



Transcending Coloniality: Reading Sarat Chandra Das's *A Journey to Lhasa and Central Tibet*

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Abstract

This paper explores Sarat Chandra Das's travel account, *A Journey to Lhasa and Central Tibet*, for the uncanny trajectory and the role the author shoulders as a surveyor spy under the colonial rule to unearth the hitherto unmapped land of Tibet. The study argues that during the course of the journey Das becomes a cultural insider and eventually embraces a cosmopolitan identity as he transcends from the singular identity of a colonial subject. Subsequent to his expeditions and rigorous learning Das becomes a pioneer-scholar in Tibetan culture and language whose original contributions have proved pertinent for generations of oriental scholars in comprehending the ways of Tibet. The paper also attempts to understand the concept of privileged mobility by deploying a comparative analysis of Das's journey with that of Henrich Harrer, a German mountaineer turned fugitive who sought asylum in Tibet. The study would also touch upon several aspects such as the traveller's individual agency as opposed to the influence of the colonial conditioning he has undergone. The study is central to understanding the complexity of protean or fluid nature of identity and thereby recognise an exemplary Indian traveller and scholar who was instrumental in mapping the remote land of Tibet.

Keywords: Travel, Privileged Mobility, Fluidity, Identity

Introduction

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries witnessed the enormous expansion of foreign territories controlled by the European powers. The possibility of the expansion was directly stimulated by collecting comprehensive knowledge about the territories they colonized or proposed to colonize. As a result, a

new cult of scientific explorers or travellers emerged. They were highly trained surveyors who had a spirit of inquiry and an aptitude to record the natural history, geopolitical climate and cultural dynamics of the territory they ventured into.

Consequently, numerous travel narratives were produced during this time. Such accounts provided detailed descriptions about the topography of the hitherto unknown remote places with great accuracy and scientific temper. The magnificent stature and the mysticality of a hinterland had made Tibet an object of fascination in the European eyes. Hence, amongst the places which were inaccessible to the Imperial powers, Tibet attained a dominant position as it remained indifferent to the foreign forces except China. As per the observations of the French historian Hugues Didier, the European fixation for Tibet dates back to the seventeenth century, with the publication of the Tibetan travel account of the Portuguese Jesuit Antonio de Andrei and later by the Italian Ipolito Desideri. However, the geopolitical repercussions towards the end of the eighteenth century paved a way for a more ardent European Tibetophilia. The presence of overseas powers like Russia and Britain in Asia during the early nineteenth century had prompted Tibet to securely close its gates to outsiders. The British, alarmed at the expansionist agenda of the Russian Tsars (as they were advancing South to Central Asia) covertly began to map the Tibetan terrain to gain access over the territory. Entering into the land of snow was something near to impossible for a traveller of a White race, therefore, to achieve this purpose, the British instrumentalized the colonial subjects of India disguising them as *Pundits* aka Scholar Pilgrims. These Pundits were surveyor-spies, trained in the land survey by the colonial masters to expose the closed topography, culture and inhabitants of Tibet. Among such *Pundits*, Sarat Chandra Das and Nain Singh Rawat were notable for their remarkable expertise and grit. Reading Sarat Chandra Das's *A Journey to Lhasa and Central Tibet*, this paper attempts to understand the travelling colonial subject in terms of the traveller's privileged mobility and the institutionalized nature of his travel to unearth

the nooks and corners of a relatively unknown or unexplored topography and culture. The study would touch upon aspects such as traveller's individual agency, subjectivity as opposed to the influence of the colonial conditioning and would attempt to understand Sarat Chandra Das's transcendence as an Indian scholar of Tibetan culture as opposed to the identity of a colonial subject – a spy designated by the British government, a person of colonial fashioning.

