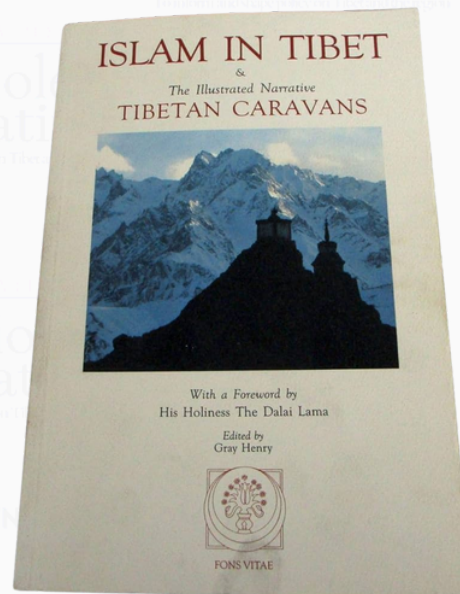
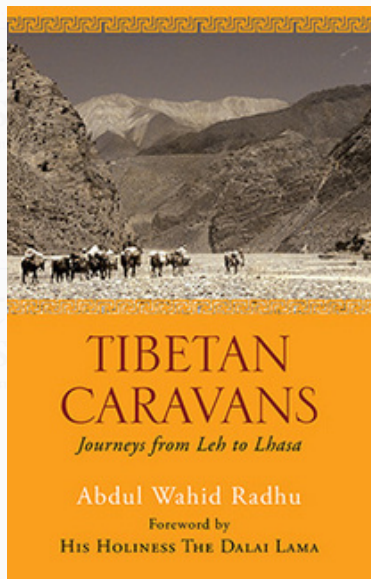


Book Review

Tibetan Caravans: Journeys from Leh to Lhasa **Authored by Abdul Wahid Radhu**

- Tenzing Dhamdul, (Research Associate, FNVA)



Images of the book Tibetan Caravans: Journey from Leh to Lhasa (which i read) and its initial edition Islam in Tibet and the illustrative narrative, Tibetan Caravans. (Courtesy Amazon and Speaking Tiger books respectively)

The reading of this book was initially inspired and suggested by the trustees at FNVA, when I had to study and learn more about Tibetan Muslims in preparation of my FNVA's Unsilenced: Voices of Young Tibetans podcast. Eventually what was intended as a reading material turned out into an inspiration and budding reverence of my own Tibetan heritage. I cannot recommend this book enough to readers, which was in its initial edition read and translated in English under the title 'Islam in Tibet: Tibetan Caravans', in understanding Tibet and its age-old relationship with the Himalayas.

As a Tibetan whose family, like thousands of other Tibetans had been forced to flee Tibet due to unrestricted violence and mass killing of Tibetans by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), my tryst with Tibet began from their stories. With my family hailing from the western region of Tibet, the author's journey to Lhasa from Leh by leading the Lopchak Mission (Caravan) personally enabled me to trace my familial roots. This very Caravan traversed through the western Tibetans towns of Minsar and Tashigang, where the prestigious Mt. Kaliash serenades these environs. What is interesting of the Lopchak Mission, which the author highlights are its geopolitical relevance and valuable evidence of showcasing Tibetan Independence as well then. Due to this fact, the Lopchak Mission unlike from the Indian side then (which was going through its own independence movement) was much lauded and respected when it entered Tibet, further becoming a physical connection between the Tibetans and Ladakhis even then. The people from Ladakh who studied in the Tibetan monastic institutes received this Lopchak Mission with much joy and pomp, driving this point of relevance.



Image of a Yak Caravan. (Courtesy The Long Rider's Guild)

An interesting aspect of this book that captured me was the author's inner self debating against modernity and traditional beliefs. It is with much experience, reading, learning, listening and understanding that he finally comes to his answer, where he sees much truth in the traditional beliefs and hopes that generations to come particularly those in Asia upholds and cherishes their tradition while keeping in time, the modalities of modernity. His explanation of Zahir (Outer) and Baatin (Inner) through Islam has a universal connotation, making sense to a reader like me as well. Likewise, the personal debate and exchange of thoughts between himself and his father struck a chord as well. I hope that I personally am also able to come to an answer eventually as well.

