

The Mystery of the Kailash Trail



Chapter 3 Chain-link

Bharat Bhushan

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Pre-publication draft manuscript

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About the book

The oldest mystery known to the Oriental World. It is said that nobody dares to venture out to walk on the Kailash Mountain. And it is also said that those who walked up the mountain, never returned. In all these centuries, they have gone within, never to return.

About the author

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books, inside the internet, and deep within the mind.

Chapter 3: Part 1: The yaks that searched for spirits and demons in the rain

Below the Dirapuk Gompa, within the circle of makeshift tents and sheds, one could see the effect of the rainstorm that had swept the night. Some sheds had broken up, and some tents had fallen. The rocks had protected them. The hailstorm had not been as severe at Dirapuk as it had been near the Choku monastery. Norbu peered outside his tent and watched the sun claim the valley. Pilgrims and animals were yet to get out of their shelters. One and all, they were all awestruck by the force of the rainstorm.

Norbu said a silent prayer, and wondered if the rain had hit Shiquanhe or Darchen with the same force. He prayed for his parents, his sister and their shop and their animals. His yaks and the Mastiff had survived the night in the tent. He looked out at the empty valley. Nobody was moving. He came out of his tent and watched the trail from the pass to Tarboche, north to Choku, and northwards of Dirapuk to Drolma La Pass. The upper slopes on the *Kang Renpoche* were shining like a newly washed photograph in the sun. The rain clouds had gone. The snowy peak was beautiful, he thought.

He wondered about his parents at Darchen at their store. Nearly a hundred pilgrims or more would have sheltered in those sheds, and the yak herd would have been moved to a safe sheltered area. Norbu thought back to his native hamlet and hoped that the rainstorm had not destroyed

the village. His family would not have any home to go back to. He wanted to return and purchase large farm plots and go in for vegetable farming. Not barley, he had decided. Barley farming was a total loss and under the mercy of the rain, the sun, the clouds, the weeds and the insects. He would go in for growing vegetables.

Norbu had seen the future. He had seen the demand for vegetables and food items on the pilgrim trails. These groups were ready to pay four to five times more than what his family would get selling vegetables in the local market. His parents could continue to manage the store at Darchen and he would raise money by taking the pilgrims on the *kora* and save enough money to go and buy large farm plots. These pilgrims were intelligent. Sometimes they talked to him and asked about him, his parents and his native village. Some pilgrims spoke to him about the world outside of Tibet. Some Han Chinese policemen spoke to him about the craze of growing vegetables inside cloth sheds. It protected the crop from clouds, rain, hail, chill and the sun.

He looked back inside the tent at his two yaks sitting peacefully. They knew that their resting time was precious. For once they would be up and about, they would be laden with luggage and goods and they would have to keep walking through the day. The luggage would not be taken off their backs even during lunch hours or when the pilgrims rested during the day. The Mastiff seemed very quiet, subdued and very different today. Norbu began to pull down the tent and started packing it up. He rolled the tent around the poles and tied it up with the fastening ropes. He had one yak for the tents and his own kit, while the other yak carried the backpacks and foodstuffs of the touring pilgrims.

The yaks watched him quietly. The same activity was going on at the other tents. Some yaks had gotten up and were moving around. The pilgrims had come out of their tents and instantly began taking photographs of the *Kang Renpoche* and everything that was happening at Dirapuk. The pilgrim guide came up to Norbu and the yak boys and handed them their breakfast kits of oatmeal, noodles, meat strips and potatoes. A good breakfast would be required after such a night. The pilgrim guide hugged Norbu in relief, at seeing him safe, and said, “We will wait here through the morning. We do not know what would be happening at the Drolma La Pass. The rains would be coming down the hill streams now, and there could be a flash flood anywhere. Let us wait and watch what happens. We could move at noon, if there is news from the Pass.”

Norbu nodded in agreement. It was better to be safe than to be caught in the sudden floods that would occur after such a cloudburst. He called out to another yak boy and got him to start cooking breakfast for all the helper boys and local porters. One of the monks had come out of Dirapuk Gompa and was walking around looking to see if everyone was safe. The yak boys and the porters bowed low in respect when the monk approached them. He came up to Norbu’s Mastiff and patted him on his head and waited for the dog to growl or snarl. The Mastiff did neither and merely whimpered.

The monk asked Norbu, “What’s wrong with this guy? I thought Mastiffs were more dangerous. Did he get frightened by the yaks in the tent, or by the rain, or by your cooking?” He pointed out to the hole that Norbu had dug inside the tent. The doused fire was still warm,

having been fed yak dung cakes through the night. The yak boys laughed politely and one of the porters came up to the monk to seek blessings. They whispered to each other and walked away. Norbu looked at the Mastiff and wondered. What was wrong?

