

SARAT CHANDRA DAS

MY HIMALAYAN
JOURNEYS

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SARAT CHANDRA DAS
MY HIMALAYAN JOURNEYS

Introduced, compiled and edited by
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INTRODUCTION

Sarat Chandra Das was 'one of the greatest pioneers of exploration and discovery in Tibet' in nineteenth century, as described by W. W. Rockhill, a well-known Tibetan traveller. In 1879-82, when Tibet was a forbidden land for foreigners, Das went to Tibet twice in the disguise of a Buddhist lama and surveyed unknown regions of Kangchenjunga massif and Tibet on behalf of British Government of India. During his journeys, he crossed glacier passes higher than 20,000 ft without the aid of modern mountaineering equipment, which has been acknowledged as 'one of the boldest journeys on record' by famous British mountaineer Frank Smythe. Apart from a remarkable contribution on the geographical research, Das, a scholar of Tibetan language and Buddhism, collected and later dispersed huge information on the cultural and social life, religion and politics of Tibet.

Das's rare travelogues, on how he crossed the Himalayas in both the journeys he made to Tibet, has been reprinted in this book. In the shadows of Das's famous works on explorations in Tibet, these narratives of his Himalayan journeys have been neglected so far. The rarity and uniqueness of these travelogues, which prompted the reprint, has been discussed below in detail.

The book also includes a sketch of the life of Sarat Chandra, as well as a brief assessment of the significance of his journeys in the contexts of geographical research, Tibetan studies and international politics of that time relating Tibet.

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NARRATIVES OF THE HIMALAYAN JOURNEYS

In his first journey, Sarat Chandra Das went to Tashi-lhunpo monastery located near Shigatse of Tibet. Starting in June 1879, he crossed the Kang La (16,373 ft) to enter Nepal from Sikkim. Then visiting Ghunsa (13,864 ft) and Kangbachen (15,553 ft) of Nepal in the northwestern valleys of Kangchenjunga, he crossed the Chabok (or Chathang) La (over 20,000 ft) and Chorten Nyima La (18,650 ft) to enter Tibet. He reached Tashi-lhunpo on 7th July 1879.

In his more extensive second journey, undertaken in 1881-82, Sarat Das left Darjeeling on 7th November 1881 and to enter Nepal from Sikkim crossed the Chumbok (or Chumbab) La, situated to the south of Kang La crossed by him in his first journey. Then he proceeded to Tibet by the route Ghunsa-Nango La (15,770 ft)- Kangla-chen Pass (over 20,000 ft) and reached Tashi-lhunpo on 9th December 1881. In this trip, he explored a wide area of Tibet and visited Lhasa, Dongtse, Yarlung Valley and Sakya. Das returned to Darjeeling on 27th December 1882.

The account of the first journey of Sarat Das, titled 'Narrative of a Journey to Tashi-lhunpo in 1879', was first published as a Government Report of the Survey of India Department in 1881. It was later reprinted in the 'Journal of the Buddhist Text Society' in 1900.

The account of the second journey of Das was published separately in two parts, titled 'Narrative of a journey to Lhasa in 1881-82' (published in 1885) and 'Narrative of a journey round Lake Yamdo (Palti), and in Lhokha, Yarlung, and Sakya, in 1882' (published in 1887), both published as Government

Reports of the Survey of India. Later in 1901, they were published together as a book titled 'Journey to Lhasa and Central Tibet' by the Royal Geographical Society of London, after being edited by a well-known Tibetan traveller, the American diplomatist, Mr. William Woodville Rockhill.