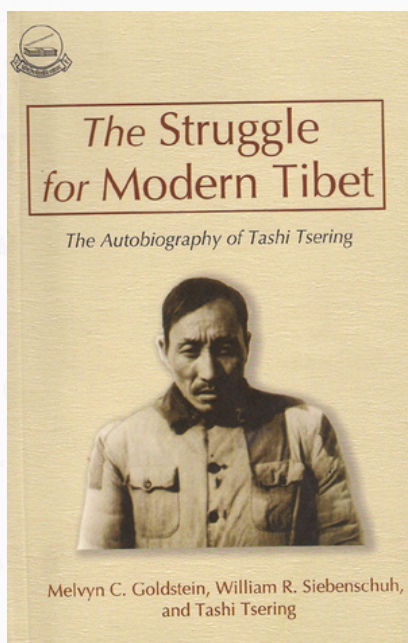


Tibetan Prime Minister Lukhangwa Tsewang Rabten. (Courtesy Shadow Tibet)

Like several Tibetans who are on this life-long journey of understanding and researching on Tibet, we are able to gain valuable insights through the authors anecdotes of events. He was an individual who witnessed first-hand in person and interacted with Tibetans who played pivotal roles during the period of prior and post illegal occupation of Tibet. His engagements with the Tibetan aristocracy in particular the Tethong family (which he refers to as Tendong interchangeably) showcased the deep level of trust and respect that people from different faith and region can foster here. He hosted several Tibetans including modern intellectual Gedhun Choepel (whom he refers to as Rimpoche Gyendum Chombel), Gyalo Thondup (elder brother of His Holiness the Dalai Lama) with whom he shares a close friendship and Bapa Phunstog Wangyal (Key interpreter between the Dalai Lama and Mao Zedong) among others brought to light his insatiable affection in learning more about Tibet and helping them in whatever capacity called for. He further depicts the development of Tibet and the Tibetan people during the crucial period from the late 1940's till 1960's in great detail, where he himself playing a significant role here in bringing Tibet to global platform. His appreciation of the famed Tibetan prime minister Lukhangwa Tsewang Rabten being a thing to note for us Tibetans and me personally (Believe many might not even know who he is unfortunately including Tibetans, with him being the very Tibetan leader who said no to Chairman Mao).



The author during the initial pages of the book tackles and brings to light a theme which has time and again been highlighted by the People's Republic of China (PRC) in legitimising their so-called liberation of Tibet, which is of serfdom and feudalism in Tibet. He brings to light the prevailing serfdom and feudalism that was present in Tibet when he was travelling and residing in Tibet. He confirms that such a system was present which even Tibetans would agree upon (Tashi Tsering la's autobiography 'The Struggle for a Modern Tibet' provides verification to it) and like any nation of the world, a majority of it experienced this phase of governance with Tibet likewise being in that phase then. However, by witnessing the Tibetan way of life, he saw a system that was not oppressive and draconian as Marx defined Feudalism and the class struggle as, which was prevalent in Europe during its dark ages. In Tibet he found how many owners and heads of such a hierarchy treated serfs with much care and respect similar to their own kin. This is not to say there were renegades who would exploit this power dynamics for personal gratification (Even His Holiness the Dalai Lama when explaining the origins of Tibetan Democracy explains how when hearing such abuse of power by few individuals in power, he felt the need to bring democracy in Tibet - which was disrupted by the illegal Chinese invasion). The author stated examples of both sides and brought to light a more nuanced nature of Tibetan feudalism that was present. Even going to the length in stating that, what China calls the liberation of Tibet instead in fact ushered an era of repression where Tibetans experienced and continue to experience much worse than the old society (the society of Tibet before PRC's illegal occupation).



*The Struggle for Modern Tibet book and an image of the Tibetan Parliament in Exile in Dharamshala, India.
(Courtesy OM Publications and Tibetan Parliament in Exile)*

His journey from Leh to Lhasa (described in apt detail) and others (including from India to China) mentioned in the book are a thing to marvel especially with the context that all happened during the mid 20th Century. For someone new to this subject though having maps and depictions of these travels would have certainly brought to light the monumental task undertaken here, the Caravans in particular. Though these (Caravans) have become a thing of the past through the advent of technology, it celebrates human endeavours, our willingness to seek new discoveries and the challenges we can overcome.

Being a Tibetan, the insights and narrations read from this book provided me to take a major step in understanding Tibet and my own people through a different but much needed lens. It similarly imparted a much-needed kindling to learn and understand more about the country which I yearn to visit and experience someday soon.



Also inspiring me to continue writing my journals (which has been in the halt since Covid). Many non-Tibetans have and continue to help us Tibetans. We as Tibetans need to recognise, appreciate and never forget them.



A portrait of the author, Abdul Wahid Radhu and a group picture of his family in Lhasa, Tibet. (Courtesy Speaking Tiger Books and Claude Arpi Blog respectively)



www.fnvaworld.org

Foundation for Non-violent Alternatives (FNVA)

143, 4th Floor, Uday Park, New Delhi, 49

office@fnvaworld.org