“Look!” shouted one of the yak boys, pointing towards the Choku monastery. The porter and the monk also looked at the direction and returned to where Norbu stood. They could see a monk from the Choku monastery and a old pilgrim guide walking towards Dirapuk. This was very rare, for a monk to walk from one monastery to another on a normal day, unless there was a festive occasion or there had been a disaster. Had something terrible occurred at the monastery? Norbu shivered, and prayed, looking up at *Kang Renpoche*. The Dirapuk monk also prayed silently.

The pilgrims had not noticed anything amiss. They did not know that it was unusual. They thought it was a regular happening. They started taking photographs of the monk from Choku and the old man accompanying him. Norbu and the Dirapuk monk started walking towards the lower trail to meet with the monk from Choku. Nobody followed them. The Dirapuk monk bowed and said, “Welcome, Brother. Before you say anything, I trust and pray to the Most Enlightened One that everyone is safe at the Choku monastery? I hope there has been no disaster.”

The old man replied, “Master, there has been no problem. I have with me, Brother Tameng, from the Choku Monastery. I am Dawa, and I am a pilgrim guide. I do not go around the entire *kora* nowadays, but escort the groups who come to Darchen and want to visit


Choku especially to seek the blessings of the Dharmakaya Amitabha Buddha. We come in enquiry, for we wish to know about certain questions from events that happened in the night that went by in the rainstorm.”

The monk from Dirapuk answered, “Brother Tameng, welcome. You are also welcome, Old Man Dawa, for I know you well, from many years. This is Norbu, from Darchen and beyond. He takes the pilgrims on the *kora*. The yak boys are preparing some breakfast, and you can share some hot soup so that you can rest and speak. You look like you need some rest, and that you have been denied it throughout the night. Were you out in the open in the rain?”

Brother Tameng asked, for he was impatient, “I must ask the questions, my brother. I will also accept the soup with much gratitude, for we do need it. But let us sit here, so that we do not frighten those who should not be. Some strange events happened out near Choku during the night. We have come to enquire about it, for the beings that created the events, whether they were humans, animals, spirits or demons, we know not who, some of those beings walked down the trail from Dirapuk towards Choku. I want to know if the yak boys noticed anything wrong at night with the yaks or the dogs. Did the yaks get disturbed, and did the dogs bark or get frightened?”

Norbu shivered again. So did the monk from Dirapuk. They remembered their discussion about the strange behaviour of the Mastiff. It was so unlike the breed. Norbu thought about the night, and said, “Masters, and Old Man Dawa, for I too know you, there was indeed something strange that happened during the night. It was

my two yaks. They were sleeping peacefully and were as disturbed as any living being could have been during such a stormy night. My Mastiff was sleeping close to me, and I was thankful for the warmth that it provided me. And then, suddenly, the yaks stood up, quietly, not grunting, inside the tent, and were wide-awake. I was worried that they would charge out into the rains and tried to get them to relax. They did not do so. They were very tense. They stood for about an hour, as though they sensed some strange spirits or demons outside the tent. Their tails were held high, and yet they did not grunt. Their breathing became very heavy and the smoke from their nostrils made it look like fog clouds had entered our tent. And then, suddenly, they sat down again and went to sleep. The Mastiff never barked at all.”



Chapter 3: Part 2: Pilgrims who spoke an ancient form of the *Pharsi* language.

The rainstorm had damaged the tented eateries at Shiquanhe through the night. Hariram Maharaj and Luo Tsering went about examining the tents and the damage. They seemed to have been lucky as compared to other tented eateries in the region outside Shiquanhe, on the road to Darchen. Most other eateries and their sheds were blown away or destroyed. Luo Tsering's eatery seemed to be quite intact. It must have been due to the protection from the nearby police station that was taller than the eatery, and stood in the way of the direction of the rainstorm and the wind that blew it around.

The vehicles that had been brought inside the tent were safe and it had been sensible to do so, thought Maharaj. It had been Luo's sudden idea and initially Maharaj had thought it was a crazy thing to do. The morning after the rainstorm showed the damage done to the vehicles that had been left out in the open during the night. More than fifty pilgrims had stayed inside the tented eatery through the night. Some were going towards Darchen and some were on their return from the *kora*. There were some local townspeople with their bicycles who had rushed in at night.

Maharaj and Luo knew most of the locals, pilgrim guides and were also familiar with some of the pilgrim groups, for they had stopped at the eatery earlier. They got their kitchen boys to start preparing soup and noodles for breakfast. Luo's wife began preparing the extra-sweet tea and *Tsampa* separately for the local Tibetans. One of the boys began to heat up the earlier

night's leftover yak meat soup and potatoes in a separate bowl in the adjoining tent. The pilgrim groups knew about Luo's separation of vegetarian and non-vegetarian food and accordingly began to move about.