Sarat Chandra Das: Colonial Subject as a Spy

Sarat Chandra Das, hailing from Chittagong in East Bengal (presently in Bangladesh), received education under the colonial regime. He was a potential asset to the imperial masters for he had acquired formal education as a civil engineer and was employed as a schoolmaster in Darjeeling. With his inclination to study Tibet and its culture, he was more than delighted to accept the offer from the government and undertake this perilous mission. Moreover, born in a Vaidya family (caste of medics), Das's expertise in medicine and scientific fashioning made him the right person to undertake the exploration and chronicle the Tibetan geopolitics and culture. The year 1879 marked Das's first and a brief expedition to Tibet accompanied by Ugyen-gyatso, a lama from Sikkim, who had also assisted him to attain a passport. During this trip, they visited Tashilhunpo and stayed there for a period of four months as guests of Sengchen Dorjechen, a revered monk and the Prime Minister of the Panchen Lama. Das exchanged lessons in arithmetic and English for the knowledge of Buddhist literature. The Minister's amicable nature and enthusiasm for Western knowledge further proved useful for Das who deployed this rare opportunity to deepen his relationship with the ruling class of Tibet. In this brief period of stay in Tashilhunpo he meticulously familiarised the topography and engaged with Tibetan works of literature. He maintained his demeanour of a pundit without leaving a tinge of suspicion and elicited respect from all sects of society. In 1881, Das embarked on an elaborate second trip into Lhasa and Tibet, as per the directive from the British government of India. The book *Journey to Lhasa and*

Central Tibet is the account of his expeditions and his reflections on the adventurous voyages he accomplished successfully.

As a spy of the colonial masters, Das commences his elaborate second voyage on November 7, 1881 from Darjeeling to Tashilhunpo, along with his companions Ugyen Gyatso and Phurchung (a Bhutia attendant). Das lucidly records about his stay there, his journey to Dongste and his travel confronting the inception of winter and trekking through the less travelled trajectories, to reach Lhasa in May 1882. Vignettes of village life —portrayals of Tibetan people, snapshots of culture and landscapes, moments while crossing the arduous life-threatening mountain trajectories during winter without the adequate gear and clothing, the formidable expressions of inhabitants at the borders who diligently guard it against foreign intrusion— fills the first half of the book. Das's narrative chronicles a vivid picture of the socio-cultural life of the Tibetans along with the factual information that the Imperial powers wanted him to record. This data includes details about Tibetan polity and structure of its governance, power hierarchy, the status of women in their society, customs, festivals, religion and culture among other nuances of Tibet. Das's observation of the Kashmiri Mohammedans who are "lax in their observance of Mohammedan laws" (151) tells us about the unorthodox ways of the Muslim community dwelling at high altitudes and their peaceful coexistence with the Buddhists. Das's meticulous account of Ugyen Gyasto's visit to the Bonbo Sanctuary of Rigyail Sendar also makes a significant chapter in the book on the ancient religion of Bonbo. Das's division of the narrative into eleven chapters and his diligent structuring of the book in the format of a journal is mimetic of his precedents (colonial travellers) trying to achieve an uncompromising objectivity to make it a reliable, authentic and organized source of information. However, the Indianness in Das's writing is inevitably omniscient throughout his narrative and thereby hints at the complex nature of the fluidity of his identity.

Das's Privileged Mobility

Sarat Chandra Das's *Journey to Lhasa and Central Tibet* opens by directly informing the readers that his journey was no solitary expedition, rather he was accompanied by two assistants, Ugyen Gyatso and Phurchung, to facilitate his requirements. Ugyen Gyatso was a Lama from the Rinchenpong monastery in Sikkim affiliated to Tashilhunpo Lamasery in Shigatse, Eastern Tibet. Ugyen's company and timely assistance proved vital to Das in his journey. Therefore, it is important to note that Das is an aberration to the individual hero-explorer trope of a romantic traveller and he falls in line with what Amanda Anderson termed 'Privileged Mobility' (Nayar). Throughout his journey, Das received assistance from the ruling echelons of both the British-Indian and Tibetan societies. It is very significant that he maintained a close relationship with Sir Alfred Croft, W.W Rockhill notes, "...he became favourably known to Sir Alfred Croft, the present director of public instruction of Bengal who ever since has been his friend and guide in his geographical and literary work and by whose representations to the Indian government it became possible for him to perform his important journey into Tibet" (1). We can also observe throughout Das's journey that he was well received by the power strata of the Tibetan society: "...the Deba (head of the village) [came] into see if I was comfortable, found wraps rather light, and brought me two thick blankets, in which my servant wrapped me up" (74). He was even revered and sought after to cure ailments and enjoyed a reputable aura equally amidst the commoners as well. there were instances of Tibetans treating Das with great courtesy; he was served tea in a China cup which Das recognizes as "a form of Tibetan politeness only shown to persons of superior social standing" (24).

