

Chapter 2

Opening the Door of Tibet

R.S. Tolia

Introduction

For the information of our honoured guests from across the globe, all eminent scholars and geographers, may I say that today they stand not ‘nearly at the gateway to Tibet’ but also in the home-land of some of the most eminent explorers the modern world has known, recipient of arguably the highest honours which the Geographical societies of Europe could bestow on any one, including the Royal Geographical Society, the Paris Geographical Society and the Italian, as well as the Government of the day. Coming as I do from this region myself it was not surprising that professor Raghbir Chand asked me to bring to the notice of the delegates the great exploratory works which had been performed by several sons of the soil, collectively described as the ‘Pundits’, in the official geographical proceedings and related records (Alcock 1877, p. cxxxvii).

I wonder if you all have been pointed out the arch-gates near Gochar, at Thal, announcing the road that you have traversed to reach here, named as Nain Singh Rawat Road, and when we go down for our village excursion, we will be taking a road named after the other, as Kishan Singh Road. Nain Singh and Kishan Singh, two of the most eminent persons produced by this region, belonged to a region known as Johar, and both of them were Johari Shaukas. While Nain Singh’s was the only name and the only one from Asia inscribed on the Honour’s Board of the Royal Geographical Society, London, Kishan Singh, his protégé and first cousin, missed joining him by a whisker, owing to the impatience of a retiring Surveyor General of India, General Walker. By any accounts Kishan Singh’s four year long survey of what constitutes South China today, was of no less significance than the celebrated journey to that celebrated city of Lhasa, by his cousin and Guru, Nain Singh.

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Tibet: The Forbidden Land

In my welcome I have mentioned that you are literally at the ‘gateway to Tibet’, which indeed you all are, as the crow flies, a matter of a few hours, albeit across the high Himalayan peaks and passes; a small idea of which you may have noticed the way the climate changes no sooner than you cross the Kala-muni ridge. To the best of my knowledge, no country or region, has remained forbidden to foreigners for such a long stretch of time, as Tibet. Geography and history have conspired with politics to make it difficult to access, and religious curiosity and practice have made it tantalizing and highly vulnerable to brute muscle-power.

To geographers reflecting on globalization and marginalization I need not waste time in explaining the role played by geography and geology in making Tibet difficult of access, nor that by politics, in continuing to keep the Tibetan ‘elected government’ in exile, or that by people practising a particular religion (Buddhism) that has made its people highly vulnerable to brute military power. Before welcoming you here I have had the pleasure of listening to presentation by Dr. A. Matsukova and Dr. M. Batsova on the ‘Impacts of Marginalization and Globalization on the Czech-German-Austrian Borderland’ (see Chap. 4). I could not help comparing the ‘Iron Curtain’ of the Soviet Block with the High Himalayan Wall, which separates our Johar region from neighbouring Western Tibet. The ‘Iron Curtain’ in Europe has had a finite life, and the after-effects of its collapse are presently under study. Here I shall briefly discuss how the high Himalayan wall has helped in moulding and shaping a ‘border-people’ and forced them into enduring and overcoming the harshest possible physical conditions imaginable, a nearly superhuman endurance story. Cis-Himalayan living conditions are nothing but stories of extreme human endurance and successful narratives of climatic adaptations, over centuries of existence (Tolia 2005).

Three Distinct Tibetan Regions

As we all know the southern border of Tibet is formed by the Himalayas; the western by the Karakoram Range, and the northern by the Altyn Tagh, which borders on Chinese Turkestan. Tibet in fact has three distinct regions, known as Chol-kha-sum. The extreme west from Ngari Korsum to Sokla Kyao is known as U-Tsang; the region from Sokla Kyao to the upper bend of the Yellow River (Ma Chu, its name in Qinghai) is known as Kham (Dotod in Tibetan), and from the Yellow River bend to Chortenkarö lies Amdo (Domed in Tibetan). There is a saying in Tibet that emphasizes the particularities of these three regions (Tsepon 1984):

The best religion comes from U-Tsang (the region adjoining Uttarakhand); the best men come from Kham (Dotod); and the best horses come from Amdo (Domed).

Let me share with you very briefly the significance of these Tibetan statements and their impacts on its history, politics and Tibet's ultimate and continuing marginalization.

