  
Ngutubes Lama 5 mules  
Denzing Lama 6 Mules  
Helper Jage Bahadur  
Ram Lama 4 Mules  
Chhiring Lama 2 Mules  
Dawa Lama 3 Mules  
Porter Chhiring Lama  
Rinjin Lama (Simikot fixer)

**Report compiled by expedition leader J. Freeman-Attwood, Cwm Pennant, North Wales 2015**

### **Expedition members:-**

**Nicholas Francis COLTON:-** UK 58yrs BMC Deputy CEO and Sports Administrator, Mountaineer. North Face of Grande Jorasse (new route) Colton/MacIntyre, North Face of Droites (new route) Colton/Brooks, North Face of Rooster Comb, Alaska (new route) West Face of Mt Huntington, Alaska, (new route) Colton/Leach Denali, Alaska, West Buttress Route North Face of Grande Jorass, Wymper Spur Direct, Freney Pillar, Mt Blanc Grande Pilliar D'Angle, Mt Blanc. First ascents unclimbed Pks circa 6000meters Nepal Tibet border 2007, 2008, 2011 and 2012.

**Edward DOUGLAS:-** UK 46 yrs, Writer and journalist..... Winter ascents in the Alps of the North Face of Les Droites, the Supercouloir on Mont Blanc du Tacul. Summer routes in the Mont Blanc Range include the Gervasutti Pillar and the Diable Ridge on the Tacul, the Jardin Ridge on the Aiguille Verte, the Brown-Whillans route on the West Face of the Blatière, a number of easier climbers in the Valais and Bernese Oberland. Himalayan climbs include West Ridge of Shivling in the Garhwal Himal and the first ascent of the North Face of Xiashe in Sichuan. He's been on exploratory trips to Nepal, Alaska and Mali, and climbed and trekked in New Zealand, Tanzania, the USA, Egypt, Pakistan and Jordan. Ascents in far west Nepal in Kanti and Changla Himals 2009 and 2011. He is the former editor of the Alpine Journal.

**Phil Bartlett:-** UK 57 yrs teacher and lecturer.... Extensive greater ranges experience. 3 expeditions to Greenland. Many trips to Karakoram and twice to Kunyang Chish 7800m with Venables. Kun Lun Shan with Attwood and Henry Day. To Sikkim Chombu East with Doug Scott. With Attwood on 4 trips to Tibet inc first ascent Shahgangsham 6822m in 2002. Many Alpine seasons inc new routes with rock to E6.

**James 'Skip' Novak.** USA 60yrs, Sailing Captain, Mountaineer. (US passport) Many Alpine seasons / 2 seasons South Is New Zealand / West Face Batian Mt Kenya / 30 years sailing and climbing making first ascents in Tierra del Fuego, Patagonia, South Georgia, Antarctic Peninsula. Ascents of Mt William, Mt Scott, Mt Paget, Mt Ashley, Mt Pelagic and numerous others. With JF-A and Doug Scott in Sikkim 1996 and on Drohmo (Kangchenjunga region) 1998.

**Julian FREEMAN-ATTWOOD:-** UK 59yrs, Forestry and land management, Mountaineer. ....

Ultrar (Hunza) expedition 1994, , Masagang 7200m expedition to Bhutan, 10 climbing and exploratory expeditions to the Tibetan Transhimalaya /, first ascent of Targo-ri 6550m and Shahgangsham 6822m; First ascent solo of Pk 6263m in Loinbo group. Mongolian Altai first ascent of south ridge Huithen; 6 Antarctic expeditions to South Georgia (first ascent Mt Kling, Mt Pelagic) and to the Antarctic Peninsula /1<sup>st</sup> attempt Cape Renard Tower. 1<sup>st</sup> ascent of un-named Peak in Cordon Navarro in Tierra del Fuego. / 6 trips to Far west Nepal 2009-15. (inc. reconnaissance for this trip)

**Caradoc 'Crag' JONES:-** UK 56 yrs, Marine Biologist, Mountaineer. Numerous ascents in Karakoram (Hunza Peak and Bibliomotin) and attempts with Attwood on Ultrar '91 and '94. Ascents in South Georgia (Mt Paget / Mt Nordenskjold / Mt Pelagic / Mt Ashley / The Three brothers.) Ascents on Antarctic Peninsula and Tierra del Fuego./ First Welsh national to summit Everest 1995. / Ascents of note in Alps, Greenland and Africa. Reconnaissance for this trip with Attwood 2013.