A minister of acquaintance offers to keep him in his house "as a member of his family and to defray all [his] expenses" (106). Therefore, Das is in a privileged position contrary to an individual explorer given his first visit, he had built important acquaintances and was familiar with the topography to an

extent. Das's journey, thus, aptly befalls with what Amanda Anderson describes certain travels that shapes cosmopolitan sensibilities in the traveller through her book *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment*.

The Tibetan hospitality and the spiritual air of the land stir Das's identity inside out on certain occasions. However, it doesn't stop Das and his assistant Ugyen from their duties as spies. They estimated the distances using prayer beads and instruments such as a prismatic compass with an attached clinometer. An instance of Das being sincere to his identity as a spy is when "Lobzang (an astrologer) seeing the lithographic press, was curious to know what 'those stones and wheeled apparatus' as he put it, were meant for. He begged me to explain the process of printing but I evaded his questions, as I had been told not to talk of the press to outsiders" (119).

Nonetheless, towards the end of the journey, Das transcends his self-representation as a colonial subject and re-fashions himself into a transcultural self. It is important not to ignore the fact that Das's interest in Tibet was not instilled by the British, rather he felt a "burning desire for visiting Tibet and for exploring its unknown tracts," he notes in his *Autobiography, Narratives of the Incidents of my Early Life*. Thus, it is pertinent to look at Das's awe for Tibet as something of personal or academic interest, while the colonial masters only served as a conduit in realizing his desire. It is this aspect that makes Das efface his identity as a colonial subject even though he deftly makes use of his privilege that comes with his association with the colonial structures. However, closely looking at Das's journey from Stephen Greenblatt's view, the individual here is mobilized by the institution. It might seem that Das is completely in control of his journey, there is an intense structural determination even though an absolute freedom appears to be conferred into Das's hands. Nevertheless, the success of his journey cannot be completely attributed to the institutional forces as upon reaching Lhasa Das's expertise, his diplomacy and pundit-like demeanour that solicits reverence

and admiration for him from the Tibetans. Therefore, one can argue that there is only little or negligible tension between the individual agency and the institution that mobilizes him. This sort of privilege is a rarity when it comes to travellers from the West since Tibetans perceived them as nothing but a threat to their land. In complete contrast to the privileged mobility that Das enjoys, Heinrich Harrer's *Seven Years in Tibet* tells the reader a precarious and arduous trek Harrer and his companion Aufschnaiter undertakes to escape the internment camp where they were held prisoners by the British government. Their hurdles were aplenty. In the preface to the book, Peter Fleming writes, "He [Harrer] travelled on foot, carried his few possessions on his back, slept on the ground in open. He was a fugitive, with no status, no papers and very limited funds, for a well-found expedition to follow his circuitous winter route across the Changthang plateau and down Lhasa would have been a credible feat" (ix). First and most importantly they were White foreigners whom the Tibetans kept at bay. Secondly, they were prisoners, with no appropriate gear to protect themselves from the biting cold, with no passports and slender provisions to keep themselves alive. In short, they were "penniless and in rags" (ix) when they finally reached the Land of Snow. As opposed to the journey undertaken by Das, Harrer and Aufschnaiter take the long and laborious route of the much-dreaded locale of Khampas (robbers). Harrer writes, "we were still illegal travellers two down at hill, half-starved vagabonds forced to dodge the officials still bound for a visionary goal that we seemed unable to reach—the forbidden city" (63).

However, this wasn't the case for the privileged traveller Sarat Chandra Das; everything came easily to him. There were servants to attend to him and ministers to offer shelter. When Das was down with "a raging fever and violent cough" (135), he was attended by Amchi (physician) and religious rituals were performed to ward off the evil spirits and for his speedy recuperation. The Lacham herself instructs Dorge Phagmo to keep Das in utmost comfort. "The Lacham kindly wrote to the Dorge Phagmo to take care of me and to look to my wants"

