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Early Exploration of Kangchenjunga and South Tibet

by the pundits Rinzin Namgyal, Sarat Chandra Das
and Lama Ugyen Gyatso

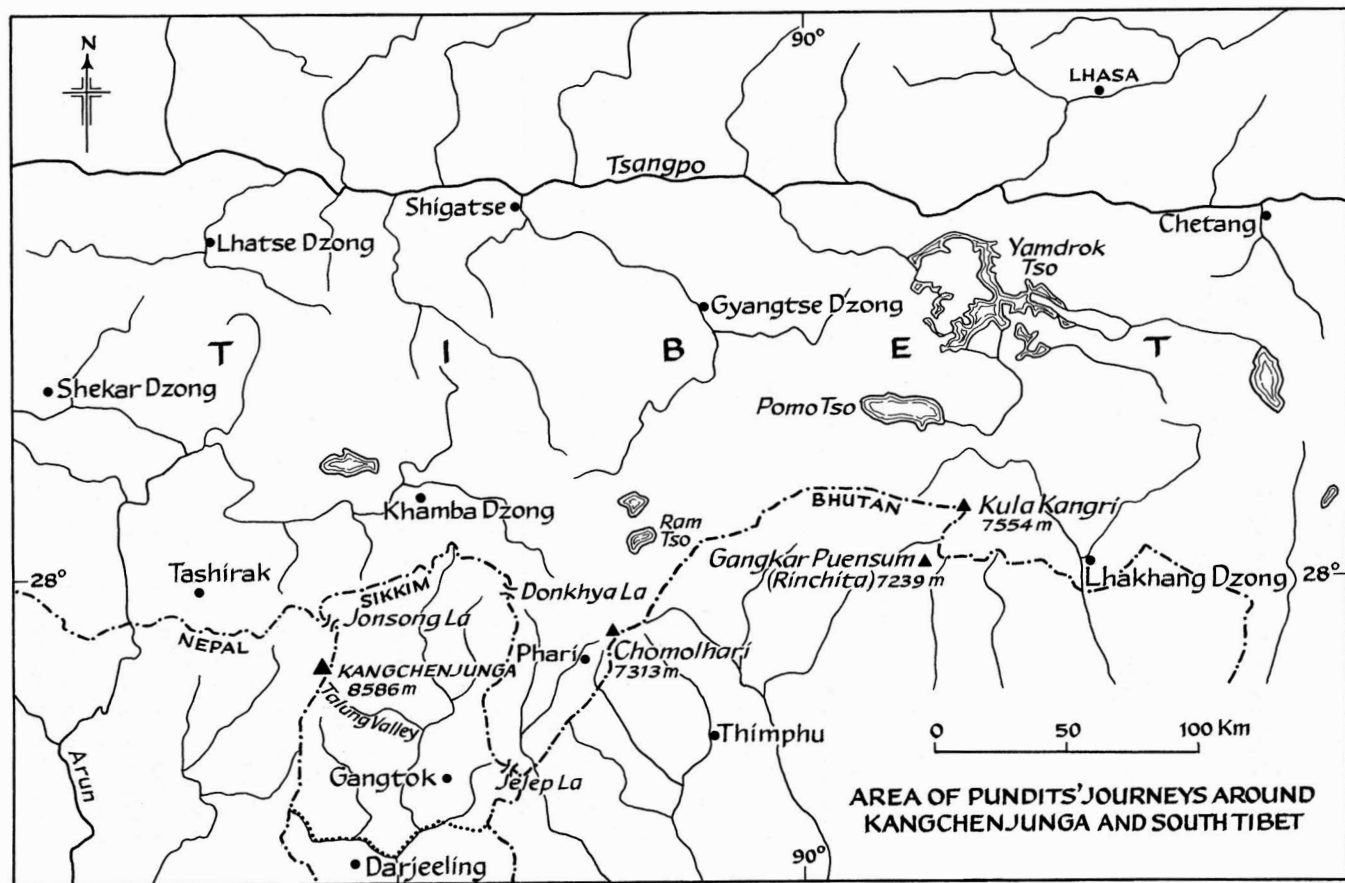
(Plates 54–56)

The initial exploration of Kangchenjunga and of South Tibet, together with an understanding of the political and cultural trends in Lhasa, was carried out by three pundits, each of whom was associated with the Bhutia boarding school at Darjeeling in the latter part of the 19th century.