The Best Religion

It is the westernmost part of Tibet, which hosts Mount Kailash, the celebrated Lakes of Mansarovar, equally important to Hindus, Buddhists, Jains as well as the Bönpas. The Bön religion, as many of you may know, precedes Buddhism. Much before Lhasa became the centre of Buddhism all over Tibet it was in U-Tsang that the earliest Buddhist monk Atisha (Depankarjanaan of Vikramshila monastery in Magadh) arrived in the Toling monastery along the Sutlej in 1042 A.D. via Nepal. Atisha and his disciples made corrections and revisions of the Tibetan translations of Buddhist texts and while at Toling, Atisha wrote a Sanskrit work called Bodhipath pradeep (the lamp that shows the path of enlightenment). Atisha, in fact, arrived and worked much later; the real credit of opening the doors of Tibet should go to Tibet's founder-king, Srongtsan Gampo (617-649 A.D.), who sent Thon-mi Sam Bhota with sixteen companions to India (Kashmir) to learn the Sanskrit language. After their return to Tibet he used his knowledge of the Brahmi and Gupta scripts to devise a Tibetan script. Atisha, Santirakshita and Guru Padmasambhava are but just a few names who helped to establish Buddhism in Tibet, while it declined in its country of birth. So, western Tibet, starting with the pre-Buddhist Bön religion, followed by Buddhism in the eleventh century, became well known for the flowering of religion. A look at the present day practice of Buddhism, along the Indian border, indicates its strongest influence in Ladakh, in the border regions of Himachal Pradesh, and a tapering presence in the westernmost part of Uttar Kashi district of Uttarakhand. Its near absence in the Johar and Darma valleys of the Pithoragarh district (with the latter retaining Bön residues), excepting of course, enclaves of migrants from Tibet (Bidang in Darma and the Molpas of Mana) reinforces the belief of U-Tsang's eminence as home to the 'best religion' (Sherring 2006).¹

The Best Men

There are two traditions concerning the racial origin of the Tibetan people. While leaving aside the tradition of Indian ancestry, one may be surprised to know that their second tradition maintains that the Tibetans are descended from monkeys, especially from a male monkey, and are the incarnation of the deity Avalokiteshvara (Cheresi),

¹Personal communication from interviews in the settlement of Bidang in Darma.

who produced six progenies through a mountain ogress. These hybrid monkeys looked like any others, except that they had no tails! Modern anthropologists claim that the Tibetans belong to what was formerly called the Mongoloid race,² and such a classification seems plausible since the Tibetans had a close relationship with the Mongols for centuries. The majority of people in the U-Tsang are short of stature, round-headed with high-cheek-bones, therefore slightly different from those other two regions. The people of Kham (Dotod) and Amdo are tall, long headed and long limbed. When the Dalai Lama fled Tibet his entourage exited through Kham, escorted by the best of men (Khampas).

And the Best Horses

It was indeed the search for these fabled ‘best horses’ of the Amdo region, about which that intrepid superintendent of the company stud William Moorcroft had heard from the Haridwar Kumbha mela, that enticed him to visit these Himalayan border valleys, a land at that time (1812) under the control of the Gorkhas. It was the search for pashmina wool and good quality equine germ-plasm that brought East India Company servants in contact with the Johari traders in western Tibet in 1812, near the Mansarovar region, which established contacts with a border people who had been in contact with Tibet for several centuries. Moorcroft’s description of his journey in disguise through the Niti valley provides a graphic description of both the ruin and desolation that had been wrought by the cruel Gorkha rule in these border tracts (1792–1815) and the flourishing land-trade that existed between these two adjoining Himalayan regions. British colonial expansion wrested these border lands from the Gorkhas in 1815, and during the next four decades the entire Cis-Himalayan foothills came under British rule. The newly acquired territories became the North Western Province and the Punjab.

Thus he secured (1792–1856) the Bengal Lower Provinces, carved out of them two new provinces, and set the East India Company into a northward expansion mode, in order to prevent the expansion of Russia towards the east, eventually halted by the Sepoy rebellion in 1857. Earlier in the 1830s the North Western Provinces had commenced a new kind of land revenue settlement, providing a financial soundness to a commercial company which had now assumed a governing suzerain role. These new revenue settlements needed land surveys, which gave rise to the Great Trigonometrical Surveys (GTS). This new survey organisation of India and Nain Singh Rawat, the Pundit of Pundits, were born the same year, 1830. The cadastral and cartographic surveys moved northwards, first to the foothills and

²“The term Mongoloid has come to mean demented physical and mental developments, features similar to the Asiatic race. A more appropriately neutral, modern term would thus be the East Asian race, from Mongolians, Koreans, Chinese and Japanese in the North to Burmese, Laotians, Cambodians, Vietnamese, Thais, Malaysians, Singaporeans, Filipinos and Indonesians in the South” (Chong 2009, p. 3).

thereafter to the great Himalayas. Nain Singh's hitherto hapless circumstance took a turn for the better, his engagement as an interpreter with the scientific Magnetic Surveys of the Prussian Schlagintweit brothers, Hermann, Adolf and Robert, came handy, when the search for a way out after the murder of Adolf near Kashgar, put a stop to the white man's entry into the Central Asian region.

