CHAPTER V

Central Asia: A Travel Mosaic

In this chapter, different aspects and parts of Central Asia will be examined close up from the viewpoint of travellers to this region specially in the 19th and 20th centuries. The reason for focusing on this particular period is that some of the most momentous happenings in Central Asia's recent history occurred during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; notably the Great Game (which began in the early 19th century), the Russian Revolution (early 20th century) and the establishment of the Soviet regime, and the aftermath of the regime's collapse (late 20th century). It can be clearly seen from the preceding chapters, that these phenomena, being of a primarily political nature, had a deep and lasting impact upon ways of life in Central Asia, including travel.

The travel-accounts of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries chosen for analysis in this study reflect this impact in varying aspects and degrees. Also, being travelogues, they characteristically refer to earlier accounts to authenticate themselves. The world-famous travel-accounts
by Huen-Tsiang, the 7th century Chinese pilgrim, Marco Polo the 13th century Venetian merchant, and Ibn Battuta the 14th century Moroccan priest, are the three works that most vividly stand out from the early travel-accounts of Central Asia and will be discussed in some detail here before moving on to the 19th century and 20th century travelogues* to which this study is confined.

Early Central Asian travel-models:

One of the earliest available travel-accounts of Central Asia, The Life of Huen-Tsiang, also embodies one of the oldest paradigms that governed the genre of travel-writing, i.e. the pilgrimage. The pilgrimage was the dominant framework for much medieval travel. Huen-Tsiang

* This is not to say that travel in Central Asia during the interim centuries, i.e. from the 14th century to the 19th century was not important. They have not been considered in this study for various reasons: non-availability of translations, some texts being out of print and sometimes lost. However, a brief outline of travellers and their works (where they exist) is to be found in Chapter I.
was a 7th century Chinese pilgrim who set out across the formidable terrain of Central Asia on the northern arm of the only two known land-routes to India. His main purpose in travelling was to seek the original sacred sites of Buddhism in India and study its various manifestations. The story of his travels is retold by Shaman Hwui Li, one of his disciples, and is thus cast in the form of a biography. His travels are punctuated by pauses at various Buddhist temples, monasteries and shrines all the way through Central Asia to India. His experiences as a traveller in Central Asia were to become familiar to all those who later undertook to travel in this region, either by scholarship or personal experience: attack by brigands, losing the way in the desert regions, being misled by goblins of the desert, seeing mirages, and so on. The physical and mental strength required to survive journeying in/through Central Asia, as evinced by the Chinese pilgrim, has since inspired some of the most famous travellers to the region: Sir Aurel Stein, for one. The life and work of Hiuen-Tsiang greatly influenced the 20th century archaeological explorer, who adopted him as his patron saint (Stein, *On Ancient Central Asian Tracks* Introduction xvi). Indeed, Stein passed through many of the places that the Chinese pilgrim visited: Khotan, Kashgar, Endere, Niya, and so on. These places have been assigned Chinese names in *The Life of Hiuen-
Tsiang, but scholars have since established their identity, some few still being contested. Thus we know that he visited Khotan, saw the Lake Lop-Nor, crossed the Indus on an elephant, experienced the terrors of the Taklamakan desert, the magnificence of the Himalayas, Kashmir and Nalanda, to name just a few. He took back with him various sacred Buddhist texts in Sanskrit (657 volumes) and as many as 150 ancient Buddhist relics. Happily for him, he managed to complete his life-work of translating the sacred texts into Chinese before his death in 664 A.D. Stein’s ‘illegitimate’ 20th century archaeological hauls of Chinese Central Asia’s Buddhist past are a dismal echo of his patron saint’s sincere commitment to religious scholarship. The Life of Hiuen-Tsiang, being primarily a biography, lays emphasis on the inward journey of the traveller: the moral and spiritual growth of the pilgrim as he made his way across the wastes of Central Asia to India. For instance, on two occasions when he is attacked by robbers and beset by heretics, he is able to overcome them by the strength of his faith and converts them to Buddhism. The work points to the centrality of the pilgrimage in many religions of the world, which in turn produced much of medieval travel-writing. The Pilgrim’s Progress by John Bunyan, and The Canterbury Tales by Chaucer are later allegories that parallel Hiuen-Tsiang’s own
journey. The impossibly difficult terrain of Central Asia is seen by the pilgrim in a philosophical light: as an obstacle to be overcome before he could reach the land of his dreams, even as Christian had to go through the Valley of Humiliation and the Slough of Despond before attaining the Promised Land, and Chaucer’s pilgrims had to brave the tedium of the road before they reach the shrine at Canterbury.

The difficulty of travel apart. Hiuen-Tsiang’s sixteen years of journeying through Central Asia and India have made a priceless contribution to scholarship on ancient Buddhism and the cultural past of Central Asia.

If travel-writing (also on Central Asia) had its beginnings in the pilgrimage, it gained momentum from another important medieval phenomenon: mercantile travel. The dangers of the journey, which were endured by Hiuen-Tsiang with a stoicism born of spirituality now became risks to be taken by the mercantile adventurer in the thirteenth century, for the sake of business. Marco Polo was a Venetian merchant who travelled across Central Asia to China, his ultimate destination, in the second half of the thirteenth century. Upon his return to Venice, his experiences were
dictated to a scribe named Rustichello. The work did not get printed until 1477, but when it did, it led practically to the 'discovery' of Asia by medieval Europeans. *The Travels of Marco Polo* is an important landmark in the history of travel-writing on Central Asia because it marks the beginnings of a shift in interest in this region: the traditional paradigm of pilgrimage now gave way to a new form, bolstered by observed experience and curiosity about other ways of life. Polo's stories were tempting enough to whet the appetites of adventure-hungry travellers, and greedy merchants alike. In an initial summary, Polo forecasts his narrative of the adventures and experiences to come to the Polos (uncle, father and son). Then the same ground is covered again, this time in great detail, and he speaks of all the wonders he has seen: nations, peoples, cities, empires, mountains, plains, deserts and seas. In the first book is to be found an account of his travels from Armenia to the court of the great Mongol emperor, Kubla Khan, in whose service as a court official he remained for many years. The second book deals with details of the Mongol court, the legendary power of Kubla Khan and the extent of his vast empire, which Polo travelled to during various court missions to distant parts. The third book describes Japan, the Archipelago, India and the Indian Ocean, while the fourth book is about the wars of the Mongols
and the northernmost regions of the Asian continent. Polo was thus the first medieval traveller to have journeyed across the whole continent from west to east, and to have left an account of his travels.

His work made Europe wake up to the fact that the Mongol empire was one of the most important phenomena to happen in the history of Central Asia, and also that it was one of the largest and most powerful empires in the world. It was through Polo’s account that Europe came to have distinct pictures of places like India, Siberia, Tibet, Burma, Japan, Java, Sumatra, Ceylon, Zanzibar, Madagascar and Abyssinia which hitherto had had only a nebulous identity in the European consciousness. *The Travels of Marco Polo* is a narrative produced centuries before science and technology came to influence travel-writing. Thus it embodies one of the concerns typical of many medieval travel-records: the line demarcating fact from fiction, documentation from tale-telling embellishment, is not clear. For instance, the extent of Polo’s travels has remained an unsettled debate. But to attempt to limit Polo’s travelogue to a true account of actual travel would be to ignore its enduring charm, and its value in the genre of travel-writing.
Commenting on this problematic aspect of travel-writing, William H. Sherman says that "if travel books gave travellers licence to write they also gave writers licence to travel: authors played with the boundaries between eyewitness testimony, second-hand information, and outright invention,...". These textual accounts, he goes on to argue, require in effect a secondary journey with its own rules and realities, in order to be written and / or read (CCTW 31). Polo's account is full of such opportunities where a "secondary journey" has to be undertaken by the reader; in crossing the desert of Lop, Polo says:

"But there is a marvelous thing related of this desert, which is that when travellers are on the move by night, and one of them chances to lag behind or to fall asleep or the like, when he tries to gain his company again he will hear spirits talking, and will suppose them to be his comrades. Sometimes the spirits will call him by name; and thus shall a traveller oftentimes be led astray so that he never finds his party. And in this way many have perished. Sometimes the stray travellers will hear, as it were, the tramp and hum of a great cavalcade of people away from the real line of road, and taking this to be their own company they will follow the sound; and when day
“breaks...they find that a cheat has been put on them and that they are in an ill plight. Even in the daytime one hears those spirits talking. And sometimes you shall hear the sound of a variety of musical instruments, and still more commonly the sound of drums” (Doren, *The Travels of Marco Polo* 63).

In the above passage, it is difficult for the reader to determine the dividing lines between eye-witness testimony and second-hand information. Equally problematic is the uneasy feeling that the whole thing is a fabrication intended to thrill his medieval readership. Whether fact or fiction, Polo’s account is important in that it points to “the sheer precariousness of medieval travel” (Clark, *Travel Writing and Empire* 5. Hereafter TWAE), and to Central Asia as an exotic land full of mystery and wondrous happenings.

A similar portrayal of Central Asian lands is to be seen in the travelogue of Ibn Battuta, but with the added dimension of religious faith colouring his perception. This theologian, whose own name was Muhammad, son of Abdullah, was born to the family of Ibn Battuta in Tangier, Morocco, 1304 A.D. He belonged, by virtue of his education
and upbringing, to the religious upper-class of the Islamic community. As a young man of twenty one, he set out from his native town with the holy and noble aim of making the haj pilgrimage to Mecca, as every good believing Muslim ought to do. But in the course of this initial journey, he wandered from the direct route and joined a pilgrim caravan coming from Damascus. Since he was in easy economic circumstances, time was not an issue, and he leisurely traversed the whole of Syria as far as the Anatolian border. This first journey made him determine to see for himself all the Islamic lands of the world as it was then known, and learn first-hand, the various ways in which Islam was practised in these lands. His decision to travel to Mecca and other holy lands which were seats of Islamic culture and learning is reminiscent of the Buddhist pilgrim Hiuen-Tsiang. But the peculiarly warm-hearted spirit of kindliness and generosity that bonds Muslims together made it possible, and even easy, for Ibn Battuta to carry out this decision. For Hiuen-Tsiang, the strength and determination required to brave the dangers of the way on his holy pilgrimage to India had to come from within: all through the lonely wilds of Central Asia, it was a one-man journey, with only spiritual conviction to keep up his courage. For Ibn Battuta however, it was pleasantly different. He had his own caravan-entourage of wives, slaves and people to sustain
him throughout his travels and do his bidding. Apart from his own retinue, he could always rely on the friendly hospitality of fellow-Muslims, whose caravans were to be seen either travelling towards Mecca, or bound on trade-missions to other Islamic lands. Travelling (either individually, or as was more often, in great caravan groups) in Central Asia after the advent of Islam in the 8th century received a stimulus from two impulses: the pilgrimage and mercantilism. Ibn Battuta himself benefited hugely from this impetus and his travel-account also reflects it. In the course of his travels (1325-54 A.D.) he declares that China was the safest and best regulated of countries for a traveller (Gibb 287). Having spent three years in study at Mecca, Ibn Battuta then made up his mind to seek his fortune in India. For then reigned here Sultan Muhammad, of the Tughlaq dynasty, whose magnanimity to Muslim scholars and theologians was well-known. It was on this journey to India that he traversed the cities of Anatolia, across the Black Sea to the territories of the Mongol Hordes, visited Constantinople, and then struck across the steppes of Central Asia. Once in India, he soon established his reputation as a genuine theologian and ascetic.
Ibn Battuta’s travels in the Muslim cities of Central Asia reflect the stupendous political and religious upheavals that had taken place here, with the coming of Genghiz Khan and his Mongol armies in the 13th century. The cruel emperor, whose empire was one of the largest in human history, was violently prejudiced against Islam, and consequently wrought havoc and devastation in the holy centres of Islamic culture such as Samarkand and Bokhara and Khwarezm (the ancient name of Khiva). As Ibn Battuta travels from one devastated city to another, his eyes rest on nothing but ruins, destroyed shrines and desecrated tombs of saints. But these sights do not deter him; he describes Khwarezm as the largest, greatest and most beautiful city of the Turks, while Samarkand is one of “the largest and most perfectly beautiful cities in the world” (Gibb 174). His enthusiasm is rooted in his religious faith, which found deep affinities with the Muslims of these lands, and rendered the very ruins he saw beautiful. He pays particular attention to the variances in religious practices in the observance of Islam; for instance, he observes that the Muslims of Khwarezm look down upon those of Bukhara as fanatics.

He also visited Balkh and Khorasan, which were in complete ruins after the advent of “the accursed Tinkiz,” as he calls the Mongol emperor
(Gibb 175). As was the case in Samarkand and Khwarezrn, the warmth and hospitality with which he meets among fellow-Muslims here colours his perception of these lands, which had been victim to Mongol (and therefore heretic) tyranny.

The most important observation on Islam that he makes is the rift between the Shia and Sunni sects, that has existed almost since the origin of the religion itself. Put simply, the Shia movement began in the first century of Islam and can be identified with a certain orthodoxy of religious dogma. This tendency causes the Shi’ite to foster religious intolerance not only against non-Muslims, but against other Islamic sects, especially upon the Sufis. Many times in Ibn Battuta’s work, we come across his consciousness of this schism in Islam, along with his own personal animosity against the Shi’ites. His observations gain significance in the light of recent happenings in the Islamic lands of Central Asia: the emergence of the fundamentalist Taliban faction in Afghanistan, its overthrow, and the current reign of the mujaheddin or religious police—all have some roots in the division that has been noted by the medieval priest. A specific mention of this religious prejudice is also to be found in Mohan Lal’s 19th century travelogue Travel in the Punjab ... and Thubron’s The
Lost Heart of Asia, when Soviet collapse gave way to religious and political anarchy.

Ibn Battuta's travelogue thus portrays Central Asia as being home to one of the world's most resilient religions. Islam withstood the Mongol scourge a century before Battuta's travels began, and survived to exist covertly through the repression of Soviet times. Though it is not without intrinsic problems, which render it dangerous for both Muslims and non-Muslims alike, it has served to hold the Islamic lands of Central Asia together from the time of Ibn Battuta's travels, up to the present time.

Travel-accounts of the Great Game

The Great Game, as has already been established in Chapter II, spanned the whole of the nineteenth century and the beginning decades of the twentieth. It was directly based on imperialist assumptions, and consisted of power politics involving British India, Persia, Afghanistan and Russia. Of these, Persia and Afghanistan were the two nations that were drawn into the Great Game as the tensions between Russia and Britain mounted. British fears over their prize colonial possession, India, grew as the Russian empire expanded, ever moving
southwards. In this undeclared war, both the British and the Russians tried to gain the upper hand by acquiring economic and political toeholds in regions surrounding India, the bone of contention. This could be done only by sending trusted men who could be depended upon to expertly survey a hitherto unknown area, feel its political pulse, report on its economic possibilities, and act in their country’s interests if the need arose. In all this, the unexplored areas of Central Asia came to be an arena for political moves of either side of the Great Game players. The Persians and Afghans had certain affinities, though no love was lost between the two countries. Both were fierce, proud, war-like peoples, and both expertly played off Britain and Russia against each other in time-honoured fashion. In the course of the Great Game both countries changed allegiances a bewildering number of times for self-gain.

James Fraser’s *Narrative of a Journey into Khorasan* (1821-22) marks an initial stage of the Great Game when the British were seeking, through aggressive ‘forward’ policies, to permanently establish their presence in Persia. His travel-account must be spoken of in conjunction with that of Alexander Burnes, who had already established his reputation as a Great Game player by visiting Bokhara in disguise, and coming back
alive to tell the tale. His three-volume work *Travels into Bokhara* created a sensation back in England, where people hailed “Bokhara Burnes” as a hero who had survived barbaric lands and cultures. Fraser’s travels come in the wake of this trail-blazer, and strike a dismal note in comparison. For one thing, British knowledge of things Persian was far greater than those of Central Asian peoples, thus rendering travels in Persia a far less exciting proposition. Nevertheless, Fraser’s travels in Persia gain significance when we consider that they coincided with a particularly turbulent phase of the country’s politics, and the Great Game itself. British political agents were to be seen everywhere, attempting to strengthen diplomatic ties, and often doing more harm than good, in sheer incomprehension of the Oriental mind. Fraser’s companion, Dr. Andrew Jukes, was the man originally intended for a diplomatic mission to the Governor of Fars, but he died of cholera before he could achieve anything. Fraser was left, therefore, to complete the mission, which was unlucky from the start. In the background of steadily worsening Anglo-Persian relations, he was asked by the British Government to find out the extent of Russian influence in Persia. This job had been originally assigned to the British resident at Tehran, but his alarming inefficiency made Fraser’s impending report all the more urgent and crucial. When it did come, his
superiors in India were surprised at the caution and restraint that he advocated in strengthening British standing in Persia. This tentativeness is to be perceived in his travel-narrative as well, despite his horror at the political chaos that he was witness to in Persia. Fraser’s narrative is important in two ways: on the one hand, it is a clear reflection of Regency England’s conception of order, civilisation, and stability; on the other, it shows a marked hesitation to impose British societal, or other, values on the Persians, unlike his contemporaries Charles Trevelyan and Conolly who were known for their missionary zeal. Like many others who were sent on diplomatic missions to Central Asia, Fraser gives vent to his sense of outrage at the ‘uncivilized’ peoples and their ways only in his travelogue, and keeps to facts in official reports.

Apart from the political trends that he observes, his narrative is also coloured by detailed pictures of the socio-economic and cultural dimensions of the Persians’ way of life. He devotes an entire chapter, for instance, to dispelling what appears to him the mythical splendour of the East, embodied in Persia. According to him, this illusion of the fabulous East is not only a Western construct, but has also been created by the Orientals themselves:
"The East has at all times been described as the land of wealth, luxury and magnificence... it was from the East that all rich commodities were received; ... jewels, spices, and rare fabrics. The earliest travellers have borne testimony to the magnificence of Oriental sovereigns, sumptuously adorned with gold and gems, surrounded by their brilliant courts, and armed with absolute power. The Eastern tales that delighted our youth, describing scenes of wonder, voluptuousness, and inexhaustible riches in the florid and hyperbolical style of Asiatic authors have added their influence...”

(Fraser, Narrative of a Journey into Khorasan 158-159. Hereafter NJK).

Being also of the opinion that more recent travellers have not done much to break this spell, Fraser sets out the “cold and accurate realities” (Fraser, NJK 159) in his narrative. He notes the harsh contrast between the wretchedness of the subject peoples and the ornate pomp of their Amir; the scarcity of water, the aridity of the land, the total absence of any security, peace or comfort that a European would naturally associate
with civilization: the old and decayed buildings, the appallingly dirty roads, and a general sense of discontent among the people.

Fraser shrewdly observes that the social status and financial condition of the traveller profoundly influence his impressions and experiences in another country; while some can afford to entertain very agreeable pictures thereof, others of a humbler stature must reconcile themselves to harsh realities. He himself, safely at a distance, could observe and describe ways of life that were unknown to the West. But despite his best efforts to maintain the neutral tone of a historian, his feelings come through: for instance, in a description of the various Turcoman tribes that he found scattered over the northeastern parts of Khorasan, he exclaims in horror at their way of life:

"... yet robbery and plunder is the Toorkoman’s true profession; ... and so far from considering it as a crime, he looks upon it as the most honourable and praiseworthy of all employments" (Fraser, NJK 274).
Yet again, his own civilized European background has him ill-prepared for the sight of a Turcoman woman's headdress: her exotic cap, trimmed with silk, gold coins, silver bells and hearts and framed with split reeds, strikes him as absurd and outlandish; he labels it monstrous (Fraser, NJK 265). It is in such details that the narrative is clearly a product of the age of empire; it is unique in that its author cautions against any headlong plunges into civilizing missions by the British in this region.

Fraser's report on Persia, advocating British restraint, in part led to the Government in India to shift their focus of attention to their North-Western frontier regions. It was decided that by exploring trade possibilities in Sindh, Punjab, Peshawar and other places surrounding the Indus river, British strength and presence in this region could be augmented. The exploration of the river and surrounding villages was a daunting task, since Ranjit Singh, the ruler of Punjab, held sway here. His irascibility and fierce independence were well known to the British. They decided that Alexander Burnes, who had proved his mettle by visiting Bokhara, was the man for this delicate mission. Burnes' work Travels into Bokhara details this expedition in the third volume, A Voyage on the Indus. Apart from the navigation of the river itself, it was also his task to
make a detailed study of the people, politics, and topography of Sindh. This travel-account has its place and time immediately prior to the British conquest of Sindh in the middle of the 19th century. From the start, one is impressed with the delicacy and danger of the entire mission. Burnes himself realized that the Amirs of Sindh were by no means deceived by the British ploy of presenting English thoroughbred horses to Maharaja Ranjit Singh; they were almost certain that the British had sent Burnes on the Indus as a preliminary step to annexing the whole of the Punjab.

On this journey (which lasted five months and covered more than a thousand miles) Burnes was accompanied by Dr. Gerard, a Bengal Army surgeon, an Indian surveyor named Mohammad Ali, an Indian doctor, and a Kashmiri munshi (interpreter) named Mohan Lal. It was a complicated matter transporting the five nervous and restive horses and a cumbersome carriage which were intended as gifts to Ranjit Singh. Burnes and his fellow-Europeans soon abandoned their native disguise when they found that it excited more suspicion than if they had dressed in their own clothes. The hostility that his expedition met with could not be ignored; they had to be ever on the lookout, after several attempts on the part of the Sindhis to murder them. The mission, despite Burnes' efforts to be as
inconspicuous as possible. attracted considerable attention and suspicion. One old man, at his first sight of Burnes’ party, exclaimed: “Alas! Sind is now gone, since the English have seen the river, which is the road to its conquest” (Burnes, Introduction ix).

Despite several mishaps, Burnes, being a diplomat as well as an explorer, managed to establish friendly relations with Ranjit Singh. A description of the Maharaja, his personality and his way of treating foreigners, are the only personal touches to be found in this narrative. Otherwise, it abounds in maps of the Indus, its course and surrounding regions, technical comparisons between the Indus and the Ganges, details of Ranjit Singh’s army forces, and the people whom he encountered. At this juncture, it is important to observe how the very nature of travel-writing on Central Asia underwent a change: individual travellers’ perceptions which were shaped by deeply personal reasons, made way for Government-sponsored group surveys, ethnological studies and topographical reports to serve in the interests of Imperialism. In fact, many Great-Game travel-accounts are almost indistinguishable from investigative reporting: notable examples are those of Burnes, Hedin, Stein and Younghusband, despite their scrupulous separation of official
reports from their personal travel-narratives. Thus, Burnes' account of his adventures becomes important in that it reflects his role in influencing the history of these lands which were the fringes of Central Asia. As the Russian empire moved inexorably across the steppes of Central Asia, the British in India had no choice but to move northwards towards the Hindukush range, annexing territories as they went. Soon it was only the fierce Afghans and their kingdom that lay sandwiched between the two empires. Burnes tried to gain the upper hand for his Government by forming a friendship with Dost Mohammed Khan, the ruler of Kabul. It appears from his narrative that he was on the best possible terms with Dost Mohammed.

In official reports, Burnes urged his Government to establish a British commercial mission in Kabul before the Russians did. But the British hesitated to act upon his recommendations, considering the fearful political ferment in which the Afghans were. It is ironical that Burnes, being such a veteran player of the Great Game, should have failed to respond adequately to the volatile political atmosphere in Kabul. Despite the warnings of his munshi Mohan Lal, Burnes made no attempt to escape from Kabul, the centre of the Afghan uprising against all foreign presence
in their land. It culminated in his assassination, by a howling mob in 1841, together with his younger brother David.