There were two pilgrims sitting near the stove, warming themselves, and looking outside the tent, perhaps wondering about if it was safe enough to travel. Luo was curious about them. He spoke to Maharaj in a low voice, in Tibetan, "Maharaj, do you see those two there, near the stove? They came in quite late, when it was almost sure that it would be a bad night. They were walking on their own. They are not local Tibetans and neither do they look like Changpa nomads. Do you know anything about them?"

Maharaj had picked up more than a good understanding of Tibetan, but could not speak it fluently, and spoke in his pidgin language that he had made up. Luo could understand it, for the conversation usually was about activity within the eatery or about religion or god and godmen. Maharaj said, "I do not know them. They are not from any pilgrim group. They look quite rested and are not tired. They must be going to the *kora*, or may be trading in goods in this region. Are you sure that they are not Changpa? Their dress looks quite like the villagers from Eastern Tibet."

Luo was sure. He knew the Changpas, for they came in regularly to trade with him. He bought meat, salt and other spices that they brought to sell. They had an easy smuggling route from Eastern Tibet to Ladakh that they had used for more than hundreds of years. It was said that there were more Changpas in Ladakh in India than there should have been in their own lands in Eastern

Tibet. They were good tradesmen and brought in a good reliable supply of spices, grains, pulses and branded goods from India. Maharaj needed those spices and pulses to cook his trademark food for the Hindu, Sikh, Jain and Buddhist pilgrims from India. He would never have eaten such food at Qinhai, from where he had come from, and neither had his wife in her village.

Maharaj went to the stove and began getting his special utensils ready. The “strictly vegetarian” pilgrims from India liked to see him in action, and actually see him cook. They knew that he could be trusted to keep his utensils and plates and bowls separately and “clean” and not to pollute them with the beef-eaters. A group of pilgrims from Gujarat, especially from Navsari, had come on an exclusive pilgrimage to the Mount Kailash, to the Hindus among them, and to the *Ashtapad*, to the Jains among them. The great Mountain *Kang Renpoche*, was all-inclusive, and was known by different names to the different religious groups who struggled and made their once-in-a-lifetime journey to do the ultimate of all pilgrimages.

The Navsari pilgrims were on their return journey from the sacred Mountain. The pilgrim guide with them was also from Navsari, though he was settled in Ahmedabad. The Jain group amongst them had a junior monk from the Navsari area. The pilgrim guide and the Jain monk were whispering between them and looking furtively at the two strange pilgrims sitting near the stove. Maharaj called out to them, and spoke in Gujarati, “Bapu, Pranaam. Greetings. It was a terrible night. We are all lucky. The blessings that your holy man has sought during the *kora* has stayed with you, and we are all safe. Come and get some honest and good Indian Tea. I have

put real ginger, brought all the way from India. It will make you feel better. Bring your entire group nearby to the stove. It will be warm here.”

The local townspeople and Tibetans and policemen from the nearby outpost were gathering at the other tent. Luo and his wife served local Chiang breakfast. The lunch and dinner was usually cooked in three cuisines, Chiang, Sichuan and Xinjiang. But breakfast was always the fast way out, and the easy way, simple Chiang style. It was all meat, in the soup, in the noodles and mixed up in the *Tsampa*. The earlier evening’s yak meat curry was gulped down as soon as it had been served. The bowls were welcomed with happy grunts and smiles. They now waited for the slower cooked breakfast with happiness, since they now had something inside their stomachs.

Maharaj was getting curiouser about the two strange pilgrims. They should have gone to the other tent and grabbed the meat soup and yak meat. They did not seem to be interested. They were waiting for vegetarian breakfast? That was really unusual. Did Changpa nomads eat vegetarian food exclusively? The pilgrim guide and the Jain monk from Navsari came to stand alongside Maharaj. They stretched their hands towards the fire at the stove and warmed them. The helper boys passed on cups of Tea to all the pilgrims including the two mysterious men.

Maharaj began to roll out his famous *aloo-parathas*, the ones that local Tibetans were very curious about, and were always standing around watching him stuff spicy and cooked mashed potatoes inside rolled out wheat bread, ready to be heated and made ready to eat with curry. The pilgrim guide from Navsari spoke to Maharaj

in Hindi, “O Maharaj, thank you for giving us tea that makes us feel that we are already back in Gujarat. I want to ask you something, and that’s why I speak to you in Hindi and not in Gujarati. Is that ok? I spoke with my Jain brother, and holy master, and we wanted to ask you if you know anything about these two men? They look like they are from this place, but we want to know if you know them?”