(136). In contrast, Harrer had no choice but to adapt to the challenges that awaited him. He writes, “we had to spend the night in an inhospitable sort of depression in the ground which barely shielded us from the wind” (22). Few chapters later Harrer writes, “With appetites blunted by this painful experience, we huddled up together under our blankets and fell, despite the piercing cold, into the leaden sleep of exhaustion” (59). Such instance from Harrer’s travel account tells the readers that his tour de force was no easy feat, unlike the privileged journey Das undertook. However, with such access to privilege and assistance, Das’s expedition was made easy and conducive from all aspects. Such assistance from all dimensions aided Das to provide a nuanced commentary about the flora and fauna, cuisines, prospects for commerce and trade, festivities, marriage ceremonies, rituals, burials and so on with first-hand and unadulterated information. Das displays his scholarly disposition in myriad subjects, he excels as a naturalist, physician, translator and most importantly as a cultural expert. Notably, Das exercises his individual agency to comment upon what was witnessed rather than just fulfilling the role of a surveyor under the imperial orders. Das, observes, infers and compares the Tibetan customs to that of his familiar framework of the Indian culture and its workings. Therefore, Das’s narrative exhibit reliability and plausibility and stick to the ‘epistemological decorum’ laid down by the historian of science Stephan Shapin. Besides, Das briefly delves into a clear political commentary over the exploitations and corruptions of the Ambans (employed by the Chinese government) masquerading as natives’ protectors against the ‘Great Game’ between Russia and the British. He also goes on to reflect on the differences between high Indian Brahminism and Buddhism. Subsequently, he traces the genealogy of Tibetan Buddhism to Indian inspirations. The author’s identity as an Indian is naturally reflected as he is able to take an empathetic stance towards the Tibetans in contrast to British travel accounts.

Similarly, Das's identity as an educated colonial subject is well reflected in his refined style of writing. He adapts a distinguished flair of an objective onlooker and saves the narrative from falling into the trap of the romantic sensibility of a tourist like that we find in *To a Mountain in Tibet* by Colin Thubron, wherein the author travels to heal from a personal loss. Yet there are instances where Das cannot evade his subjectivity as an observer. As a result, descriptions and appreciations about the aesthetics of the landscape and cultural practices can be traced in his narrative. Das expresses his fears and anxieties without overindulging in psychological explanations, instead, he uses his subjective experience to explain the cumbersome geographical set-up of the terrain, its inaccessibility and the amount of tedium one will have to encounter trekking through the mountainscapes.

Das as an Observing I/Eye

Das's accounts are based on his first-hand observations or 'self-seeing' except for the chapter that narrates Ugyen's visit to the Bonbo Sanctuary of Rigyal Sender, wherein Das has culled out information from Ugyen's diary. The journal format of his narrative itself clearly tells us that this book is based on a log he had meticulously maintained during the course of his travel. Accordingly, his narrative adheres to the autoptic method which was famously followed and advocated by Greek historian Herodotus through his travel narratives. Pieces of evidence acquired empirically were regarded highly credible since the wake of Enlightenment. Considering this as the foremost reason, we can argue that the usage of the verb "I" was a key means of asserting the accuracy of the account which rendered an authoritative position to the information documented and presented by the author. Therefore, Das's usage of "I" is far from being subjective. It is also notable that Das carefully keeps the metaphysical, immaterial assumptions as well as personal feelings minimal in his account and in this light, we can argue that Das is a Cartesian subject or self who is an observing I/eye, surveying his environment emphasizing on procurement of knowledge.

Orientalizing Tibet: The Colonial Gaze

In the prefatory note to the book, W.W Rockhill, an American diplomat and scholar in Tibetan studies, elucidates the invaluable contributions and findings of the *Babu* (colonial subject) pertaining to the Land of Snow. He points out that Sarat Chandra Das was a true scholar and explorer who was successful in documenting the hitherto unreported details about the north-east of Kanchenjunga, the true dimensions and shape of Lake Palti, distances, altitudes and the like. He also remarks that the data collected by Das is of “great value to Oriental students” (vi).

At this juncture, it is important to examine this travel account in the light of what Bernard S. Cohn termed as “epistemological projects”. In his *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge*, Cohn explains how the British methodically employed various modalities to gain extensive knowledge on the territories they colonized or proposed to colonize. Assimilating knowledge-- structurally dividing, classifying and compartmentalizing data was necessary to render a certain logic or utilitarian value to whatsoever was gathered – this was the European standpoint. They recognized that accrediting logic, value and order is essential to colonial expansion. In this pursuit, the British designed investigative modalities such as historiographies, observational/ travel accounts, surveys, enumerative projects, museological and surveillance modalities to exercise control over the impending colonies. Das’s travel account, *Journey to Lhasa and Central Tibet*, therefore falls under the observational/ travel modality and served its purpose as an authentic compendium which later aided Francis Younghusband to lead a military expedition in 1903 to Tibet with ease, as Das offered Tibet in its nakedness to the imperial powers, following the colonial demarcation of the Indo-Tibetan boundary in 1914.