This school, which was independent of the Survey of India, was opened in April 1874 with Sarat Chandra Das (Pundit S.C.D.) as headmaster. Its declared aim was to provide a good education for young Tibetan and Sikkimese boys resident in the Darjeeling area, but its less obvious role, according to Sir Andrew Croft, the Director of Public Instruction in Calcutta, was to 'train interpreters, geographers, and explorers who may be useful if at any future time Tibet is opened to the British.'

Between 1848 and 1851 Joseph Hooker, later Director of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, and President of the Royal Society, made the first botanical and topographical exploration of Sikkim. In his *Himalayan Journeys* he comments that 'It was not known that Kangchenjunga [Peak IX] and the loftiest mountain in the world was on my itinerary.' Hooker explored the south and west side of the mountain but it was pundit Rinzin Namgyal who made the largest initial contribution to our knowledge of this peak and the surrounding area.

Rinzin Namgyal (Pundit R.N.) was born in 1850 into a Sikkimese lama family whose family name was Kunlay Gyatso Laden La. He was the brother-in-law of Lama Ugyen Gyatso (Pundit U.G.). Educated at the Bhutia boarding school, he started survey work in 1879, and was in the team that met Sarat Chandra Das on his return from his first visit to Tibet. In 1883 R.N. explored the then unknown Talung valley in Sikkim and, a year later, accompanied H C B Tanner of the Survey of India on a journey to South Tibet by way of the Lipu Lek Pass, in the area where Kumaon, Tibet and western Nepal meet. Returning to Darjeeling, he was put on the payroll of trans-Himalayan native explorers, and his first independent mission was to survey the unexplored north and west sides of Kangchenjunga. This he did



between October 1884 and January 1885, making the first complete circuit of the mountain, and providing sketches of each side of the peak and the adjoining valleys; he also pointed out that there were many glaciers on the Nepalese side of the peak, which contradicted reports of 1880. He also defined the frontiers of Nepal, Tibet and Sikkim in this area.

In 1885-86 he was sent to explore east and west Bhutan, and in 1886 he tried, unsuccessfully, to determine the course of the Tsangpo river. In 1887 he worked with H C B Tanner again, surveying 26,000 miles of west and central Nepal from survey towers on the frontier. It was not until 1924-27 that the Survey of India was allowed to send native surveyors (though not Europeans) into Nepal. In 1888-89 R.N. worked with Needham around Sadiya on the Brahmaputra. J F Needham, Political Officer at Sadiya in Upper Assam in 1885, was one of the people who helped to prove that the Tsangpo and Dihang were one and the same river and that it flowed into the Brahmaputra.

In 1899 Rinzing Namgyal accompanied Douglas Freshfield on the first European circuit of Kangchenjunga, which confirmed its extensive glaciation. One area of contention was the Jonsong Pass on the north-west side of the mountain. Crossing the pass himself, Freshfield decided that R.N. had indeed crossed it in 1884, but that in 1879 Sarat Chandra Das and Lama Ugyen Gyatso had crossed a different pass further west.

The Freshfield party included the geologist Professor E J Garwood, the Sella brothers Emilio and Vittorio, an Alpine guide Angelo Maquignaz and Rinzin Namgyal. Garwood made the first modern map of the Kangchenjunga region, which showed the full extent of the glaciers and satellite peaks and superseded the previous map made by the pundit Sarat Chandra Das. Vittorio Sella took what may have been the first photograph of Mount Everest, from a spur on Jannu.

R.N. was the only pundit to visit England, where he met Queen Victoria and was presented with a gold watch. His last official work was probably in 1902, when he helped J Claude White to delineate the Sikkim-Tibet border.