The Jain monk said, also in Hindi, “There is a reason, Maharaj, why we speak in Hindi and not in Gujarati. These two men were with us at the *kora*. They were not with us, but they were nearby and we saw them on many occasions. We did not think too much about them but what we heard at night, when we were all sheltering during the rainstorm, makes us curious. And what we saw or did not see during the *kora*, about these two men, makes us more curious. Do you know them?”

Maharaj was puzzled. He had thought that these two men had come to Shiquanhe to proceed to Darchen, for they did not look too tired or exhausted. Why would Navsari pilgrims want to talk in Hindi and not in Gujarati? That was really strange, he thought. He replied, “No, my brothers. I do not know them. What was strong about what you heard at this place, during the night?”

The pilgrim guide said, “Maharaj, you know that we are from Navsari. We are therefore familiar with different types of Gujarati, Hindi and Kutchi languages. These two men who look like they are from Tibet, they were talking a strange and not-so-familiar language that we have heard only in Navsari. It’s not Gujarati. They talked the language of the ancient priests of the people from

Iran, the Parsis. It was not actually the language that we hear from everyday from the Parsis we meet. It was very different. But we sensed it to be the type of ancient Parsi that their priests recite when we attend their weddings and religious functions. It was not entirely the same, but was similar.”

The Jain monk added, “Yes. It was that. What was strange was that these two men were with twelve other pilgrims when they came by our group at Darchen, when we had completed our *kora*, and they went ahead with them and returned from Tarboche itself. The twelve other pilgrims went ahead. Why would you go all the way to Tarboche to leave your companions?”

Chapter 3: Part 3: Village dogs that did not bark at night, while the yaks were silent.

Vijay Kulkarni had stayed up awake through the rainstorm during the night inside his 4-person alpine tent near the Manasarovar Lake. Their camp was near a village settlement at some distance from the lake. They had pitched their tents outside a school's compound wall. The buildings and the nearby prayer hall had offered some protection to the group from the hailstorm that had crashed down during the night. The storm had ceased after dawn, and surprisingly the morning fog and chilly wind was absent.

He walked around the tented area looking out at the deceptively still waters of the Manasarovar Lake. The waves were lapping at the shore and one could hear the faint sound. It meant that the morning was very silent in the village. That was strange, thought Vijay. He should have been hearing the Mastiffs and other village dogs barking their heads off. The domestic yaks sitting nearby were also quiet. Possibly everyone, humans and animals, were all tired in trying to survive through the night.

His colleagues had not stirred out of their tents. They knew that there would be no moving about until the sun had come out and there would be no sign of any repeat storm. The group was taking the opportunity to sleep in and gather some much needed rest. Vijay walked near the school compound gates and looked in. Several trekking and pilgrim groups had set up their tented camps inside the compound. The school building had been constructed on three sides around an open playground. It had been a sensible choice. The tents had

not blown away and there did not seem any damage. The school gates could also prevent disturbance from the village dogs and yaks.

Vijay walked back to his tent and looked in. His team was waking up and moving around. Himanshu and Paramita came out and joined him in moving around. They were hydrogeologists, and had come on the expedition to collect rock samples and study the region. This area was like a godsend opportunity for them and they enjoyed the aspect that Vijay and other trekking leaders would be worrying about the logistics. It was a mixed group, comprising trekkers, pilgrims, hydrogeologists, inland fishery experts, wildlifers, photographers, birdwatchers and tour guides.

Each group had their own agenda. They did their own thing while the tour guides and trekking leaders kept them moving within an agenda. The Chinese did not like anyone wandering around and usually frowned upon any informal studies that had not been permitted. Fair enough, thought Vijay, we would have done the same thing in India, and we would not have done that only to the Chinese. We would have stopped one another also from studying whatever is usually obvious to each of us.

Himanshu asked, “Vijayrao, what happened to you at night? I did not see you sleep at all. You seemed to be moving about in the tent through the night. You had also walked out during the rain and kept going in and out. What happened? Upset stomach?” Paramita laughed, for she knew that Himanshu liked to keep making fun of Vijay. She added, “No, that cannot be. Vijay Sir does not ever have an upset stomach. He has moved about in so many wild areas and he has eaten all types of food. His

stomach cannot be upset. He must have been moving about trying to take photographs of the rain and thinking of trekking in the heavy downpour or in the hailstorm.”

Vijay smiled at their banter. He knew them from old times, even Paramita. She had been a post-graduate student at the University of Pune and was a keen geologist. Himanshu had made her into a serious hydrogeologist and an expedition addict. They had accompanied him on many expeditions and were genuine in their work and much accomplished. Vijay replied, “No upset stomach. I do not know what happened to me. I could not sleep at all. I sat in the tent for quite some time. I was very curious. A strange situation had occurred. The dogs in the town were not barking. It was raining very heavily. I felt that it was such a waste. Here we were, up at the shadow of the Mount Kailash and on the banks of the Manasarovar Lake. An opportunity of more than a lifetime, and it was raining. And we were hiding inside a tent when we had some of the best rainproof kit and dresses with us. Why hide inside? I decided to go outside and watch the rain.”

