

NOTES ON A VISIT TO WESTERN TIBET IN 1926

HUGH RUTTLEDGE, I.C.S.

THE traveller wishing to enter Tibet from the Almora district of the United Provinces has before him a choice of three main routes. The first goes by the valleys of the Sarju and Goriganga to Milam, a distance from Almora of 110 miles, and thence over the Untadhura, Jainti, and Kingribingri passes to the Tibetan market at Gyanima, some five marches from Milam. The other two routes are identical with each other as far as Khela, in the valley of the Kali river, our frontier against Nepal; from this place the Darma valley branches off to the north, past the lovely Panch Chulha peak, and at its head lies the Nuë, or Darma pass, leading direct to Gyanima. The other, and easier, route is up the Kali valley *viâ* Garbyang to the Lipu Lek pass, within easy reach of the big market at Taklakot. On this route is encountered the famous, or rather notorious, Nirpania cliff, the worst part of which can now be turned by a *détour* along the Nepalese bank of the river.

The valleys above named pierce the central chain of the Himalaya, and are the home of the Bhotias, a people probably of Tibetan origin, though now professing the Hindu religion. They have a monopoly of the trade between India and Western Tibet, a monopoly of which no one is likely to deprive them while communications remain in their present state.

Undoubtedly the easiest of the passes is the Lipu Lek, 16,750 feet high. This can be crossed by mules and ponies eight months in the year; but it should not be treated with contempt, for I know a Bhotia who lost his toes on it in November, three or four years ago. The Bhotias of Chaudans and Byans, the northern patts of the Kali valley, usually cross into Tibet in July and return in October. Taklakot is about 7 miles across the border.

Under orders from the Government of India, I visited Western Tibet in 1926 to investigate conditions of trade between the Tibetans and the Bhotias. The latter carry up every year grain, rice, cloth, and various kinds of haberdashery, returning with wool, borax, and salt. But for them Western Tibet would probably starve, as the high altitude of most of the plateau, and the nomadic habits of the people, render cultivation impossible.

Before the British expedition to Lhasa in 1904 no officers had, so far as I know, visited this part of the country on duty. But in 1905 Mr. C. A. Sherring, of the Indian Civil Service, was deputed to report on trade and to cultivate friendly relations with the officials. He described his experiences in 'Western Tibet and the British Borderland.' He was followed, in 1908 and 1911 respectively, by Messrs. Cassels and Stiffe, of the same Service, acting under similar orders. Since then a number of complaints from Bhotias concerning trade restrictions had accumulated, and it was thought desirable to have them inquired into.

I was fortunate in obtaining permission to be accompanied by my wife and by Colonel Commandant R. C. Wilson, D.S.O., M.C., Indian Army; and after some preliminary work in the Johar and Darma valleys—the latter being reached by way of the Rálam pass—we crossed the Lipu Lek on July 10 and pitched camp at Taklakot. I need not



Mr. Rutledge's route into Western Tibet

add anything to the descriptions of this part of the country published by Dr. T. G. Longstaff and Mr. Sherring. A violent wind, blowing unexpectedly from the east, expedited the pitching of tents, and we settled down to four days of official calls, interviews, and business discussions. The place of the Jongpen, who was away at Lhasa, was more than adequately supplied by his wife, a lady of determination and much business

acumen. We had the good fortune to witness, in the monastery, the "Gugu" ceremony, or spring blessing of the people. This was extremely well arranged and conducted by the chief lama, who is appointed from Lhasa. His dignified courtesy provided a pleasant contrast to the manner of his monks, who appear to be turbulent and ill-disciplined.

Some light was shed on local politics by a strike of the local villagers, who have to provide forced labour to the Jongpen and the monastery. The lady incumbent was quite equal to the occasion; she called in the Church, and as the lay and ghostly authorities of the place thoroughly understand one another, the strike collapsed.

News was received here that the newly appointed Senior Garpon, or "Viceroy," was on his way from Lhasa to Gartok. He would pass through Barkha, north of the sacred lakes, and this afforded the hoped-for opportunity to continue our journey northwards, instead of making straight for Gyanima, as an interview with the great man was highly desirable. Accordingly, on July 16 we left Taklakot, turned the eastern end of the ridge, passed the Jumla mart of Gungung Samba, and faced north. For some 3 miles the going was fairly level, but after passing the tomb of Zorawar Singh, the Sikh general who was defeated and killed here in 1841, we found ourselves breasting a long and steady ascent. To the left was the valley of the Karnali river, flanked on its farther side by low hills, and the road to Gyanima; to the right were the endless scree slopes up which Dr. Longstaff forced his way in 1905, in his attempt on Gurla Mandhata. The great mountain was fairly free from cloud, but a good view of it is not obtained till one reaches the neighbourhood of the lakes.