While Burnes single-mindedly focused on the economic possibilities of the river, his interpreter Mohan Lal kept a journal, in which he recorded his impressions of places, peoples and cultures that they encountered on their perilous journey. His travel-accounts *Travel in the Punjab, Afghanistan and Turkestan to Balk, Bokhara and Herat* is partly based on this journal, and retains the features of the diary form, with date-wise entries of incidents and experiences. It covers the period from December 1931 to January 1846. He had been instructed, at the commencement of the mission, to protract his route in a field-book, and to note down all information that was of statistical, geographical and commercial importance. Since he identified himself almost totally with British interests, he faithfully carried out this task: the travel-account names routes, rivers, passes to Peshawar, Kabul, Balk, Bokhara, Meshed, Sindh and Baluchistan; indicates altitudes and temperatures of places, their climate, the fertility of soil, crops, products, buildings and architecture. He has carefully noted, for example, the strength and inaccessibility of the Rotas fort, the subterraneous passage of water in the
fort of Atak. and the new walls around the city of Khandahar. He has also painstakingly noted detailed lists of prices of different commodities like cloth, pulses, butter, wool, silk and indigo at important trade centres, the customs duties to be paid in different towns, the profits accruing to the traders, and potential for future commerce.

But the travelogue is unique among Great Game records in that it is infused with a lively interest in humanity: he offers comments on the physique and features of the different tribes and peoples he meets, their habits of industry, their outlook and customs, instances of laziness, filth and other human failings. This commentary forms a contrast to European prejudices; most of it is to be gathered from sundry little localized anecdotes all along the narrative. For instance, during a particularly difficult phase of their journey, he pauses to admire a bird with bright blue and red plumage; in Peshawar, he stops to tell the story of a tailor who was praised by the Sultan for having killed his unfaithful wife and her lover, and for bringing the corpses to show the king. This little story ironically illustrates the very strict moral code enforced under the rule of Dost Mohammed Khan, despite his own notorious lewdness and dissipation. As later events were to prove, Mohan Lal’s judgement of the
Sultan’s character was much more accurate than that of Burnes. On a march to Jhelum town, Mohan Lal notices the beauty of a woman drawing water from a well, which he describes with decorum and dignity: he refers to her “graceful deportment” and says that she is “a perfect model of beauty” (Lal, *Travel in the Punjab* 14 Hereafter TIP). He visits and describes monuments, tombs, ruins, gardens, the Chihal Zinah building¹ erected by Babur; at one point, he even excavated a few coins of antique interest for the Royal Geographical Society. These descriptions are of a rambling nature, interspersed with local folklore and legend, and present a stark contrast to Burnes’ perception of the same lands, which often took the form of strategic information in various classified systems.

Mohan Lal also takes keen note of the Shia-Sunni conflict that had so preoccupied Ibn Battuta in 14th century Central Asia: in Kabul, he observes that the Shias live separately from Sunnis in a walled street, and almost always have the upper hand over them in matters of religious

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1. Chihal Zinah means Forty Steps. The emperor Babur built it to commemorate his conquering the city of Kandahar.
dispute. Of the wealth of detail of people, places and legends, two descriptions stand out vividly in the narrative: one is the legend he relates about the rock sculptures in Bamiyan, and the other is his description of the holy city of Bokhara. The legend of the Bamiyan sculptures revolves around their origin: the Pandava princes. (of the Hindu sacred epic Mahabharata) are said to have carved them during their unhappy exile. This curious legend gives rise to speculations on the extent to which knowledge of Hinduism had spread beyond the country of its birth and taken its place among local cultures and religions in Central Asia. Mohan Lal goes on to speak of Tamburlaine the Great who ordered his expert archers to shoot down the images, which were anathema to his religion, but the images remained unharmed.

On reaching Bokhara, Lal is struck by the beauty of its natives, both men, and especially the women. But in almost the same breath he speaks of their habits of personal hygiene which are appalling, and it is no surprise to learn that almost everyone is afflicted with guinea-worm (rishte is the local name). He observes that no native uses water for washing, but a piece of clay instead. Those who use water are cried up as infidels. The prevailing religion being Sunni Islam, he notices many instances of bigotry against the Shias (the Qizal Bash, as they are locally called) who are
treated with great contempt, quite in contrast to the religious climate he had sensed in Kabul. Happening to pass through the bazaars, for which Bokhara, like Samarkand, was famous since the times of the Silk Road, he remarks that a number of Russian articles were on sale, such as sugar, paper, lace, and other goods. This fact points to the strong position that the Russians had managed to establish in trade relations with Central Asia at the time of Burnes' mission. Lal also notes other goods for sale such as corn, fruit, silk, tobacco, rice, opium, china-ware, and tea, some of which find their way to Persia, Russia, India and Afghanistan. In return, Bokhara received the legendary Kashmiri shawls, brocade, steel, iron, cloth and many other items of merchandise.

Considering the peculiarly difficult circumstances in which he had to keep up his journal of daily observations, Mohan Lal's travelogue is remarkably rich in detail and displays a sharp insight into the nature of people and things. He was travelling through a vast land with a bewildering diversity of cultures and peoples, but in almost every place the act of writing was regarded with deep suspicion. Both Burnes and Mohan Lal travelled under the aliases of Sikander Khan and Hasan Jan, respectively. Many a time, Lal had to hide his writing in a cloth wrapped
around the waist. In Bokhara he could write down his experiences of the day only by night. Despite his ambiguous cultural and political status (a native Indian Kashmiri who could easily pass for an Afghan by his appearance, working for the British officials who accompanied him), he managed to live up to his avowed aim of “rendering good and faithful service” to the British Government (Lal, TIP, Introduction viii). The qualities that come through in his narrative are his loyalty, diplomatic skills, his clever gathering of military and strategic information, his resourcefulness and fluency in many languages and dialects. These qualities made him an invaluable asset to the British. For their part, they merely regarded him as a tool; his benefactor Trevelyan felt very strongly that Mohan Lal was a triumphant example of what a sound British education could achieve, since it enabled him to use the English language. Lal himself, in a brief preface to his travelogue, speaks deprecatingly of his usage of English, which is both quaint and creative. For instance, in speaking of the women of Kabul, he quotes a native proverb which he translates as follows: “The flour of Peshawer is not without a mixture of barley and the women of Kabul are not without lovers” (Lal, TIP 43-44).
Notwithstanding his inferior official status in the British mission, Mohan Lal surveyed the lands, negotiated with traders, borrowed provisions, acted at times as agent of the British Government, dealt with local chiefs, bribing or coercing them into signing treaties in favour of the British. But it is important to note that his devotion to the British cause was not without reservations. At a time just before Burnes was murdered, Lal had been making false promises to the local Afghan chiefs of British support, who in turn “sacrificed their own interests to the British cause” (Lal, TIP, Introduction V). Later, when the Afghans awoke to the perfidy of the British, and retaliated with one of the bloodiest battles in Afghan history, Lal confesses: “I was so much ashamed at the recollection of the assurances I had given them, by the order of my superiors, that I was unable to shew my face to them. This was not honourable on our part.” (Lal, TIP, Introduction V).

The travelogue also contains a route map, showing Lal’s movements across a vast area that comprised of parts of India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran and Central Asia in the first half of the nineteenth century. Lal’s work, with its myriad observations of ways of life and peoples and cultures, shows Central Asia as it was a few years prior to
Tsarist expansion: natives and local cultures admitted the Russian presence only in its economic capacity and allowed no political interference. We see the different parts of Central Asia (Turkestan, as Lal refers to it) retaining much of their ancient culture: tyrannical and cruel amirs who were a law unto themselves, the subjects being ever in awe of their lords, the fierce and rapacious banditti who roamed the steppes, lurked in mountains to waylay passing caravans and defied all authority, the constant bickerings between local chiefs, and their religious animosities, the cruel punishments meted out to offenders, and so on. In this travel-account there is a unique blend of the official reports he made and the curious observations of men and matters that he noted in an individual capacity.

*Travels in Central Asia* (hereafter TICA), by Arminius Vambery (a Hungarian scholar of independent means who sympathized with the British) presents a distinct contrast in technique; the first part of the travelogue deals with the story of his travels from Teheran to Samarkand in the course of which he studied various Turkic languages, and the second part is devoted to reports concerning the geography, ethnography, statistical information and the social and political atmosphere in Central
Asia in the second half of the nineteenth century. The latter part of the travelogue was written with the sole motivation of personal interest and had no official purpose to it. But British officials who were feverishly engaged in the Great Game (especially Major-General Sir Henry Rawlinson to whom the book is dedicated), were on the look-out for all new information on Central Asia and must have found much in Vambery's reports to chagrin them. In fact, their worst fears were all but confirmed: Russian presence in the major cities of Central Asia such as Samarkand, Khiva and Bokhara was gaining in strength day by day, through flourishing trade policies and commercial intercourse. Also the sphere of Russian influence had extended, alarmingly, to the mouth of the Oxus river and included the entire western part of Central Asia. Vambery gives it as his considered opinion that Tsarist Russia would not hesitate long before it swallowed up the whole of Turkestan, outdoing the British. In short, he subscribes wholeheartedly to British fears of Russian designs on India. He also strongly disapproves of what appears to him British indifference to Russian plans in Central Asia. He portrays the "Russian Bear" (Vambery, TICA 443) as slowly and silently advancing on Central Asian territory and taking possession of it. He undertook to travel to Central Asia in 1863, when Tsarist expansionist policies were in the
His reasons for this journey were of a purely scholastic nature; he wished to ascertain for himself whether his native language of Hungarian had roots in the Tartaric or in the Finnish branch of the Altaic family of languages. This philological purpose took him first to Constantinople, where he lived for many years, imbibing the various languages and studies of Islamic culture, which, as he puts it, “transformed me into a Turk – nay, into an Efendi” (Vambéry, TICA, Preface viii). He then continued east, and traversed a large part of Central Asia by a route never before undertaken by a European: the map provided at the end of his travelogue shows the author’s movements from Teheran to Sari and Karatepe, on to Gomushtepe, through the plateau of Kaftankir to Khiva, ferrying across the Oxus to Bokhara and on to Samarkand, through Karshi in the Karakum desert to Herat, Meshed and back to Constantinople. In effect, Vambéry described a huge circular figure over the western parts of Central Asia, and cut across the Kara Kum (black sands) and Kizil Kum (red sands) desert, which is one of the largest deserts in the world, if not the largest. His decision to travel
disguised as a Dervish\(^2\) and in the company of any passing caravan was taken for the most practical reasons. For one, his studies in Constantinople had familiarized him with all the different sects of the Islamic faith; he knew that nobody would suspect or harm a Dervish belonging to the Naqshbandi sect.\(^3\) The accoutrements that went with this identity were ragged and tattered clothes, minimal possessions, a begging bowl and walking staff, and prayer-beads. Vambery assumed all of these, and only one or two Muslim caravan-mates knew of his dissembling. As Reshid Efendi, he gave it as his earnest desire to visit the seats of true Islam in Turkestan, and that it was for this reason alone that he had come from Turkey. This statement, though completely untrue, had the desired effect of his gaining a place among the other travellers who were bound in a caravan for Turkestan. Thus Vambery minimised for himself the risks attendant upon lone (white or otherwise) travellers in 19th century Central Asia; his adopted identity as a Dervish and his place in a

\(^2\) Dervish — a wandering Muslim mendicant, believed to have mystic powers and revered all over Central Asia.

\(^3\) Islamic brotherhood, professing Sufi mysticism, commonly found in Central Asia.
traditional mode of travelling at once protected him from being waylaid by bandits on the road, the terrors of losing his way in the unending deserts, and such other dangers common to travel in Central Asia up to the 20th century. The strategies used by Vambery to travel to, and return from Central Asia display acculturation in a peculiar form, in that he was using what he understood of other cultures for his own purposes. The duration of his adopted identity as an Oriental is to him, reassuringly brief, and regarded as a necessary step in order to achieve his goal.

At the outset of his travels into Central Asia, Vambery notes, as many travellers (such as Mohan Lal and Ibn Battuta) had before him, the Shia-Sunni differences which he encounters in Persia and in Central Asia proper. In fact, it is on the basis of these differences that he divides Persia from Central Asia: the comments made by his Sunni companions, expressing their distrust of his holy purpose in travelling, would have been sacrilege to the Shia Persians. [The Shias are bound to praise all those bound on Ziaret, a pilgrimage to the tombs of Muslim saints.] Despite his blending in, Vambery had other difficulties in making scholarly observations. In his Preface, he voices one of these in succinct terms: he begs the reader "not to forget that... (he was travelling in)... a country
where to hear is regarded as impudence, to ask as crime, and to take notes as a deadly sin” (Vambery, TICA, Preface ix). Notwithstanding these prejudices, Vambery managed, as others had before him, to conceal the fact that he was writing down his observations and experiences in Central Asia, for the consumption of his fellow-Europeans.

During his travels as part of an ever-growing caravan, he describes the people around him in terms conventionally attributed to the Oriental: he finds them dirty, smelly, hideous, with beggarly clothes and filthy houses, thinking nothing of lying and cheating as a matter of course. He declares that the Oriental, and particularly Muslims, are “bred up in lies and treachery...” (Vambery, TICA 35). These very features and tendencies were adopted by the European traveller for his own convenience and protection, but this fact does not stop him from passing judgement: “The Oriental is never what he seems...” Elsewhere in his travelogue, he remarks: “The Oriental is born and dies in a mask; candour will never exist in the East” (Vambery, TICA 274, 288). These extravagant statements were the very stuff of the colonial discourse that dominated travel-writing on Central Asia notably up to the 20th century. At Gomushtepe, his first taste of Central Asiatic life, he indulges in the
very hypocrisy that he had accused the Other of; he accepts the
enthusiastic welcome hugs and the legendary Turkoman hospitality to
travellers, though he was supposedly a Dervish, detached from the
enjoyments of worldly life. His experiences in Gomushtepe reaffirm his
notions of Oriental hospitality and leave him surprised at the religious
fervour he had seen displayed. He realized that his pose as a Dervish had
a double advantage: primarily it led people to believe that he was utterly
destitute and dissociated totally from any official status; secondly, the
character he was impersonating was only half-understood, and inspired
awe and reverence among most of the people he encountered. He
witnesses the way in which a firm belief in a vengeful Nemesis and an
appeal to conscience lead to the resolving of a petty crime. It is amusing
in the context of his own deceit, to note that he recommends these
techniques to London crime detectives.

As he travels on, he meets with an almost universal belief among
Central Asiatics that Roum (Turkey) is the seat of true Islam, and that
Persians (who were being used by the Turkomans as slaves) are heretics.
He exploits this belief for his own advantage from the start of his journey:
everywhere, he is welcomed as a true Muslim from a holy land, since he
lets it be known widely that he was from Constantinople. Like Fraser before him, Vambery is struck by the complete absence, in the Turkoman tribe, of any sense of opprobrium in their chosen life-career of thieving. He notes that the young men returning home with their booty are hailed as true heroes (Vambery, TICA 68-69). He is even more amazed by the Turkoman mode of transacting business on credit, which operates on trust and honesty, qualities that are to him incongruous in a culture kept alive by banditry. He does not seem to understand that such ways of life in Central Asia (which probably exist to this day) were born of man’s attempt to survive in one of the world’s most formidable terrains; the simple basic necessities of life have to be sometimes acquired by the most desperate, if unlawful (in European terms), means. He himself came close to insane desperation in his desert crossing to Khiva, where the caravan’s drinking water ran out and all of them suffered the torments of desert thirst. The hard lessons of survival that he had to face on this stage of his travels render Khiva beautiful in his eyes, with its fine meadows, rich fields, domes and minarets. His picture of the Khan of Khiva is very similar to the European perception of Maharaja Ranjit Singh: Seid Mehemed Khan Padishahi Kharezm struck him as a pompous, dissipated, savage and tyrannical old man. And as Burnes had
experienced at Ranjit Singh's hands, Vambéry too had a cordial reception as a holy and learned man. These cases, where Europeans were well-received by the Amirs and Khans of Central Asia, are rare instances in the history of the land. The hospitality extended by the Khan of Khiva and the freedom accorded to Vambéry to wander about the city are exceptional; it can only be attributed to the success of his disguise and his own ability to act the part. He soon had cause to regret this freedom, however. His notions of hospitality contrast sharply with the Oriental attitude to food; he recounts in amazement the unbelievably enormous quantities of food consumed by the natives around him, while his own inability to follow suit is regarded as low breeding. Vambéry came from Europe, where people, by and large, never had to think about the availability of food; the Oriental attitude stems from the widespread experience of rarely having enough to eat. In the course of his wanderings in Khiva, he encounters a Khivan woman whose resemblance "to the daughters of Germany" strikes him, along with the sobering realization that the Khivans' lot is wretchedly different (Vambéry, TICA 133).

Vambéry's career as a Dervish ensured his survival in Khiva, engaging, as he did, in faith-cures, miracle-working and reciting prayers in
return for alms. It is perhaps this simple faith that prompted him to declare: “The Khivan Ozbeg, although but rough-hewn, is the finest character of Central Asia” (Vambery, TICA 136). He also feels that his stay in Khiva, notwithstanding some horrifying episodes, was the pleasantest part of his Central Asian journey.

The less-pleasant aspects of his experiences in Khiva had to do with the treatment of prisoners and wrong-doers. But Vambery, while he reacts with horror at torture-scenes like most fellow-Europeans, has an informed understanding of the way crime was dealt with in 19th century Central Asia. The punishment for the sin of lechery, or adultery, is death by stoning; in the first instance, the object of desire meets with the same fate. In this regard, Vambery notes: “In Khiva, as well as in the whole of Central Asia, wanton cruelty is unknown; the whole proceeding is regarded as perfectly natural, and usage, law, and religion all accord in sanctioning it” (TICA 139). And this, after his mute horrified witnessing of a terrible scene in which some poor old men, who had been taken as prisoners, were bound hand and foot and had their eyes gouged out, with the executioner kneeling on the chest of each victim to do the job, and then wiping his knife on the hoary beards of the unfortunate creatures.
But this terrible treatment, of prisoners won in honourable battle, was common in many parts of Central Asia upto the coming of the Russians in the late 19th century. The people themselves had a simple acceptance of such inhuman practices as due and just punishment.

Vambery perceives a similar attitude towards the Emir of Bokhara by his subjects. At the time of his being there, the then Emir was the son of the notoriously cruel Nasrullah, who had shocked civilized Europe with his bloody execution of the two British officers Conolly and Stoddart. Happily for Vambery, this Emir was known for his gentleness and affability, and for his strictness in upholding the purity of Islam and for the strict economy with which he conducted his own household. In Bokhara-i-Sharief (the Noble), Vambery's skills as a Dervish are put to the utmost test, for it was here that the order of the Naqshbandi originated. Besides, Bokhara is considered by all Muslim Asiatics to be the holiest city in Asia. So it is not surprising to find that Vambery was asked all kinds of questions on the most intricate points of the Islamic faith. But he passes all the difficult tests put to him with ease and lives for a short while in Bokhara in comparative comfort. During his stay there, the details of people and daily life around him appear totally incongruous with the city's
public image: the holiest place in all Asia has a filthy water supply system. the people themselves have unspeakably dirty habits of hygiene, and are commonly afflicted with rishte, or guinea-worm. Mohan Lal, a fastidious Kashmiri, had also been distressed by these things when he had accompanied Burnes there. But for all this, Vambey is of the opinion that “the man that has wandered about through the deserts of Central Asia will still find in Bokhara, in spite of all its wretchedness, something of the nature of a metropolis” (Vambey, TICA 190).

It is in this metropolis of Central Asia that he finds that religion (specifically, Islam) is inextricably linked to the practice of slave trade. Only “unbelievers” such as Shia Persians and Hindus can be made into slaves, Jews being considered unworthy of even slavery.

As he proceeds from Bokhara to Samarkand, he senses that the picture of Samarkand he had been given by Bokhariots pointed to an age-old rivalry between the two Khanates. While he does not elaborate on the notions he had preconceived, the historical importance of Samarkand had somehow diminished in his view. Nevertheless, the entire section on this Khanate in his travelogue is devoted to its historicity; he describes the
various palaces of Tamburlaine, whose capital it had been, the mosques that the emperor had constructed, the tomb of the great man himself and madrassahs, or colleges of Islamic learning. Many of these historical sites he finds to be in ruins, alongside which the newer parts of the city had sprung up. Vambery was compelled to leave Samarkand after only eight days’ stay there since word had somehow got about that he was a foreigner impersonating a Hadji.\(^4\) He was forced to separate from his caravan friends at short notice, since his onward journey was on a route different from theirs. In view of the affectionate and close relationship he had had with his caravan-mates, he refrained from disillusioning them in their innocent belief that he was a true Muslim bound for Mecca. He moved on to Karshi and Kerki, well-known caravan-stops, on to Zeid and Maymene, which were vassal provinces to the larger Khanates of Bokhara and Samarkand. On this return journey too Vambery travels in various caravans for reasons that have been earlier mentioned. He soon reaches Herat, one of the easternmost fringes of Persia, and refers to it as “the gate of Central Asia” as he moves past it to Meshed (Vambery, TICA 286). As he nears Meshed, he gradually abandons

\(^4\) Hadji – one who has performed the Haj, or pilgrimage to Mecca.
his Dervish guise since he no longer requires it. He describes the lands and peoples of Central Asia, as he had seen them, to the King of Persia who had wished to see him as soon as he arrived. Vambery then goes on to revive all his European contacts in Persia before proceeding to London to report to the Royal Geographical Society. His narrative ends with his expressing a sense of complete bewilderment on having experienced the world of Central Asia, which was so different from his own.

If Vambery’s narrative portrays Central Asia as a land in which the Russian presence was slowly gaining ground, Burnaby’s *Travels and Adventures in Central Asia: A Ride to Khiva 1876* (hereafter TACA) reflects a Central Asia overrun by Tsarist troops, with their Cossack army and official quarters established everywhere. Among the prominent architects of this new political configuration were General Kauffmann who was the first Governor-General to Tashkent, the newly-declared capital of Russian Turkestan and General Milutin, the Minister of War at St. Petersburg. From the latter Burnaby obtained official permission to travel in Russian Turkestan, in his professed capacity as an individual dissociated from any political agenda. His real purpose was to get to the
bottom of what the Russians were up to in Central Asia, and to gauge their intentions towards British India. This was in the mid-1870’s, with the Great Game in its most intense phase. It was unheard-of for an Englishman to be travelling in Central Asia, which had been so recently added to the Tsar’s dominions. Burnaby’s decision to do just this, without resorting to any of the usual deceptions common to most European travellers to Central Asia, can be attributed to two reasons: firstly, his excellent diplomatic connections in St. Petersburg which secured him permission to travel in the Tsar’s newly-acquired domains; secondly, his own intrepidity and sense of adventure that had been kept constantly whetted by his exploits elsewhere in the world, such as Central Africa. This present journey which he commenced overland from European Russia, shows Burnaby, a veteran Great Game player, in his element: he speaks of his great curiosity to see for himself whether the machinations of Russia in Turkestan had had the salutary effect of her civilizing mission, or if the war-like peoples of the former Khanates had “brought the Russian down to an Oriental level, and... (whether) the vices and depraved habits of the East were actually being acquired by some of the conquerors” (Burnaby, TACA Introduction 6-7). He was also bent on finding out how the varied effects of Russian domination of Central Asia
would impact British interests. Given the comparative proximity of Khiva to European parts of Russia, as opposed to the other Khanates, Burnaby decided that it was here he could sense the political atmosphere best. As it was, he had not been granted permission to enter Khiva, but to Fort Petro-Alexandrovsk, a recent Russian establishment near the city of Khiva itself.

The Preface and Introduction to Burnaby’s travel-account (written by himself) show how well informed he was on Anglo-Russian relations since the beginning of the Great Game. Russophobia had greatly increased after the Sepoy Mutiny in India in 1857, and consequently Burnaby’s observations on the Russian attitude to British India gained greater significance. He quotes from a Russian official’s work of that time, in which Russian awareness of their proximity to India subsequent to their take-over of Central Asia, and the possibilities thereof are voiced:

5. **Russia and England in the East.** By Captain Terentyeff
(Burnaby, TACA Preface v-viii).
“Sick to death, the natives are now waiting for a physician from the North... it cannot be said with any certainty that .. small sparks of rebellion may not, if supported by an impetus from without, produce a general conflagration throughout the length and breadth of India ” (Burnaby, TACA Preface vi).

