CHAPTER II

Geography and Topography of Central Asia
Central Asia as a geographical term defies precise definition. On the basis of geographical contiguity and close historical and cultural links, the Central Asian region is taken to include that part of Asia which extends from the Kazakh steppes of Soviet Union to Afghanistan and from the Caspian sea to the western boundaries of China. It includes Tibet also. The major part of Central Asia now comprising Sinkiang under Chinese rule in the east, the Soviet nationalities of Kazakstan, Turkmena, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kirizia in the west is marked by two geographical factors: The arid zone covered largely by the deserts and small number of river valleys and the oases. The Kazakstan in the western part of Central Asia is called the steppe region marked by a geographical factor ideally suited for pastoral nomadism. This region, as also the northern part of Taklamakan desert in Sinkiang was the wandering place of the nomadic tribes like the Yueh chih, Tukhars, Wu Sun, and the Sakas. The river valleys and the oases were inhabited by the sedentary population who cultivated small pieces of land around the river banks. The main area inhabited by the sedentary population in the western part of Central Asia previously called Russian Turkistan was the land between the Syr and the Amu rivers which alongwith other minor rivers of the region formed the major river systems of the.
western part of Central Asia now called Soviet Central Asia. The habitable parts in Eastern Turkestan or Sinkiang were confined to the oases formed by the Tarin basin which is the major river of Taklamakan. These oases which could sustain a very small population became in course of time big centres of flourishing cultures. These oases included Endere, Khetan, Loulan, Yarkand and Kashgar to the south of Taklamakan and Karashahr, Kuchi and Turfan to the north of the desert. The afore-mentioned region between the Amu and the Syr rivers was called by various names like Trans-oxania, Sogdiana and Mawar-un-Nahar.

The entire Central Asian region being beyond the Oceanic influences faced scarcity of water from early times. As has been rightly put by Vaidyanath the history of Central Asia has been the history of the struggle for water. The conflicts between the nomadic and the sedentary population marked the entire course of the history of Central Asia.

Another chief characteristic is the high mountain system which formed an important element of the landscape in Central Asia. The main mountain systems are: the Tien-sien, which is the dividing line between the eastern and western Turkestan; the Kun lun which forms the dividing line between Sinkiang and Tibet; the Pamirs and the Hindukush which separate Afghanistan from the Soviet Central Asia. The passes on these mountain systems formed
the main lines of communication between different parts of Central Asia. The passes of the Tien shan and the Pamirs formed the connecting link between the eastern and western Turkestan. Passes on the Hindukush were the main lines of communication between the Kabul and the Soviet Central Asia. Another important mountain system is the Karakorum range, the passes on which were used by the caravans from Leh to enter Sinkiang and Tibet. The difficult terrain, rugged passes and the scarcity of roads however never restricted the movement of men and material from one region to another.

Kashmir with which we are directly concerned here, was connected with the Central Asian region through different routes. In ancient times it formed part of Gandhara, (now north west frontier province of Pakistan) and a road along the course of the Jehlum river passing through Muzafferabad, Abbotabad and Hazara reached Peshawar the headquarters of ancient Gandhara. From here the route proceeding to the valley of Kabul passed through Hidda, Nagarahara (Jalalabad), Bamiyan etc. It then crossed the passes of the Hindukush mountains and reached upto Balkh called in Greek Bactriane and in Sanskrit Vahlīka. It was along this route that the famous Chinese pilgrims Yuan chwang and O'Kong travelled to reach Kashmir. Balkh formed a junction of routes leading to Central Asia. The first route towards the north proceeded through Sogdiana. It crossed the Amu and the Syr and then passed by Tashkend
and the Lake Issiq kol. The route further went westwards through the passes of the Tien Shan mountains to Uch Turfan (Aqsu) which lies to the north-west of the Tarim basin. Another route which was mostly used by the Buddhist missionaries went via Tokharastan near Badakhshan and Wakhan and crossed the Wakhjir pass or other difficult passes over the Pamirs. Thus the route reached into Sariqel south of Muztagh Ata. From the ancient capital of this region known as Tash Qurghan different tracks led down to the foothills on the sides of the Tarim basin and further to the Oases of Kashgar and Yarkand. There was also a third route leading from Balkh to the Tarim basin. The route was mostly used by the ancient caravans. It went to the Qizil su or Surkh Ab to big Pamir like valley of the Alai. This route further crossing the upper side of Irkeshtan and the head waters of the river Kashgar reached down to the oases of Kashgar.

