The Story of Kintup

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In the middle of last century there were large tracts of unexplored country north of the Himalayas. The inhabitants had no desire that it should be explored or to allow strangers, whose purposes they could not understand, to travel about.

It was this situation which led the Survey officers to train a little band of Indians, known as 'The Pandits', and send them out to complete the arduous and often dangerous work of surveying and mapping.

The Pandits had to find their objectives secretly, since the native people were often hostile. They travelled in disguise, without passports or credentials. So that they should not be identified, and victimized, they were officially known by certain initials and not by name. If they got into difficulties they had to extricate themselves as best they might, without looking to the British Government for help.

The thrilling stories of these wonderful men can now be read only in obscure Government publications or in an abbreviated form in the pages of geographical journals of the 'sixties and 'seventies. There you may read of 'N. S.' or the 'First Pandit' (Nain Singh, C.I.E.) who on one of his great journeys passed through Nepal where he was foiled in his first attempt to cross the northern frontier into Tibet and finally succeeded in reaching the great plateau and exploring the country towards the sources of the Tsangpo, Sutlej and Indus. There will also be found the story of A. K., perhaps the greatest of all, whose three years' journey disguised as a pilgrim took him from India through Tibet and Mongolia to western China, whence he travelled towards Assam. But being unable to penetrate the tribal country on the frontier he was obliged to return to Lhasa to find his way to India from there. The portion of his journey from Rima, where he was turned back by the savage tribes to Lhasa, was perhaps the most im-

A photograph of Kintup taken in 1913, when, thirty years after his secret explorations were completed, he was found in Darjeeling and brought to Simla to tell his story again.
important of all, since as his road did not cross the Tsangpo he proved that that river must flow into Assam west of Rima. This man counted his paces during the whole of these three years except for a few days in Mongolia, when he was obliged to ride as no members of his caravan travelled on foot in that country, where indeed man, woman and child live on horseback.

Another, who is believed to be the origin of the Bengali Babu in Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*, is D. S. (Rai Bahadur Sarat Chandra Das, C.I.E.). He had a great advantage over his fellow secret explorers in being well educated and cultured, as his notes on the things he saw are fuller and more interesting than those of his less competent contemporaries.

All were not equally successful; the results of some were found to be unsatisfactory when checked by the stories of others; one is described as “wanting in nerve”. This is not to be wondered at when we consider the danger they ran in case of detection. Their instruments were concealed in the false bottoms of their boxes or in the prayer wheel which every Tibetan pilgrim carries, while the rosary used for counting their *Mamis* (the number of times the pilgrim has recited the formula *Om mani padme hum*, “Hail to the Jewel in the Lotus”—Buddha is usually figured in pictures and images as sitting in a lotus) was most useful for counting the explorers’ paces, especially when made of 100 instead of the usual 108 beads. Quicksilver necessary for observing the altitude of stars with the sextant, was carried in a coconut, or in hollow cowrie shells stopped up with wax.

We are here concerned with K. P., whose results were not so reliable as those of the trained explorers but whose perseverance in the face of dangers was surpassed by none and whose story is perhaps the most exciting of all.

Kintup, to give him his real name, was an inhabitant of Sikkim, unable to read or write a word in any language. The Survey of India had trained a Mongolian Lama and ordered Kintup to accompany him as servant. They were to endeavour to trace the river Tsangpo from Tibet right through to the plains of India and to settle definitely the question whether there were any great falls during its descent from the plateau of Tibet. If they were unable to follow the river the whole way, they were to mark a number of logs and throw them into it in order that its connection with the Dihong which flows from the Abor Hills into the plains of Assam could be confirmed. An explorer, G. M. N. (Nemsing), had previously been sent down the river but had not succeeded in tracing the river below a level of about 9600 ft., and as his survey, in the words of the official report, “ended in air”, much reliance could not be placed on it.