Burnaby goes on to say that Russia could pose a threat to British India if Tsarist troops were allowed near Merv, Balkh and Kashgar, which were important strategic locations in terms of commercial potential, availability of food supplies for accommodating army troops and so on. At the commencement of his travels into Central Asia, Burnaby was familiar with the work of his predecessor Vambery. But unlike him, Burnaby did not resort to any disguise, or attach himself to passing caravans. Travel in Central Asia was being strictly monitored by Tsarist troops garrisoned everywhere, and safety for individual travellers had improved considerably. Vambery had a scholarly interest in the languages of Central Asia, while Burnaby was acting as an unofficial political spy. But the two travellers had some common ground in the style of organization in their respective travelogues: Burnaby too has devoted the
first part of his work to an account of his adventures, with strategic, economic and political information forming the latter part.

In St. Petersburg, Burnaby finds that his Russian acquaintances regard the Tsarist expansion as being mutually beneficial; the British in India would have much more ‘civilized’ neighbours in the Russians than if Central Asia had been left to itself. This was in direct contrast to the attitude of the British Embassy officials in Russia, who implicitly equated Russians with Orientals. It is possible that this feeling was born of the chagrined consciousness that the British in India were fast losing out to the Russians in commercial competition in Central Asia. Burnaby himself displays an amused contempt for Russians, and takes many a dig at them in the course of his journey from Moscow to Orenburg, when he sees their inefficiency and corruption at close quarters. Driven by a Tartar coachman through heavy snow, Burnaby encounters as many hassles of travel as anyone in Central Asia: from Orenburg to Orsk to Karabootak, he has to deal with tedious delays in getting fresh post-horses, frostbite, snowstorms, rude inspectors, suspicious officials, frozen food supplies, and so on. In Russian Asia, the situation is no better:
"I could not help thinking that in Russian Asia the authorities cared less for the travellers' lives than for horses, there being no punishment whatever for the drivers should they upset their fares ... I could not harm a horse for less than forty roubles, whilst my driver might break my neck for nothing" (Burnaby, TACA 146).

He goes on to a place called Kasala, where the original inhabitants were the nomadic Kyrgyz, but now all the different peoples of Central Asia and Russian merchants are to be seen, since Kasala has become an important commercial centre. It is during this stage of his journey that he is able to closely observe the ways of the Kyrgyz tribes. His experience of Kyrgyz horses makes him reflect on their endurance and capacity, a fact later corroborated by Nazaroff, an authority on the horses of Central Asia. Burnaby's travels are punctuated by his stopping with various nomadic Central Asiatics in their temporary homes (kibitkas or yurtas) on the way to Khiva. He thus has an opportunity to observe their domestic and social life at close quarters, even as Nazaroff would, when as a counter-revolutionary fugitive he hid among the Sarts and Kyrgyz from the Bolsheviks. Burnaby, essentially very British in his makeup, realizes that privacy is not considered essential in steppe life, where many people share
the same space. But the cheerful readiness with which they share their meagre resources with their guest is completely lost upon him; instead he makes uncomplimentary remarks to the reader about the appearance of the Kyrgyz maidens he sees around him. He goes on to speak of Kyrgyz marriage customs and other social practices, but all the anecdotes he relates in this connection are rendered distorted and funny since he has an overwhelmingly European perspective on the people around him. For instance, in a tête-à-tête with a young Kyrgyz widow, conducted through the mediation of Nazar, his Tartar coachman, Burnaby tells us that his wish to compliment the lady on her beauty was translated as follows: “He says “that thou art lovelier than a sheep with a fat tail”, “that thy face is the roundest in the flock, and that thy breath is sweeter to him than many pieces of mutton roasted over bright embers” (Burnaby, TACA 357).

This speech, a piece of coarse humour in Burnaby’s point of view, is actually delicate and traditional homage to a Kyrgyz lady’s beauty. Sheep with fat tails are considered by the Kyrgyz to be a great delicacy, roast mutton being one of their choicest dishes; while having a round face and red cheeks is thought of as a mark of great beauty. This one-sided
and limited viewpoint detracts in many ways from the otherwise gripping narrative.

Other details of Kyrgyz life observed by Burnaby, such as the slaughtering of horses and sheep for feasts, the nomad’s summer subsistence on kumiss (fermented mare’s milk), horse-dealing, horse races, their notions of propriety and hospitality, their unique marriage ceremonies, — all find specific mention in the Manas, the national epic of Kyrgyzstan, which has survived for more than a thousand years. The epic, originally oral in nature, existed in the performances of bards and created the world of the Kyrgyz nomad, which remained virtually unchanged even in Burnaby’s time. Describing the Kyrgyz as the Arabs of the steppes, he deliberates upon the special relationship between a Kyrgyz and his horse, which prompts the nomad to often equate the animal with his wife, children and his most precious possessions. This close bond between man and beast found its way into the realm of legend, when bards began to sing of the epic hero Manas and his magic horse. Burnaby, not having a very high opinion of the Kyrgyz in general, turned their love of horses to his own advantage. By pretending to have a great interest in buying horses, he persuades his Tartar guide Nazar to help him
get to Kalenderhana, where the latter's brother-in-law was a horse-dealer. This place was nearer Khiva, quite out of the route to Fort Petro-Alexandrovska, his supposed destination. He carefully avoids Tashkent, the newly-declared capital of Russian Turkestan, which a predecessor (Major Wood, of the Oxus fame — see Chapter II) had visited, in an abortive attempt to get to Khiva. As he nears Khivan territory, he notes that desultory warfare is yet going on between the Russians and the Turkomans, and directs sarcasm at their civilizing mission, which he calls a "terrorizing system" and observes that "the progress of Russia in the East is based upon the sword and the gibbet rather than upon Christianity and the Bible" (Burnaby, TACA 232).

Recounting the history of Russian attempts to conquer Khiva in the past, he carefully notes the fiery enmity between the Khivans and the Cossacks (part of the Tsarist troops) and also has a clear picture of the negotiations between the present Khan of Khiva and General Kauffmann, the conqueror of Turkestan. Once actually on Khivan soil, Burnaby describes the ways of the Khivans as he observed them on the way to the city proper, in considerably less derogatory terms than he had used for the Kyrgyz. Perhaps he was softened by the hospitality of the Khivans, which
is legendary, and extends not only to the wayfarer, but to his animals and other travel-companions as well. He speaks of the famous melons of Khiva, which he savoured in many Khivan households, and even attempted to grow, back in England, but met with no success (Burnaby, TACA 278).

Relying heavily on his diplomatic connections and the official permission he had received back in Russia, he makes no secret of his nationality in Khiva, unlike Vambery, and Burnes before him. In Oogentch, a part of Khiva, he attracts a vast crowd by asking a barber to shave his chin, and not his head, as the Khivans do. Everywhere on Khivan territory, the natives have a consuming curiosity to know whether Russia was going to war with the English. Burnaby, keeping up the pretence of not having any political information, gives non-committal answers. He gains entry into the city itself with a gracious letter of permission from the Khan, for which he had cleverly applied, using a native scribe. Word spread in the city that he had been given a friendly reception by the Khan, and so Khivans vied with one another to have him as a guest in their households. Burnaby’s experience at the hands of the Khan was similar to that of Vambery’s with the Khan of Bokhara, an
exception rather than the rule. But for all his politeness, the Khivan Amir was under no illusion about the intentions of either the British or the Russians. He expresses his wonder at Hindustan, a land of mysterious delights to most Khivans (Burnaby, TACA 313).

From his meeting with the Khan, Burnaby decides that the notorious cruelty with which he had been associated was largely a Russian construct, that "they only existed in the fertile Muscovite imagination, which was eager to find an excuse for the appropriation of a neighbour's property" (Burnaby, TACA 296). He also observes that the picture Russian newspapers gave of the Khan were very different from the real man, who was "a cheery sort of fellow" (Burnaby, TACA 308). Before leaving Khiva, he received a halat, or traditional robe, from the Khan, which is the highest honour paid by Asiatic potentates to foreign guests.

Having gathered all kinds of strategic and political information from his stay in Khiva, he makes his way to Fort Petro-Alexandrovsk. Here, notwithstanding the strained relations between Britain and Russia, Colonel Ivanoff welcomes him. Burnaby, a consummate sportsman, goes hunting
with a few Kyrgyz and Bokhariots native-style, with dogs and trained falcons. He also partakes of the social life in Russian garrisons, before retracing his steps to Kasala, Orenburg and Uralsk. In Uralsk, he finds that Russians were using various parts of the newly-conquered Turkestan as places of exile, much as Siberia was used to deport criminals.

From Burnaby’s work, three facts clearly emerge: that the Russians considered Central Asia (all that they had taken control of, that is) as their property, and that this acquisition must do the Tsar credit; their conviction that their civilizing mission in this land would uplift the barbarous native peoples; and that the British, while looking down upon Russians and their commercial enterprises in Turkestan, had lost out dismally in the race for political ascendancy in this land.

*Wonders of the Himalaya* (hereafter WOTH) by Sir Francis Younghusband reflects the author’s unique perception of a land caught up at the centre of imperialistic forces which manifested themselves in the Great Game. In an age of empire when expansion of territories was being aggressively carried out, and exploration of new lands was usually a prelude to annexation, Younghusband managed to preserve the purity of
his explorer’s spirit. His work illuminates a life-career bound up intimately with Central Asia’s snowy mountain ranges and deserts for a span of fifty years. The year 1884 marks his first journey into the Himalayas, which was inspired by the exploits of his uncle Robert Shaw, who had himself been an intrepid traveller-explorer. The autobiographical skein which runs through the narrative indicates that it is a much older man recounting the experiences of his youth, with a maturer perception and a humility born of wisdom:

“By rare good fortune I have been able to live in the Himalayan Mountains for years together, to explore them up and down from one side to another... year after year... I do not seem yet to have told all that they have been to me...” (Younghusband, WOTH 1).

Younghusband’s career in the Great Game took him to Manchuria, Tibet, and over the entire expanse of Central Asia. But it was with the mountain ranges that separated British India from Central Asia, especially the Himalayas, that the explorer was personally involved. For him, each exploratory foray into the mountains was also a journey of inner exploration and his work reflects this. Through the rigours and dangers of each expedition, he traces his moral and spiritual growth: to him, every
journey into the mountains is not only an exciting adventure to the young careerist, but also a test of courage, fortitude and endurance which helps him evolve into a finer being. His reflections on the adventure with the Mustagh Pass (then the dividing line between British India and China) clearly show this:

"The... greatest obstacle had been overcome... my object had been achieved... deep swelling gratitude came surging up within me – that deep satisfying thankfulness a man feels when he finds he has fulfilled himself – has done the thing which he was built to do."

(Younghusband, WOTH 81)

Part of this feeling must also be attributed to the young man’s pride in the fact that he was the first European to traverse this new route across the Mustagh Pass overland from India to Turkestan. In all his engagements with the mountains, a certain inner strength and indomitable spirit buoyed him up in the face of some of the world’s most dangerous natural phenomena. In the Mustagh Pass crossing, two of his men were nearly lost in a glissade of snow and ice. Even in such moments of extreme crisis, he displays a remarkable coolness and manages to
extricate them. This conviction that Nature has the divine power of bringing out the best in a human being permeates his view of others who partook of his mountain adventures. Observing that his own interest in the spiritual evolution of mankind deepened with each of his expeditions, he also encounters a nebulous impulse that seemed common to all the religions within his experience. Of the illiterate uncomprehending natives who humbly did his bidding during the expedition, there were Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists and Confucians, who, according to him, "... felt something without expecting them to be good. And (they were) in readiness to sacrifice their lives for the good of the expedition... What I worshipped was what they worshipped" (Younghusband, WOTH 160).

To pinpoint the underlying reasons for this common urge “to be good”, nearly all of Younghusband’s expeditions were carried out in the age of empire, when the natives who helped him were subject to this representative of Imperialism. In short, if they wanted their wages at the end of an expedition, it was largely their responsibility to ensure its success. The other reason is that the sheer formidability of the terrain brought men of widely varying backgrounds together in the common attempt at survival. The incredible altitude of the mountains, the dangers
of their glaciers and their sheer magnificence have had a humbling influence on man since times immemorial. In Younghusband, this humility takes the form of a pantheistic vision; he rejects the conception, in his youth, of Nature’s forces as his personal enemies, and subscribes now to the belief that God and Nature work together to protect and cherish man. In the light of more than three decades of subsequent experiences with the mountains, he says:

"... if trust be placed in such a God, as the source of all goodness, wisdom, and beauty, ... we shall be able ... to ... confront with confidence physical Nature in her sterner aspects and come to love her even in her austerest moods" (Younghusband, WOTH 155). He also disapproves of the white man’s tendency to contemptuously dismiss native faith in the spiritual powers of Nature; he is of the opinion that all faiths, of Europeans and Asiatics alike, ultimately share the same ground: “... this propitiating of the spirits who dwell in the mountains must fulfill some need in the human race or it would not be so common as it is” (Younghusband, WOTH 91).
His unique attitude towards people not of his own race or religion, and towards lands not part of the British Empire stands out distinctly from a background of reigning Imperialism. Everywhere he goes in the Himalayan ranges, his encounters and relations with people are tinged with a sensitive understanding of other cultures and values. His meeting with a telegraph clerk in Skardu, the capital of Baltistan, in which he admires the clerk’s talent for composing music for himself in his lonely outpost, is an instance of this. The men in his own team are regarded as equals, striving for the same high values in life. Of one of his most useful team-members, a native Balti, he says: “Poor Turgan had suffered dreadful buffetings in life. Baltis have a hard task of it to get a living from the land... But ... in the inner core of him, was all the time this tender disposition, which neither his hardships nor his hard fate had been able to subdue...” (Younghusband, WOTH 99).

Elsewhere, on the occasion of his meeting the Governor of Ladakh, Younghusband’s observations of the family life of a member of the subject race are truly remarkable:
"(He was) ... a fine type of Hindu gentleman... a high-caste native of Kashmir, of the true old-fashioned type ... with remarkable composure and grace of manner. Centuries of strict and rigid training have gone to make a man like that, up against whom the ordinary Englishman looks remarkably uncouth and rude ... it is sad to think that they are dying almost completely away with their suave and polished manners and correctitude unshakable. And sadder still it is that their sons, under the impact of Western civilization, have lost faith in what their fathers believed in, and yet have not found faith in our way of life" (Younghusband, WOTH 100-101).

It is astonishing to find, in a travelogue of the Great Game, such a fearless critical assessment of the 'civilizing' mission of British Imperialism. Curiously enough, this consciousness of the eroding effects of Western civilization on other cultures does not corrupt his own faith in the dynamics of empire. A strong and deep-rooted consciousness of being a representative of the Queen permeates almost all his experiences in the Himalayas, and sustains him in encounters with hillmen raiders, or fellow-explorers working for other Governments. Younghusband's exploration
of the Hunza region and the passes surrounding it, was to assess the possibility of a Russian advance on India through these remote regions. In doing this, he comes up against Darwaza, the gate to “the raiders’ lair” (Younghusband, WOTH 168). Few white men had gained entry into this lair and come out alive. But Younghusband turns the encounter into a successful dialogue, in which, with a mixture of bravado and imperial authority, he manages to extract a treaty from them to the effect that they would no longer raid passing caravans. But in his recounting of this remarkable feat, he disclaims any prerogatives of imperial authority, and declares that these ‘wild’ men (among whom were Hunza raiders, nomad Kyrgyz, Gurkhas, Pathans, Ladakhis and Baltis) did his bidding of their own accord. Indeed, he is of the view that England was above the assumptions of Imperialism; of his initial encounter with the raiders he says:

“If I had thought that it was the will and intention of England, and in accordance with her character, I could have ... fired upon them, tried to strike awe into them, impressed them with the sheer might of England. But I knew... her intention was that I should by every means possible get on good terms with them, melt away opposition,
and induce them to stop raiding and behave in a neighbourly, friendly way towards us” (Younghusband, WOTH 174).

Seen in the light of post-colonial thought, this speech, with its personification of England as a living, thinking and feeling entity, appears to be the very essence of Imperialism, thinly disguised in the form of friendly overtures to the Hunza raiders. This encounter, which took place in one of the world’s most ‘lawless’ regions where slave-raids and blood revenge were the commonplaces of daily life, was regarded by Younghusband’s superiors as a triumph of their nation.

In the course of his Hunza adventure, Younghusband meets a rival explorer, Captain Grombtchevsky, the only other European to have visited Hunza and survived the experience. He had been sent by the Russian Government to discover what the British were up to in the northern frontiers of India, on the Central Asian side. When their paths meet, each is acutely aware of the animosity between their respective countries, and strangely enough, make no secret of it. The Russian openly talks of the Tsar’s armies marching on India, while Younghusband parries this thrust with talk of the British fortification of India’s borders. But brandy and
vodka, freely plied, prevent these shows of strength from becoming ugly or hostile. They part on friendly terms, each feeling that his own country was the greatest power in the world.

The narrative has its lighter moments too. Upon crossing the Saser Pass in the midst of the caravan season, he observes the lusty humourous enjoyment of life by the hardy caravan merchants of Central Asia:

“... these Central Asian merchants are great politicians and keenly enjoyed the rivalry between us and the Russians” (Younghusband, WOTH 132). Speaking of the Andajanis who were by then Russian subjects, he notes that their remarkable hospitality and irrepressible jollity were characteristic of Central Asian travelling merchants, and embodied in Jan Mohammed, a native of Bajaur who had rendered him great help on occasion. He also had a particularly soft place in his heart for the cheerful Gurkhas in his team who endured the most appalling hardships without complaint. In the exploration of a glacier region west of the Mustagh Pass, amidst heavy snow and icy crags, he is particularly touched by a Gurkha joke about “looking for some soft stones to lie on...” at night (Younghusband, WOTH 163).
In most of his expeditions to the Himalayas and beyond, there is an infusion of historical knowledge that colours his perceptions of the land. As a young man, he had been unaware of the age-old mythic value placed by Indians on the Himalayan peaks, which were sacred to them. He was merely impressed by the devotion and courage of the pilgrims he saw seeking in Nature’s grandeur spiritual truth, after the example set by holy men such as Ramakrishna Paramahamsa. It is in the latter part of his career, as an older and more experienced man who had survived many Himalayan expeditions, that he realizes the reasons why men (Indians especially) felt the need to mysticize these grand and formidable peaks, and how whole ways of life, centering around religion came to be associated with them. As a Westerner, he attempted to comprehend the enormity and majesty of the Himalayas by climbing as many of the highest peaks as he could; seemingly ‘conquering’ some of the world’s highest mountain ranges by the act of scaling them. He sees their overwhelming size as a challenge to his own physical powers, and he bravely takes it on.

His other work *The Heart of a Continent* (hereafter THOAC) appeared in 1937, to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of his 1887
journey through the Gobi desert and Chinese Turkestan from Peking to India (by the Mustagh Pass). Colonel Mark Bell, Director of Military Intelligence in British India, made his way from India to Peking through Central Asia in March 1997. His aim in undertaking this journey was to check the extent to which the Chinese would be able to resist encroachment by the Russians towards India, from which they were separated only by the outlying province of Chinese Turkestan (Sinkiang, as it came to be later called). Younghusband, then only aged twenty three, asked to accompany him, but was instructed to go to Central Asia by the caravan route across the Gobi desert. Bell himself went through China proper. The two routes then joined at Hami at the extreme eastern end of Chinese Turkestan. The travelogue was constructed by him from a diary he had kept of the journey, and contains several extracts from it. The narrative initially shows the sense of excitement with which the inexperienced youngster sets off, thirsting for adventures in a "hazy mysterious land" (Younghusband, THOAC 1). Seeing the Great Wall of China, he describes it as a miserable structure, bearing no resemblance to the grand edifice near Peking. He had come upon a part of the Wall that was crumbling to bits and showing every sign of decay. At Kalgan, a trading-centre, the bazaars of which he finds very different from those he
had seen in Central Asian Khanates. he realizes its value as a meeting point for people from many varied cultures: Indians, Afghans and Turkis meet and talk over their travels, debate on the state of the caravan-trails and so on. Keeping in mind Prejevalsky’s travels here, he refers to the legendary explorer’s description of the Mongolian camel when he sees it among the yurts of the cheerful Mongols. Leaving behind the Mongol temples and lamaseries, he starts the crossing of the Gobi, which strikes him as “extremely dreary looking — nothing but sandhills everywhere” (Younghusband, THOAC 42). Mildred Cable and Francesca French, missionaries in Chinese Turkestan in the early 20th century, testified to the dreariness of the land in their work *The Gobi desert*. They speak of the burning arid waste of dunes interspersed with monotonous rolling expanses of gravel, exposed to a pitiless sun. Younghusband goes on to give a scientific explanation for the occurrence of such a landscape — the extreme aridity, and the sub-zero temperatures of winter together cause mountain decomposition, and this in turn increases the quantities of sand and gravel that make up the desert. This interest in the topography of Chinese Turkestan was shared by Sir Aurel Stein, whose name is inextricably linked with Chinese Central Asia’s archaeological past. In a brief scientific work entitled *Desiccation in Asia*, he has analysed the
different ways in which human activity in Central Asia has brought about changes in climate, soil, rock and water formations, water and sand bodies, and so on. He goes on to compare the varying conditions of the land with every expedition he makes. Being favourably impressed by Kashgari and Turki women, Younghusband compares them with Chinese, Mongol and Manchu women, and finds the former much more dignified in bearing and appearance. Meeting a Russian merchant in Yarkand, he establishes an excellent rapport with him, as he had with the Russian officer Grombtchevsky, three years earlier. These individual relationships present a curious contrast to the sour Anglo-Russian political relations prevailing at that time. He also meets Petrovsky, the Russian consul in Kashgar, who professes not to have conflicting interests with the British. Younghusband goes on to Yarkand, which he describes as a land of extremes; "(t)he people, however... are the essence of imperturbable mediocrity" (Younghusband, THOAC 157). Perhaps this severity of judgement can be put down to the memory of his uncle Robert Shaw's unsuccessful attempt to establish a trade connection (in tea export) from India to Yarkand. He consoles himself by visiting the house of Andrew Dalgleish, the intrepid Scotsman who had settled as a trader in Yarkand, and who had been cruelly murdered by an Afghan near the summit of the
Karakoram Pass. By talking to natives, (he had a Chinese interpreter called Liu-san) he learnt that Dalgleish had earned the respect and affection of those around him.

In crossing the Mustagh Pass, he takes issue with the name of the mountain, the ranges of which deeply affect him by their majestic grace and purity: "Why call it the Karakoram? Karakoram means 'black gravel'. and no more inappropriate name could be imagined for a range of the highest snowy peaks in the world" (Younghusband, THOAC 179). 'Mustagh' means 'ice mountain', which he finds less jarring.

During the last part of his journey, he is impressed by the stamina and courage displayed by the Baltis when crossing Himalayan glaciers and passes, the very qualities he had admired in his 1884 expedition. An Epilogue, containing his revised reflections, is to be found at the end of the narrative, added in 1934. Here again is to be seen his spiritual involvement with Nature, previously evinced in Wonders of the Himalaya:

"Upon no occasion were the wonders of the universe more impressively brought before my mind than in the long, lonely marches in the Gobi Desert" (Younghusband, THOAC 219-200).
Younghusband also displays an unenvious awareness of explorers whose careers in Central Asia flowered soon after his own retirement from the field of action. These include Roy Chapman Andrews who led an American scientific expedition into Chinese Turkestan. The mission discovered dinosaur eggs in the region and other weighty evidence to show that the Gobi desert had once been covered with lush vegetation. Other explorers mentioned by Younghusband are Sven Hedin, and Sir Eric Teichman, who had the advantage of using motor transport through Turkestan on some of their later expeditions in the early 20th century.