But, the narrative of the first journey of Das in 1879, his first encounter with the desolate snowy regions of Himalayas which overwhelmed him, was not included in the book 'Journey to Lhasa and Central Tibet.' The reason for this, as described by the Editor, W. W. Rockhill, was— 'As the route therein described is the same as that followed by the traveller in his second and more extended journey of 1881-2, and as the results of his studies in Tibet in 1879, as shown in this report, bear nearly exclusively on historical and religious subjects, it has been deemed advisable to omit it from the present publication.' But, in actual, the route as well as the time of two journeys were different, second being in winter presenting a completely different experience to Das. Moreover, Das himself was quite cautious about any repetitions while narrating his second journey. However, the first report remained unavailable as a book. Mr. D. W. Freshfield, who explored Kangchenjunga region in 1899, included extracts from Sarat Das's first narrative as an appendix of his book 'Round Kangchenjunga', from where it has been reprinted here.

Narratives of Das's second journey in 1881-82 was in much more detail and impressed many, among which the Peking correspondent of the London 'Times' wrote in 1885— 'The Pandit's narrative is written in a simple, natural and graphic style, more like that of Defoe than of our contemporary litterateurs. Every detail of the journey is described, and yet the interest never flags.'

In the October 1889 issue of 'Nineteenth Century', Graham Sandberg wrote— 'The narrative of his travels is really most fascinating. If published, we believe it would form one of the most delightful books of travel ever written. Its simple narrative style, most creditable to a Bengali, is relieved by the

introduction, every few pages, of Tibetan legendary lore of a very interesting kind.'

The narratives were published, indeed, by RGS, but only after being edited by Mr. Rockhill, who claims in the Introduction of the famous book 'Journey to Lhasa and Central Tibet'— 'It is these reports, which, with only such slight modifications as have seemed absolutely necessary to make the narrative connected, are published in the present volume.' In actual, Mr. Rockhill truncated the Himalayan journey part to almost one-fourth of its original, in the process depriving the readers of much of its charm and simplicity.

In this regard, comments of Freshfield in his book 'Round Kangchenjunga' are worth noting. Freshfield said, 'Mr. Rockhill, however, naturally did not do his work from a mountaineer's point of view. Anxious to preserve space for full details as to Tibet itself, he cut down the Himalayan narrative somewhat closely, and further changed it by modifying many of the more characteristic expressions of his author. For me there is an agreeable freshness and picturesqueness in a narrative of mountaineering told by a Bengali Babu in his own exact words. I like to know his frame of mind, the legends and fairy tales that to him were real, the dangers he imagined as well as the perils he really encountered. I believe many English readers will find the same curious fascination that I have in the Babu's unexpurgated description of how he crossed the snows on his way to the Holy City, and perhaps be reminded, as I have been, of the Anglo-Saxon pilgrim who complained of "the bitter blasts of glaciers and the Pennine army of evil spirits" that guarded the snows of the St. Bernard and the road to Rome.'

Mr. Freshfield included, in the appendix of his book 'Round Kangchenjunga,' the Himalayan journey part of Das's travelogue from his original unedited report. This part also has been reprinted here.

So, now with this book, the original unedited travelogues of Sarat Chandra, on both of his Himalayan journeys, are made available to the reader.

Sarat Chandra Das was born in 1849, in a Hindu family of *vaidya*, at Alampur of Chittagong District of the then East Bengal (Now in Bangladesh). According to his brother, Nobin Chandra Das, 'from his boyhood, Sarat Chandra evinced that firm determination, and love of peril for its own sake, in which is to be found the clue to his success in after-life.' He received his education from the Engineering Department of the Presidency College at Calcutta and studied up to the highest class of Civil Engineering. As a brilliant student, Sarat Das came to the notice of Sir Alfred Croft, the then director of public instruction of Bengal. Since then, Sir Croft guided him in geographical and literary works and it was through his representations to the Government of India that the dream of Das to journey into Tibet came true later.

In 1874, Sarat Chandra Das, while a student of the Presidency College, was appointed head master of the Tibetan Boarding School, then opened at Darjeeling under the orders of the Lieutenant-Governor, Sir George Campbell. Lama Ugyen Gya-tsho, a monk of the Pema-yang-tse monastery of Sikkim, held the post of Tibetan teacher in the same school. Ugyen Gya-tsho was related to the royal family of Sikkim. Here, at Darjeeling, Sarat Chandra engaged himself deeply in the study of Tibetan language. He paid several visits in subsequent years to the monasteries and other places of interest in Independent

Sikkim and made the acquaintance of the Raja and his ministers.