The Asian White Spot

Quite like the scientific data on the 'white spot' highlighted by the latest Assessment Report of the IPCC, the murder of Adolphe Schlagintweit near Kashgar, rendered any exploration by a 'white man' impossible. However, by this time a visit to the source of the Sutlej River in western Tibet by the Schlagintweit brothers (Schlagintweit and Schlagintweit 1861–1866) and the earlier visit of William Moorcroft to the Mansarovar region, had thrown up the possibility of a way forward. It presented itself in a set of border-people who had been trading with the Tibetans for a long time, in the same trans-himalayan regions, and it was apparent that they exercised considerable influence in these areas because of their trading superiority. The plan was to recruit young persons from these communities, train them for survey work, and deploy them to continue with the scientific survey. Their competence to undertake such surveys, their commitment, industry and honesty, had already been vouchsafed by the published works of the authors of the Magnetic Surveys of India, in the volumes of explorations in High Asia. The brothers had even offered Nain Singh an assignment in the company in Europe but reported that his attachment to his home-land proved stronger.

Pioneer Teacher and Self-taught Linguist

Even today, after six decades of independence and promotion of science, the Indian Himalayas suffer from being a "white spot" as concerns scientific data. This contrasts with the career of Nain Singh Rawat, a humble and indebted young man from this region. He started frequenting a school at Milam, while the North Western Province had just commenced setting up the Tahsili schools (Allender 2006, pp. 22 f., 39 f.), i.e. vernacular schools funded out of 1 % of tax revenue, at the Tahsil (subdistrict) level (Mir 2010, p. 55). Without a formal schooling, as none existed then, Nain Singh taught himself Hindi, English, both spoken and written Tibetan, not to mention Persian which was the official language. That he was quick at picking up measurement knowledge and even the use of sophisticated surveying instruments has been testified in the reports of the Schlagintweits. Of late, his control of words and expression, in some of these foreign and Indian languages, has now been testified by recent research. His contributions to the development of the modern Hindi language proved him worthy to be included as one of its fine practitioners.

His 'Akshansh Darpan' or mirror of Latitude, an instruction booklet that he wrote on the specific request of the officials of the education department, makes him arguably the first author of a technical treatise in Hindi. This book also testifies also to his excellent qualities as a trainer as it was he who in his final years assumed the role of a Chief Trainer for the younger surveyors recruited by the GTS (Tolia 2000).³

From a penniless indebted young man Nain Singh through his major exploratory works was able to considerably fill-up the 'Asian cartographic white spot', and he was acknowledged by the authorities as 'one individual who had contributed maximum to our extant knowledge of the Asian High Plateau'. His pupils were also as well trained by him, as the master trainer. Geographers have mentioned that some of these pupils later excelled the master himself.

Growing Literature, Awards and Decorations

Highest scientific and official awards followed. His multi-faceted talents are best reflected by the fact that the headquarters of the Survey of India, one of the oldest scientific organizations of the world and his employer, erected his bust alongside the one of his cousin Kishan Singh Rawat and the most celebrated Surveyor General of India, Sir George Everest. Besides, a road and the main auditorium of the Survey of India were named after him. Independent India has honoured his achievements and memory by releasing a postal stamp and a first-day envelope, thus raising him to one of the most outstanding sons-of-the-soil. The Royal Geographical Society honoured him with its highest distinction by bestowing the 'Patron's Medal' upon him. He is the only Asian to have his name on its Honour's Board. The British Government matched it with the highest civil honour conferred to an individual, namely Companion of the Indian Empire (C.I.E.), with land jagirs (land grants) in Sitapur. Gold Watches and other honours followed from various Geographical Societies of Europe.

In this age of 'scientific white spots', with the state spending millions in the name of science and technology, teaching and training, the eminence and the value of the contributions made in all these respects by Nain Singh Rawat and other 'Pundits' engaged in these scientific explorations stand out in sharp contrast. In passing, when soon after the well-known Young husband Expedition to Tibet in 1904 (Tibet Frontier Commission) Tibet opened up to the outer world for the first time, a technical mission was mounted, primarily to test and validate the existing scientific knowledge available in the official records. Most of this had been

³For the sake of record, and to provide a sense of the extent of this recorded scientific information, let me provide brief details of Nain Singh's celebrated four survey explorations in Tibet and Central Asia (1865–1875): 1865–66: Kathmandu—Lhasa—Mansarovar Lake (21 months, 1200 mi), 1867: Origin of Sutlej and Indus rivers, and Thok Jalung in Tibet (7 months, 850 mi), 1873–74: Douglas Forsyth's Second Yarkand—Kashgar Mission, and 1873–75: Leh—Lhasa—Tawang, Assam (1319 mi).

sedulously collected by these Indian explorers, led by Nain Singh. This mission was declared a failure as it was unsuccessful in discovering any major discrepancies, but its leader Captain C.G. Rawling, himself from the Survey of India (with Captain C.S.D. Ryder and Captain Wood) felt proud of the fact that the scientific information recorded by Nain Singh, under extremely difficult working conditions, stood fully validated!