Both Sarat Chandra Das and Lama Ugyen Gyatso came from a more cultured background than Rinzin Namgyal. Das was born in Chittagong in East Bengal, and studied civil engineering in Calcutta. After a bout of malaria, he was recommended, at the age of 25, for the position of headmaster of the newly-established Bhutia boarding school in Darjeeling. In 1876 Das read the newly-published *Narratives of the Mission of George Manning to Tibet and of the Journey of Thomas Manning to Lhasa* by Clements Markham. This book changed his life and kindled in him a love of exploration and a burning desire to visit Lhasa. As a result, he studied Tibetan energetically and confided in his friend Lama Ugyen Gyatso, who taught Tibetan at the school, that visiting Tibet was uppermost in his mind. Getting permission was extremely difficult but Das conceived the idea that his friend Lama U.G. could travel to monasteries in Lhasa and Shigatse

carrying tributes from his family monastery at Pemionchi in Sikkim. Whilst there, he would obtain permission from the Tibetans for Das to enter Tibet. Lama U.G. agreed to this plan and British permission to cross the frontier followed rapidly. To maximise their visit, each received instructions from the Survey of India, and Das received permission from his wife by telling her that Shigatse and Tibet were only a few miles from Darjeeling and therefore he would not be away for too long!

Lama U.G. and Sarat Chandra Das left Darjeeling in June 1879 and crossed into Tibet west of Kangchenjunga. Das, who suffered severely from mountain sickness, had to be partially carried over the Jonsong La by a porter, Phurchung. He wrote: 'In this miserable fashion did I cross the famous Chathang La [Jonsong La].' U.G., despite his corpulence, crossed the pass by his own efforts. They reached Shigatse on 7 July and saw Tashilumpo monastery for the first time, 'a dazzling hill of polished gold'.

In the Panchen Lama's absence, the Prime Minister, who had secured the passport for Das, received them warmly and started the study of Hindi and Sanskrit. He was also taught how to use a camera, develop photographs, and use a telescope. On his return, the Panchen Lama became suspicious, believing that the two pundits might be British agents. However, he allowed them a silent audience and permission to leave for Darjeeling in late September with passports and forty volumes of Tibetan manuscripts. They were promised a visit to Lhasa on their return the following year.

In 1881 they returned along the same route, west of Kangchenjunga. After crossing into Tibet, this route followed an eastern tributary of the Arun valley and Tashirak village. The same route was used in a reverse direction by J B L Noel in 1913 on his unsuccessful attempt to reach Everest from the east. After meeting the Prime Minister again at his home at Dongtse, they left for Lhasa on 20 April. Unfortunately, Das became ill and had to rest for some time near the Yamdrok Tso lake, a famous geographical feature which, because of its shape, was known as the 'Signet Ring' or 'Scorpion Lake'.

After crossing the Tsangpo by the iron bridge described by the pundit Nain Singh in 1866, Das reached Lhasa, the city of his dreams, on 30 May 1882. Owing to a smallpox epidemic, so common in Lhasa, he was forced to cut short his stay, but he had time to map the streets, visit the temples, take part in religious festivals, buy many Tibetan books and observe religious and medical practices. Finally, he had an audience with the Dalai Lama, a child of eight with 'a bright and fair complexion with rosy cheeks'. On leaving Lhasa he visited Samye, the first monastery to be built in Tibet in AD 775, and visited Chetang on the Tsangpo; finally he returned to Shigatse, where he learned that the Panchen Lama had died. He reached Darjeeling on 27 December 1882 after an absence of fourteen months. Unfortunately the Tibetans eventually discovered the true nature of Das's mission and punished those involved by imprisonment, execution or beating.

Sarat Chandra Das's book *A Journey to Lhasa and Central Tibet*, published

in 1902, was the first detailed account of Lhasa and South Tibet and is a veritable mine of information.

In 1885 Das accompanied Colman Macauley to Peking, where his tact, learning and diplomacy were much appreciated. Returning to Darjeeling, he settled down to a life of scholarship, producing a Tibetan–English dictionary in 1902. For many years he was involved in intelligence work. He died in 1917, probably in Japan. Truly he was ‘a hardy son of soft Bengal’.