In the last years of the 19th century, the Trans-Caspian Railway came to be established, connecting the khanates of Samarkand, Khiva, Bokhara and Khokand, together with other oasis towns, to the larger world. This railway eased the difficulties of travel in Central Asia to a large extent, especially for individual travellers. Two American students, named Allen and Sachtleben, who travelled through Russian Central Asia in 1894 on bicycles, broke their self-imposed marathon when confronted by the vast sands of the Kara-kum desert. They rode the Trans-Caspian Railway from Ashkhabad to Samarkand, thus avoiding the hardships
common to most desert travellers. The account of their travels, entitled *Across Asia on a Bicycle* is disappointing, in that it does not offer any fresh perspective on Central Asia. It is natural to assume that their chosen mode of travel would involve an immediate engagement with the land and its peoples, that could not otherwise be had. But their travelogue is to a large extent pedestrian in character. The narrative hinges on Eurocentric notions of civilization, evinced in their revulsion of Kyrgyz traditions of hospitality (their host placed a choice mutton tidbit in their mouths, according to custom), and their impatience at the delays inevitable at most Russian posting-stations. In fact, their description of one such place, with its dirt, noise, confusion, idle tarantasses and the obsequious hospitality offered by the station-master, is reminiscent of the atmosphere of Pushkin’s short story *The Station-Master’s Daughter*. The two travellers also betray a complete lack of sensitivity to the culture of the people amongst whom they are; they derive a childish glee in photographing some of the natives, quite against their inclinations. One picture is of a Sart rescuing his children from “the foreign devils” and their camera (Allen and Sachtleben, *Across Asia on a Bicycle* 123).
Encroachment on Central Asian domains and their culture, with far deeper and harder-hitting consequences, came from European quarters in unexpected ways in the beginning years of the 20th century. Sir Aurel Stein, the Hungarian explorer, was largely responsible for unearthing the richly varied archaeological past of Central Asia, concentrated in various ancient sites of civilization in Chinese Turkestan. His exploits in this region, and the controversies that still rage over his archaeological hauls, have been elaborated in Chapter III. Europe regarded him as the greatest archaeological explorer of the age, who had, incredibly, unearthed Central Asia’s Buddhist past from the sands of oblivion in which they had been buried. The Chinese, to whom this part of Central Asia had been home for centuries, regarded his feats as daylight robbery and to this day are filled with bitterness over their plundered cultural past. Stein’s own work, *On Ancient Central Asian Tracks*, while displaying a clear awareness of other contemporaries in the archaeological arena, takes very little note of the sentiments of the natives in this regard. His main concern was to take back to European institutions as much of Central Asia’s cultural past as he could load on to camels’ backs. His work therefore deals with the finding and preservation and transport of these relics, together with his own conjectures about their origins, spread over three expeditions in the early
decades of the 20th century. Chinese Central Asia is portrayed as
treasure-ground for relic-hunters, an archaeologist's vision of paradise.
Stein's work is an unusual travelogue in this sense. His movements are
mainly from one site of excavation to another, constantly assisted by his
team of diggers and native servants whom he had hired on each
expedition. The narrative focuses single-mindedly on the work at hand,
and the immediate problems thereof. For instance, after his stunning
discovery of the ancient manuscripts at the Tun-huang caves, he at once
engages with the problem of how to acquire them. The deceptions he
perpetrated on the simple priest Wang (the keeper of the caves) are
outlined without the least sense of remorse. Rather, he betrays a feeling of
exultant joy that his plans met with success, a success they seem little to
deserve. On occasion, Stein pauses from his digging to observe the
terrible beauty of the desert, its harshness and desolation, which had been
so graphically described by Marco Polo. Stein quotes the Venetian's
evocation of the Lop desert, with its mirages and evil spirits, but is more
interested in the geographical history of the desert's fringes. His
observation of this land led him to the conclusion that the ancient Su-lo-ho
river once emptied itself into the great Lop Sea, which is since dried up.
One aspect of Stein's movements in Chinese Central Asia is the loneliness that attended them. Except for his chosen team of hired help, he was totally alone with the land he had come to resurrect. Since archaeology was his passion, this absence of human intercourse did not affect him much; besides, the thought of Europe and the sensation his finds would cause there among his well-wishers, was constantly and reassuringly with him at all times. In this context, Stein's expeditions to Central Asia conformed to a pattern of European travel discourse that had been established for well over a century since 1800: travel took a man from his "civilized" home-ground to an unknown land, which he would proceed to explore in various capacities (scientific, religious, cultural, political, economic). His findings, manifesting themselves in the form of personal narratives, official reports and very often, in relics and specimens of the unknown culture, would then be submitted for scrutiny back in Europe. This process led to the interpretation of these lands by Europe. In other words, explorers like Stein "produced" for European consumption a part of the world hitherto unknown to them (Pratt, Imperial Eyes Introduction 5). Central Asia's sand-buried ruins come alive with evidence of the long-lost and ancient civilizations that had once animated them, in Stein's work.
Another work, *On Alexander’s Track to the Indus* (hereafter OATTI) shows Stein’s interest in the geography and history of western Central Asia, apart from his archaeological concerns. This is a personal narrative of his expeditions around the northwest frontiers of India in the early 20th century. The prime motivating factor in undertaking this lonely expedition was one of historical interest. Stein knew that Alexander the Great had travelled in these regions on his march of conquest towards India and inner Central Asia. This had endowed the place, west of the Indus, with “a special human interest” for him (Stein, OATTI, Preface viii). As he follows in Alexander’s tracks through the vales, cliffs, ravines and gorges of the Indus river, he remarks that of all the travels he had ever undertaken for geographical and antiquarian research, this particular expedition was the most powerfully attractive and interesting to him (Stein, OATTI, Preface vii). Considering the range and scale of his forty-odd years of exploration in British service (which took him from westernmost China right through Central Asia, and from the snowy Pamirs down to the coast of the Ikhthyophagoi by the Arabian Sea), this expedition dealt with a relatively smaller area. It confined itself to the route of Alexander’s campaign, through the great Peshawar and Swat
Valleys, along the course of the Swat and Indus rivers, and the Pir-Sar area, where he located the famous Aornos. Aornos was a remote and almost inaccessible mountain fastness in Pir-Sar, which Alexander had conquered. Stein’s account of these discoveries is enhanced by beautiful illustrations, and photographs that he took of various Buddhist shrines in the course of his wanderings. In the preface to the travel-account, also written by the author, is a capsule-history of the geographical area that bound his expedition. He mentions the Aryan conquest of this region in pre-historic times, the Persian empire of Darius, Alexander’s campaign, the great Indo-Scythian Kushan dynasty that replaced the Hellenistic chieftain from Bactria, the decay of the Kushan empire and the White Hun and Turkish domination that succeeded it. The region then saw the fanatic Islamic onslaught of Mohammed of Ghazni. His tyrannical rule gave way later to the more moderate reign of Emperor Babur, despite frequent clashes with the native tribes of Swat. The first half of the nineteenth century saw the rise of Sikh power under Ranjit Singh, but Swat remained unaffected by it. The native tribes there were then under the spiritual leadership of a Swat native called Akhund. Akhund’s grandson had come to power at the time of Stein’s visit to Swat, but he had little hold over this politically turbulent land. With British annexation of the Punjab (as a
consequence of Burnes' travels on the Indus), some measure of peace and political stability came back to the region. Stein counts it his good fortune to have had such excellent relations with the officers in charge of guarding the North-West frontier province. He shows his gratitude in his dedication of this travel-account to the memory of Colonel Sir Harold Deane, who was the first Chief Commissioner of this area.

In a comparison of Stein's account with that of Burnes, it can be seen that both works cover approximately the same geographical area—the course of the Indus, its tributaries and the surrounding mountain regions. But their individual travels were motivated by very different impulses. Burnes' voyage up the Indus was a trail-blazer for the British to follow up, initially with their trade and commerce, and ultimately with political domination. Stein's exploration of these areas were carried out at a later stage, when British control over the North-west frontier was absolute. The political uneasiness and hostility from natives that Burnes had sensed during his journey had totally disappeared. Stein indulges his passion for geographical and historical exploration in a land that now offers him political protection at its various British outposts. Just as his archaeological expeditions to Chinese Central Asia had been inspired by
his patron saint Hiuen-Tsiang, the present journey imbibed some of the historical romance and glamour of a region conquered by Alexander the Great. As he traces the emperor’s route along the Indus, he ‘reconquers’ these regions, which were remote enough to be exotic from a Western point of view. At the pinnacle of this expedition is Stein’s discovery of Aornos, a historical mountain-site in Pir-Sar that had once been conquered by Alexander. Up to the time of his discovery, Aornos had been a dream-like entity, detailed in Arrian’s history of Alexander’s exploits. Once Stein actually found the famous rock structure, he camped with his men for a few days in Pir-Sar to take in its glorious reality. He speaks of his feelings as he moved on to the next stage of his journey: “... I should gladly have remained longer on this classical counterpart of ‘my’ Kashmir alp, so glorious were the views it offered” (Stein, OATTI 156). From the summit of another crag called Mount Ilam, he bids farewell to this land of varied tracts from which “it had been (his) good fortune ‘to lift the Purdah’ ” (Stein, OATTI 170). This quaint personification brings alive for us a craggy and desolate landscape that had been shrouded in myth, legend and history since the time of Alexander.
From this analysis of travel-writing on Central Asia up to the beginning years of the 20th century, it can be seen that admixtures of fact and fiction on Central Asia (Marco Polo) had given place to an emphasis on scientific accuracy in portrayals of the region. In *Imperial Eyes: Travel-Writing and Transculturation*, Marie Louise Pratt addresses the question of how travel and exploration writing "produced the rest of the world for European readerships at particular points in Europe's expansionist trajectory" (Pratt, *Imperial Eyes* 5). Applying this question to travel writing on Central Asia, it can be seen that this land was regarded throughout the duration of the Great Game as a site of "informal empire", with British, Russia and various European countries practising a sort of "unofficial imperialism" (CCTW 53). The emphasis on scientific knowledge of the non-European world resulted in vast collections of scientific data, specimen plants and animals and archaeological relics from these countries, including Central Asia. Travel-writing on Central Asian lands became more and more secular, with many areas of this region being "reinvented" by the European traveller for his own perception of his country's interests: for instance, the exploratory reports submitted by Alexander Burnes to the British Government; Stein's *Serindia*, which was a detailed report of his explorations in Central Asia and western
China. Different parts of Central Asia which were hitherto unknown to
Europe, now became "exploitable wilderness(es)" (CCTW 58), thus
making imperialism inextricable from travel-writing on this land.

With Europe's scientific and technological advancement came
supposed intellectual superiority - and the urge to dominate the primitive
savages of the Central Asian wilds. Thus, science itself (and to a lesser
degree, religion) became 'imperialistic' in its outlook (CCTW 61); nowhere is this tendency more noticeable than in the establishment of the
Royal Geographical Society in 1830, and the Society's support to the
exploration of Central Asia by the British and other Europeans. As a
result of science and religion being harnessed to the Imperial cause,
different kinds of travel-writing on Central Asia emerged in the 19th
century - missionary publications (eg. Joseph Wolff's mission to Bokhara
in 1843), scientific journals (Stein's Serindia, all the Royal Geographical
Society publications), economic and political reports (Burnes' Travels in
Bokhara, Vambery's and Burnaby's works) and so on. These offshoots
of the genre of travel-writing came to reflect the different areas of life in
which Imperialism manifested itself in Central Asia.
Within the travel-account itself, illustrations and sketches gave way to photographs by the 20th century. For instance, the work of Sachtleben, and more importantly Stein, are rich in both detailed and panoramic views of Central Asia’s topography. Nineteenth century Western interest in Central Asia, as deduced from travel-writing of that time, is a classic example of Edward Said’s definition of Orientalism -- “interpreting the East in order to dominate it” (CCTW 63). Especially towards the middle and end of the 19th century, scientific exploration of Central Asia by Europeans was almost always inevitably followed by annexation of the particular region, mainly by the British and the Russians, who were chief players in the Game. Because of their ‘superior’ position, European travellers were privileged to represent Central Asia only as they saw it. [Even Mohan Lal, a native of Kashmir, was a tool in the hands of the British, and his travel-account reflects British interests in the Great Game to a large extent.] Native perceptions of Central Asia did not exist for Europe because they were not “written.”
The Russian Revolution which began in 1917 spread like wildfire to the remotest regions of the Tsar's former empire in Central Asia. The coming of the Bolsheviks to Central Asia greatly strengthened Russia's position in the Great Game of the early 20th century. The British were having their own problems holding the reins of a growingly restive population in India, and their fears of Russian designs on their prize colony only grew. As the Red colour of Bolshevism spread over Central Asia, the various war-like natives of this land reacted with anger and rebellion. The White Uprising of counter-revolutionary forces (who wished to reinstate the Tsarist regime) was the most prominent and violent protest against the Bolsheviks in 1918. The Whites were supported in their cause intermittently by the basmachi (see Chapter IV) and by the British. Both these factions wanted to witness the downfall of the Reds for different reasons: the basmachi saw the Reds as destroyers of their religion, Islam; the British feared that the Reds would manage to woo the native population of India and stimulate them to rebellion. [Indeed, their fears were far from unrealistic. Lenin's dealings with Indian revolutionaries have been outlined in Chapter IV.]
Tashkent had become the newly-declared capital of the Bolsheviks. It was also home to Paul Nazaroff, the ringleader of a plot to overthrow Bolshevik rule in Central Asia in 1918. Nazaroff had close connections with the British, who he hoped would come to the aid of the Whites once their rebellion took off. He was known to have supplied with funds Colonel F.M. Bailey, a British intelligence officer who had been sent to Russian Turkestan to report in secret on the Bolsheviks’ movements. Being the most wanted man in Tashkent in 1918, Nazaroff was hunted by the Cheka (Lenin’s secret police) through Central Asia. His work describes his travels and travails during that year in his effort to get to Kashgar in Chinese Turkestan, where there remained a Russian consulate. When he finally made it to Kashgar, all Russian (Tsarist) diplomatic missions in China had been dissolved, and Nazaroff was forced to move on. He somehow managed to reach British India, where he had friends, who helped him get away to England. Malcolm Burr, the translator of his two works, knew Nazaroff in South Africa, where the author worked for a while as a mining engineer. Nazaroff died in exile, without ever having

6. He is also called Pavel Stepanovich Nazaroff by some of those who knew him.
once seen his wife or beloved home again. His two travel-accounts, born of his traumatic circumstances, are unique narratives in different ways.

The first, *Hunted through Central Asia* (hereafter HTCA) is the narrative of the man to whom circumstances suddenly rendered his own homeland inimical to him. While being very circumspect about his own role in the White conspiracy, he makes no secret of his dislike and contempt for the Reds and their goings-on. When for a brief while the Whites held Tashkent, Nazaroff describes a man called Pashko who had killed thousands, now in the hands of the Whites. Disgusted at his whining in terror and begging for mercy, Nazaroff remarks: “This surprising cowardice, the baseness and absence of dignity, is characteristic of all these active revolutionaries and leaders. They are miserable scoundrels, and do not even know how to die decently” (HTCA 32).

Before his troubles began, Nazaroff, born in Orenburg in the Urals of pure Russian stock of Old Believers, had earned a doctoral degree in Zoogeography at Moscow University. He was also trained as a mining engineer. Malcolm Burr describes his friend Nazaroff as a geologist, mineralogist, chemist, ornithologist and skillful taxidermist, sportsman, firearm expert and archaeologist all in one (Nazaroff, HTCA, Preface xii).
Nor was this description an extravagant claim. Nazaroff had travelled widely in the Caucasus and Urals before settling in Tashkent. His discoveries in mineral exploration of Turkestan revealed a wealth of copper, silver, gold, coal and oil. In Tashkent itself, he was a recognized authority on horticulture, having introduced many West European fruits and flowers with success in Turkestan, also the groundnut.

Though Nazaroff’s travel-accounts are both occasioned by his situation as a hunted man, he displays a remarkable ability to transcend his impossible circumstances. He separates the personal from the scientific, the natural realm of the latter helping to mitigate the hideous reality of the former. Yet his works are not in the least escapist. In both *Hunted through Central Asia* and in *Moved On!* he never once loses sight of the immediate peril of his situation. But even in extremis, his capacious mind could engage in an intelligent and passionate interest in man and Nature alike. As the Cheka launched a massive man-hunt for him, Nazaroff hid from his enemies among the Sarts and the Kyrgyz in Turkestan who offered him sympathy and shelter. Hiding in their homes, Nazaroff had a unique vantage position from which to observe the ways of life of these Central Asiatic peoples, of which most Europeans had only
the vaguest stereotypical notions. The Sarts are distinguished from the Kyrgyz in that they live in settled populations, whereas the Kyrgyz wander in nomadic groups. Both, however, are Muslim tribes, and no European had ever had the opportunity to glimpse their domestic life at such close quarters. In the Turgai steppe, Nazaroff observes first-hand a Kyrgyz wedding, at which a twenty two year-old girl, her first husband having died, was being married, according to custom, to the dead man’s nine year-old brother. The poor girl, he says, was sobbing bitterly, while the little boy, happily played in his best clothes (Nazaroff, HTCA 85).

Despite being subject to a rooted clan system, Kyrgyz women were important members of their community. Nazaroff gives an instance of this in his description of a woman called Kurban Djan Datkha, “the Empress of the Alai” who led her people to resist the Russian General Skobeleff’s advance. Her leadership qualities so impressed Tsar Nicholas II that he sent her a diamond necklace as a gift. Nazaroff also mentions a Turkoman woman who led her tribe in a prolonged resistance to the Bolsheviks. Considering his remarkable ability to relate to people of widely varied backgrounds, it is not surprising that the Sarts and Kyrgyz who hid him in their homes were willing to risk their lives for him. At one time, the Sart
Akbar, in whose home he was hidden, found out at the marketplace that the Reds were hot on Nazaroff 's trail. He returned at once and walled up Nazaroff with brick and mud since there was nowhere else for him to hide. Of this ordinarily claustrophobic experience, Nazaroff wryly comments: "...Shut off by the wall as of a tomb from the New world of the disciples of Karl Marx. I felt absolutely calm and at peace in my heart" (HTCA 74). During his stay in Akbar’s house, he observed that women had no problem sharing a husband, but that they would not tolerate any favouritism on the husband’s part. He himself was witness to many a stormy scene in Akbar’s household. Things reached such a pass that Nazaroff had to leave the haven of Akbar’s home and make the wide open forest spaces of Turkestan his home for the times ahead. Despite his isolation in hiding, Nazaroff makes companions of the sun and rain, the glades and orchards, grass and herbs, birds and animals, in all of which he had a passionate interest. When he first escaped from Tashkent, he had “little thought I was setting forth on a long and distant odyssey that would take me right across Central Asia, to the mysterious land of Tibet, over the Himalayas into the plains of Hindustan” (Nazaroff, HTCA 35). He had thought, as most émigrés did, that he would soon be able to return to a liberated Turkestan. As another well-known émigré writer Vladimir
Nabokov put it, they all expected to return to a “remorseful, hospitable and racemosa-blooming Russia” (Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* 255). But we know that Nazaroff never again set eyes on his motherland, and the only consolation he had was to observe the beauties of Nature around him. It is amazing that a man on the run, from enemies who knew no mercy, could have given so much of his attention to his natural surroundings. Nazaroff bestows the calm and interested gaze of a true naturalist on whatever he sees. His mind is almost totally free from self-pity and fear, even though he had several narrow escapes. In one such incident, he was attempting to escape from a Red guard post in the disguise of a ‘comrade’, at the head of a caravan of camels carrying bee-hives. As the guards came closer to inspect him, he warned them sharply to keep away from the bees. His informed knowledge about the ways of several different kinds of insects always includes precise taxonomical information and plenty of their natural history. One night as he slept in a ruined building, he was tormented by the stings of great blackbugs. Nazaroff identifies them as *Reduvius fedschenkianus*, *Oshanin*, and describes how the Khans of Turkestan used them to torture criminals with. Nasrullah, the Emir of Bokhara, threw two British officers Colonel Stoddart and Captain Conolly into a pit crawling
with these vermin, where they suffered for a long time before being pulled out and executed in 1842.

Nazaroff's deep knowledge of the plants and herbs of Turkestan helped him survive throughout that terrible time before he could reach Kashgar. Here is Central Asia portrayed as a mysterious but sheltering place for those who knew of its secrets. Nazaroff's perception of the wilds of Central Asia contrasts sharply with that of most Europeans who found themselves in this land. The very natives who were repulsively 'uncivilized' in the eyes of the white men, made him welcome in their humble homes and shared their meagre food with him. The varied climate of Turkestan, together with its even more varied topography, helped Nazaroff in his hiding, rather than hindering his escape. His intimate knowledge of both helps him find the best hiding-places: near springs, the water of which was healing, in dark glades with fruit-orchards that nobody even suspected of existing, anywhere in Turkestan. He makes some very interesting observations on the fruit forests of Turkestan, the origin of which is unknown. Walnut, pistachio and almonds, once endemic here, were decimated by camels and metal-workers who needed wood. Nazaroff noted that these trees now grow only where camels cannot reach
them. His knowledge of medicinal plants, roots and herbs once nearly
gave him away. He cured a native’s cough and running sore, and word
spread of the ‘miracle’ he had performed. Soon more people turned up,
and it became dangerous for him to stay there any longer.

Nazaroff was also familiar with the way most natives (who could
not afford expensive Chinese tea) made different teas: from the dried
skins of peaches, from dried yellow-briar flowers, blue sage and balm. He
himself drank a native tea made from Sisimia loesli, a plant which grew in
abundance in forest clearings and glades. His intimate knowledge of the
natural resources of Turkestan led him to the realization that the Bolshevik
Revolution had only done irreparable harm to this region.

In Pishpek (the old name of Bishkek, capital of Kyrgyzstan), he
observes the effects of Communism on this land:

“'The dictatorship of the Proletariat had placed its heavy hand on
this remote but wealthy province, where formerly... everyone had
been his own landlord, every townsman had his own house and
garden, every countryman his own field and farm, where before the
revolution a pood of wheat had cost ten kopecks, where they used
honey to grease the wheels of the peasants’ carts .... This was a land where the Kirghiz had their herds of tens of thousands of horses and flocks of hundreds of thousands of sheep, where it is literally true that beggars went on horseback.... to beg for alms” (Nazaroff, HTCA 154).

Nazaroff sees this once fertile and bounteous land now confiscated by the Bolsheviks, and the disastrous effects of their ignorant handling of it. In a land where the native Kyrgyz had once raised millions of horses, cattle and sheep, and different kinds of fruit and crops, only corn could now be grown, with no transport available to take it to other places. In the course of his wanderings, Nazaroff finds evidence of the Bolshevik scourge in other aspects of life as well; on the road to Semirechie, he comes across a terracota idol in a cave, which had been smashed by some Russians for the gold coins in it. They then proceeded to melt the ancient coins and got drunk on the money. It saddens Nazaroff to see these valuable relics of ancient cultures of Turkestan being destroyed by ignorance and drunken stupidity.
Horses, so integral a part of life in Turkestan, find an important
place in the narrative. Nazaroff's knowledge of horses was exceptional,
especially with reference to the breeds native to Central Asia, such as
Karabair, Karashar, Kyrgyz, Semirechie breed, the Turcoman horse, the
steppe horse and wild horses. He points out the outstanding qualities of
these horses, especially the endurance capacity of the steppe horse. He
notes that these horses were instrumental in the conquests carried out by
legendary military leaders such as Genghiz Khan and Tamerlane
(Nazaroff, HTCA 288). In his own experience, the perils he faced (in the
shape of a native bridge built without a single nail, or scrap of metal over a
yawning abyss, or when it was so dark that visibility was nil) were
rendered less dangerous by the intelligent behaviour of his native horse.