Kintup had accompanied G. M. N. on this expedition as his servant and for this reason was sent in a similar capacity with the Mongolian Lama. The two men left Darjeeling and crossed the northern frontier of Sikkim, into Tibet in August 1880. At Tso Lamo, a beautiful lake situated among immense snow peaks at a height of 17,000 ft., they found the traders of northern Sikkim exchanging merchandise with the people of Gyantse. The two travellers joined the latter in the guise of pilgrims and accompanied them to their home, whence they proceeded to Lhasa.

The Mongolian Lama had previously spent some time in Sera, one of the three great monasteries of Lhasa, and he now feasted his old companions there for six days. The travellers then returned by boat down the Kyi Chu which flows past Lhasa and eventually reached Tsetang, a town on the south bank of the Tsangpo. Here the Lama fell ill for twenty days and treated Kintup very badly. The next place of any importance they reached was Lhagyari where a semi-independent chief dwelt. After rejoining the Tsangpo they continued down the valley, stopping in caves or villages and begging as pilgrims do. A pilgrim can travel over any inhabited part of Tibet trusting entirely to the generosity of the inhabitants. For it would be an act calling for condign punishment in the next world to allow a pilgrim to starve.
Though the people must, one would think, feel that a man was carrying his religion too far when he had himself shut up in a cell for three years relying on the faith of the inhabitants of the nearest village to keep him alive. Perhaps pilgrims were equally sure of their sustenance in our own country in a less material age.

Nang Dzong was the next place of any size reached. Kintup's report on this is as follows: "At the next jikyöp (rest-house) which they reached they noted a stream which issued from the interior of Nang Dzong and flows in a northerly direction, joining the Tsangpo at a distance of five chains from Nang Dzong. The Tsangpo which was on the left flows towards the east." It was from such quaint scraps of geographical information that the survey officers compiled the map which has proved to be remarkably accurate.

Leaving the river for a day here the pilgrims crossed a pass on which were "many barbarians and many herds of wild sheep". "It is very difficult to cross in stormy weather." At one place they were delayed four months "owing to the Lama falling in love with his host's wife". They continued their journey after settling this little difficulty by paying 25 rupees and eventually reached a monastery, Pemakoehung, below which there was no road. The river flowing through gorges among high mountains. Here was found the steepest fall in the waters of the great river which Kintup reported to be about 150 ft. This was a considerable exaggeration as was afterwards proved, but was due to a misunderstanding or mistranslation of Kintup's words. The two pilgrims then returned up the river and proceeded to travel round the gorge with the intention of striking the river below and following it to India.

After travelling for some days they reached the frontier of the semi-independent district of Po-me, the inhabitants of which are notorious as robbers and are the terror of all the more settled parts of the country. They were stopped at a bridge on the frontier and the Lama went to interview the local official in order to obtain permission for them to enter the country. Kintup was meanwhile left at the bridge. A few days later the Lama returned with the necessary permission and the two pilgrims went to stay at the house of the official, with whom the Lama seems to have made friends.

The Lama now determined not to pursue the quest any further and perpetuated a great act of treachery against his comrade. He told Kintup to stay where he was until his return in two or three days. When two months had elapsed and no signs of the Lama were forthcoming, Kintup's suspicions were
aroused, and he found to his horror and dismay that the Lama had sold him as a slave and decamped. In the words of his report, “He understood then why the Jongpen (official) would not let him go anywhere about the place”.

It must be remembered that owing to robbers it would have been impossible for the party to carry large sums of money and that whenever they stopped for any time they were bound to work for their food and subsist on this and on the charity bestowed upon pilgrims. As his leader had treated him so treacherously his first thought might well have been to get out of the country and return to his home; but it was not; on the contrary he thought only of the continuance of his quest which had been so unfortunately interrupted. He remained as the slave of the Lama who was sent with me sold him as a slave and himself fled away with the Govt. things that were in his charge. On account of which the journey proved a bad one; however I, Kintup, have prepared the 500 logs according to the order of the late Captain Harman and am prepared to throw 50 logs per day into the Tsang-po from

Kintup’s next care was to see how this could be done. He returned to his master and served him for two months more, after which he asked for permission to visit a holy place called Tsari, which was again granted.