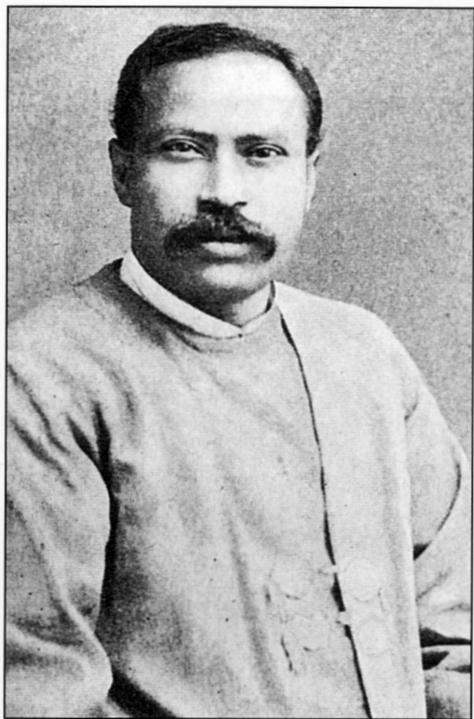
Das’s companion on his two journeys, Lama Ugyen Gyatso, was born in 1851 into a distinguished Sikkimese-Tibetan family whose ancestors had founded the Tashi monastery near Sakhyong. He entered Pemionchi monastery at the age of ten to study for the priesthood, and remained there for twelve years. In 1872 he visited Tibet, obtaining the *Tongyur*, a complete set of 225 volumes of a famous Buddhist scripture, and a year later joined the Bhutia boarding school as a teacher of Tibetan. After his two explorations with Das, Lama U.G.’s third exploration, in 1883, was with his wife. He entered Tibet by the Donkhya La in NE Sikkim on 19 June. After visiting Kampa Dzong and Gyantse, he surveyed the surrounding country and then continued to Shigatse where he visited Tachi Lumpo monastery, and returned to the Yamdrok Tso lake previously visited, with Das, in 1882. From here he went south and east by the Lhobra valley to the Bhutan border. At Lhakhang, he, his wife and brother-in-law were imprisoned, but a few bribes secured their release and they made for Lhasa. It was during this period that Lama Ugyen Gyatso discovered the highest peak in Bhutan, Gangkar Puensum (Rinchita) at 7239m.

The party entered Lhasa secretly at night and sheltered with a friend at Drepung monastery. He surveyed Lhasa ‘under the cover of an umbrella ... sufficient to disguise his proceedings’. Unluckily, he was recognised by a beggar who knew he came from Darjeeling and demanded money to keep quiet. U.G. paid up but left Lhasa immediately, riding on a pony but still taking bearings under the cover of his umbrella. Crossing the Tsangpo river, he completed the survey of the Yamdrok Tso lake and, travelling inconspicuously, crossed into Sikkim by the Chumbi valley. Resting at his own monastery at Pemionchi, he reached Darjeeling on 15 December 1883.

The account of his journey, given to Col. T H Holditch, was later described as ‘one of the best records of Tibetan travel that has been achieved by any agent of the Survey of India’. On his expeditions with Sarat Chandra Das, it was Lama U.G. who obtained most of the geographical information, and he was described as ‘the harassed and hard-working surveyor’ whilst Das was portrayed as ‘the light-hearted observer’. Lama U.G. continued to be of considerable assistance to the Government of India, and it was he who helped to take down an account from Kintup (who was illiterate) of his exploration of the Tsangpo. He also helped Das with his Tibetan–English dictionary and acted as an interpreter for various frontier missions. Finally, he was made Assistant Manager and then Manager of Government Estates. He died around 1915, leaving two widows but no children.

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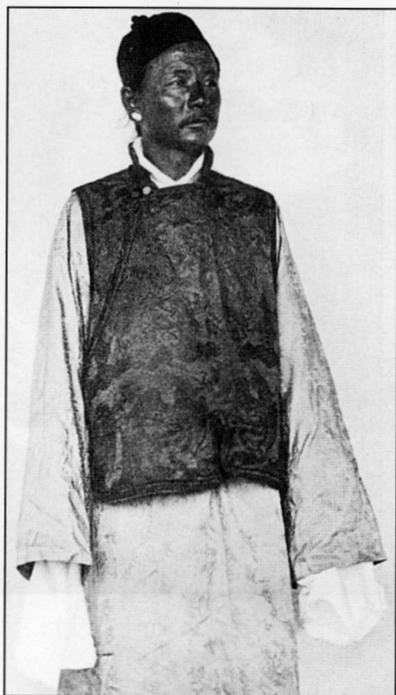


Above

54. Sarat Chandra Das (Pundit S.C.D.)
(*Alpine Club Library Collection*)
(p191)

Right

55. Rinzin Namgyal (Pundit R.N.)
(*Alpine Club Library Collection*)
(p191)





56. Chola Lake and Pass. Mount Kanchanjanga [sic] in the distance. (*Alpine Club Library collection*) (p191)