Up to this point there had still been a fair amount of cultivation to be seen, with here and there a house, and even a poplar tree; now, however, the road with its frequent "manis" struck boldly into the wilds, and as if to mark the change we met a picturesque mounted ruffian from the region north of Kailas. One of our Bhotia companions explained that he was an amateur dacoit. Evidently he was out of practice, for he smiled blandly, showed me his sword in its silver scabbard studded with turquoises, and posed for the camera.

We were now at a height of nearly 15,000 feet, and traversing a bare and stony wilderness studded with burtsa and scarred by occasional rocky watercourses. Towards midday the wind got up, and the sun was very powerful, while water was absent till we reached Rungung, where is a small river flowing westwards from Gurla, past a little monastery. This is a fairly good camping-place, partially sheltered from the wind by a few stone walls and by the banks of the river; it is infinitely preferable to the bleak and inhospitable Balduk, a short distance farther on.

By the evening of July 17 we were encamped at the south-east corner of Rakhas Tal, after crossing a col of about 16,000 feet to the west of the Gurla pass. From the col there is a magnificent distant view of Kailas;

in the middle distance lie the blue waters of Rakhas, studded with a few islands and bounded by low hills which are a riot of red and brown and green. A strong and steady west wind was driving the waters of the lake in little waves against the south-eastern shore ; and here we met a party of three Dokpas, on their way to Taklakot with sheep. They were armed with the muzzle-loader of the country, with the usual forked rest attached to the muzzle, and a beautiful tassel pendent from the latter. The breech was carefully protected from the driving sand by a parti-coloured cloth. Swords in scabbards bright with silver incrustations and turquoises completed their armament.

The water of the lake is sweet. On one of the islands near the southern shore is said to reside, wrapped in contemplation, a sadhu from Muttra, to whom a year's supply of food is taken across the winter ice. In the previous winter the ice gave way beneath the provision party and they were drowned ; my informants could not say whether any further attempt was made to reach the unfortunate hermit. The Hindus of the party appeared to have scant veneration for Rakhas.

On the morning of July 18 we crossed the neck of land which separates Rakhas from Mansarowar, a distance of only $3\frac{1}{2}$ miles, to Ghosal Gumba. The elevation of this part of the neck is some 300 feet above the lakes. It is well covered with burtsa, and abounded in upland hares (*Lepidus hispidus*) and a kind of field rat, all very tame.

The water of Mansarowar also is sweet. The Hindus, and even one or two of the Bhotias, occupied themselves with a highly superficial ceremonial bathe ; I attempted a swim, but was forced by the cold of the water to come out very soon. However, I was pronounced to have acquired merit by the performance.

At this place we saw no birds, but in the course of next day's march to Jiu, partly along the shores of the lake, we saw a fair number of bar-headed goose (*Anser indicus*) and Brahminy duck (*Casarca rutila*). Sand grouse (*Syrraptes tibetanus*) were plentiful among the low hills. About 3 miles short of Jiu lies a large borax bed, now in disuse. Since the War the export of borax has declined very rapidly.

Jiu monastery is built on an isolated rock, about 100 feet above the shore ; it is a foundation much favoured by the Dokpas, and must be one of the dirtiest in Tibet. It overlooks a well-defined channel running westwards from Mansarowar to Rakhas. We found a little sandbar, about 3 feet high, keeping out the waters of the former ; but it seemed likely that water had recently flowed, as there was a chain of pools which, to the west of the monastery where there are some hot springs, merged into continuous water. The latter did not appear, at the time, to be in motion ; the Bhotias and Tibetan yak-drivers, however, assured me that they had seen water actually flowing from Mansarowar to Rakhas, three or four times in the last ten years ; and that in 1925 it was necessary to wade through it at Jiu. I satisfied myself, by the

aneroid, that there is a difference of some 50 feet in the altitude of the two lakes, Mansarowar being of course the higher. Heavy rain, which does sometimes occur in this region, might easily break down the little sandbar. Next day we crossed a channel about 20 yards broad, coming down from the hills to the north-east. It enters the first channel just west of Jiu, and undoubtedly carries water when the snow is melting or after heavy rain. The west wind was terrible at Jiu, coming up-channel from Rakhas, and it lasted nearly all night.