Kintup, in performing the pilgrimage of Tsari, found that on one pass, the Drôma La, no woman was allowed to go, and gives the following explanation: “The reason assigned is that formerly a goddess named Dolma, who wished to judge the moral behaviour of men and women, laid herself on the path-way at the summit of the pass. A man came by and found the road blocked by the goddess, who was disguised. So he asked her with kind words to get out of his way. In reply the goddess said, ‘My brother, I am so weak that I cannot stir; if you pity me, please find another road; if not, cross over me’. On hearing this the man took a different road. After a short time a woman passed that way and she also saw the goddess and told her to give way; the same reply was made by the goddess, but the woman crossed over her and went on. Therefore from that day women have been forbidden to pass over, and from that day the name of the pass has been known as Dolma La or Drôma La.”

Years later I visited this holy place, and committed the serious offence of slaying a stag! I begged the people to tell me the best way of expiating this sin, and was told to go and do the pilgrimage, but to be sure that I did not take the life of even the smallest maggot or insect in doing so. The journey round took me eleven days and in due course I reached the Drôma La. Having Kintup’s little anecdote in my mind, I asked the people the reason for prohibiting women from crossing the pass. An old and crusted monk replied: “Well, you know what women are; they lie, they steal, they cause every kind of trouble, commit every sort of crime . . . we want none of them here!”

Kintup’s object in getting permission from his lama-master to go to Tsari was really to get a message sent to India to warn the survey officers to look out for his logs, so after performing the pilgrimage at Tsari he went on to Lhasa where he had the following letter written to the “Chief of the Survey of India”:

Sir,—The lama who was sent with me sold me to a Dzongpen as a slave and himself fled away with the Govt. things that were in his charge. On account of which the journey proved a bad one; however I, Kintup, have prepared the 500 logs according to the order of the late Captain Harman and am prepared to throw 50 logs per day into the Tsang-po from
Bipung in Pemakoichen, from the 5th to the 15th of the 10th Tibetan month of the year called Chhuluk (water-sheep) of the Tibetan calculation.

In Lhasa he found a 'Kazi of Sikkim' to whom he entrusted the letter for delivery to the Surveyor-General through 'Nimsring'. This Nimsring or Nemsing (probably more correctly transliterated Nyima Tsering, meaning Sunday-Long-Life) was the explorer G. M. N. whom Kintup had accompanied some years previously, in his attempt to follow down the mysterious river.

At this point Kintup must have been sorely tempted to give up and return. He had been nearly three years out in Tibet on this hazardous work; he had been betrayed and deserted by his companion; he was not himself a trained explorer; he had already collected a mass of useful information; he had to face a life of slavery with an unknown future. On the other hand, here he was at Lhasa among friends from his native land of Sikkim, and nothing would have been simpler than for him to have walked off with them to his home. He, however, always kept his objective in view. He had to go back and throw those logs into the river. So putting aside all temptation, he returned to his master in the gorges of the Tsangpo. The distance as the crow flies was 250 miles and 'as the beggar 'ops', a great deal longer. He even travelled by another and longer road to collect further information.

He then served his master for another nine months when he again asked permission to perform a pilgrimage to a holy mountain. The Lama now set him free saying, "I am glad to see you visiting the sacred places, so here I have given you leave to go anywhere you like." He then went back to his cave and on the correct days threw the 500 marked logs into the river. Now that his task was completed he wished to return to India. His nearest road as well as that which would have furthered his object, was to follow down the river to India. This road entered the territories of various tribes whom we call collectively Abors. After working for a month to obtain a little money for the journey, he started. At great risk he penetrated some distance among these savage tribes. At one place he notes that the people are "said to eat dogs, snakes, tigers, leopards, bears, monkeys, etc." At another place he was arrested "but got free by paying 306 anna coins". For a night's shelter he "had to pay a handful of salt to every man and woman that were in the house". Eventually when at a distance of thirty-five miles, as he guessed, from the frontier of India, he could get no further and was obliged to retrace his steps to Lhasa, whence he reached his home in northern Sikkim. Here owing to the death of his mother he remained ten weeks and finally reached Darjeeling to make his report on November 17, 1884, after an absence of nearly four and a half years.