In 1878, Ugyen Gya-tsho was sent to Tashi-lhunpo monastery and Lhasa of Tibet with tribute from the Pema-yang-tse monastery. Sarat Das used this opportunity and sent a letter through Gya-tsho seeking a position of student in the monasteries of Tashi-lhunpo or Lhasa. He was denied of the access to Lhasa, but the Spiritual Prime Minister of the Tashi Lama at Tashi-lhunpo invited 'the Indian Pandit Sri Sarat Chandra Das' to visit Tashi-lhunpo, where his name had been inserted as a student of theology in the Grand Monastery.

Accordingly, in June 1879, Sarat Das, accompanied by Lama Ugyen Gya-tsho, set out for Tashi-lhunpo of Tibet. As, in those days, Tibet was a forbidden land for foreigners, Das had to take the guise of a Buddhist Lama. British Government of India, for their political interest, used this opportunity to survey the unknown approaches to Tibet through Das. Das and Gya-tsho reached Tashi-lhunpo on 7th July 1879, exploring on their way the unknown north and northwestern regions of Kangchenjunga and crossing Chathang La (over 20,000 ft) to enter Tibet via Nepal. After staying there for three months they returned to Darjeeling towards the close of the year. They were hospitably entertained by the Prime Minister and invited to return to Tashi-lhunpo in the following year. The account of this first journey of Sarat Das, titled 'Narrative of a Journey to Tashi-lhunpo in 1879' was first published as a Government Report of the Survey of India Department in 1881.

Next year, in 1880, Sarat Chandra was prevented from undertaking his second journey to Tibet owing to the disturbed state of Sikkim. He left Darjeeling on 7th November 1881 and proceeded to Tibet for the second time, this time in winter, with his usual companion Ugyen Gya-tsho. They reached Tashi-lhunpo on 9th December 1881. During the stay here, Das made various excursions along both banks of the river Tsangpo and explored a vast region of Tibet. From Tashi-lhunpo they proceeded to Lhasa and stayed there for two weeks.

Here, Sarat Chandra was able to meet the Holy Dalai Lama the 13th. He visited several monasteries and important places and closely observed the cultural and social life, religion and political scenario of Tibet. During his visit to the ancient monastery of Sakya, he found many rare books in Sanskrit hundreds of years old that had been believed to be lost forever. On his return to India in late 1882, he brought back over two hundred volumes of manuscripts and block prints, a number of them in Sanskrit, obtained from the great libraries of Tibet. The account of this second journey of Sarat Das was first published in two parts, in 1885 and 1887, as Government Reports of the Survey of India Department and were kept as strictly confidential until about 1890. Later, they were published together as a book titled 'Journey to Lhasa and Central Tibet' by the Royal Geographical Society of London in 1901.

After his return to India, Sarat Chandra Das settled at Darjeeling and, with the vast knowledge he gathered about the culture and religion of Tibet, started contributing in literature by writing in different journals. From 1881 to 1900, Sarat Chandra worked as the official translator of the Tibetan language for the Government of Bengal.

In October 1884, Das accompanied Colman Macaulay, Secretary to the Government of Bengal, to Lachen valley of Sikkim, in the Tibetan frontier, for a meeting with the Tibetan *Jongpon* (district chief) of Khamba. In October 1885, he again accompanied Macaulay to Peking to help him in diplomatic negotiations with Chinese Government, which is known as 'Macaulay Mission'. In China, Das impressed both the Chinese lamas and ministers with his profound knowledge in Tibetan studies and Buddhism. After these two tours of Das accompanying Macaulay, his close connection with the British Government was clear to the Tibetans. Unfortunately, Tibetan authorities severely punished the Tibetans who helped Das during his stay in Tibet.

In 1887, Sarat Chandra visited Thailand to study Buddhism, where the King, being deeply impressed by him,

presented him with the medal 'Tushitamat'. Das also visited Japan in 1915.