The road, or rather series of tracks produced by the habit of yaks to advance across country in line, now turned off north-west, towards Barkha; and we entered a region, first of low sandhills covered with burtsa, and then of open plain, one of the great grazing-grounds of this area. At the northern edge of this plain rise suddenly the lower buttresses of Kailas. Barkha itself is by no means easy to find, as it lies under a bank, and is invisible till one is right on top of it. In any case there is not much to see, this headquarters of the Barkha Tarjum consisting of two mud houses and a courtyard. Here the post from Lhasa to Gartok changes, and the Government trader stacks his China tea, of which he will afterwards dispose by forced sales to the people, while he lays in merit by visits to Mansarowar or Kailas.

Whatever the defects of Barkha architecture, there are none in its views. To the north Kailas, alone and unrivalled, the perfect shiwala; to the south the gigantic ramparts of Gurla Mandhata; and far beyond them, yet visible in this clear atmosphere, the Himalaya. East and west stretches the illimitable grass plain, dotted with sheep and yaks, occasional black dots showing where the Dokpas and Nekarias are encamped.

Fortune smiled on us here; the Garpon was not expected for five or six days. Obviously, therefore, the moment was ripe for a pilgrimage round Kailas, and this began on July 21 with a march to Dorchan, where the "parikarma" route branches off to the west for the orthodox clockwise circuit of the mountain. Dorchan is a Bhotanese foundation, entirely free from Tibetan interference.

The place was full of interesting types: nomads from the north, one of them a smartly dressed youth armed with an old but well-kept Russian Army rifle, and accompanied by an equally smart wife whose fur toque was the admiration of us all; pilgrims from Kham on the Chinese frontier; big hulking Nekarias, soi-disant traders, but obviously of doubtful respectability; beggars of every description; and three devoted Hindus from the Central and United Provinces, recently robbed, and miserably cold and underfed, requiring assistance. One cheerful party of Tibetans was busily engaged in performing the parikarma, a distance of 28 miles, once a day for twelve consecutive days, thereby acquiring sufficient merit to last a lifetime. The altitude of Dorchan is about 15,200 feet.

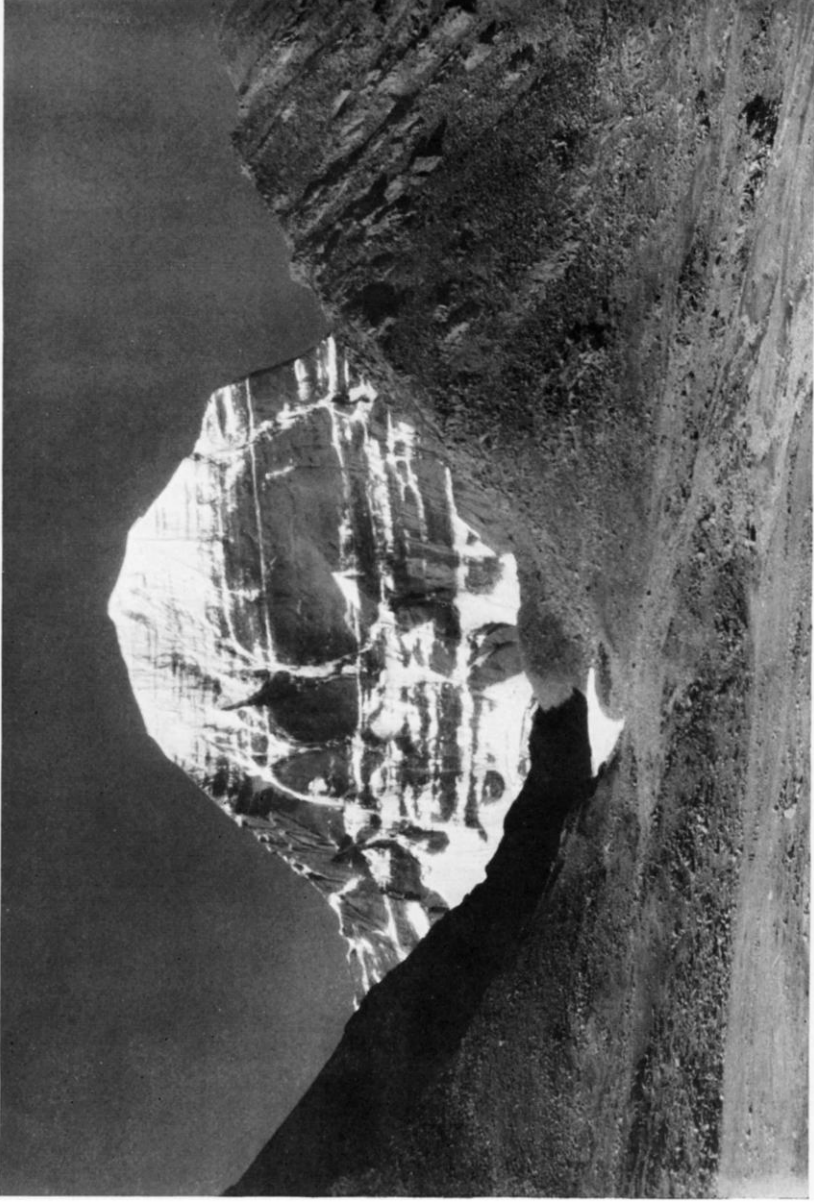
Leaving at 7 a.m. on July 22, our main party set off westwards along