In a place called Tokmak, Nazaroff finds, curiously enough, that the
Bolshevik revolution had not wrought any profound changes here. This
was mainly because all the Soviet officials were local men, who were not
inclined towards Communism, and made an outward semblance of
political conformity in order to save their town from the ravages of the
Bolsheviks. Nazaroff takes advantage of this comparatively liberal
atmosphere to purchase an old rifle. The man who sells it to him also
treats him to an ill-tempered outburst regarding the depredations of the Soviets on Russia, but Nazaroff is too wary to be drawn into such a trap, if it was one. He is rather amused when the irascible shopkeeper invites him to “Look at the damned mug of that blasted Jew!”, meaning Trotsky (Nazaroff, HTCA 165). As he nears the Chinese border, the unhappy destruction of traditional Russian institutions and culture by the Revolution is to be seen in a particular incident: a Kyrgyz who had given shelter to Nazaroff for the night asks about Tsar Nicholas, not knowing that he and his entire family had been killed. On hearing the news, the old man broke down and wept. The very peasants who were now supposedly liberated from the tyranny of their Imperial master, now wept “for the tragic death of their White Pasha, as the Tsar was known throughout Central Asia” (Nazaroff, HTCA 286).

Two of his last chapters, entitled “Desolation” and “Despair”, describe his difficult journey to the Chinese border, where he planned to somehow get across to Kashgar. But his feelings, echoed in the titles, do not come in the way of his observation of some of the most incredible things in Turkestan. He mentions the “Uzun Kulak” (the Long Ear) of the Kara Kyrgyz, a method by which they transmit messages faster than any
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telegraph (Nazaroff, HTCA 277). He describes in detail how Turkic
women use the lethal poison of the Aconite plant in Semirechie to get rid
of unwanted husbands: they make an infusion of the poisonous root and
soak the victim's shirt in it. Later, when worn after a bath, the skin
absorbs the poison through open pores, and in two or three months the
man sickens and dies (Nazaroff, HTCA 277). He speaks of the marmot, a
rodent native to the Tian Shan mountain region, which when cornered,
sheds tears and wipes them with its fore-paws! (Nazaroff, HTCA 249).
Observing a woman who was delousing her husband's shirt and eating the
vermin thereof, he refers us to the accuracy of Herodotus, who wrote so
many centuries ago of "the Scythians who eat lice" (Nazaroff, HTCA
243-244).

Nazaroff's trials only worsened as the Chinese authorities deported
him back into Soviet territory upon his reaching the border. Undeterred by
this unexpected setback, he made a perilous illegal crossing past the
Chinese border into Kashgar, and rested for a few days at the Russian
consulate where he had friends. But this consulate was soon forced to
close, and Nazaroff's expulsion was ordered. But he managed to spend a
precarious four years in Kashgar, doing all sorts of menial jobs, like many other displaced Tsarists in Turkestan.

A unique picture of Turkestan emerges from his narrative, mainly because Nazaroff views the country around him not with the feverish glance of a hunted creature, but with the calm and collected gaze of a truly educated human being. He observed not only details of natural life around him, but also directed a keen eye on the various Asiatic peoples who sheltered him and helped him in his flight. His observations are truly sensitive in a contrapuntal sense: "... a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which... the dominating discourse acts" (Said, Culture and Imperialism 51). Nazaroff’s work displays an acute consciousness of the significant features of the metropolitan culture Bolshevism, and its impact on the peripheral cultural entities that it sought to overcome. While his narrative is characterized by, indeed occasioned by, a deep ideological hatred for the dominant culture of Bolshevism, it is by no means one-sided. His attitude transcends way above the Russians’ general contempt and intolerance of Asiatic peoples, who were struggling in a desperate bid to protect their individual identities from the onslaught of Communism. For
instance, his observations on the political atmosphere in Tokmak show that
the natives of this place had sensed the lack of ideological convictions in
their Communist overlords. He is very touched by the way the Sarts
simply accepted him as one of themselves; he knew they were fully aware
of the appalling risks they were running by sheltering a man who was
wanted by the KGB. He noticed that the Sart women who were always
veiled from strangers, were completely at ease with him; one of them gave
him a blanket at night which was her dowry.

Nazaroff’s consciousness of the friction caused by Russia’s
Europeanized values seeping into Central Asia is apparent in the narrative.
Describing the different parts of a native Sart woman’s dress, he also
discusses their social significance: “For a Sart woman to appear in the
streets without parandja and chimbet would be the greatest disgrace,
equivalent to admitting herself to be a lost creature...” (Nazaroff, HTCA
50). He feels that the business of unveiling native women, mistakenly
believed by Europeans to be the first step towards emancipation, is much
more problematic than is imagined. Such inroads into their personal
culture, he argues, have a deep and profound psychological impact on the
Sarts. For instance, when the Bolsheviks recruited Communists among the
Sart women to preach the emancipation of their own kind. Beginning with unveiling the face, the Sart community saw this as a gross insult to their culture. They showed their anger and resentment by slitting all the emancipated women’s throats (Nazaroff, HTCA 51). He also observes, in the same context, that a Sart woman wearing her apparently cumbersome native costume feels herself as free and easy as her European counterpart in a mask at carnival time (Nazaroff, HTCA 51).

Nazaroff’s work is a mine of information of the most fascinating aspects of some of the little-known natural wonders of Turkestan. While noting their differences from their European counterparts, he observes that perhaps it is just as well that a good deal of the natural wealth of Central Asia is so difficult to access, since this prevented the Communists from plundering it all. His closing remarks in chapter nine encapsulate the history of Central Asia as a periphery of the metropolitan Russia: in colonising Central Asia, the Tsarist Government had populated this rich and remarkable land with the refuse of its own society – drunkards, beggars, criminals and such like. (This treatment of Central Asia as a land of exile had also been observed by Burnaby.) An even more deplorable state of affairs soon came about when the Socialist Government came to
power. They at once took over the fertile and beautiful lands of Turkestan and turned them into unendingly monotonous kolkhoz (collective) farms, for a common good that was dubious to all but themselves. According to Nazaroff, the Socialist peasants and workers knew “how to do only one thing, to rob and ruin this rich and beautiful country” (Nazaroff, HTCA 127). Everywhere around him, he sees the withering and blighting effect of the mistakes made in the name of Communism — lush green pasturelands left bare and deserted, beggars who were formerly rich landowners, whose properties had been “socialized” from them for collective farming.

In the post-colonial context, Nazaroff’s works show that he was way ahead of his times. Throughout his enforced journey, he was keenly aware of an irony that dogged his trail — Communism, far from being the herald of freedom from the tyranny of empire, was in fact a grotesque continuation of it. He realises that the old order had seemed to fit in better in the consciousness of these simple peasants and nomads, in whose cause the entire Bolshevik revolution had apparently been enacted. During the Tsarist regime, the peoples of Turkestan had been left much to themselves in comparative peace and their lands were only official protectorates of the
Tsar. Now Communism presented itself as a new form of colonialism, in which not only the economic wealth of Central Asia was mortgaged, but social and cultural structures were forcibly reconfigured as well.

Nazaroff’s *Moved On!* is chronologically and thematically a sequel to his earlier work, and presents a calmer and even more contemplative prospect. The awful suspense, the blood-chilling tension of the chase, and the hairbreadth escapes which are described in *Hunted through Central Asia* are absent here. Yet it must be said that nowhere in either narrative does the author seek to dramatize the situation, or himself. He tells us his experiences simply as one human being to another, showing the utmost grace and dignity even under such traumatic circumstances. The narrative of *Moved On!* (hereafter MO) overlaps in time that of the earlier work. Thus his experiences in Kashgar, which place he reached at the end of his flight across Central Asia, are detailed here, over a span of four years. Unfortunately for Nazaroff, the Chinese Government in Kashgar recognized the authority of the Bolsheviks and a Soviet Consulate was soon opened in the city. Nazaroff perforce was moved on. It is then that he began his epic journey through Yarkand and Sinkiang, through the Kun Lun and Karakoram ranges, over the Roof of the World, Ladakh, Western
Tibet, right down to Kashmir, where he had British friends. Malcolm Burr
has likened his travels to those of the legendary Marco Polo. This
comparison hardly seems like an exaggeration, considering that Nazaroff
used the same means of travel as the great Venetian, and encountered
much the same difficulties on the route. Kashgar is the first place in
Chinese Turkestan where Nazaroff finds sanctuary from the bloodthirsty
Cheka. The first four chapters dwell mainly on the city of Kashgar, which
he describes memorably as "the land of lost civilisation," with "... the
strange medieval life of bygone days, a population crystallized in all
details of its daily existence through the centuries..." (Nazaroff, MO 13-
15).

With that characteristic absence of any bitterness over his hard lot,
Nazaroff proceeds to examine life in Kashgar in all its varied aspects. In
this, he combines the perceptions of a historian, botanist, mining engineer,
hunter and ethnologist all in one, as evinced in his earlier work.
Disclaiming all the usual reasons for travel to Central Asian towns like
Kashgar, such as trade, or scientific exploration, he remarks:
“There stood I upon the threshold, in the city of Kashgar, not as a traveller, not as a scientific explorer or mere tourist, but as a poor devil of a refugee, driven out of the socialist paradise of the Bolsheviks, having lost my fatherland, my family, my home, my property, left without a farthing” (Nazaroff, MO 19).

This is almost the only instance in both his narratives, where he speaks of his own pitiful personal circumstances. But as he had done in Russian Turkestan, he puts aside his troubles and actively engages himself in savouring life in a city that had always fascinated him from his school days. Nazaroff speaks of Kashgar’s ancient history, which is closely associated with some of the earliest civilisations of mankind, the Aryans; its rich culture, and its importance in 19th century scientific exploration. He mentions the names of Prejevalsky, Sven Hedin, Sir Aurel Stein and Von Le Coq, all of whom had at one time or another visited Kashgar in the course of their travels. Nazaroff had a particular reason for being happy in Kashgar despite all his troubles. This was because he felt himself to be within the radius of Srinagar, the capital of Kashmir, which to him was “... the land of poetry, the romantic threshold of distant India” (Nazaroff, MO 20). India, itself a country with some of the most ancient cultures and
civilisations of mankind, fascinated Nazaroff's scholarly mind. Here too he had British friends among whom he would find support and succour.

The neighbourhoods of Kashgar, with their flora and fauna, people and buildings remind him of the Ferghana region in Russian Turkestan. In observing the dress, appearance and habits of Kashgari men and women, he notes how different were the Sarts here when compared to the Sarts he had lived with in Russian Turkestan. The Kashgari Sart women wore brighter colours and did not veil their faces; the Chinese women, traditionally segregated, were as free as the Sart women in practice. The ass, rather than the horse, was the universal beast of burden. He also speaks of the natives' fondness for flowers and pigeons, both of which are found in plenty in Kashgar. The dryness of Kashgar's climate, Nazaroff discovers, has its joys and problems. On the one hand, the aridity had preserved the remains of many ancient civilisations, including metalware, earthenware, entire libraries of books and manuscripts, which had been buried by shifting sands, and were later found by Stein's excavations. On the other hand, the immediate problem was the lack of proper irrigation and drinking water. The need for water was so acute that Kashgar had, as in bygone days, recourse to the Mullahs' prayers for rain.
Nazaroff was able to observe this curious faith practice, the effects of which had been also witnessed by Marco Polo. In Nazaroff's perception of various aspects of Kashgari culture, there is no trace of the European's condescending superiority. Nor does he contemptuously dismiss Oriental epistemology.

His second chapter is infused with a great deal of Kashgar's history prior to the Russian Revolution. Speaking of the violent entry made by the Bolsheviks into Kashgar, he echoes the attitude of the Chinese to the Red soldiers: they "...were human only in external appearance, but within had the hearts of wild beasts" (Nazaroff, MO 44). This attitude on the part of the Chinese is ironical, considering the atrocious cruelties of which seemingly refined and cultivated Chinese are capable of, as testified to by Nazaroff: a Chinese acquaintance of his, a good-humoured and kindly man to all appearance, gave his Sart cook fifteen hundred lashes for a small offence. In recounting this episode, Nazaroff wonders whether it is not impossible for a European to understand the workings of a Chinese mind (Nazaroff, MO 45).
With the trained mind of an ethnologist, Nazaroff draws various distinctions among the natives of Kashgar, such as the Sarts, Chinese Sarts, Tadjiks, Uigurs, Turki and Mongols. These different peoples have mixed in Kashgar over the centuries, and Nazaroff traces their individual origins painstakingly in his work. He outlines the history of the Turanians, who later became well-known as the Hun conquerors of Europe. The vast cultural abyss that separated Europe from Central Asia, even in those ancient and comparatively simple days, is captured by Nazaroff in a single detail of Turkic daily life:

“To the present day there are descendants of the Huns in Europe, the Kalmucks or Djungari, mongolized Turks, whose favourite dainty is a piece of tender meat cooked under the saddle on a horse’s back, where it gets impregnated with the animal’s perspiration and ‘done to a turn’” (Nazaroff, MO 50).

European historians describe the aversion felt by Western Europeans for this culinary practice.
During his stay in Kashgar, Nazaroff comes upon many relics of the city's ancient past, and tries to find out more about them from the local people. His attempts are futile since the locals have no memory of their own past: "They have no history. Islam, crystallizing their understanding, has made them lethargic. They have only the petty interests of a dwarfed mentality" (Nazaroff, MO 51). Nazaroff takes a tolerant view of this ignorance, since he found that the native Sarts had at least refrained from destroying the relics, which were monuments to a remote antiquity. Nazaroff displays a remarkably clear understanding of the roles played by Aurel Stein, Von Le Coq and others in the archaeological resurrection of Central Asia’s long-lost ancient civilisations. He does not share in a latter 20th century view of this cultural ‘looting’ of Central Asia by Europeans, most forcefully voiced by Basil Davidson in his work *Turkestan Alive*. As a Russian who was deeply inward with many Asiatic cultures, and who knew the land so well, he suggests that many more archaeological relics and secrets still remain in the sands, waiting to be excavated (Nazaroff, MO 54). He goes on to discuss the geological factors that have turned a major part of Central Asia into a waterless expanse of desert and shifting sands. Like Aurel Stein who also wrote about desiccation in Asia as a result of human
activity, Nazaroff thinks that the arid infertility in some parts of Central Asia is not so much due to the processes of Nature. He too attributes it to the activities of man and their impact on this region: war, internecine struggles, raids, forays and invasion by savage hordes cut the water supplies of settled civilisations in towns and cities, leading to their destruction and ruin (Nazaroff, MO 57). He also takes issue with one Dr. Emil Trinkler, who in his work The Storm-Swept Roof of Asia, voices a belief that even three thousand years ago, the now barren Taklamakan desert was ‘wooded and watered’ (qtd. in Nazaroff, MO 58) and had gradually dried up over the years. Nazaroff goes on to give us historical evidence to prove that Dr. Trinkler’s theory of the processes of Nature in this region is quite baseless: right from its Sumerian beginnings, to the Scythians, Persians, the invasion of Alexander the Great, the Arab conquest, the coming of Genghiz Khan and his Mongol hordes, Tamerlane, internecine struggles, the Chinese takeover, subsequent rebellions, the tyrannical Yakub Bek who ruled Central Asia from 1865 to 1876 and his dealings with British power, and his death — Nazaroff demonstrates the impact of human activity in Central Asia on its topography. His retelling of the historical events of Central Asia’s dim past is delightfully cast in the form of little connected anecdotes; one such recalls his youth in Tashkent,
where he often used to see a Sart named Bek Kuli Bek who was a cotton merchant. Nazaroff knew that he was the son of the tyrant Yakub Bek, who had died in 1876:

“In this modest and silent Sart, ... no one would have recognised His Highness the Heir to the throne of Kashgar who, in his day, did not recoil from any brutality, from the pillage and ravaging of an entire province and the treacherous, cold-blooded murder of his own blood-brother.”

When later in the 1890’s, Nazaroff asked him whether he was not going to take advantage of the political ferment in Kashgar then going on, “the former ruler of Kashgar” modestly lowered his eyes and murmured that his time had passed (Nazaroff, MO 71). This little vignette of history, bound up with Nazaroff’s own personal past, shows his peculiarly Russian talent for story-telling.

Nazaroff’s superior understanding of the varied cultures of Central Asia is to be seen in a beautiful heart-warming description of life in Kashgar’s bazaars. He observes that the bazaar is not just a market place
for groceries and provisions, but the hub and centre of social life; and also the curious absence of class and caste distinctions among the common people who throng the bazaar, as seen from the practice of sharing a tobacco hookah mouthpiece amongst a hundred different users, without wiping it. He also realizes that bazaar gossip is a very fair estimate of public opinion on any given matter. He goes on to speak of goods being measured in Kashgar by donkey-load; of narcotics having precedence over alcohol in this predominantly Muslim land; and of the native Kashgari punishment for thieves, of which he witnessed gruesome evidence in the bundles of amputated arms and feet nailed to the city gates, with their owners chained to a wall with them. This terrible penalty calls to mind the customary punishment in Khiva for offenders: the Khan would order their eyes to be gouged out, or have them beheaded. [The Hungarian scholar Vambery was witness to both these horrors when he visited Khiva in 1864.]

Nazaroff, at best, has a rather low opinion of the Chinese in general. This is in strange contrast to his sympathetic understanding of other Asiatics. Perhaps his feelings were influenced by his knowledge of Kashgar's recent history, in which all kinds of atrocities were perpetrated
by the Chinese in the name of dispensing justice. These horrors were to a large extent the brainchild of one General Ma, a political tyrant who terrorized Kashgar for many years in the 19th century. His life and activities have been described in detail by C.P. Skrine in his work *Chinese Central Asia*. Nazaroff, himself nearly a victim of the bloodthirsty Bolsheviks, shows his horror at the appalling cruelties of the monstrous Ma. Nazaroff goes on to give us quite an entertaining picture of Chinese dinner parties, at which it was a common occurrence for a guest to be poisoned to death, or summarily arrested and thrown into prison, or even shot point-blank in cold blood. From his descriptions, it is evident that a Chinese dinner party was in stark contrast to the stately Kashgari dastarkhans (holiday feast tables); it was an arena for personal vendettas, petty quarrels, political intrigues, and even love affairs to play themselves out.

When Nazaroff’s isolated condition as a fugitive from relentless enemies becomes unbearable, he finds some solace in the few British and

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7. He was Consul-General at Kashgar from 1922, and Nazaroff’s close friend. Skrine has provided photographs of Kashgar for *Moved On!*
Russian friends he had at the Consulates. Through contact with them, he gained access to books, newspapers, reviews and Reuters telegrams which served him as "an 'eye into Europe' from another world" (Nazaroff, MO 86). Colonel Etherton (British Consul-General) and Mr. Fitzmaurice (Vice-Consul) who had befriended Nazaroff, left Kashgar in the summer of 1922, and were replaced by C.P. Skrine and Mr. Harding. Nazaroff, as were the natives of Kashgar, was very attracted by the charm and tact shown by Mrs. Skrine; the time he spent with the couple helped to relieve the monotony of his existence as a refugee in Kashgar. The Skrines were a resourceful family: they got up innumerable tamashas for the children of the Europeans living in Kashgar and devised all kinds of gifts for them. Mrs. Skrine's life in Kashgar is in contrast to that of Lady Macartney, wife of Sir George Macartney, who was British representative in Kashgar from 1890-1918. She has set out her unhappy experience of Kashgar in her memoir *An English Lady in Chinese Turkestan*.

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8. A native term for all kinds of entertainment, whether public or private, individual or collective.
The interest Nazaroff had displayed in the natural wealth of Russian Turkestan is also directed at the natural history of Kashgar. The various birds, beasts and plants that he comes across are described with a fine eye for scientific detail, a style characteristic of the man. Geese, ducks, snipe, crows, sheldrake, starlings, great white herons, sparrows, water rails, wrens, wagtails, wall-creeperers, kingfishers, hoopoes, kites, grosbeaks, golden orioles, quail, chukar — the list is endless. He points out the curiously lovable nature of the Asiatic hedgehog, which behaves as if man were its natural protector, in complete contrast to its surly European counterpart; he speaks of the local ibex and gazelles that were confirmed tobacco addicts and of a young snow leopard that he played games with. As he had done in the forests of Russian Turkestan, Nazaroff makes friends of these wild creatures as if it were the most natural thing to do. For someone who had a marked taste for and skill in hunting, it was remarkable that he could establish anything like trust with so many wild animals.

His botanical knowledge of the flora of Kashgar is truly amazing. The ‘genesta’ plant leads him to the argument that many such words of Asiatic origin have found their way into European languages and culture;
he gives the examples of the words ‘hurrah’ which was originally a Turkic war cry, and ‘hurricane’. He observes that the flax-yielding ‘kendyr’ plant tolerates severe frost up to -30°C, and the salt-resistant capacity of the ‘tugrak’ tree. In every instance, he gives the Latin nomenclature of every species, and he does not neglect to discuss the native lore which indicates the local uses of particular plants. As for opium, he has marked views on the subject of smoking it:

“I do not think there is any other subject in which the ignorance of the inner life and psychology of the Chinese on the part of Europeans is shown up more glaringly than in the clumsy and spontaneous interference of the peoples of the West in their struggle with a custom so profoundly rooted in the people of China from time immemorial as the smoking of opium. Never has the hypocrisy of Europe and America been more luminously exposed than when they saw this mote in the eye of their Chinese neighbour, but were blind to the beams in their own” (Nazaroff, MO 101).

In such instances does Nazaroff show his awareness of the irrelevance and futility of applying Western codes of conduct to the
Orient. In Kashgar, while both Chinese and other authorities have officially forbidden the trade in opium, he finds it flourishing in the black market.

During his days at Kashgar, Nazaroff was able to make two excursions under the official protection of Skrine; one was to the foothills of Kungur and Chakrash, the other to Maral Bashi, the Yarkand river and the edge of the Taklamakan. These excursions gave him an opportunity to observe the places beyond Kashgar which were otherwise inaccessible to him, considering his precarious position. In these places, he observes the peculiar desert-forests which have poplars, tamarisks and willows whose roots reach above one’s head, sand hummocks and so on. His stay at the Yarkand-darya was especially delightful and valuable to him since he was actually in the place so often described by his countryman Prejevalsky. When he was getting ready to go back to Kashgar, there is an unsettling incident in which Nazaroff’s horse took fright in crossing a bridge, with himself being thrown from the saddle and nearly drowned. Thematically this mishap is a precursor to the second part of his narrative in which his relative safety in Kashgar comes to an abrupt end, and he is forced to move on. As he was recovering from his accident, Nazaroff became
aware that the Chinese Government was “hand and glove with the Soviets”, and that his personal safety would be short-lived if he remained in Kashgar any longer (Nazaroff, MO 115). Urged by his friends to make for India over the Karakorams, he too finds it a fascinating proposition: “From boyhood the overland route to India had always exercised for me an irresistible attraction, especially through the mysterious regions of Central Asia” (Nazaroff, MO 115). Regarding the much-used western route to India (through Persia or Afghanistan) Nazaroff remarks: “The historical road of the conquerors ... has by now become banal. It can be done in a motor-car” (Nazaroff, MO 115). His sentiments echo those of a later traveller to Central Asia, K.P.S. Menon, who was Indian Ambassador to Soviet Russia in the 1960’s. The route chosen by Nazaroff, which lies east of the Hindu Kush and the Pamirs, was little known, and had not changed much over the centuries. This route held a special appeal for him due to other reasons. Long before 860 A.D. (the year of the foundation of the Russian state) the people of Russia were in contact with the inhabitants of Central Asia and through them with distant India. This relationship between Russia and India through the lands of Central Asia has been immortalized in ancient Russian folk poetry, fables and fairy tales, with allusions to the wanderings of Russian heroes such as the
Tsarevich Ivan, who makes his way through “Seven and twenty countries to thirty empires” in his quest for the magical Fire-Bird. This bird, according to the illustrations found in most editions of Russian folk tales, bears a remarkable resemblance to the peacock, which is found in Northern India. It is probable that the Russians’ early contact with the legendary riches of ancient India led them to mythicize the country in their folk traditions.