In 1892, Das founded the 'Buddhist Text Society of India' in Calcutta and acted as the secretary of it. He was also an associate member of the Asiatic Society of Bengal. The Government of India awarded Sarat Chandra the title of 'Rai Bahadur' for his achievements. The Royal Geographical Society of London awarded him the 'Back Premium' in 1887 for his contribution towards geographical researches.

Das's articles on Tibetan studies published in different journals (see Bibliography) and his lectures were put together and edited by his brother Nobin Chandra Das to publish in book form titled 'Indian Pandits in the Land of Snow'. After his return from Tibet, Das started compiling his most famous literary work, 'A Tibetan-English dictionary, with Sanskrit synonyms' which was first published in 1902 from Calcutta. It is still popular and considered as a standard after more than hundred years. Das also authored 'An introduction to the grammar of the Tibetan language' which was first published in 1915. Apart from these, Das wrote many books and articles in Sanskrit and Tibetan and translated many Tibetan works to English.

At Darjeeling, Sarat Chandra named his house 'Lhasa Villa' and played host to many notable guests including tibetologist Sir Charles Alfred Bell, Russian explorer Ekai Kawaguchi, Madame Blavatsky and anthropologist Walter Evans-Wentz.

Sarat Chandra Das died on 5th January of 1917.

MY HIMALAYAN JOURNEYS

PREFATORY NOTE TO THE NARRATIVE OF
A JOURNEY TO TASHI-LHUNPO IN 1879

Babu Sarat Chandra Das, the writer of this Narrative, was, in 1874, while a student of the Engineering Department of the Calcutta Presidency College, appointed head master of the Tibetan Boarding School, then opened at Darjeeling under the orders of the Lieutenant-Governor, Sir George Campbell. Babu Sarat Chandra applied himself assiduously to the study of Tibetan; and paid several visits in subsequent years to the monasteries and other places of interest in Independent Sikkim, where he made the acquaintance of the Raja, his ministers, and other persons of importance. In 1878 Lama Ugyen Gya-tsho, a monk of the Pema-yang-tse monastery, who held the post of Tibetan teacher in the same school, was sent to Tashi-lhunpo and Lhasa with tribute from the Pema-yang-tse monastery; and advantage was taken of this opportunity to find out whether it would be possible for Babu Sarat Chandra Das to visit Tibet, as he much desired to do. The Lama met with little encouragement at Lhasa; but at Tashi-lhunpo the Spiritual Prime Minister of the Tashi Lama, with the permission of the latter, sent by the hands of Ugyen Gya-tsho an invitation to 'the Indian Pandit Sri Sarat Chandra Das' to visit Tashi-lhunpo, where his name had been inserted as a student in the Grand Monastery; offering him his choice of routes, and commanding all Jongpons (district chiefs), or other persons to whom the letter might be shown, to help forward the Pandit with all

his baggage. In accordance with this invitation Babu Sarat Chandra, accompanied by Lama Ugyen Gya-tsho and taking with him a few scientific and other presents, together with a *photographic camera*, set out for Tashi-Lhunpo in June 1879. The travellers returned to Darjeeling towards the close of the year, after a residence of three months at the capital. They were hospitably entertained by the Prime Minister, who gave Babu Sarat Chandra a cordial invitation to return to Tashi-lhunpo in the following year. This, however, he was prevented from doing, owing to the disturbed state of Sikkim in 1880.

A. W. CROFT

1st August 1881

Extracts from
NARRATIVE OF A JOURNEY TO TASHI-LHUNPO in 1879

EQUIPMENTS, ETC., FOR THE JOURNEY

1. A *companion* in Lama Ugyen-Gya-tsho.
2. One guide from Jongri to Kambachan (Gyunsa).
3. Two coolies.

One pocket sextant.

One prismatic compass.

Two hypsometers¹, one thermometer.

One field-glass, and one hundred and fifty rupees cash.