the well-worn track, marked every few yards by manis and chortens which have to be passed on the left. Colonel Wilson and a Sherpa porter struck off up the nearest valley, bent on an exploration of the approaches to the mountain, while we continued westwards for about 3 miles, and then turned north to gain the western flank, up a gaunt and awe-inspiring valley, the true left side of which is formed by the terrific limestone precipices of Kailas. Some 3 miles up this valley lies the little Nandiphu monastery, with a staff of three men and one woman; and close by are a few caves in which hermits are walled up for prolonged meditation. It is a grim spot, but the staff were friendly and cheerful, and showed us their images and library with pride. The deputy chief, whose superior was away at Khojarnath, took particular pains to display one fierce-looking image, explaining that as police were few in the country it was necessary to guard against thieves by more ghostly means. This monastery also is a Bhotanese endowment.

Soon after leaving this place we were assailed by a storm of hail and sleet, but soon the white summit of Kailas was again visible through a cleft in the limestone curtain; one of the wildest rifts it has ever been my luck to see. The rocks on this side drop sheer into the valley for thousands of feet; gigantic slabs, showing almost no trace of weathering. Somehow or other, Colonel Wilson and his Sherpa companion found their way down faults in this face, and to our great relief rejoined us at Dindiphu monastery, on the north side of the mountain, in the evening. Theirs was a fine bit of mountaineering.

The little Dindiphu monastery is a Lhasa foundation; it lies in a desolate wind-swept valley, at a height of a little over 16,000 feet. To the north are the lower ridges of the Kailas range, some 18,000 feet high, mere rubbish heaps of loose limestone, with patches of snow in the gullies. Southward there is only one thing to see—the immense north face of Kailas, a precipice of about 6000 feet, utterly unclimbable. Near the summit (22,028 feet) there is some ice and snow, the whole crowned by a big cornice; but for the most part this face is of perpendicular limestone slabs, of a brown and chocolate colour, far too steep to hold snow, and entirely unbroken.

Next morning, July 23, broke fine, and we left at about 8.30 to climb the 2000 odd feet which lead up to the sacred "Gauri Khund," a frozen lake at the end of the long north-east ridge of Kailas. The Hindus went fasting, and felt the altitude a good deal, though the ascent is gradual and nowhere difficult. By 11.15 we were all at the Dolma pass (18,600 feet). Here is an enormous boulder, gay with flags and streamers, round which both Hindus and Bhotias went in solemn procession, murmuring prayers. I estimated the area of the lake to be, roughly, 7 acres; it was frozen over except at the sides, where the hot sun had melted it a little, and ceremonial bathing, mostly symbolic, was possible. Here I was surprised to see a solitary bee.



Phot. Mr. H. Rutledge

North face of Kailas from Dindiphu



Fiu Monastery

Phot. Col. Commdt. R. C. Wilson



The Darma Gorge from near Nangling

Phot. Col. Commdt. R. C. Wilson

From this point the north-east ridge springs up steeply for 1000 feet or so, and then carries on at an easy angle for about 2 miles till it articulates with the north-eastern arête leading sharply to the summit. An ascent might be just possible by this route ; but we made no attempt, as I was afraid of missing the Garpon, and also the weather did not look at all propitious. Before leaving, the Hindus and Bhotias enacted a pretty little ceremony : they insisted on sharing food with us, declaring that caste was in abeyance at this spot, and that this act would ensure our meeting in another life.