“So why are looking so different,” asked Paramita, “you seem so very different. You look strange and weird all over. What happened? Did one of the dogs pounce on you, or did the yaks charge at you? You look like you were scared to death, with all your hair standing on end, and you are walking about extremely nervously, jittery and all scared.”

Vijay nodded. He was glad that the subject had come up so soon. He wanted to get it off his chest and talk to his friends. He said, “I had a really weird night. It was weird throughout the night. So many incidents that happened

are all strange. Not a single incident or a disturbance, but it was all so very different. I was walking about, all kitted out, and I do not think I was seen in the rain, because my kit is all-black, and it was an all-black night out here, with the rain pouring in like there was nothing else in nature.”

“About 2 am or so, I saw the mastiffs and other dogs from the village. They were all whimpering. They were not getting wet. They were all hiding deep inside the school porch and in the open porch of the prayer halls. They were not getting wet and were quite dry. But, they were all whimpering. It was very strange. And then, I saw the yaks. They should have been sheltering and should have been inside their sheds and places where their people would have moved them to protect them from the rains.”

Vijay continued, “The yaks were standing out in the rains, bunched up and all wet. They were watching the Kailash peak. They did not move from the spot, and did not move their gaze away from the peak. I kept walking around, and realized that all domestic yaks had come to stand together. Something was happening. Were they seeing ghosts? If there were ghosts or demons or evil spirits around, why were they watching the Kailash peak?”

Himanshu interrupted, “Vijayrao, this is a strange place, we knew that. The local stories are full of demons, gods, good and evil spirits and humans possessed with strange powers. Why cannot the yaks have their part in it? But what you say is strange. Why should all the yaks come together? They do not know each other, and all the yaks in this village would not be related. They come from

various villages, towns, prefectures and communities. They are so many hybrids. Why would they stand together, and that too, in this heavy rain? It does not make any sense.”

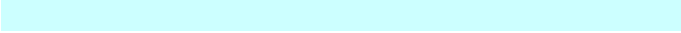
“I agree,” said Vijay, “I thought the same. I looked around to see if there was any human walking around. There was none. I walked around the yak herd, staying quite far away, until I was in a straight line behind them, and the Manasarovar Lake was behind me. I was in the line from the Manasarovar Lake to the yaks that had gathered. I could see what they were seeing. I was also watching the Mount Kailash. I tell you, Himanshu, Paramita, this place is really strange.”

“It was about 3 am or so, thereabout. It was raining heavily here, and so was it raining through the Lake and the area to Mount Kailash. But, as I kept watching the yaks, the rain seemed to have stopped at the Mount Kailash peak areas, at night, while it was raining everywhere else. The Mount Kailash and its peaks were all shining brightly. I could see the moon shining extremely bright, and the snowy peak was as brilliant as it was day out there. It stayed like that for about an hour or so. And suddenly, I could no longer see the peak. The rains had started out there, I guess.”

“During that time, the yaks stood still, bunching tighter and tighter, watching the Kailash peak. They stood that way, even when the rains had started out there on the peaks. I came back to our tent and sat for some time. You two were sleeping so peacefully, that I had no mind to disturb you. I came out at about 4.30 am, and the yaks had gone and there was no animal or human being

moving about. The dogs were still whimpering on the school building's porch."

Vijay continued, "Something happened out there on the Kailash peak that the yaks here, so far away, and the dogs, dangerous at other times, knew about. They seemed to know that something was happening out there. How can we stay here, not knowing about it? I want to change the plans for our expedition. Let us go out to the *kora* once again. I want to go to the nearby monasteries and the pilgrim trail and ask one and all about what happened out there. I wonder if someone was witness to whatever happened."



Chapter 3: Part 4: The entry from the valleys above the *kora* trail for the wild yaks

Sangye, the great old Qinhai nomad horseman, was restless at Dirapuk, having waited for the rainstorm to subside. He feared for the worst, for Dirapuk and the Drolma La Pass were the highest places on the *kora* around the *Kang Renpoche*. He prayed that snow or frozen carpets of water would not follow the rainstorm on the pilgrim's trail. The yaks would slip with their luggage and could break their legs. Who would take care of them? It was difficult to get medical help in these regions and the animals had the worst of the pilgrimages.