Nazaroff is a traveller in the truest sense of the word: having traversed almost the whole of Central Asia from the Urals over the Kyrgyz steppes to Tashkent (his home), all over Turkestan, the Pamirs, Upper Bukhara and Semirechie and to Kashgar, all on horseback, he is in a superior position of authority on the terrain, routes, cultures and peoples of these lands. According to him there is no better way of learning to know a country than to go over it on horseback (Nazaroff, MO 117). Again, like K.P.S. Menon who felt he had become a postal packet as he flew to Central Asia, Nazaroff is keenly aware of some of the disadvantages of steam and motor transport. He amusedly speaks of European friends of his who cannot imagine a life without modern amenities such as the constant availability of food, trains and cars for transport and such like.
With good wishes from British and Russian friends, Nazaroff moves on from Kashgar and reaches a village called Yapchen. Stopping in a caravanserai, he has the encouraging experience of being solemnly greeted by an Indian jawan⁹ who happened to be there. As he rides on, he meets various Sarts who ask him for medicine. This was a common experience to most European travellers in Central Asia. Every stage of this journey, since it was very different from his desperate flight across Russian Turkestan, is punctuated with nuggets of cultural, historical and incidental information. For instance, he is amused by the irrepressible coquetry of a Chinese young woman, who, after months of gruelling travel through the heat and sandstorms of Central Asia’s deserts, made herself up to take tea with her husband. What strikes him as a common element among bird, beast and man on any trail in Central Asia is the absence of any bustle or hurry: “The East cannot endure haste. It loves repose and calm, grandeur and dignity” (Nazaroff, MO 126).

Elsewhere, as he was preparing to begin the day’s journey, he remarks: “The East hates hurry, and speed, which is the Divinity of the

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⁹ A lackey in the service of the British Govt
European, is to the wiser Oriental the attribute of Shaitan” (Nazaroff, MO 154). This binary opposition between the Orient and Europe may have in part been augmented in the age of Imperialism and empire, with its emphasis on materialism, scientific and technological progress, and the competition among European countries for the wealth of the East.

On reaching Yarkand, he meets with a kind reception at the Swedish Mission established there, and stays a week, savouring the peace and restfulness of the place. He has warm praise for the Mission’s achievements, notably that of the rehabilitation of Sart street urchins. While in Yarkand, Nazaroff notices a Muslim custom that was strangely at odds with the otherwise liberal social atmosphere of this trade-centre: paper being the medium for writing the word of God, there were special receptacles for depositing waste paper, which was not to be discarded heedlessly. This feeling for paper, he says, is in total contrast to the Chinese, who have a history of burning and burying entire libraries by Imperial orders (Nazaroff, MO 134).
Nazaroff leaves behind the warmth of his Swedish friends in Kashgar to confront the perils of the road ahead. This route led him over the table-land of the Karakorum to the source of the Indus, with the attendant dangers of ‘tutek’ or altitude sickness. Men and beasts simply gasp, bleed from the nose and throat and then die by the wayside. Nazaroff was accompanied by five ‘kerekeshi’ or drivers, a caravan leader called Salamat Khan, nine pack-horses and a mule, thus forming quite a small traditional caravan of his own. In the province of Khotan, witnessing the official welcome given to the new incoming Chinese amban (Governor), he is surprised at the relative freedom of speech, movement and decision exercised by the Muslim women in these parts; they appeared to be on equal terms with the men. In Karghalyk, he has an unexpected pleasant surprise: his innovative idea of using paper bags to protect grape-crops from wasp attacks was already in use, and that too in the Ak-sakal’s home (village elder, literally greybeard). A particular variety of plum that he had cultivated in Tashkent in happier days had found its way to Andijan and Kashgar, and Nazaroff himself met it on a picnic.

Nazaroff’s experiences with native pack-animals such as the Asiatic donkey have led him to reject the usual Western stereotype of stupidity
and obstinacy centred around this creature. In fact, due to ignorance, the Western world has come to associate these attributes so closely with the animal that the words ‘donkey’, ‘mule’ and ‘ass’ have now become terms of abuse. Nazaroff’s own knowledge of these humble animals is in every way superior. In Kashgar, he says, the country would soon be the victim of ruin and famine without the aforesaid asses.

On his journey Nazaroff encounters an Afghan native, who had been, as consul of Yarkand, to Khotan on a confidential mission. He tells Nazaroff the story of the Emir of Bokhara; his pathetic resistance to the Bolshevik onslaught in 1919 is reminiscent of the Tibetan resistance to the Younghusband expedition in the early 1900’s. The Bokhariots, like the natives of Lhasa who had had implicit faith in the protection offered them by their Buddhist religion, considered themselves to be in complete safety. For they lived in Bokhara-i-Sharief (the Noble), the holiest land in Central Asia, and they believed that its very sacredness would protect them. It goes without saying that they fell to the guns of the Bolsheviks, as the Tibetans had to those of the British.
Nazaroff feels a touching sense of oneness with flocks of cranes in flight, which, like him, are on their way to India. Recalling his wistful and hopeless longing to be free like them while languishing in a Tashkent prison, he exults now that his wildest dreams had come true (Nazaroff, MO 149). After an episode of unruly pack-horses, he begins his ascent into the Karakoram region, well past the Kun Lun range. At a spring called Ak Madjid (White Mosque), he is joined by a Muslim Chinese official called Hadji Tungling, whose caravan teams up with his own party for convenience. Faced with the first, but the easiest, of the six dangerous passes they have to cross, Nazaroff shares his uneasiness at the prospect with us — worries about food supply, the consequences of the rarefied air, the endurance of the party's pack-horses, and the men themselves. He describes this part of the Karakorams in terms of curious contradictions: as a place of desolate horror, where at least three famous geologists have left their bones, and as an inaccessible land of promise containing rich gold deposits unknown to the civilised world. Even in these remote and barren passes, Nazaroff stops to give us details of the plants he finds along the way. The faculties of a lesser man would have been totally preoccupied with the business of getting on, without breaking his neck. On the road to Hunza (also called Kunjut) which had been a bandits’ lair since days of
yore, Nazaroff reflects on the ‘civilizing’ influence of the European missions on the natives of these parts: Colonel Durand’s 1891 expedition had ended the professional looting, plundering and kidnapping that had characterized the people of Hunza; the violent and savage Turcomans of the Transcaspian province in Vambery’s time became peaceful citizens of the Russian Empire after General Skobeleff’s expedition.

As he traverses the banks of Raskem Darya, a barely accessible river, he recalls that he had often encountered this name in travel-accounts of Central Asia which he had read in his youth. The similarity between the topography of this region and that of Sao Vicente (one of the Cape Verde Islands) strikes him with its improbability. The picturesque native names given to places along his route are rooted in the experience of native travel in these parts: Kulan Uldi (the Wild Ass died), Kuk At Auzy (the Grey Horse’s Mouth), Sud Tash (Milk Stone), Igar Saldi (they saddled up), Kapa Bulgan (they were downhearted), Daulat Beg Uldi (Daulat Beg died), Tutialiak (the Place of Mulberries). These are instances of the manner in which Orientals use generations of travel experience to memorize a place, as opposed to the Western man’s passion for topographical classification and documenting places through maps. At Ak
Tagh (White Mountain) Nazaroff's party experiences 'tutek', severe mountain sickness caused by the lack of oxygen at high altitudes. Salamat Khan's horse dies, and the other beasts and their owners are in very great danger of dying too. Sven Hedin, on one of his numerous expeditions had this to say of the region:

"If any road in the world deserves the name of Via Dolorosa, it is the caravan road over the Karakoram pass connecting Eastern Turkestan with India. ...Like an enormous Bridge of Sighs, it spans with its airy arches the highest mountain land of Asia and of the world" (qtd. in Nazaroff, MO 193).

But Nazaroff's experience of the route, strewn with dried mummies of pack-animals lying still in the grip of their mortal convulsions, and grinning skulls, leads him to reject what he feels to be an overly-poetical description (Nazaroff, MO 193), quite inapplicable to the road. At the Shyok glacier, where the Yarkand Darya and the Indus begin, he finds the 19th century Russian poet Lermontov's words appropriate to the place:

"... here the birth of the rivers is seen;"
Here the first stirring of ominous cloud.” (qtd. in Nazaroff, MO 203).

Nazaroff meets the Swedish Mission caravan quite unexpectedly in this lonely region, and his joy is unfeigned. While he exclaims with pleasure at their hospitality, cultured manners and goodwill, he does not evince the violent longing of most European travellers to be back in their own countries, where the amenities of civilisation abound. He goes on to discuss the relative advantages of riding a yak instead of a horse on this road, since yaks can pick out danger spots along the trail and avoid them. When confronted by the rare sight of a yak with broken legs, that had been abandoned by a passing caravan, he realizes that the natives’ religion Buddhism forbids them to kill any bovine animal, and does it himself, out of mercy, and in the memory of his escape from a condemnation to death not many years ago. Nazaroff’s brushes with death did not harden him into bitterness or callousness, but instead brought forth his innate tender mercy and kindness to fellow-creatures on the road. In addition to the usual perils and hardships of the Karakoram, there is the deadly aconite plant (which he had seen in Russian Turkestan also) growing along the way, on which famished pack-animals graze and die. He meets a Sart
family stranded by the wayside whose animals had been claimed by this deadly plant.

The Karaul Darvan pass leading to the Nubra Valley reminds him of the descriptions and pictures of Hell in Dante’s *The Divine Comedy*, only on a grander and even more terrible scale. Putting all his faith in his Bhoti caravan leader, he reaches the top in safety. Nubra Valley is a welcome change from the miserable barrenness of the route over the Karakoram, where the monotony had been relieved only by attacks of ‘tutek’ and death. This part of Western Tibet, cut off from the rest of the world by icy mountain ranges, “... has not lost its highly individual character inherited through millennia” (Nazaroff, MO 223). Everywhere he finds irrigated lands growing food-crops and flowers alike, inscriptions of the prayer “Om mane padme hum” sacred to Tibetans, natural hot springs (which were a boon to the weary traveller), and picturesque Turki natives. It is possible, from an Indian point of view, to account for the fact of Tibetan homes being located on the highest mountain ledges and slopes, by attributing it to their religious philosophy: the higher one is, the closer to God and Heaven. Nazaroff, being an outsider, finds it incomprehensible; he marvels instead at the beauty of this fairy-like valley, the civility,
simplicity and dignified poverty of its inhabitants, their remarkable 
industry, contentment and joie de vivre:

"It seemed to me that I was seeing in real life before my eyes some 
fairyland, where everybody was poor and good. If some poet 
wanted to sing of a land of such ideal virtues, or an artist to illustrate 
a story of a good fairy and her poor but hard-working people, he 
could not do better than pay a visit to the valley of the Nubra, where 
he would find his model in real life", Nazaroff rhapsodizes (MO 
229).

He goes on to contrast the Bhots of Tibet with Russian muzhiks, 
and finds the former infinitely preferable in every way, with their wise use 
of Nature's resources and eco-friendly habits. This economic native way 
of life was in stark contrast to the depredations wrought by Russian 
peasants in the name of Bolshevism that Nazaroff had seen in Russian 
Turkestan.

He is next faced with the crossing of the last mountain pass on his 
route, the Kardong; it comes off without mishap. Through a mental prism
of remembered illustrations and photographs, he at last glimpses Leh; on entering it he has a delightful feeling of comfort and contentment. During his stay here, he is struck by the uncommon form of polyandry practised by the Tibetans here; the women take a man into their homes on trial for a week, after which he becomes a husband if he passes the test. Otherwise, he is rejected outright, with the compensation of a sheep. The Tibetan woman also reserves the right to take as many more husbands as she likes, in addition to the ones she already has. Nazaroff also watches a game of polo, an ancient Asiatic game that dates back to the days of Emperor Afrasiab, in the sixth century before Christ.

In Ladakh, Nazaroff observes that the territory, although Indian both geographically and politically, consists of Nature that is largely Central Asian in character – arid stony mountains that shelter the land from the outside world, tamarisks, poplars and willows abounding. It was this aspect of Ladakh, according to Nazaroff, that led the Chinese pilgrim Fa-Hien to regard the place as the “source of Pure Faith” (Nazaroff, MO 253). The road from Srinagar to Leh, described by many a traveller and tourist in bygone days, lends itself to two contrasting impressions: to one coming from Kashmir in a comfortable car on the excellent motor road
through the impressive Himalayan landscape, there were only arid
mountains, gloomy defiles and precipitous tracks to be seen; to Nazaroff,
who had suffered unimaginable privations and dangers on the Karakoram
route, and ‘tutek’ on the Roof of the World (Bam-i-Dunya), the Leh-
Srinagar route offers pleasure and relief. At this point, he jauntily declares
that in spite of all that he had been through, he "would not for one moment
exchange this great ride of mine for all the modern ‘expeditions’ by
aeroplane in the world" (Nazaroff, MO 257). His attitude celebrates the
spirit of Man, and Life itself.

Leaving the Indus valley, he begins the ascent to Lamayuru, one of
the worst stretches of the whole road. Visiting the famous monastery in
Lamayuru, he observes that the rituals of the monks are strikingly similar
to those of Roman Catholic priests. In this connection, Nazaroff amusedly
mentions the 18th century Jesuit missionary Ippolito Desideri, who was
certain that such similarities in religions were the work of Satan.

Five years since January 1919 when he fled Tashkent, Nazaroff at
long last reaches his ultimate destination in India — the vale of Kashmir,
with an immense feeling of relief at having survived against such terrible
odds. He dispassionately compares his own journey with that of Marco Polo's, and finds them to be the same in terms of the time and route taken, and the means of travel used. Coming across a stretch of beautiful mountain flowers, he picks a few and sends them to his family in distant Russia; however he learnt afterwards that they were never received. Despite this added disappointment, this little gesture symbolizes Nazaroff's unflagging spirit, his zest for life and hopes for the future.

Along the banks of the Indus, he sees a village which recalls to his mind Russian folk tales: there were huts "on chickens' legs," buckwheat corn (the traditional Russian staple for kasha {porridge} and pancake) being threshed in the old-fashioned Russian way, and — wonder of wonders, the very Fire-Bird of Russian mythology, which he identifies as the monal, or Impeyan pheasant. [Interestingly, Nazaroff speculates that these stories preserved the tradition of expeditions by East Europeans into Kashmir since the beginning of human history.] He also traces the probable connection between the mythological humpback horse and the camel (Nazaroff, MO 294).
At a place called Kangan, he has a chance meeting with an American lady and her daughter, who had been travelling about in India for two years, and were now in Kashmir for its natural beauty and the sport it offered. Their warmth, hospitality and interests combine to leave a very happy impression on him. In Gangarbal village, he finds a car waiting for him, sent by the thoughtful Skrines. As he enjoys their hospitality (complete with silver Russian samovar), he identifies himself with the mythological hero of Russian folk tales, who after many years of toil, tribulation and wandering in far lands, enjoys being the guest of the Princess of India (Nazaroff, MO 300).

*Moved On!* has a conclusion, in which Nazaroff voices certain opinions he has formed as a result of his six-year odyssey from Tashkent to India, which called for much more than mere wanderlust and a spirit of adventure. Characteristically, he shows no bitterness over his hard personal lot (he was never to see Russia or his family again), nor cynicism about his uncertain future. He addresses certain scholarly issues that have preoccupied him for some time now, in a manner that bespeaks true intellect of a very high order. Peter Hulme, a critic on 20th century travel-writing, speaks of "some travel-writers (who) practice a kind of deep
immersion in the cultures they are visiting, acquiring the sort of intimate knowledge which gives them access to people and places unknown to short-stay travellers, let alone tourists” (CCTW 97). Nazaroff, despite his enforced displacement, and consequent travails, belongs eminently to this category of travel-writers. This remarkable ability to transcend his impossible circumstances and display grace under pressure endears him to all who are familiar with his works. The first question that he addresses is how and where the flora and fauna of the northern lands of Asia passed over into the subtropical parts. He conclusively proves that it is not the mountain ranges that pose a barrier to the Nature of the North moving southwards (as is generally supposed), but the vast steppe lands of Central Asia. He also adds that the names Kun Lun, Karakoram and Himalayas do not indicate separate ranges, but that they are a labyrinth of mountains, valleys, ravines, gorges and plateaux.

The final issue he wishes to discuss is the historical “mistake” made by the well-known 19th century geographer A. Humboldt: the latter had suggested that the Himalayas and the Tien Shan ranges were connected by a north-south range, which he named Bolor Dagh. This range is not acknowledged in most 20th century maps of Central Asia available today.
Nazaroff, with his fine-tuned understanding of the geography of Central Asia and its fringes, testifies to Humboldt’s theory, and pleads for it to be restored to the map of Central Asia, with the famous geographer’s name attached to it.

While history was responsible for Nazaroff’s enforced exilic displacement from his native Tashkent, his long odyssey across Central Asia and over the Himalayas produced two of the finest travelogues in the genre. In his writing, wide-ranging intellectual curiosity, broad human sympathies and an encyclopaedic mind dwell on a land which he knew so intimately and to which he had become an alien. Nazaroff’s two books show travel-writing at its best, exploring its farthest reaches, in the tradition of his illustrious forbears, Aleksandr Pushkin and Anton Chekhov.

Despite the momentous changes in Central Asia caused by the Russian Revolution, there were a few travellers to this region in the early decades of the 20th century. Their expeditions were markedly different in
character from those of the 19th century, which had been strongly motivated by economic, political and strategic considerations. These newer travellers were not completely divorced from the active engagement with their respective countries' interests that was characteristic of nineteenth century travel. But they are distinct from earlier travellers to Central Asia in that their journeys were more personal and individualistic in nature. While each of the three travellers discussed in this section had distinct and separate reasons for going to Central Asia, they are nevertheless bound by a common element in their travel-accounts -- a strong autobiographical skein runs through each of the three works considered here.

An intrepid explorer of Central Asia whose career in the East spanned more than four decades (starting in 1885) was the legendary Swedish traveller Sven Hedin. His fame as a fearless explorer whose avowed wanderlust took him to hitherto uncharted parts of 19th century Central Asia was then, and still is, on par with that of Marco Polo. He was also a prolific writer; *Through Asia, Central Asia and Tibet, History of the Expedition in Asia* are just a few of his works, now long out of print and very difficult to obtain. In this context one of Hedin's most
personal travel-accounts, *My Life as an Explorer* (hereafter MLAE) is very useful, since it outlines all the expeditions that the author undertook to different parts of Asia, from 1885 to 1908. The travels in this time-period were marked by an intense personal ambition to visit hitherto unknown parts of the world; those missions which he undertook as a famed explorer, in the 1920’s belong strictly to the realm of geographical and scientific research. Sven Hedin stands out from the general group of late 19th and early 20th century explorers because of his political and diplomatic clout, which he used cleverly to satisfy his inner ambitions. Amongst his personal friends were the King of Sweden, the Tsar of Russia, the President of the Royal Geographical Society, and innumerable European consulates. Such influential connections gained for him entry into parts of Central Asia that were forbidden territory to most Europeans of his time. On one journey in 1891 he was even feted by the Emir of Bokhara (Said Abdul Ahad), a far cry from the experience of less-privileged European travellers to this city. Perhaps because of his special standing with the governments of so many different European countries, including Britain, his perception of Central Asia was tinged with a certain sense of superiority, so typical of 19th century Western attitudes toward the Orient. His experiences in Central Asian lands were privileged to such
an extent that his account of them reads like an itinerary of balls, fetes, and state receptions across cultures and continents. Colour runs riot through the narrative; images of Oriental splendour that for most Europeans existed only in the imagination were realities to him. Gold and precious stones, gorgeous Persian carpets, silver staffs, verdant gardens, Arabian steeds, stately palaces and grand receptions—these things are attendant upon most of his expeditions.

The main agenda of almost all his travels was to map out for the Swedish Government areas of the Central Asian landmass that were unknown to the European world. In doing this, he was also satisfying his own innate desire to see for himself a part of the world that his own countrymen knew very little about. But not all his expeditions met with success. His daredevil forays into the Gobi and Taklamakan deserts were complete disasters and as he himself admits, he had to beat “a death-strewn retreat” for lack of water (Hedin, MLAE 310). In his narrative of this journey, the Taklamakan lives up to its evil reputation, appearing to be of chimerical proportions, with its aridity and harshness sucking the life out of its victims. Traveller, time and space alike come to a standstill as the crazed search for water begins. Just as Hedin was about to give up all
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hope, he came upon a little oasis of sparkling fresh water which saved his life, but came too late for some native members of his party. Fortunately for Hedin, his good rapport with the natives of his team comes to his aid, in extremis. Mongols, Chinese, Kyrgyz and others work together to salvage what they can from the ruins of the expedition. Hedin himself does his best to stem the hostility and contempt that his Ladakhi men exhibit towards the Indians of his party, for their inability to withstand the merciless cold and rarefied mountain air of the Central Asian terrain they were traversing.

On his way from Tibet to India, he celebrates Christmas with Lama songs, Buddhist and Islamic prayers and readings from the Bible. This peaceful co-existence of religions, among a handful of men thrown together in the harshest of geographical conditions by nothing more than force of circumstances, speaks a great deal for Hedin’s character and personality. What comes out very strongly from the travel account is his intrepidity, determination and fortitude. But there is also a disturbing element of complacency in the man, perhaps born of the unquestioning support provided by his Government, and the worldwide attention that his exploits received. This smugness leads him into a totally insensitive
attitude towards the natives of Lhasa: Tibet had always been a forbidden land to strangers and foreigners, especially white men with mysterious equipment. But Hedin derived much excitement from several attempts at trespass. He glories in the fact of having reached Shigatse, close to the capital of Lhasa, without being noticed by native officials. His sense of personal achievement is infused with gleefulness, not unlike that of a schoolboy playing truant. It is this lack of responsibility and a willful imperiousness that cost him, one by one, almost all his supporters and admirers. The very societies and people interested in the exploration of Central Asia who had been singing his praises now turned against him.

The ever-fluctuating political dynamics between China and the British over the opening-up of Tibet, together with the anti-foreigner stance of the Tibetans themselves, also greatly influenced Hedin's detractors. Many geographical societies disowned him and his work, leaving him very bitter. A certain cynicism can be sensed in the latter part of the travelogue; he projects himself as a much-misunderstood and injured genius. For

10. A Swedish travel-writer by name Zac O'Yeah, whom I met in the Department of English, Bangalore University (2002) described Sven Hedin as a “quite controversial figure” in his country today.
instance, when turned back by officials in Tibet from advancing any further to Lhasa, he says:

"The Tibetans are an odd folk! ....I had recourse to all sort of tricks and stratagems to get into the unknown land north of the Tsangpo, and yet I had failed. In the end, I had been compelled to sacrifice about a year's time, a whole caravan of forty animals, and thousands of rupees...." (Hedin, MLAE 521).

Hedin's travels in Central Asia upto 1908 were marked by a certain pattern: setting out from 'civilized' unknown lands of Central Asia where he mapped what he discovered and back to civilization again. And all the time he spent in actual exploration there was the reassuring thought that home and family and friends eagerly awaited his return. This pattern was common to many 19th & 20th century travelogues on Central Asia.