A steep descent, down execrable boulders and scree, led to a beautiful green valley watered by a river ; a complete contrast to the savage grandeur of the western side. Unfortunately the clouds were now coming up fast, and we never got a view of the eastern side of the mountain ; but the general impression was that from this direction the angles are less severe, and that an ascent from the south-eastern corner should offer the best prospects of success. For the most part the permanent snow-line appears to be at about 19,000 feet. By evening we were encamped at the Juntilphu monastery, another Bhotan foundation ; and from here could again see the great plain of the lakes. Enormous herds of sheep were coming down from the north-east on their way to Gyanima.

On the morning of July 24, after a visit to the monastery, six of us abandoned the regular track, of which 6 miles remained to Dorchan, and struck up a valley westwards, hoping to see something of the mountain from this side. After some hours' scrambling we reached a watershed at about 18,000 feet, but were again disappointed, for though everything was clear towards the lakes, Kailas itself was wreathed in cloud. So we descended upon the Kyangda monastery, under the south face, and here found about a dozen monks, led by a little man, who appeared not too pleased by our visit, but showed us the interior, with its beautiful lacquer and brass work, and well-kept images. In a corner was a monk reading a manuscript, marking each sentence by beating a drum at his side. There was a suit of chain armour, said to be a relic of Zorawar Singh's army.

Returning to Dorchan, we found that the new Garpon had arrived, but had inaugurated his *régime* by setting off for the parikarma. So we had to wait for his return, in bad weather ; and met him on the 28th. The interview with him was both interesting and pleasant ; he is of a good Lhasa family, and has charming manners and quick perceptions.

The journey from Dorchan to Gyanima, *via* Lajindak and Rinjinchu, needs little description. At Lajindak we appeared to be encamped by the first continuous water of the Sutlej, though I think that Rakhas Tal, about 6 miles away, may be considered to be the source, as between stretched a long chain of pools. The water of the Sutlej was brackish and unpleasant.

The name Gyanima is applied to two markets, 4 miles apart, the summer headquarters of the Johar and Darma Bhotias. It is a well-watered plain, shut in to the north by hills, and terribly exposed to the west and east winds. No houses are permitted here, and hail and sleet storms appear to be frequent. Here we met the British Trade Agent and the Tibetan Government trader—the Jung-Chun—a most amusing and sagacious person, fully alive to the iniquities of his traffic.

Three days were now devoted to official calls and diplomatic discussions, and on August 3 we said good-bye to our Tibetan and Bhotia friends, and started for the three days' march to the Kingribingri pass, *viâ* Guniyangti and Thajang. Here, as everywhere else on these plains, almost the only vegetation seen, apart from the occasional grass, was the cushion-like *Caragana pygmæa*, for which name I am indebted to my friend Rai Shiv Ram Kashyap Sahib, Professor of Botany at the Government College, Lahore, an indefatigable traveller who accompanied us all the way from the Lipu. Here also we saw many kyang, mostly very tame.

On the evening of August 5 we found ourselves held up by a little glacier river in spate, near Charchin at the foot of the Kingribingri; but by starting early next morning we were able to cross the icy water and accomplish the long march *viâ* the Kingribingri (18,300 feet), Jainti (18,500 feet), and Untadhura (17,700 feet) passes to Dung, near Milam. Near Charchin and on the top of the Kingribingri we found, for the first time, fossils in considerable quantities. They were mostly, I think, ammonites. The Rai Sahib had found one or two at Dorchan.

Colonel Wilson and my wife and I completed our return to civilization, accompanied by two Gurkhas and four Bhotias, *viâ* Martoli, the Lwanl Gadh and Traill's pass, last crossed in 1861 by Colonel Edmund Smyth. The pass has probably become more difficult since it was crossed in 1830 by Traill, owing to the retreat of the Pindari glacier, and is now only suitable for mountaineers.

Thus ended, at Almora, some 600 miles of enjoyable trekking, performed entirely on foot to the scandal of right-thinking Indians and Tibetans. Our little retinue appreciated, as much as we, the opportunity to visit Kailas, and for much of our pleasure we were indebted to the labours and companionship of Kunwar Kharag Singh Pal, a scion of the old Rajwar family of Askot, who in 1905 accompanied Dr. Longstaff and Mr. Sherring.