Kashgar also formed a junction of routes leading from Kashmir via Leh through the Karakorum passes. The first important town in Sinkiang via Karakorum passes was Yarkand on a direct line between Kashgar and Leh in Kashmir. A number of passes would lead to Yarkand from Leh but generally owing to weather conditions and the difficulty of terrain, only the following three were frequently used:
Leh to Yarkand via Nubra valley, Karakorum and Killian passes: 482 miles;
Leh to Yarkand via the Shiyok valley, Karakorum and Yangi Dawan: 515 miles;
Leh to Yarkand via Chanchemo and Saju pass: 577 miles.

Leh was connected directly with Khotan via Ilchi pass. Yarkand and Kashgar were also reached from Kashmir via Gilgit and Yasin valleys and through the Hunza and Sarikol passes. From Kashgar two routes known as the silk routes passed along the northern and southern fringes of the Tarim basin. These two routes met at the place known as Yu-men-kuan or the Jade Gate near the hills of Tunhwang on the northwestern boundary of China.

From Leh also started the trade route to Tibet. The route passed through Ruthok—a small and important town on the frontier of Ladakh. Ruthok is picturesquely situated on the side of a hill standing isolated on the plain near the eastern end of lake Pangong. Across the lake there runs the official boundary between Tibet and Ladakh in Kashmir. The highest altitude on the route connecting Ruthok with Lhasa at Moriam-la pass is 15,000 feet. The pass defines the waterparting between the sources of the Brahmaputra and the Sutlej.
Referred to as "the roof of the world" Tibet is situated to the south of Chinese Central Asia. It is a region of high plateaus and mountains. On the west it stretches from the Pamir highlands to the rugged mountain border of the Chinese province of Szechwan on the east. On the south it has the high ranges of the Himalayas and on the north the Kun lun, the Altym tagh and the Nanshan ranges. The western and southern border of Tibet has the Himalayan mass that spread from Nanga parbat in the northwest to Namcha Barwa in the southeast. The highest peak is Mount Everest rising to 29,028 feet on the Tibet Nepal border. Stretching eastwards in the north of the lake Manasarowar is the trans-Himalayan or Kailash range with clusters of high peaks.

The west and north-west region of Tibet has lakes the largest being the Manasarowar in the west. The lakes extend from the Pangong lake in Ladakh near the source of the Indus to the sources of the Salween, the Mekong and the Yangtze rivers. The region is termed as Changthong or "Northern Plateau". Being located far away from the ocean the region is extremely arid and possesses no river outlet. It has many brakish lakes. In the south from the lake Pangong to the Tengri Nor lie the valleys of the upper Indus, the Sutlej and the Brahmaputra.

The river region of Tibet includes the upper courses
of the Brahmaputra, the Salween, the Yangtse, the Mekong and the Yellow river. The ranges running from north-west to south-west with deep or shallow valleys form innumerable furrows in central and western Tibet.

Most of the important rivers of Asia rise in Tibet. The Indus river is known in Tibetan as the seng-ge kha-'bab meaning "out of the lion's mouth". It has its source in western Tibet near Mount Kailash—a mountain sacred to the Buddhists and Hindus, wherefrom it flows eastward across Kashmir and Pakistan. Again, the Sutlej rising in western Tibet and known as the glang-chem kha-'bab meaning "out of the elephant's mouth" flows to the south to reach western India. Another river known in Tibetan as the Rma-eya kha-'bab meaning "out of the peacock's mouth" becomes the Ganges. The Rta-mchog kha-'bab meaning "out of the horse's mouth" flows to the east and joins the Skid chu (Happy river) in the south of Lhasa. This river is known as Brahmaputra. The Salween river has its source in central Tibet where it is known as Dnyul chu. Flowing through eastern Tibet it enters Burma. The Mekong river is formed of two rivers—the Ngom chu and the Rdze chus starting in the north. These rivers flowing through eastern Tibet merge at Ch'ang-tu and enter Laos and Thailand. The Yangtze river has its source in the 'Bri chu rising in the north-east and Huang Ho or the Yellow river of China has its source in Rma chu also rising in the north-east.
Lhasa is the most important town of Tibet. Other towns next to importance are the monastic town of Tashi lampo (Shigatse) and Gyantse on the Nyang chu river in the southern districts of Tibet. Gyantse is a southern tributary of the Tsampo which joins the river Nyang chu about 150 miles above Lhasa.

It has been estimated that before the Chinese annexation of Tibet in 1959, about twenty percent of the population belonged to the clerical order. Monasteries were the main seats of learning. Traditional division of Tibet comprises three regions known as the Dbus-Gtsang, the Khams and the A-mdo. According to a Tibetan tradition the best religion comes from Dbus-Gtsang, the best men from Khams and the best horses from A-mdo.

As noted above Tibet was reached from Srinagar via Leh over the Zoji-la pass. O'kong has first made a distinct reference to this road which leads "through the 'gate' to Tou-far or Tibet".

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