Although Das’s endeavour was purely intellectual and raw to his sensibilities, his readings of the previous travel accounts written by the British travellers notably, George Bogle, Thomas

Manning and Joseph Dalton Hooker along with his education under the English mentors, arguably rendered him a priori of receptivity toward the Tibetans. Moreover, the non-Tibetan Das depicts and conducts himself as a dominant figure, who possesses and shares knowledge with the otherwise innocent or the noble 'Other'. It is nothing peculiar and noteworthy that Das, being an Orient himself, could effortlessly identify with the Tibetan society with empathy; he enjoys a sense of belonging and profound interest in their language and culture and customs. Yet, we can observe that his Western liberal education and the nature of his task intervene to overcome his subjectivity in several instances. Therefore, Das's gaze, one can argue is similar to the imperial gaze, which fetishizes and infantilizes "the Other". In Edward Said's parlance, Das's account on Tibet, "Orientalizes the Orient" i.e., Tibet is Tibetanized, validating it as a space, as "imagined" by the colonial masters. We can observe patronizing comments, idealization, mystification and a portrayal of the Tibetans as ignorant or naïve, in various instances implicitly in his account. For example, Das notes "... even among the uncivilized dwellers of the hills wine could inspire such eloquence" (12). Das attributes an indigenous person's eloquence as something inspired only by wine. Such a construction of Tibet, definitely validates and naturalizes what the theretofore existed travel accounts by the orientalist had remarked about the Tibetans. It is plausible to argue that Das's realistic narrative is not deprived of colonial attitudes and his gaze over Tibet and its inhabitants is similar to that of the colonial/ imperial gaze, as Mary Louise Pratt describes for the European traveller. However, what's oddly interesting and cannot be ignored about Das is that he develops an uncanny sense of belonging to the Tibetan life. Das later embraced Buddhism and became a renowned Tibetologist. He also published a dictionary in Tibetan language and has translated Tibetan literatures into Sanskrit and wrote several books exclusively on Tibet. Though his initial writings were reports for the intelligence and survey departments, in the twilight of his life, Sarat Chandra Das completely embraced

Tibet, distancing himself from the colonial mode of comportment.

Das's travel is apparently devoid or is negatory of any 'tension' (between the individual agency and structural constraints) recognized by Stephan Greenblatt as "Cultural Mobility" which an individual, mobilized by structural power, might be subjected to. Das in fact enjoys and exercises his agency and at the same time, he is cautious in conduct and is wary of committing any mistakes which would expose his secret mission. The constraints Das encounter are mainly bureaucratic in nature which he resolves by adeptly making use of the diplomatic relations he maintained with the power strata of the Tibetan society.

Conclusion

This paper highlights that the seemingly objectivist writing of Das begins to reflect a subjective perspective up to an extent. Das gradually detaches himself from the identity of a colonial subject and alternatively fashions himself as a cultural insider exhibiting great affiliation toward the cosmic and platonic existence of the Tibetans. This detachment could also be explained in Amanda Anderson's terms as caused by his 'privileged mobility'. Consequently, Das's first-person narrative takes an inward turn at certain instances which apparently is inevitable, instead of the deliberate assertions of subjectivity that we observe in modern travel writers like Colin Thubron or Peter Matthiessen where personal affectations and transformations are weighed more in contrast to studying the space in detail.

However, towards the end of the book, we can observe that Das re-situates himself as a dispassionate observer again. During his journey back to India, he becomes more conscious about his identity as a colonial subject and at the same time, he locates himself as an insider to Tibet. Das surpasses his institutionalized sensibilities to become an Indian scholar of Tibetan culture from that of a *babu* (colonial subject).

Consequently, upon reaching back to his native place he devotes his life to studying, writing and translating Tibetan literature. However, we can see that he is not troubled or dislocated by the conflicting identity he has acquired, instead, he truly becomes a transcultural being of cosmopolitan sensibilities. Das fulfils his purpose effectively and provides a detailed account of Tibetan ethnology, namely everything essential for the imperial masters, thus making his narrative a priceless repertoire on Tibet. The author's account, thus, continues to serve as a profound source of knowledge regarding Tibetan ethnography and its cultural comportments.

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