

Central Asia's cultural crossroads



BOOK REVIEW

SHYAM SARAN

This book conjures up a magical vision of Central Asia, where even in the early years of the 20th century, frontiers had not yet congealed into boundaries and peoples of the borderlands sustained a unique crossroads culture, formed over several millennia. This was a culture deeply influenced by the towering majesty of the mighty Kunlun, Karakoram and Himalayan ranges, through whose treacherous passes ancient caravan routes threaded their way, linking fabled cities and oasis towns. It was also steeped in sensibilities, formed over millennia, as varied ethnicities, languages, customs and traditions encountered each other creating a gentle

cosmopolitanism that thrived on mutual respect.

The great merchant families of the era established caravan trade networks covering vast distances. The Radhu family had branches in Yarkand in Xinjiang, Leh in Kashmir, Lhasa in Tibet and Kalimpong in India's East. The book has a detailed and fascinating account of Lokchak, one of the more important caravans linking Leh with Lhasa, which was not just for trade but, more importantly, for carrying the biennial tribute from the Ladakh royalty to the Dalai Lama in Lhasa. Although this caravan was invested with both temporal and religious symbolism, its uniqueness lay in the privileged mission being entrusted to a Ladakhi Muslim trading family. And the story also testifies to Leh's importance at the crossroads of the Xinjiang and Tibet caravan routes.

One should not miss reading the section on Radhu's travel over the Xinjiang-Gilgit-Baltistan route and his encounters with the British Consul-General, Eric Shipton, in Kashgar and his stay with the

Emir of Hunza across the border. Eric Shipton became well-known as a mountaineer and adventurer in his own right.

The book also contains an absorbing account of Kalimpong of the early nineteen fifties, when it became a colourful melting pot of peoples from across the Himalayan world; there were rich

traders, aristocratic exiles from Chinese-occupied Tibet, secret agents from China, the US and UK, and adventures and explorers from distant parts of the world. It is from here that the Gyalo Thondup, the elder brother of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, orchestrated the Khampa rebellion against Chinese occupation of Tibet, with help from CIA. Gyalo Thondup's own fascinating story has been put together by Anne Thurston in the book *The Noodle Maker of Kalimpong*. Radhu's account overlaps with Gyalo Thondup's. The two met in Nanjing, China's wartime capital, just before the Communist takeover, and

became good friends. They later reconnected in Kalimpong and worked together for some time for the Tibetan cause.

Tibetan Caravans is important because it provides a ringside view of events leading up to the Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1950 and the subsequent developments culminating in Dalai

Lama's escape to and exile in India in 1959. Radhu describes how the Tibetan ruling elite in Lhasa was completely out of touch with the significant political changes taking place in both China and India and what they meant for Tibet's own future. When Chinese forces moved into Tibet,

the reaction was one of confusion and perplexity, as if this was a temporary phenomenon that would soon dissipate. The author has harsh words for India, which appeared to have acquiesced in China's occupation of Tibet quite readily, pursuing an illusory Asian solidarity with China rather than appreciating the

Radhu describes how the Tibetan ruling elite in Lhasa was completely out of touch with the significant political changes taking place in both China and India

danger to India that the loss of a buffer in Tibet would entail. The then Indian ambassador to Beijing, K M Pannikar, comes in for sharp criticism for displaying a gullibility that patent Chinese hostility failed to overcome. Nehru is portrayed as a leader who shared Pannikar's overly optimistic evaluation of Chinese intent, but redeemed himself somewhat, by readily offering sanctuary to the Dalai Lama and Tibetan exiles after the Tibet revolt of 1959. Radhu was also bitter at becoming a target of Indian intelligence for several years, partly because of his relations with a cousin who had joined the Pakistan Foreign Service and partly because of his association with Gyalo Thondup whose work with the CIA had become fairly well known in subsequent years.

The book has a brief Foreword by His Holiness, the Dalai Lama and an interesting Preface by Marco Patties, a well-known Tibetologist whose book, *Peaks and Lamas*, is still widely read. Siddiq Wahid, who has penned an excellent Introduction, has rendered a great service in bringing out this new edition of his father's autobiography. We have a rare and authentic account not only of a way of living which has passed into oblivion,

but also a historical narrative that provides an eye-witness account of the wrenching change that was imposed upon a people who had freely roamed the mountains, valleys and grasslands of the vast Central Asian realm for millennia and evolved a culture full of grace and vitality that placed high value on hospitality to the stranger and help and succour to fellow travellers on the caravan routes.

As Mr Wahid has so aptly observed, "Stories that allude to and illustrate the symbiotic relationship developed from generations of accumulated insights by societies who have learned how to hear each other out, agree and even do battle and yet remain hospitable to each other. They are precious intimate histories."

This one certainly is.

(The reviewer is a former Foreign Secretary and a Senior Fellow, CPR)

TIBETAN CARAVANS Journeys from Leh to Lhasa

Abdul Wahid Radhu
Speaking Tiger
304 pages
₹450