*East of the Sun and West of the Moon* (hereafter EOTS) is a travel-account by Theodore Roosevelt, and his brother Kermit. The former went on to become President of the United States, while Kermit was involved in the business of shipping. At the time of their undertaking a journey to
Central Asia, Theodore Roosevelt had just lost the elections: he had been campaigning for the post of Governor of New York. This was in the mid 1920's and he got "an involuntary holiday" (Roosevelt, EOTS 1). His brother Kermit was also inclined to take a holiday from his own trade affairs, and the two men decided to make a hunting-trip to Central Asia. Kermit's business had taken him all over the world, including Manchuria, but they had never been to the Pamirs, Central Turkestan and the Tian Shan range. These places were their destination, mainly because they supported some of the largest populations of Central Asian wildlife, which also served as game to European sportsmen — *ovis poli*, the great wild sheep that Marco Polo discovered in 1256 A.D., and to which the American bighorn is related; *ovis ammon karelini* and *ovis ammon littledalei* which were other kinds of Central Asian ibex, snow leopards, the great brown bear, the Siberian roe, the Asiatic wapiti, and so on. What was originally a two-man hunting-trip grew into what was called the James Simpson-Roosevelts-Field Museum Expedition. This was because of the financial support offered by the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago. The Roosevelts regarded their expedition as a noble and scholarly undertaking which would serve as a fitting link to the Roy Chapman Andrews Expedition that had been underway for some time.
There is no doubt that their exploits in Central Asia led to a deeper knowledge of the wildlife of this part of the world in their own country. But seen now in the context of the 21st century and its intense concern over diminishing world wildlife, their scientific expedition dwindles to a hunting trip, on which two men with rifles and a thirst for blood indulge their passions on their innocent prey. For political reasons, they could not use the route through Afghanistan; instead they take the dreaded Leh-Karakoram route that had such an evil reputation amongst those who had traversed it. They passed through and camped at several places rendered familiar to us through earlier travel-accounts: the Zoji Pass, Dras, Kargil, Leh, Khardong, Kizil Tash, the Saser Pass, the Karakoram Pass, the Suget and Sanju passes, Muzart Pass, Aksu, Maralbashi, the Burzil Pass, Srinagar and so on. To lend credence to the scientific interest of the expedition, two friends of the Roosevelts were asked to go along: Cherrie, who was a scientist and Cutting, who was a professional photographer. Considering the number of mountain passes and glacial regions they forded, it is not surprising that the Americans in the party regard their environs with hostility and resentment. As for the natives, they were to be trusted as little as the deserts they came from; on meeting the Chinese amban in Tashkurgan, they describe him as being "the nightmare Life in
Death...” (Roosevelt, EOTS 245), because his hard life in the desert mountains had made him skeletal-looking.

Between hunting trips and measuring ibex horns (which they regard as trophies of their skill in hunting), Theodore and Kermit take turns narrating alternate chapters, speaking with one voice. It is as if one man undertook the journey and the telling of his experiences. Their personalities are not very distinct from each other in the narrative. They do not evince much curiosity about the strange new lands or people they saw; only a cursory glance is bestowed on the cultures that offered them hospitality wherever they went. For instance, they describe the construction of a Kyrgyz yurta which was put up for their sole use, but nothing of the warmth and cheer offered them inside it comes through in the narrative (Roosevelt, EOTS 110-111). They also describe most of the natives who helped them as “jungli wallahs” (Roosevelt, EOTS 114), a local term for rough wild uncultured fellows. The shock of the wide contrasts in culture that is seen in many modern 20th century travelogues is found here too. Theodore laments that these natives knew nothing of stalking wildlife, despite their having “eyes which were crosses between a telescope and a microscope” (Roosevelt, EOTS 115). Central Asia, with
its natural wealth and wildlife, was to the Roosevelts only a place to be used and exploited. They do not feel the need to understand the different ways of life they encountered. The end of the travelogue is marked by a triumphant sense of achievement in their having survived the natives and wilds of Central Asia, and for having acquired enough wildlife specimens to satisfy several museums.

America’s relationship with 19th and early 20th century Central Asia was manifest mostly in scientific and exploratory missions, without any political involvement. The Pumpelly expedition in the beginning of the 20th century mentioned in Nazaroff’s work produced very valuable physico-geographical and geological information on Turkestan. The Langdon Warner expedition undertaken in the early 1920’s resulted in various archaeological hauls, the relics of which are to be found in the Fogg Art Museum. The Roosevelts’ expedition, although the account of it reads like an exciting hunting trip in the back of beyond, was a genuine scientific contribution to American knowledge of southwestern Asiatic wildlife. It served as a sequel to the Roy Chapman Andrews mission which had exhaustively researched the varieties of mammal, bird and reptile life in northern and Central Asia.
It can be seen from a survey of travellers to Central Asia and their writings thereof (ref. Chapter One), that travel to this part of the world was essentially a male domain, as it was in the rest of the world. Central Asia being one of the most difficult regions of the world to travel to and in, it was not surprising that the qualities required for survival in this land were those conventionally associated with male travellers — toughness, courage, endurance, the ability to withstand hardships, and to deal with ‘uncivilized’ natives. This construct of travel (and travel-writing) as a male activity was especially noticeable in the period of the Great Game. There was, in the history of mapping and surveying, labelling flora and fauna and staking claim to territories in Central Asia, an underlying sexualisation of the land itself. This trend was part of a larger context:

“As Europe acquired colonies, maps establishing the precise boundaries between disputed claims became vital... the early history of colonialism is one in which new territories were metaphorised as female, as virgin lands waiting to be penetrated, ploughed, and husbanded by male explorers” (CCTW 231).

The writings of these male explorer-travellers also came to reflect their attitude to the land, and certain conventions of travel-writing came to
be established as a result. In 19th century travelogues on Central Asia, importance was given to the presence of scientific facts, supported by maps, sketches and photographs, together with an impersonal and factual style of writing. These features, especially prominent in Great Game travelogues, were traditionally associated with the ‘male’ gaze that Central Asia was subjected to.

It hardly needs saying that there were not many women travellers to Central Asia, as to other parts of the world, in the nineteenth century. Prominent among the few women who dared to ‘trespass’ on this male domain were Lady Hester Stanhope (who went away to Turkey in 1810 never to return) and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu\(^\text{11}\) (who travelled to Constantinople in 1716 to join her husband who had been appointed ambassador to Turkey). Women who ventured outside Europe were under the protection of their husbands who usually had some official post in the region. For instance, Lady Macartney accompanied her husband Sir George Macartney as a bride of twenty one to Kashgar, where there was a British Consulate in the late 1890’s. She spent seventeen years in

\(^{11}\) Her *Letters* belong to a sub-genre of travel-writing; her work challenges the European exoticising of the Orient (CCTW 229).
Kashgar, and established the famous Chini Bagh, as her home came to be called. With her husband, she extended hospitality to renowned explorers such as Aurel Stein and Von Le Coq. Her memoirs, entitled *An English Lady in Chinese Turkestan*, reflect the initial homesickness of the bride, the strangeness of the land to which she had come, her incomprehension of unfamiliar ‘exotic’ customs and her hostility to the natives who constantly demanded her husband’s attention.

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There were hardly any women travellers to Central Asia even in the early 20th Century, who undertook the journey away from home independent of their husbands’ careers in the Orient. In this context, the travels of Mrs. Alec-Tweedie in the early 1920’s across Russia, Siberia and China, and Alexandra David-Neel’s journey into Tibet at about the same time, stand out as important milestones in the history of travel-writing on Central Asia. The former witnesses the impact of the Russian Revolution on the countries she visited and wrote of it, catering to the anti-Bolshevik sentiments of her largely British audience (CCTW 233). David-Neel undertook her odyssey into Tibet at a time when the British had recently forced the country open to see it for themselves. But for most Europeans, Tibet was still a forbidden land, in the sense that the British
would not allow anyone into their sphere of influence. Having made several illegal journeys across the Tibetan border, she was keen to learn more about the country, its people and culture. She spent some time learning the Tibetan language and familiarizing herself with oriental ways of life. In almost all her journeys she was accompanied by a young Sikkimese named Yongden, whom she later adopted as her son. She reached Peking in October 1917, and made her way across China torn by civil war to the great Tibetan Monastery of Kumbum. From here, she planned to walk to Lhasa, the holy capital of Tibet that had been so recently desecrated in the eyes of its inhabitants by Colonel Francis Younghusband and his troops. Her plan was to travel in disguise, as a Tibetan beggar-woman with her son, bent on a holy pilgrimage to Lhasa. With her notes, money and revolver variously concealed in her ragged clothes, she dyed her hair black with Chinese ink and darkened her face. A prayer wheel and rosary beads completed her equipment, and she set out in the winter of 1923, with Yongden disguised as a lama. It was the worst time at the year to be travelling in Tibet, considering the sub-zero temperatures, and the harshness of the mountain terrain, together with the wretched condition in which she had chosen to travel. After suffering various hardships that were common experience to the few Europeans who
had been there earlier, she reached Lhasa. Her entry into the capital coincided with the Tibetan New Year Festival and she did not attract too much attention to herself. Her narrative, *My Journey to Lhasa* (hereafter MJTL) betrays a consuming anxiety about the efficacy of her disguise, the narrow escapes she had and the lengths to which she went in order to fool the natives who were suspicious of her. For instance, when ordered by a lama who was doorkeeper to the Potala to remove her fur-lined bonnet before entering, she is in a quandary since the dye she had used had worn off and her own brown hair was visible. Her consternation comes through in her description of the lama, whom she calls a “horrid little toad” (David-Neel, MJTL 263). Apart from such anxieties, her account reflects her honest pride in the fact that she was the first European woman to set foot in Lhasa, and a marked determination not to be detected or deported before she had had time to observe life in all its aspects here. Noting the various practices of lamaism in Tibet, she is of the opinion that they have nothing to do with true Buddhism, which denies all rituals (David-Neel, MJTL 261). Despite the wide-spread notion that Tibet was a wholly Buddhist land, David-Neel found that lamaistic rituals, born of a simplistic understanding of the Buddhist faith, were being carried out in the Potala itself, which was home to the holy spiritual leader of Tibet, the Dalai
Lama. She also describes in detail all the superstitious beliefs which she felt the natives were prey to, such as the belief that some mothers have poison concealed on them somewhere which they cannot help transmitting to others (David-Neel, MJTL 303-4). She writes of a phurba, or magic dagger, which by a lucky turn of circumstance, loses its evil power in the eyes of her Tibetan companions, and ends up in her hands as a souvenir of her journey (David-Neel, MJTL 305-7). Once when she was gathering specimen plants to take back to botanists in France (her native country), she encountered robbers. She was able to prevent them from stealing any of her belongings by playing on their simple religious beliefs; she gave out that she was a seer, who knew the truth of all things, aided by a holy bowl of special water. The robbers took fright and disappeared. This incident was one of many such, where her knowledge of Tibetan Buddhism came to her rescue when confronted by brigands.

In her work, it is also obvious that David-Neel uses her knowledge of Tibetan culture for strategic purposes; to her the Tibetans are simple gullible folk whose religious feelings can be easily played upon, to gain her own ends. Her attitude to the Tibetan land is ambivalent: the absence, of any scientific facts about the topography of Tibet which would have
served the cause of Imperialism, is seen together with a European's dismay at the impossibly difficult terrain. But in her determination to reach Lhasa, she regards all the hazards of the journey as obstacles that could be overcome if one had the necessary grit. Her travel-account is also clearly reflective of the robustness that she displayed in her journey across Tibet.

Her narrative, in speaking of strange and incredible things peculiar to Tibet, serves to exoticise the land further in the eyes of her European readership. For example, she writes quite matter-of-factly about lung-gom, the art of flying, which she claims some lamas could perform. Even more incredible is thumo reskiang, or the system of "self-heating" in sub-zero temperatures through certain rituals. Apart from practising it with success herself, she describes this extraordinary phenomenon as being "but a way devised by the Thibetan hermits of enabling themselves to live without endangering their health on the high hills. It has nothing to do with religion, and so it can be used for ordinary purposes without lack of reverence" (David-Neel, MJTL 133). This matter-of-factness rendered Tibet and its culture all the more mysterious in European eyes.
Perhaps these details were the cause of the skepticism with which her travel-account was received. Her European male contemporaries were quick to point out that her work contained no maps, and that the narrative itself was lacking in any scientific information which would prove her claim of having been there. In matters of convention, her narrative was nothing like earlier written reports on Tibet. David-Neel, for her part, triumphed in her successful foray into what was a male-dominated region of travel and travel-discourse. This triumph can be seen throughout her work; initially she asks herself whether she would ever reach her goal, Lhasa, “laughing at those who close(d) the roads of Thibet”; later when she is actually in Lhasa, she remarks to her son Yongden that they had “won the game” (David-Neel, MJTL 9, 258). And throughout the course of her narrative she portrays herself as one who is determined to overcome all odds; indeed she manages to worm her way out of every difficult situation with the resourcefulness, courage and cunning that were hitherto mainly male characteristics. It has been argued that David-Neel consciously describes herself in terms that were predominantly associated with men adventurers, in order to lend credibility to her extraordinary narrative. Perhaps during the times she lived in, such devices were necessary to gain acceptance in scholarly circles. Read today, what comes
foremost is the courage and determination of a woman who challenged the
notions of travel, and travel-writing thereof as being essentially male
prerogatives, especially with reference to the forbidden land of Tibet.

Vikram Seth's *From Heaven Lake* is an account of his hitch-hike
journey as a student in the 1980's from the oases of northwest China to the
Himalayas, crossing Sinkiang, Gansu, the plateau of Qinghai and finally
through Tibet. Even at this latter stage of the Communist era, Tibet's
borders were being jealously guarded by the Chinese Government, and all
foreign travel was strictly censored. As an Indian, Vikram Seth
encountered fewer difficulties in this regard; but his narrative offers a
Westernized Indian's point of view. While he is able to communicate in
Chinese, and derives a vague sense of comfort from the few Indian
influences he sees around him (such as the use of Devanagari script for
writing prayers), his travel-journal concentrates on matters of daily routine
and the immediate present. He visits the Potala as any foreign tourist
would, and comes away feeling overwhelmed by a blur of unfamiliar
impressions. Seth's narrative shows up Tibet much as it is today: as being
part of Communist China, with its spiritual leader the Dalai Lama in what
seems to be permanent exile in India.
Travel-accounts of the Soviet regime:

The various uprisings that took place in Central Asia after the arrival of the Bolsheviks were firmly put down by them. Various nationalities and communities within Central Asia suffered heavy losses in terms of life and property, but in the long run the Soviet mantle descended on each citizen, and Central Asia came to be fully absorbed politically, economically and culturally, by the Soviet Union. The Iron Curtain was effectively drawn between the U.S.S.R and the rest of the world for a period of seven decades. During this time, travelling to and in the Soviet Union was next to impossible since the Communist officials strictly restricted and monitored all foreign contact. The travel-accounts of this time are few and far-between, and generally written by those who were willing to brave the impediments in their path caused by Soviet bureaucracy. In this section, various travelogues covering the entire span of the Soviet era have been considered.

Imperium by the Polish writer Ryszard Kapuściński, is divided into three parts; relevant to this study is Part I, entitled “First Encounters”, and covering the time from 1939 to 1967. In it Kapuściński talks about
the coming of Soviet troops into his hometown in the Polesie region of Poland (Byelorussia), about his journey to Siberia’s desolate wastes, to Transcaucasia and to the republics of Soviet Central Asia. According to him, these “territories of the ... USSR ... are filled with exoticism, conflicts, and a singular atmosphere replete with emotion and sentiments” (Kapuscinski, Imperium, Preface IX). A close look at his narrative will show that these aspects of the land are clearly a direct result of the collectivization drive instituted by the Soviet system’s officials.

Kapuscinski made his journey into the Soviet Union alone, inexplicably bypassing all its official institutions and routes. He wandered as far as time, opportunity and strength allowed, from Brest (the border between the USSR and Poland) to Magadan on the Pacific, and from Vorkuta beyond the Arctic Circle to Termez (the border with Afghanistan), covering a total of about sixty thousand kilometers. The part of his narrative that concentrates on Central Asia is woven around the controversial draining of the Aral Sea. As he flies to this part of the Soviet empire, he observes the depredation wrought on the land in the Stalinist era; the most crucial issue being the redirecting of the Amudarya and Syrdarya rivers, both of which fed the Aral Sea. The tributaries of both
these rivers had fed the water supplies of the former Khanates – Bukhara, Khiva and Samarkand – for centuries. Now he observed that the once-verdant field and fruit orchards that had flourished on the banks of these rivers had disappeared, and that more and more of Central Asia turning into desert. The once fertile oases of Uzbekistan were plowed over by bulldozers, which he describes as “hot metal cockroaches” (Kapuscinski, Imperium 257). The waters of the rivers being redirected through canals, he sees the beautiful variety of Turkestan’s natural wealth being supplanted by cotton crops. As he observes this change (that later turned out to be catastrophic for the people who lived here) he remarks: “It is easy to imagine the despair and terror of peasants from whom one takes the only thing they have – the currant bush, the apricot tree, the scrap of shade” (Kapuscinski, Imperium 258). Farmers, gardeners and orchard keepers were being employed as labourers on cotton plantations, “bend(ing) down ten to twelve thousand times” a day to earn their daily wages (Kapuscinski, Imperium 259).

Kapuscinski portrays the lands of Central Asia as being harnessed to the Soviet cause: Central Asia is the periphery that supplies raw material to the metropolis – textile mills “in the central sections of the
Imperium” (Kapuścinski, Imperium 260). The officials in control of the running of this economy were the main beneficiaries of the proceeds of cotton production, while the cotton-pickers would remain unemployed for three-fourths of the year, battling with the problems of starvation and a diminishing drinking-water supply.

Another economic and ecological disaster that the narrative draws attention to is the salting-over of the fertile regions of Central Asia. In every instance where water was forcibly redirected to irrigate naturally desert regions, the concentrated salt in the desert sands would rise to the surface, rendering all plant and animal life impossible. Kapuścinski sadly notes that the “golden land of Uzbekistan, which was first cloaked in the white of cotton was now glazed over with a lustrous crust of white salt” (Kapuścinski, Imperium 260).

Of the miserable recipients of the Soviet welfare schemes, Kapuścinski flinches from their terrible reality. He sees fishermen who are out of work, for there are hardly any fish left in the Aral Sea; he sees the crumbling walls of their decrepit houses, and the women’s veiled faces, indicating the futility of speech. The barrenness of their lives is evoked in
terms that are reminiscent of T.S. Eliot's imagery in *The Wasteland*: "Laughter (here) would sound like the screech of a rusty nail against glass" (Kapuscinski, *Imperium* 262).

Kapuscinski's narrative is unique, in that it is an energetic critique of the Soviet Union and its institutions. He portrays to us the terrible economic mistakes committed by Communist aficionados, and the consequences thereof on the lands of Central Asia and its peoples. His work also marks the beginning of a new trend: travel-writing became a writing-career all its own, from having been simply a methodical recording of travels undertaken. This trend was noticeable increasingly after the Russian Revolution; travel writing of this period had an immediate engagement with social and political issues, as seen from the works of Nazaroff, Kapuscinski, and others.

The image of Central Asia as a vast salty desert that is seen in Kapuscinski's work is reflected in the narrative of Sir Fitzroy Maclean, who travelled to the Soviet Union in the early 1940's. His work, *Eastern Approaches* (hereafter EA) covers a span of eight years; the first part of
his work describes his exploration inside Soviet Russia (which included Central Asia) during the time just before the outbreak of World War II.

After more than two years of diplomatic service in the strife-torn France of the 1930's, it seemed vitally important to Maclean "to know what the Soviet Union stood for, what her aims were and what part she would play in the international conflagration which already seemed inevitable" (Maclean, EA, Preface XII). It is not that Maclean was unaware of the Soviet Union's rigid policy to keep out all prying foreigners from the fabled lands it contained. He planned to somehow evade the processes of getting official permission, and see Soviet Central Asia for himself. In fact his narrative is full of a boyish glee at deceiving Soviet officials, and giving the slip to N.K.V.D. agents who were inevitably set to trail suspicious-looking foreigners. Defying the lice, bad food, interminable bureaucratic procedures and impossible transportation that were characteristic of most Soviet travel, Maclean was able to get to Alma Ata, the capital of Kazakhstan. He describes it as one of the pleasantest provincial towns in the Soviet Union, being one of the first Russian settlements in Central Asia.

12. In Kazakh, it means "Father of Apples" (Maclean, EA 60-61).
He finds the city fully transformed by the Soviet system: blocks of Government buildings, telegraph, telephone and wireless buildings, blocks of flats, asphalt streets, scientific institutes, the cinema, well-stocked shops and the tramway system all jostled side by side. Relishing the flavour of the apples for which the city was famous, he gains an impression of prosperity and progress in Kazakhstan as a whole; he also notes that his country was the most important cattle-breeding area in the Soviet Union. He manages to roam at will in Alma Ata, talking especial delight in misleading his N.K.V.D. agent who kept trailing him. He gives the agent the slip altogether when he unobtrusively boards a train for Samarkand, hoping to stop off at Tashkent on the way. As he travels, he describes the Kazakhs, Uzbeks and Tartars and the European Russians he sees on the train with himself. He finds himself unable to distinguish the Kazakhs from the Kyrgyz, for they looked remarkably alike. He regards them as simple friendly nomads and mountaineers of a much lower standard of culture than the Uzbeks, who came from the fabled lands of Bokhara and Samarkand. These simple folk he finds “... ha(d) proved much more malleable material from the point of view of administration and propaganda than the other culturally more developed
races of Russian Central Asia... they have fewer religious and cultural traditions to break down” (Maclean, EA 124).

He too describes his peasant and farmer companions on the train in terms of qualities usually attributed by Europeans to Asiatics — dirt, greed, slovenliness, stupidity, gullibility and inefficiency. He has analysed as probably no one had before, the musty, inescapable odour of this land, compounded of the “old Russian smell... of black bread and sheepskin and vodka and unwashed humanity”, blended with “modern smells of petrol and disinfectant and the clinging, cloying odour of Soviet soap” (Maclean, EA, Preface xiii).

A missed connection gives him several hours to explore Tashkent, which he does under cover of darkness at midnight, going to dimly-lit chai-khanas (tea houses). He does not elaborate on his discoveries here, and merely lets drop hints of the native culture he saw, through images of squatting Uzbeks sipping tea and filling the streets with the sound of their flat drums.
Arriving in Samarkand in an impossibly crowded train, he views the city in the early morning's light. He describes the famous Registan, or the city's square, with its lofty arches and madrassahs (schools of Islamic learning). He notes the crumbling mud-walls, the sun-baked bricks, the Tillah Kari (Golden Mosque Madrassah), the slim minarets, the blue domes sparkling with glazed tiles of turquoise and the flat-roofed mud houses that Samarkand was famous for. Entering the city proper, he visits the Bibi Khanum mosque which stood in ruins, the Shah-i-Zinda mosque which was the tomb of Kasim Ibn Abbas, a Muslim soldier-saint, the Gur Emir, which was the tomb of the mighty Tamerlane himself. All in all, he finds the city to be little changed since the Tsarist invasion of 1868. Uzbeks in national dress (of long striped quilted coats, turbans or embroidered skullcaps), women with tradition black horsehair veils, the open bazaars, the innumerable chai-khanas — all seemed unaware of

13. Named after a Chinese princess who was one of Tamerlane's wives, and built by a Persian architect who escaped Tamerlane's wrath (upon discovery of his guilty love for Bibi Khanum) by sprouting wings and flying off the top minaret back to Meshed his hometown, according to local legend.
the enormous upheavals that the Revolution had caused elsewhere. But as he was leaving the old town, he chanced to see twenty-odd little Uzbek girls of three or four years' old being marched briskly up and down in fours and made to sing hymns to the glorious Leader of the People (Maclean, EA 72). So he knew that it would not be long before Samarkand was Sovietized too, and all the remnants of its ancient civilisations would be swept away.

On comparing Samarkand with Tashkent, Maclean finds that the latter was a much larger city, since it was the centre of the Soviet cotton industry, with a reputation for wickedness. The markets were full of noise and strife, in marked contrast to the leisurely pace of life he had observed in Samarkand. He finds that he cannot get into a train without a fist-fight, native-style. He receives offers for all the clothes he had on, from a crowd of Uzbek ankles—deep in mud. Outside the town he too observes, like Kapuscinski before him, native Uzbek villagers working in cotton mills and fields.
On yet another officially sponsored journey to Central Asia, he goes this time to Urumchi, the capital of Sinkiang, the main province of Chinese Turkestan which had also come under Soviet sway. Here Soviet bureaucracy catches up with him, and the N.K.V.D. officialdom insists on his leaving Chinese territory. He goes back to Alma-Ata, and is expelled from there unceremoniously.