All these surveys, needless to say, were undertaken on foot, measuring distances, simultaneously taking various observations, and meticulously keeping a day to day diary including his personal observations. Thousands of square miles of hitherto uncharted regions were thus mapped for the first time, along with their latitudes and other related scientific observations which were taken along the route. The co-ordinates of all habitations and places were also recorded and mapped. Large areas of Tibet hitherto unknown to the outer world were thus recorded, with various social and economic observations, which only a person with Nain Singh's background could possibly attempt (Singh 1973; Bhatt and Pathak 2006).

Teacher and Trainer Par Excellence

Nain Singh and Kishan Singh were unknowingly following the foot-steps of great savants like Aisha, Santirakshita and Padmsambhava. While the latter were simply fulfilling requests made by the Tibetan Kings to impart to them the teachings of the greatest reformer India gave to the world, Lord Buddha, the Pundits were filling the 'white spots in the scientific knowledge' on the geographical maps of the modern world, with which our scientific community is still battling.

Here it may be useful to briefly explain the term 'Pundit' (or Pandit) often applied before the names of Nain Singh Rawat and also Kishan Singh. When the vernacular schools were being opened in the 1860s during the colonial period, formal teaching was restricted to the study of the three R's (reading, writing, arithmetics). Prior to this, schooling was confined to just two communities, both at home: for the Brahmin youth for the purpose of performing the rituals, and for the Bhotia youth, as the trading community needed to keep their trade accounts. As the teachers employed were mostly Brahmins from the Pundit class, the teachers employed in the schools acquired the epithet of 'Pundit', for a school-master, similar to the Master ji of later times. Thus, the expression 'Pundit' simply meant a teacher ('Moulvi' for a Muslim teacher). Nain Singh had been employed as a teacher first at Milam, his home-land, and later in Darma, where he was sent to start a new school in Garbyang. After his training at the Survey of India in Mussoorie in 1863 he and Kishan Singh were entrusted with the Tibetan explorations and given the pseudonym of 'Pundits', to hide their real identity. By this time Tibet had become a totally forbidden land, closed to outsiders.

The first exploration report mentioned 'the Pundit', hiding Nain Singh's identity, as the explorations were to be carried on further and the identity of the explorers had to be protected from the Tibetan officials. In due course the 'original Pundit' i.e.

Nain Singh, was to assume the role of a trainer for the new recruits of the GTS, and ultimately he was recognized as the chief trainer and thus the Chief Pundit, in the official records. Thus the expressions Pundit and ‘the original Pundit’ merely alluded to a pseudonym applied for a teacher, who later became an explorer, and ultimately the chief trainer for an entire crop of outstanding geographical explorers, who mapped the length and the breadth of a vast country like Tibet. This was no ordinary phenomenon as these explorations were conducted and completed while a sword of death hung over them, any disclosure of their identity resulting in instant death. Much was made of this ‘epithet’ in one of the discussions held in the Royal Geographical Society with an unsuccessful attempt to belittle the importance of a great work recently completed by Kishan Singh, in a bid to secure RGS honours to the retiring Surveyor General, Colonel Walker via the presentation of preliminary results of south China explorations, completed in 1884. However, as the RGS had several old India hands, who knew India like the back of their palms, this nefarious attempt to belittle the great achievements of the likes of Nain Singh and Kishan Singh, were completely thwarted. The only consequence was that Kishan Singh Rawat’s work did not receive the highest honours that certainly were due to him, as Kenneth Mason later insinuated. That Nain Singh was a trainer par excellence is best testified by the instructive language that he used in his master piece, the *Akshansh Darpan*, and the re-iterative pedagogy that he deployed to explain the intricacies of taking measurements and applying mensuration formulae to his adult protégés at the Survey school (*ibid.*; see also Tolia and Prakashan 2010, Book IV, pp. 131–150).

Just as the abiding contributions made by the early Buddhist savants of the middle ages remain to be fully assessed and acknowledged by India and the Buddhist world, the contributions to physical and social sciences and the world of literature made by some of these intrepid explorers of our times also remains mostly un-acknowledged, unaccompanied as these are with the academic degrees or patronage enjoyed by the likes of Swen Hedin or David Livingstone. I would like to describe it as a case of ‘academic marginalization in an era of global excellence’ and how this has been possibly averted thanks to this field trip to this remote Himalayan region. Field work has unfailingly lent depth to all academic studies.

Our dialogue will continue to add more to what I have tried to share through this brief presentation, intended to perpetuate the memory of arguably the greatest among the many 19th century surveyors. It is indeed no less an academic feat by which the accomplishments of these ordinary looking local greats have been rescued from being lost to the scientific and literary worlds.

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