17TH JUNE 1879— At 8 A.M. we set out for Jongri.² At 10 A.M. we reached a zone where we met with new families of trees. The vegetation changed abruptly and varieties of rhododendron, juniper and birch displaced the oaks and chestnuts of the lower zone. The leeches had disappeared. The slope, from 9000 to 12000 feet in height, is known by the name of *Mon Lapcha*. The scenery was exquisitely beautiful, chiefly owing to the profusion of flowers, amongst which the varieties of rhododendron (red and pink) were conspicuous. The beauty and variety of the vegetation made me deeply regret my ignorance of botany. Midway between Bakhim and Jongri I met Dr. Inglis, a venerable old gentleman, who had come out from Darjeeling

to see Jongri. Owing to the stubbornness of the coolies and the improvidence of his guide, he had been reduced to great straits for want of provisions, and was unable to proceed further towards the snows. Dr. Inglis told me that he had taken a fancy to visit the Himalayas on his way to New Zealand, where he was going to take charge of his estate. I was sorry that I could not give him all the assistance he required, but I did what I could for him to the best of my power and means.

At 5 P.M. we reached Jongri, and took shelter in a cow-herd's house. Water boiled at 187 degree, giving a height of 13,700 feet; the temperature was 49 degree Fahrenheit in the shade. I was much struck with the extreme beauty of Jongri. The slopes were neat and trim to the eye, with flowers and dwarf shrubs scattered over them, and a few yaks (*Chamari* cow) grazing here and there. The trees were in full foliage, and the valleys below were a mass of rhododendrons and other flowering trees. The evening breeze was cool and bracing; and the parting rays of the sun gave a crimson tinge to the peaks of snow and the whole atmosphere. The Hindu poets tried in vain to describe these regions which they had never seen; but even when seen, language fails to convey any idea of their beauty. To my right Kabur raised its snowy peak; in front the great Kang-chan looked down on me; to the left were the icy cliffs of Kang-la; while behind me the Rathong kept up its ceaseless roar as it rushed away to the south. Here we spent a whole day.

19TH JUNE— At 10 A.M we set out from Jongri. The sun could scarcely be seen on account of the dense mist, but the Lama succeeded in taking the bearings for the route survey. On two successive nights I tried to take observations by the sextant, but could not see a single star for the fog. The sun was too high in June to enable us to take a meridian altitude.

At 1 P.M. we crossed the Rathong by a bridge of planks, and through endless groves of rhododendron made our way towards the Nepal frontier on the west. At 3 P.M. we reached

the junction of the Yampung and Kang-la roads. From this place there is a road leading towards Singla, Phellut and Sum-dub-phuk (Sundukfoo) on the Tongloo Range. We followed the course of the river Chu-rung which rises from Kankar-teng. Here our guide (Paljor) killed a red-crested hen-pheasant with a stone, but failed to hit the cock. We were then overtaken by rain, and at 3 P.M. arrived at Te-gyab-la (14,800 feet), where we took shelter in a cave under a huge mass of rock. Here we met three Tibetans, from whom we learnt that Singbeer, the Nepalese out-post guard, had given up his ambitious proposition, and the Pass was declared open. This was excellent news. The wind was very cold and snow began to fall. There was no vegetation except shoots of fresh grass just springing up, and spongy patches of lichen here and there. We passed the night in much discomfort, harassed by chill wind and sleet.

20TH JUNE— We set out early in the morning, which was fair and pleasant. The valleys through which we passed were covered with freshly springing grass. On either side of this level pasture-land arose a range of snow-clad mountains. At noon we reached Chu-kar pang-zang, the source of the principal affluent of the Rathong, where no pasture was visible, but only the rubble and boulders of a moraine, probably one of the largest in the Himalayas. We commenced our ascent through the boulder heaps, which extended about half a mile. I saw two or three marmots under a boulder, but failed to capture them. I cannot tell what they find to live on. We then arrived at the foot of the Kang-la peak. The sun was very powerful overhead. We longed for a fog to shelter us from the sun and to dim the glare of the snow, which became doubly strong and unbearable under the midday sun. The lama and I put on our blue spectacles, while our coolies and guides painted their cheek-bones below the lower eyelid with black to protect their eyes from the glare. I put on my fur-lined coat, but after walking some distance I found the heat unbearable, and threw the coat to a coolie. Our guide walked first, and I followed his

