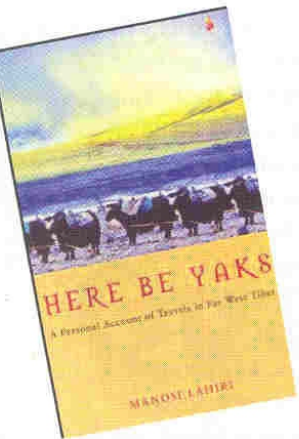


Here be Shiva and Sutlej



Here Be Yaks: A Personal Account of Travels in Far West Tibet

Manosi Lahiri, Stellar Publishers, 2006, Pages 286

MOHAN GURUSWAMY

TIBET IS INDIA'S biggest geographical neighbour. The Indo-Tibetan border begins in the eastern most tip of India in Arunachal Pradesh and ends in the icy heights of the Karakoram Range. Tibet's influence is seen all over India's Himalayan region where the Tibetan strain of Mahayana Buddhism predominates. The languages of Ladakh, Sikkim and Bhutan are variants of Tibetan. The great gompas of Thigse, Shey, Rumtek or Tawang are architecturally similar to the gompas of Tibet and what happens inside them is just the same. Buddhism went to Tibet from India and with it went the best impulses of India's traditions, philosophy and folklore. Even the Tibetan script is derived from ancient Pali which was the dominant language of upper India during the period of Gautama Buddha and the great Mauryan and Magadhan kingdoms. The scripts of Thai, Cambodian, Burmese, Telugu and Kannada are also derived from Pali. But it is Tibetan that is the closest to Pali. Thus, today it is the countless Tibetan Buddhist monks in India who are best placed to interpret the golden age of Bharat preserved in the manuscripts and etchings of the period to the people of India.

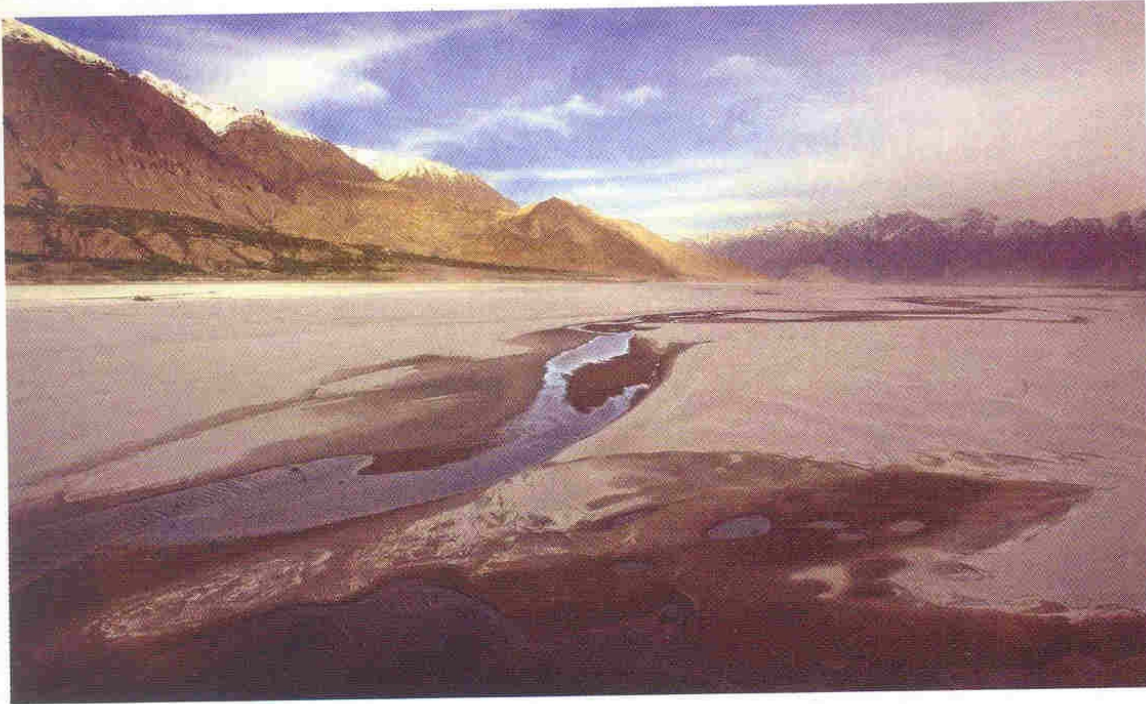
However much Tibet may have drawn from India and however close they may have been to India not just geographically but spiritually, Tibet has always been a remote and exotic land to most of the Indians. While this may be so, the holiest lake and mountain of the Hindu folklore and tradition, the abode of Shiva, lies in Tibet. Even today the *parikrama's* of the Lake Mansarovar and the Mount Kailash are the highest ritual a Hindu can perform in a lifetime or for that matter, even in several lifetimes. This remoteness is almost entirely due to geography, for as the crow flies, Tibet is the closest to the Indo-Gangetic plain, which is the cra-

dle of Hindu civilisation. Tibet is separated from India by the tallest and lengthiest mountain range in the world, impervious to all but the hardest and most determined. While spiritually and geographically closest to India, Tibet has been historically closer to China and even Mongolia, because the lay of the land made it naturally contiguous with few geographical barriers.