Two disappointments were in store for him: first, Lieut. Harman, the Survey Officer who had trained him and sent him out, had died; secondly, the letter which he had travelled hundreds of miles to despatch from Lhasa, had been received by Nimsring after the date on which Kintup had said he would throw his logs into the river. This being so, Nimsring threw it away and did not trouble to deliver it. As a consequence no one was on the look-out for his marked logs and they doubtless drifted unseen out into the Bay of Bengal.

Other disappointments were in store for poor Kintup. On his arrival in India his story was doubted. He was, of course, paid his bare wage, but no special rewards were given to him and his reports were pigeon-holed until the savage Abors gave trouble in 1911. The reports were then brought out, as they were the only sources of information on the country north of the tribesmen in existence.

It happened that a couple of years later the late Captain Morshead, of the Survey of India, and I were given the opportunity to follow in Kintup's footsteps. It was found that the whole story was remarkably accurate. The educated mind relies largely on the written word—we even make lists of our daily trivial duties. The uneducated mind retains a far surer memory. Which of us with no written note could give details of mileage, approximate size and description and relative position of villages we had visited years ago? Kintup gave these details and, although he occasionally made mistakes in estimating distances, and even in the order in which various places came, the information he brought back was on the whole accurate. We felt that such devotion had been inadequately rewarded and made it our duty to find Kintup if still living.

In the thirty years which had elapsed all trace of him had been lost. He was eventually found working in Darjeeling and was interviewed and his story again obtained from him. As told at that time it varied from the official report of thirty years previously in one or two points, and varied towards further accuracy, which led one to the conclusion that he had been incorrectly reported or
translated in 1886.

One of the differences was, perhaps, the most important of all. This huge river, proved afterwards to be a mile and a half wide where it flows over the Tibetan plateau, dropped about 8000 ft. in a straight-line distance of 100 miles. Falls of immense size might account for this. Kintup's report said, "The Tsangpo is two chains distant from the monastery (Pemaköchung) and about two miles off it falls over a cliff called Sinji-chogyal from a height of about 150 ft. There is a big lake at the foot of the falls where rainbows are always observable."

This proved to be untrue, but the name Sinji-chogyal was the clue to this mis-translation of his report. At the village of Gyala a small stream joins the Tsangpo. This stream falls 150 ft. over a cliff, and behind the waterfall a deity called Shinge Chögye is carved or painted on the rock. Pilgrims visit this place and consider that they have achieved a success if they can see the god through the falling water. This stream joins the Tsangpo at a quiet portion of the river which might well have been described by Kintup's translator as a 'lake.' This fall of Shinge Chögye was not on the main river at all, and Kintup, when describing the place to me in 1913, never suggested that it was.

And now, what about the fall in the main river? This was also found to exist in the form of a very steep rapid in which rainbows were visible. The river at this point narrows to about 50 yards in width and through this gorge it plunges down steeply some 30 ft. All this Kintup described with great accuracy when he was asked about it in 1913. He even compared the height of the fall to that of the house in which he was sitting as he recounted his adventures.

Kintup was given a further reward and died in comparative comfort a few months later.

Such is a very brief account of one of many stories of the secret exploration of the countries lying along the northern frontier of India. There is something reminiscent of Marco Polo in the calm way in which these men accepted long weary delays of months on end. In giving every praise to Kintup and his like, let us not forget the Survey officers who chose and trained these remarkable men and organized the whole exploration. It was not done in any haphazard way but systematically, so that the accounts of one man could be checked by those of others.