He knew that he had taken care of the safety of his horses, yaks, mules and ponies. He had also made sure that his mastiffs were protected. The sun came out later on the hidden valleys north of Dirapuk and Sangye waited inside the shed that he had built of stones, old bricks, scavenged tin sheets, canvas cloth and camouflaged army webbing. The shed was more of a single wall that helped him and his family to stay within the mountain overhang that backed out to a series of caves. One could not see the caves from below, in the valley, or from the tented settlements at Dirapuk. The Qinhai old man protect all humans and animals in his care in the overhang.

One end of the caves and the overhang stretched out to the settlement of tented eateries, camping areas, cemented rooms that protected the foodstuffs and ducks. From his hideout, Sangye could look into the valley above Dirapuk, stretching north-west away from the *Kang Renpoche*, and higher towards the other peaks that

were much lower. He could also see down the trail towards the Choku monastery and upwards, towards the east, to the Drolma La Pass. He called out to Yeshe and they walked to the edge of their settlement and watched the pilgrims and others move around near Dirapuk.

Yeshe called out to Bzanba and Kangryi, the *Tsang Khyi* mastiff dogs, who did not move out from the shadows inside the caves. Sangye remarked, “Leave them be, they must be hesitant to go out so early, after the rainstorm. Let us go out and see what has happened to all our stuff. The storm was quite heavy and has gone away just about after the dawn.” They walked out to the edge of the stone edge, above the spread of tents that had come up in the evening and night and watched. People were moving about. Some trekkers were walking up towards the tented eatery that Yeshe’s parents managed.

Sangye could see Yeshe’s parents had woken up earlier and the women-helpers were also active, beginning to heat up soup bowls, hot water and tea. The pilgrims would welcome the sugary tea and soup. Very soon, they would also be looking forward to some hot and appetizing breakfast. The old man was happy with the cup of tea that he had in his hand. He grabbed Yeshe by his shoulders and began walking to the rear end of the stony overhang. The passages from the valleys were usually good indicators of snow to come, or of sudden floods that were hiding away. Yeshe’s parents had planted vegetables in tents made of army webbing material.

The tents protected the vegetables from the sharp chill and night and morning dew. As they approached the tents, Sangye and Yeshe called out to each other,

pointing out the terrible destruction that seemed to have occurred during the night. The two largest tents seemed to have been pulled down. The smaller tents were all standing intact. The largest tents were towards the mountain trail that came down from the higher valleys and were along the mountain river stream that flowed amongst tall boulders.

Yeshe spoke first, “Is that not strange, the larger tents have fallen while the smaller ones are standing and there does not seem to have been any damage to them.” The old man nodded, and rushed to the area of damage. The tent pegs seemed to have been pulled out in a row, and the tents had merely fallen over the planted vegetables. The crop was not destroyed. The tents had to merely be pulled back once again. He examined the pegs closely. He had pushed them in when they had put up the tents and he knew that he had hammered them in to quite a depth. How had they come to be pulled up? He noticed a stranger aspect. The pegs between the two tents had been pulled up. The pegs on the other sides of the tents were intact and there was no disturbance to them, or any sort of damage. So why did the pegs along the passage between the tents removed?

Sangye and Yeshe rushed to the trail between the two large tents. The trail came down from the upper slopes of the valley and went towards the lower slopes to the east of the Dirapuk tents and settlements. The trail had followed the river stream from the upper slopes and had come away because of the big boulders that had come down during an earlier avalanche and landslide that must have happened at least fifty or hundred years ago. The two tents had been established on either side of the narrow trail. There was hardly any movement in this

region, and especially during the rainstorm, no person or animal would have dared to move around in the upper slopes.

Yeshe wondered, “Why would all the tent pegs be pulled up? Who would have the strength to pull them out? All the tents along this trail have been pulled up. What sort of animal, and what sort of strength would have pulled out these tent pegs, and so many of them?” The old man nodded in agreement, and looked closely and wandered about. “Yeshe, look closely. All tent pegs have been pulled out in one direction only. Something or somebody has come down this trail, and the tents have been pulled out as they came down. Whatever it was, it was very strong. Extremely strong.”

The trail was quite wide, and yet it narrowed near the vegetable tents. This was the first year that Yeshe’s parents had tried to grow vegetables in this high location. It had worked out well even though it was still an experimental challenge. The local villagers at Dirapuk or at Darchen did not know about the experiment in any detail. They had laughed about it when they heard it from the women helpers or from the shepherds who went up the trail to search for wandering sheep. Sangye looked at the trail above the tent area. There were no forests here. The grass clumps were the only vegetation.