footsteps. He cautioned me to be careful, as a single false step might precipitate me into a yawning crevasse. On my right and left, at a distance of about one hundred yards on each side, avalanches were falling with a thundering noise, but we kept clear of them. After walking about a mile in the snow, we landed again on *terra firma*. Here, on a heap of stones, some flags were flying. The guide told me that this marked the boundary of Nepal and Sikkim. After resting for a few minutes we went forward. We had another field of snow to cross, about a mile in length, but not so level as the first. For a short distance we descended by an easy slope, but as we got further down the gradient became greater and greater, and the snow was slipping down in semi-fluid masses to a green gully, from which issues the Yamga-chu. Our guide told us that the Yamga river was a most destructive torrent, its waters suddenly increasing so as to damage bridges and kill travellers. This may be caused by the sudden melting of snow brought down into the gully. The river is worshipped by the Nepalese and the Bhutias.

I may observe in passing that the range, which commences from Te-gyab-la, and extends northward to meet the lofty Kangchan peaks, with Kang-la as its culminating snow-line, separates the great rivers of Eastern Nepal, such as the Tambur, the Kosi, and their feeders, from the Rathong, the Kullait, and the Rumum, which flow through Sikkim and fall into the Teesta. It stands at right angles to the great range extending from west to east whose dominant peaks are Kangchan and Everest (Gauri Shankar). Another range runs parallel to the former on the east of Sikkim from Donkhya towards the south-east. It is called the Thanka-la Range, and contains the Cho-la, Yak-la, Gnatui-la and Jelep-la Passes, separating the basin of the Machu, in whose valley Chumbi lies, from that of the Teesta.

At length we came to an inclined plane with a gradient of nearly 30 degree. The guide helped me, and I got down safely. Our coolies slid down with their loads on their backs;

one was bruised by coming against a boulder. Below this slope is the source of the river Yamga-chu, which flows into the river Tambur. All the rocks and boulders on this side of the Kang-la were of red sandstone, while in Sikkim most of the rocks are of silicious, calcareous or granitic formation. After travelling more than five miles we arrived at a plain, where we were delighted by the sight of vegetation. This place is called Phur-pa-karpu. We followed the course of the river, along the banks of which were many small stone enclosures where travellers and yak-herds take rest. From Phur-pa-karpu we came to Tunga-kongma further down. Many cascades fell from the mountain slopes on our left. The valley of Tunga-kongma contains scattered bushes of rhododendron and other plants, besides a profusion of lichens. Yamga-tshal lies below the place where we halted. It contains many tall deodar trees, besides rhododendron, juniper, birch and larch. The path was easy, but we were much exhausted. At dusk we reached the nearest cavern, where Ugyen Gya-tsho was attacked with bilious fever. Our guide cooked a little rice and prepared buttered tea, and we refreshed ourselves after the day's tedious journey. Next morning I gave the Lama a dose of tartar emetic, which afforded him some relief. We halted here for one day, and on the following morning recommenced our journey.

22ND JUNE— We set out early towards the north-east, crossed the Yallung river, a feeder of the Yangma, by a wooden bridge of deal planks and juniper logs, about thirty feet long and six feet broad; and then began to ascend the Tsho-chung-la, also called Chunjerma. The ascent was very steep for about 2500 feet. At noon we reached the top, where there are two small lakes, the circumference of the larger being not more than 500 feet. Between the Yallung river and the Yama-tarachu (river) there are four ridges to cross. These are the Mirken-la, Pango-la, Senon-la and Tama-la. The Mirken-la and Pango-la are the steepest; their heights must be between 12,000 and 14,000 feet.(read the entire book)