Throughout its long history the easy and continued Tibetan political intercourse with China and Mongolia determined its politics and present situation. There were even many times in history when Tibetans conquered China and imposed their will upon them. The earliest of these was when Trisong Detsen seized Changan (now Xian) and appointed a new emperor. In 1642 the fifth Dalai Lama sallied forth to Peking to demand that the Ming emperor recognise the Tibetan sovereignty and independence, which he did. But at other times the Mongols, Manchus and Hans dominated and ruled Tibet. Like Mongolia and Manchuria, Tibet was not one of the lesser partners in the long saga of China's historical evolution. Today Tibet is a part of China, but Tibet, nevertheless, is still a distinct nation even if it is no longer a separate state. That China now extends into Tibet is why it is India's neighbour in a *de facto* and possibly even *de jure* sense, but it is still Tibet that is India's true neighbour.

Given this long and proximate relationship with Tibet, it is indeed a pity that we Indians know so little about Tibet as a country. For long it has been the spiritual seekers and later the cartographers and spies of the Survey of India who maintained a physical contact with Tibet. By this time Buddhism had mostly disappeared from the land of origin and it was the 'pundits' of the Survey of India who brought a record of it as a living religion back to India. The greatest of these 'pundits' was the legendary Sarat Chandra Das whose books about his experiences in Tibet are still avidly read in India. But that Tibet is now long past. Tibetans have now become a minority in their country and a process of assimilation by 'Hanization' is underway. It may be of interest to note that today there are only 18 Manchu language speakers left in China. If this has been the fate of a language of a people who ruled

Manosi Lahiri's investigation to puzzle out the source of the Sutlej would have done Sherlock Holmes proud



over all of China till not long ago, one can imagine where Tibetan is headed. Thus, any account of travel through Tibet will be a record of a rapidly disappearing phase in Tibetan history.

Here Be Yaks by Manosi Lahiri is as she describes it on the jacket, a personal account of travels in far west Tibet. This is why it is most interesting. Lahiri is a professional geographer and a pioneer in geo-informatics, who first undertook the physically and mentally challenging *kora* or circumambulation of the Mount Kailash in 2000. She returned to repeat it, two years later. While it was personal grief and spiritual quest that took her to Tibet the first time, it was the professional geographer's curiosity that led her to undertake the arduous journey a second time.

In the course of the first *kora* her trained eye had noticed that the Ganga *chu*, the stream that linked the Manasarovar and Rakas Tal lakes, was no longer there. While this may have profound implications to our traditional beliefs about the origin of the Ganges, this had even more profound implications to our ecology for many of our great rivers originate in Tibet. Lahiri was now determined to find the real source of the Suttlej and record it to better our understanding of the profound changes that are underway in Tibet.

While this is mostly a personal record of her travels in west Tibet, her observations of everyday life in Tibet and the progress of the journey make it very interesting reading. You get a real feel about the profound changes being wrought on Tibet without the agitated polemics of most the recent

writings on Tibet. Her account of the outer *kora* leaves you wondering if it is the thin air of Tibet or the proximity of Shiva that brings about the exhilaration that many pilgrims experience. This feeling of being close to the gods is indescribable and can only be felt, but Lahiri does a magnificent job of almost taking the reader along on the great *parikrama*. This is great reading and even a greater feeling.

But her search for the source of the Suttlej, which is the centrepiece of the book, is a detective adventure. Sherlock Holmes would have been proud. Her search was not an arduously physical expedition like the one mounted by Dr Livingstone for the source of the Nile. Lahiri's search is more akin to putting the pieces of a complex puzzle together with personal observations and images from India's remote sensing satellites being related together to give us a vivid picture of the havoc that is being wrought on the pristine land on top of the world.

There is yet another part to this book. It is the travels into the remote Tsaparang and the ruins of the lost Kingdom of Guge, a region still well out of the tourist and professional traveller's orbit. This is the area that is geographically closest to northern India. Till a few hundred years ago Guge owed allegiance to the Kings of Ladakh at Leh. This is the region that was penetrated by the legendary Dogra general, Zorawar Singh. Lahiri once again takes us on a trip rich with details of history and legend. *'Here Be Yaks'* is a must read for those interested in and concerned about Tibet. ■