The upper trail was almost five metres wide at the nearest spot in the valley above, when it left the river and came away because of the high boulders. It must have been a herd, moving down the slopes to escape the rainstorm. Chiru antelope would not have the strength to pull out the pegs. Kiangs were not known to hide in the


upper slopes. Which other animal was known in these higher slopes, he wondered. Yeshe stood alongside the old man, and the two Qinhai nomads tried to visualize what must have happened in the night. Whatever came down, the large herd of animals was very strong, and needed a lot of walking space. This herd walked together. They needed to get away from the upper slopes.

“Where would they go?” asked Sangye, in spoken thought, almost in a whisper, “Yeshe, my boy, why would animals this strong require to get away from the upper slopes? They were not coming down because they were scared, my boy, they were coming down because they were going somewhere. Where would they go? This trail is crowded with pilgrims, trekkers and very good wildlifers and local villagers. There would be immediate mention if such a herd, of very strong animals, were to be seen moving around.”

“I think these animals waited for the rainstorm to come. They were waiting for a moment in this region of the *kora*, when they would be sure, absolutely sure, that nobody would be moving about. The rainstorm provided the opportunity. They were going somewhere and were in a stubborn hurry about it, and were walking in the storm in the dark night. The ropes of the tent pegs must have been just a mere hindrance to the strength of these animals. Whatever this was, it was a herd of very large and very strong animals. They could not be chiru or kiang or wild horses or domestic yaks. Even wild yaks that we know are not known from these higher valleys.”

Yeshe looked around in amazement. His grandfather was correct. There was no sign of any other damage. Even

the vegetables had not been trampled upon. The tents had been left lying where they had fallen down when the pegs were pulled out. He looked at the ground, where the morning dew had settled in along the river edge and pointed, “Look, there, at that dew that has collected in the edge of the grass clump. It’s a clear trail. That’s a yak’s footprint. But, look at the size and the depth of the footprint in the mud and grass. That is not a regular wild yak or a domestic one. This one was very large. This animal was very heavy. And, if it was a herd of great strength, this was a herd of wild yaks, very large, moving down this valley to the trail of the *kora*. Where did they go? Where did they come from? Why do they hide from one and all in this valley?”



Chapter 3: Part 5: He who could not recite his prayers through the night.

The tented eatery at Darchen was crowded with pilgrims and local villagers queuing up for hot soup and tea in the morning. The rainstorm had ended an hour earlier and the pilgrims began to move around. The vehicles were moved out of the tents, where they had been kept to protect them from the hailstorm. The tables were rearranged and two additional hot water dispensers were kept outside the tent. Pilgrims came up to the hot water tanks and filled up their bowls to help them wash up and get ready for the day. This was not a daily provision, but after the rainstorm, the eatery owner felt that it would help the pilgrims feel welcome at his establishment.

Shenshe, the Chinese policeman, had slept in the eatery, while waiting out the rainstorm. He had chosen a good warm corner, and had used the large round bolsters and the mattress in place of the sleeping bags that others were using. The Buddhist monk from Nalanda and the Sikh holy man from Amritsar in India had slept nearby. Their luggage was kept between them. The presence of the Chinese policeman inside the tent had prevented any enterprising quick-fingered thief from exploring the bags while the pilgrims slept through the stormy night.

This was a strange world, thought Shenshe. His family and his elder relatives had warned him about not going crazy in Tibet. He had expected that he would be posted to some remote location in Tibet and would not be able to get back to his family as often as he would have wished to. He had however not expected to be posted in this remote circus, as he often called it. Everyday was

different. It was not like Lhasa, where every policeman was supposed to be extremely alert and watchful. This place was a different country each day, as he had determined.

Every day he saw new people, from different places in Tibet, from other countries and from all communities. Each visitor had his own reason for coming here. For every visitor, it seemed to be a journey of a lifetime. Most people came from places that did not have high mountains. For Tibetans also, this place was an important pilgrimage. Chinese tourists and pilgrims from other parts of China had begun to journey here. Shenshe wondered about this strange meeting place. The highest in the world, as he often heard others discussing the pilgrimage.

Yesterday, he had learnt something quite new. The Buddhist monk from Nalanda was Tibetan, but he was not from Tibet. He was third generation born in India, and came from a monastery that was not within a Tibetan exile enclave. He was traveling with a person from an entirely different religion, very unlike the one that he practiced. Was it allowed? Every pilgrim from India seemed so very different. This other pilgrim was from a community that he had rarely met. He had seen them in other cities in China, very occasionally, and sometimes in Lhasa. He had also seen a couple of them on the newly introduced train to Lhasa. But he had never met one in Darchen or heard of a Sikh pilgrim on the *kora*.

The Sikh pilgrim seemed to know everything about the *kora* and about the *Kang Renpoche* Mountain. He called it the Sumeru Mountain. That was something new,

Sheshe thought. He had memorized all the names for the mountain, and when he had thought he had them all, this Sikh pilgrim had called it by yet another name. They were sleeping peacefully. However, he had noticed that the Sikh pilgrim had not slept during the night. He had been sitting up through the night, facing the mountain, meditating or chanting. He had been using his prayer beads and reciting slowly. The Buddhist monk had sat up once or twice, and watched him quietly, and had gone back to sleep.

Once the Sikh had gone out of the tent, dressed up in a good rain jersey, and had stood at the entrance area. Shenshe kept watching him. The Sikh seemed disturbed and he had kept moving in and out of the tent, with his prayer beads. He would go outside the tent and stand, looking around and searching for something. The Buddhist monk from Nalanda woke up twice and looked at the Sikh pilgrim and smiled at his restlessness, and went back to sleep. Shenshe wondered about it. He assumed that it must have been because of the strange location and the proximity of the holy mountain that he had come this far, in search of answers to questions within his religion.

Shenshe waited for the two pilgrims to wake up. He sat nearby, in a relaxed manner, suspecting that the day would be very long and there would be too many things to attend to. He wanted to pick up on the opportunity of sitting down in peace that he had obtained, and he would maximize it. The police outpost was nearby, but the other police constables had gone away to Shiquanhe and had been expected to return. They would have been held up due to the rainstorm, he thought.

He joined the owner of the tented eatery for breakfast at his invitation. The hot noodles, soup and tea was extremely welcome. Meanwhile, the two pilgrims had woken up and cleaned up. They packed up their sleeping bags and haversacks. They seemed to be carrying separate tent kits also, observed Shenshe. At his gesture, the owner of the eatery invited the two pilgrims to sit with them for breakfast. The Sikh pilgrim sat down next to the Chinese policeman, and placed his hands together in prayer, and recited a couple of sentences to himself.

Not able to contain his curiosity, Shenshe asked, “O Mr. Singh, you did not sleep well. I saw that you were sitting up and meditating through the night. You were walking around and went out in the rain also. Something was disturbing you. Are you ok? Everything ok? No problem? Is your stomach doing fine with the miserable food of this Tibetan hotels? Not like Beijing, you know.”

The owner of the tented eatery and the Buddhist monk from Nalanda did not respond to the bait of the Chinese policeman about Tibet. Everything about the high mountains of Tibet seemed to be miserable to the Han Chinese, thought the monk from Nalanda, for he had been told of the years of oppression and the persecution of Tibetans over the past many decades. He had not expected that it would be so deeply ingrained amongst the common everyday people of China and Tibet. They should be grateful, he thought, for all their waters come from Tibet. If not for the *Kang Renpoche*, the people of China would have been destroyed in history, a long long time ago.

“Sardar Amarpal Singh of Amritsar”, said the Buddhist monk, and translated the questions that Shenshe had

asked, “I had also noticed that you had a very disturbed night, though you were in constant prayer. Do tell us what was it that was disturbing you, so very badly. I had thought of asking you at night, but each time I woke, I saw you with your prayer beads and prayer books. I did not have the courage to disturb you at that time.”

The Sikh pilgrim bowed to Sheshe, and with the Buddhist monk translating for him, he spoke slowly. He said, “Yes. You are a true policeman, I can see. In India, also, I am always watched. People do not understand me. My brothers, Sikhs in service to the temple understand what I can experience. I cannot explain in detail. I am able to sense or experience or go into a trance when I focus on divinity. I can sit peacefully for meditation. I do not need food or water until I come out.”

“But, what happened yesterday, at night, during the rainstorm, was very strange. I am usually able to sit down for meditation even on a crowded street or inside a railway train. There are always people at our temple, and yet, I keep reading the holy books with peace in my heart. But, yesterday, I could not pray at all. I tried my best. I kept stopping and starting and stopping and starting all the time. I could not even complete one round of my prayer beads.”

“I went out of the tent, many times,” Amarpal continued, “I tried to seek strength from the *Sumeru* mountain. I called out to my Guru. But there was something that prevented me from talking to my God, from doing my prayers, and from reciting the holy name, as I have been taught to do so, and as I have done for so many years, in my beloved Amritsar. I went out to try to see the holy mountain, and failed to do so.”

“And then, at one time, when I closed my eyes and focused entirely on my *waheguru*, my guide and my inspiration, I saw a miracle. In the midst of the rainstorm, I could see the *Sumeru* Mountain, shining in the moonlight. The rain had stopped falling on Sumeru and the moon was out there, shining brightly. The snowy cap of the Sumeru was so brilliant, I was lost for words to myself, to describe it. And then, it was gone. The rains were back on the Sumeru. The peak disappeared from view, once again. I was, once again, not able to recite my prayers properly. What would have happened out there? I need to go to the Sumeru Mountain and explore.”