Undaunted by this ignominious treatment, he sets out on a private jaunt of his own, this time to try and reach Bokhara. From Moscow he reaches Ashkhabad, the capital of Turkmenistan, and goes on by train through the Kizil Kum desert, its vast stretches of pale red sand being inaccurately described as Kara Kum (Black Desert). From the little Soviet town of Kagan he decides to walk the eight miles to Bokhara since the N.K.V.D were hot on his trail. Not knowing the way, he wisely follows the endless caravans of Bactrian camels which were undoubtedly on their way to Bokhara, still being tailed by his N.K.V.D. spies. His view of Bokhara is replete with historical memories; he talks of the Rev. Wolff who went to Bokhara in 1845 to ascertain the sad fates of Conolly and Stoddart, who were being held hostage by the Amir Nasrullah. Following in the steps of the “Eccentric Missionary”, he finds Bokhara to be “an
enchanted city, with its pinnacles and domes and crumbling ramparts white and dazzling in the pale light of the moon” (Maclean, EA 145). He spots the Tower of Death, from which criminals used to be hurled in olden days, but now finds it ornamented with a great Red flag at its summit. Exploring the inner city by daylight, he feels that it resembles Samarkand and Tashkent in some ways – the same labyrinthine narrow lanes between high windowless mud walls, the same jostling crowds, donkeys, camels, the chai-khanas filled with gossiping customers drinking tea (Maclean, EA 147). But in some ways Bokhara retains for him its uniqueness, in contrast to the other two metropoles where “East and West lie side by side and often intermingle...” (Maclean, EA 147). In Bokhara-i-Sharief, the holiest city in Central Asia, the Communists came up against its Islamic culture that had endured for centuries. The mullahs and other religious chiefs would brook no interference in matters of religion, and so the Communists had left the old city to decay.

As he threads his way through the famous monuments of this stronghold of Muslim culture, he mentions the names of the principal mosques – the Kalyan or Kok Gumbaz, the Mir Arab and some smaller mosques and madrassahs in which the city abounded. He looks with awe
at the great Ark or Citadel of the Amirs of Bokhara, a grim thousand-year old structure at which so many foreigners (notably Stoddart and Conolly) had met their deaths.

The Soviet onslaught on this ancient culture had begun in small ways: the traditional *khalats* worn by the women of Bokhara were now being produced by collectivized seamstresses working for a state combine; individual enterprises had been all but stamped out.

Recollecting uneasily his precarious position and lack of time, he boards a train at Kagan on to Afghan Turkestan i.e. that part of Afghanistan which bordered the Soviet sphere of influence. His train follows the course of the Amudarya through eastern Turkmenistan; to reach Afghan territory he had to cross the river with many attendant difficulties. At Termez, he realises that the river represented Soviet Russia's hermetically-sealed border with Afghanistan. After verbal tussles with the local Soviet officials, he gets across; having avoided quarantine in an Afghan station for cholera, he gets to Mazar-i-Sharief, the chief town. Its features remind him strongly of Bokhara; he goes on to Tashkurgan, traversing a part of the ancient Silk Road that had connected Turkestan
with India. This road he found was mainly used by lorries coming from Kabul. Through the Khyber Pass he reaches Peshawar, which he thinks is "completely Central Asian in character", with its citadel and bazaar, its few British institutions making it refreshingly different from the Soviet Union (Maclean, EA 170).

Through a series of complicated manoeuvres that would have left any N.K.V.D. agent breathless, he smuggles himself back into the Soviet Union, this time through Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan. In this last region too, he finds the power of the Stalinist regime in full swing; factories, pipe-lines, government buildings and ongoing mass deportation of peasants had Sovietized it effectively. The Central Asia portrayed by Maclean differs to some extent from that of Kapúscínski; in this narrative the old order jostles with the new, and people are shown as still being able to lead a traditional way of life alongside the latest Soviet developments. We also see Marxism coldly coexisting with Islam in Bokhara; the legendary markets of Samarkand still retain vestiges of their former brilliance side by side with kolkhoz farms. His reports to the British Government back in England on the Soviet presence in Central Asian lands can be seen as some of the last echoes of the Great Game. It is clear
from his narrative that the Communists had at last won ground in Central Asia to such an extent that the British presence was rendered ineffectual.

*Flight to Sovietland* by Satyanarayana Sinha (hereafter FTS) reflects the cultural changes wrought by architects of the Soviet regime: St. Petersburg had been renamed Leningrad, and it had a new Metro service. His visit to Soviet Central Asia in 1955 coincided with the festivals of the October Revolution's 38th anniversary and he sees many places decorated with Red banners, slogans and portraits of Soviet leaders. Passing through a gallery, he observes that paintings were made to the Soviet order – women were to be depicted as having been newly released from the oppression of Tsarist times; portraits of interesting characters depicted people from humble backgrounds with honest jobs provided by the Soviet Government. Sinha also finds that Indo-Soviet relations are also a cause for celebration and joy on the occasion: India and Russia have always had cordial political and social relations. Flying to any part of Soviet Russia from Moscow had become a relatively simple affair since the establishment of Aeroflot, the Soviet airline. This made travelling to Central Asian regions an easy matter, and a very different proposition from the days of crowded trains, or even further back, long
and tedious caravan-trails. In Kyrgyzstan, he hears of a musical that portrays Soviet reality — a young girl who had been sold in marriage to a hateful old man runs away to become a famous actress and “the idol of Kirghizia” (Sinha, FTS 108). He drives around Tashkent which is full of giant textile mills and agricultural machinery. An Uzbek dance that he witnesses tells the story of Gyulnara, a poor orphan who grew up to become a celebrated ballerina. In Tashkent’s Red Square, he is surprised to find a good many Muslim women alongside the jubilating crowds of men on the morning of the Anniversary Festivals, some even performing acrobatics. The days of oppression of women in Central Asia are over, in Sinha’s narrative. At Gorki Park in Termez he observes that the bust of the Soviet writer had been carved by a local artist to look like a Tajik. Flying over the Hindu Kush range, he located Bamiyan on a map, calling it “the Ajanta of Afghanistan” (Sinha, FTS 122). He speedily reaches Delhi from Moscow, the flight taking “only sixteen” hours. On the whole his narrative reflects Soviet cultural assimilation in the Central Asian lands in its most euphoric stage.

Maclean’s and Sinha’s works are instances of the outside world’s interest in the machinations of the Soviet system and the economic and
cultural changes that were being wrought within Soviet Central Asia. There were other travellers to this land who sought escape from the metropolis culture they lived in, and tried to derive satisfaction from visiting places of historical and ethno-cultural significance in Soviet Central Asia. This trend was akin to that of 20th century travel in the world context, wherein the ‘exotic’ peripheral land travelled to was seen as offering a purer mode of existence: temporary relief from the pressures of life in the metropolis. In 1953, the Rev. Georges Bissonnette was the only clergyman in the U.S.S.R. who was not a Soviet citizen. Hailing originally from New England, he was later appointed as Chaplain to the Americans in Moscow’s Foreign Colony. Convalescing after a jaundice epidemic hit the American Embassy in Moscow, he decides to accompany his friend Adalberto Figaro di Gropello (who was counsellor of the Italian Embassy) on a holiday trip to Soviet Central Asia. As they discuss their plans, Bissonnette is filled with excitement: “Visions of gold domes looking down on the eternal squalor of the East filled my mind as I heard the magic legendary names” (Moscow was my Parish 82. Hereafter MWMP). However, their adventures are severely limited by the Intourist apparatus which curbed the spirit of many an aspiring traveller in mid-20th century Soviet Central Asia. Tashkent disappoints him, as his arrival
there coincided with a fearful snowstorm; the weather permitted him only to visit a drab National Museum. In Bokhara and Samarkand, the past glory of their history and their legendary bazaars full of local colour had been almost totally replaced by drab kolkhoz farms. Beautiful mosques and native architecture had given way to apartment blocks, and Bissonnette cannot help commenting on the poverty of Soviet architecture. Everywhere in Central Asian towns and villages, he and his companion encounter a deep distrust of and hostility to photography. Central Asia's Islamic atmosphere was slowly being eroded by Soviet ideology which precluded religion, but the natives of the older generation were still culturally moored to Islamic belief which forbade pictorial representation. Strangely enough, they do not find this cultural resistance in Khiva; a motley crowd of children as well as adults gathers every time they want to take pictures, and people push and shove one another to get in camera range. Bissonnette offers no explanation of this remarkable cultural difference, despite his noticing that Khiva had "remained uniquely Eastern, virtually abandoned by the Soviets"; the native Khoresms (Khivans) themselves called their city "the last place on earth" (Bissonnette, MWMP 130).
During their time in Khiva, all the local folklore gathered by Bissonnette is unpleasantly associated with the simultaneous experience of his witnessing an aggressive campaign for Soviet elections. The memory of this campaign was further reinforced by a film on the glories of Communism, with Lenin for its hero. Alma-Ata resembled Frunze (as Bishkek the capital of Kyrgyzstan used to be known in Communist times), in that both capitals were strongholds of Communism; all the individuality of the pre-Revolutionary period had been nearly obliterated. Despite the fact that his experiences were to a large extent contrary to his expectations, Bissonnette says that the supreme discovery of his Central Asian trip was the idea of space: he was deeply struck by the sheer size of the Soviet Union as he travelled about in it.

This notion of the enormity of the Soviet Union and its growing power is also testified to by John Gunther, a British journalist who travelled to Russia in the 1950’s. His work, *Inside Russia Today* (Hereafter IRT) provides an insight into the relationship between post-Stalinist Russia and Central Asian dominions. Gunther managed to visit Bokhara, Samarkand and Tashkent after the obligatory tussle with Intourist. His work is clogged with much statistical information which
robs it of life as a travel-account. Notwithstanding such drawbacks, his research points to the immensity of Central Asia's natural resources and the manner in which larger Russia was using their resources. According to him, "What Central Asia means to the Soviet regime can be expressed ... by one word — Frontier" (Gunther, IRT 496). Elaborating on the achievements of Soviet development projects, he remarks that "(t)he desert (of Central Asia) blooms, not with roses but with factories" (Gunther, IRT 497). Another British writer Laurens Van Der Post, in his Journey into Russia illustrates with a telling anecdote the Soviet work-ethnic that had blanketed all individual enterprise in Central Asia: in Ashkhabad (capital of Turkmenistan), he is taken to a factory that produced rugs and carpets, and introduced in particular to a young girl there who could produce more carpets than any one else. She was regarded by the other workers as a heroine of Soviet Labour and was the admiration of the entire factory. This anecdote illuminates the way in which the Soviet notion of 'work for the common good' had infiltrated into one of the most traditional handicrafts that Central Asia had been famous for since times immemorial. To Van Der Post, this cheerful acceptance of youthful energies being harnessed to the Socialist cause seems "a frightening denial of life" (Journey into Russia 103).
Other travellers to the Soviet Union of the 1950's and 1960's have voiced similar apprehensions about the workings of the Soviet system. K.P.S. Menon, who was Indian Ambassador to the USSR from 1952 to 1961, is one such. Two of his works, *Many Worlds Revisited* (a sequel to his well-known autobiography *Many Worlds*; hereafter MWR) and *Russian Panorama* (a travelogue spanning his diplomatic career: hereafter RP), have been considered here. *Many Worlds Revisited* contains a detailed account of Menon's overland journey from India to Chungking in August 1944, which he performed in part on foot and on horseback in a span of 125 days. Many place-descriptions are taken from his book *Delhi-Chungking* which was his first work, published soon after the journey. The route of his travels took him from Bandipur in Kashmir to Yangihissar in Sinkiang; this route lay across the Himalayas, the Karakorams, the Pamirs, and over the Burzil, Mintaka and Chichkilik passes. The route then continued from Yangihissar along the southern edge of the Taklamakan desert to the historical towns of Kashgar and Keriya. From Kashgar to Urumchi he motored along the Sino-Soviet border for a thousand miles and flew the rest of the way to Chungking. His narrative of his travels is pleasantly laced with humorous anecdotes.
and is a standing example of the manner in which the personal element became an intrinsic part of travel-writing in general. In many mid-and late 20th century travel-accounts, autobiography is almost indistinguishable from travel-writing as a separate genre; Menon’s writing illustrates this.

Many travellers have been inspired by the legendary Marco Polo and Hiuen-Tsiang and Menon is no exception. He often quotes their words in his observations on the merry Turki people whom he found little influenced by the austere advent of Islam in the 10th century. His passage from Kashgar to Urumchi was on the northern arm of the Silk Road; he had traversed the southern route on his way to the oasis towns of Khotan and Keriya. These were the very routes used by Hiuen-Tsiang. Old relics in Khotan remind him of the rock-cut temples at Ajanta and Ellora: like them, these Khotanese relics were of an ancient and gracious civilisation that had flourished long ago. His stay in Urumchi was marked by political tension, for which reason he was glad to leave it by air for Lanchow, capital of the Kansu province. He has the unique experience of walking on the Yellow River which was frozen half along its length – “it was like walking on glass” (Menon, MWR 206). In parts of the river where ice was still forming, he quotes a Chinese description of it – “liu chu ,
flowing pearls” (Menon, MWR 206). His stay in Lanchow was memorable in other ways; he visited the tomb of the legendary Genghis Khan, which was guarded by Chinese soldiers and Mongol lamas. He is especially fascinated by one of the more gruesome banners of the mighty emperor – “Genghis Khan used to pluck a hair from the head of everyone of his victims and hang it on his banner; and there were as many hairs on the banner as stars in the sky” (Menon, MWR 207). A certain gentleness of nature and his cultivated sensibilities prompt him to light incense sticks at the tomb of the ferocious tyrant, keeping with Mongol traditions and withhold his judgement on the subject.

Menon recounts his visit to Chinese Central Asia as Ambassador to the USSR thirteen years later in both his works. The changes he witnessed in Urumchi on this latter visit make him feel like Rip Van Winkle – the collectivized and mechanised agriculture, the burgeoning schools, industries and technical institutes, the Sovietization of the ethnic populations and so on. Sinkiang, he feels, is no longer “a Central Asian Arcady” (Menon, MWR 209). The most conspicuous elements that emerge from both Menon’s works are to him the highly debatable advantages and changes wrought by Communism in Central Asia; as also
his intense concern over the onslaught on Nature by human technology. He bemoans the succumbing of the Karakoram-Himalaya region to the railways. He describes this place as “the last refuge of Nature” (Menon, MWR 209). Recalling his feelings on having travelled eight hundred miles from India to Sinkiang on foot and on horseback in 1944, he says:

“No one who has a feeling for Nature will contemplate with equanimity the prospect of an Indo-Sinkiang road. I dread the thought that some day men may ‘do’ in three or four days the magnificent country which it took me forty six days to march through. To enable every Tom, Dick and Harry to picnic at the foot of Nanga Parbat or Mount Rakaposhi or cross the Mintaka or the Chickkillik Pass in his jeep, or flit past the Batura or Sussaini glaciers, will be a sacrilege. But Nature will not permit it. Armed with snow and blizzards, avalanches and landslides, she will jealously guard these regions as her last preserve against the intrusion of man” (Menon, RP 196).

Comparing his earlier impressions of Urumchi with those of his 1957 visit, he remarks that the changes in Urumchi remind him of Oxford.
Though no two cities could be more unlike each other. Oxford which had once been a venerable city of learning was now a booming industrial town; while Urumchi which had for a thousand years been ‘an intellectual as well as a political vacuum’, had become a brand new world. Here the character as well as the composition of people had changed (Menon, RP 192).

Coming from a land which boasts of some of the most beautiful mountain systems in the world, he finds the Karakorams rather “moth-eaten” in comparison. Fascinated by the vast sterility of the Taklamakan desert, he echoes the sentiments of Stein and Younghusband in the remark: “... there was something majestic about it, something impressive in the very absoluteness with which it shut out all objects which might distract your attention from the contemplation of infinity” (Menon, MWR 200).

Elsewhere, Menon lays emphasis on the fact that his work Russian Panorama was meant to be travelogue, not a political memoir or economic study; his perception of the Soviet Union was uniquely different from other contemporary travellers:
“Factories leave me cold. By training and temperament, I am enthralled by the beauty and history of the places I visit and the charm and oddities of the people I meet rather than by the statistics and indices of production and distribution” (Menon, RP, Foreword vii).

This viewpoint was in complete contrast to those of the British, who in time-honoured fashion were keeping an anxious eye on the growth of the Soviet empire through their journalists, such as Van Der Post and Gunther. Their former apprehensions about Russia’s designs on India had all but proved baseless; now their greatest fear was that the Soviet Union would threaten Britain’s position as one of the world’s leading powers.

Menon’s dislike of the rush and hurry of modern life in the 20th century finds particular expression in his antipathy to all air travel. Every time he flew, he “felt like a postal packet, carried... by the winds of circumstance... over land, without a chance of getting to like it, to know it, or often even to see it” (Menon, RP 166). His acute sensitivity to the disadvantages of air travel makes him view Tashkent with a rather choleric eye initially. He likens the city which had become the capital of Soviet
Central Asia to any dishevelled district in North India, with the same discomforts, heat, flies, dust and listless humanity. In speaking of the four Central Asian republics he passed through, a keen awareness of the advantages as well as drawbacks of the Soviet regime is displayed. He notes some of the positive effects of Soviet administration such as the careful preservation of ancient architectural designs in Bokhara, Samarkand and Ferghana; here the state extended support to the indigenous population to study and keep alive their fabled arts and ancient cultural traditions. In Kyrgyzstan he saw the remarkable change and progress that had come about in just a few years after the Revolution; these were embodied in the establishment of hundreds of schools, collective farms, technical institutes and so on.

Moving from Kyrgyzstan to Kazakhstan, he likens the journey to that from Afghanistan to India, apparently struck by the enormous natural wealth of the latter republic. Agriculture and mining had made great advances in this mineral-rich land under the Soviet system. In Alma-Ata, he meets a Mother Heroine, who had gained this title for successfully raising a family of fourteen children. Describing his visit to her household, he extends the general impression of fertility and cheerful prosperity of the
land into their very drawing-room: “She has richly earned the title of Mother Heroine, having exceeded the prescribed quota of ten children by four ... a number of speeches were made eulogizing her services to the state...” (Menon, RP 184).

Tajikistan which he visited in 1960 (with the then President of India Dr. Rajendra Prasad), also appeared to be flourishing under the Communist regime. He was told time and again how culture had kept pace with economic development. But his keen observation detects various flaws in an apparently faultless and highly successful political system. To him, Soviet suppression of Islam the dominant religion in Central Asia, and of all other religions, was manifest in a local citizen’s mechanical declaration that there was complete freedom of religion in Uzbekistan. He also observes the manner in which the history of Central Asian peoples was being rewritten in accordance with Communist ideology: to the natives and local Russians of Uzbekistan, the tomb of the legendary emperor Tamburlaine was fast losing its historical importance and was merely a beautiful work of architecture. The Mongols, in stark contrast to the popular ideological trend, fiercely persisted in the belief that an immortal spirit resided in the tomb of their emperor Genghis Khan.
The Mongol uneasiness with the Soviet order of things has been noted by the American writer Gore Vidal who visited Mongolia in the 1980's, to report on the Gobi National Park which was just then being created. Mongolia was the first independent nation to turn socialist after Russia and theoretically it did not belong to the Soviet Union. But almost all their development projects were being funded by 'disinterested' Soviet aid, in the form of unconvertible rubles which could only be spent in accordance with Soviet regulations. In practice therefore, Mongolia was a Soviet sphere of influence. In his work, Gore Vidal has captured the inefficacy of Communist development projects in the capital Altai (southwestern Mongolia) in a telling detail of daily life. Apartment blocks had been put up to provide housing for the Mongols in this area. The freedom-loving Mongols, who have lived for centuries as nomads, showed their hatred for these closed spaces unmistakably; they put their animals and other belongings in the apartments and went back to living in their traditional yurtas, which served all their year-round needs. It kept them warm in winter and cool in summer and was a convenient portable home when they decided to move on. The missionaries Mildred Cable and Fransesca French had an accurate and sympathetic understanding of the
nomadic ways of the Mongols, among whom they lived and worked for many years: "The Mongol’s home is his tent, and his nomadic life is the expression of a compelling instinct. A house is intolerable to him, and even the restricting sense of an enclosing city wall is unbearable” (qtd. in ‘Mongolia!’ by Gore Vidal. R. Davidson, Journeys 403).

During the Iron Curtain years the Soviet Union had projected itself as a monolith embodying the principles of progress, equality and opportunity for one and all. The writing of K.P.S. Menon and others from the outside world brings a fresh perspective to bear on Soviet Central Asia, cutting across the rhetoric of Party propaganda and viewing the land and its peoples with an unbiased eye.

*Post-Soviet travelogues* :

In the late 1980’s, Gorbachev’s policies of liberalization, together with his ‘de-Stalinization’ programmes, ushered in a new era. There was a shift in emphasis from the conventional Soviet bureaucratic structures to
increased participation by "informals,"\textsuperscript{14} in the political affairs of Russia. These strategies seemed to contribute to a more relaxed atmosphere than had been hitherto possible in the USSR. However, there was an increasing disillusionment with the entire Communist set-up, which was further fuelled by the shocking discoveries (of the extermination of millions, Russian and non-Russian alike) of the de-Stalinization campaign. All hope of reforming the Communist polity was abandoned: "Almost overnight, Gorbachev’s public image shifted from that of a radical reformer to being the representative of a doomed system" (Dawisha et. al. RNSE 19). Despite desperate attempts on his part to contain the leakage of central power, the Soviet empire continued to disintegrate, with the nationalist cause (of Russian and non-Russians alike) being championed by Boris Yeltsin. Though the official declaration of the dissolution of the Soviet state did not happen till 1991, its effects could be seen and felt

\textsuperscript{14}. Organizations created through spontaneous social action that lay outside the administrative control of the Party and governmental bureaucracies (Dawisha et. al. RNSE 18).
in the closing years of the 1980's. The Iron Curtain had been abruptly drawn aside, letting in a stream of foreign travellers, curious to see what the Soviet system had been all about.

Amidst the waves of resurgent nationalism within Russia and the newly-independent Central Asian republics, there was a compulsive search for identity, meaning and cultural roots among the people, based on an intensive reexamination of their historical past. This trend was reflected in travel-writing on the Central Asia of the post-Soviet era, notably the work of Colin Thubron. During this period, a new sub-genre, of travel-writing as cultural history, developed as an offshoot of the post-colonial era. William Dalrymple’s *In Xanadu: A Quest* is an example of this (hereafter IXAQ). Following a tradition that was characteristic of much travel-writing on Central Asia, Dalrymple’s work points to his deep involvement with the legendary 13th century travels of the famous Venetian Marco Polo. Most 19th and 20th century travelogues display an awareness of the importance of Polo’s travels. But Dalrymple goes further than this; he undertakes a journey overland from Jerusalem to Xanadu, closely following Marco Polo’s trail, with a phial of Holy Oil from the Sepulchre to take to Xanadu, even as Polo had done in the time of Kublai
Khan. In doing this Dalrymple belongs to a group of late 20th century travellers and travel-writers who have been keen to follow in the footsteps of earlier known travellers to a particular region; like them, his method was to retrace the route "in order to mark the historical gap between the two moments and ... to throw light on the earlier work...". As a traveller, he also takes on the role of investigator, with the result that his work reads somewhat like a detective story (CCTW 98).

Dalrymple set off on his historical journey as an undergraduate at Cambridge, accompanied by his then girlfriend Louisa. The first part of his journey, from Jerusalem to Lahore was accomplished under the able guidance of another friend, Laura (who at the age of twenty one had single-handedly explored the whole of India when her father was posted in Delhi). In the spring of 1986, the Karakoram highway (which connected Pakistan with China) was reopened to foreign travellers, albeit with severe restrictions. Official red tape and bureaucratic obstacles, more frustrating to travellers in Central Asia than ever before, were miraculously swept aside by the weight of Laura’s influential connections. Throughout the narrative, Dalrymple expresses a feeling of being overwhelmed by the complete efficiency and control over difficult situations exhibited by his
female travel-companions. At Jerusalem, he experiences the usual culture-shock of most white travellers to the Orient; in his case it was mitigated by the touristic atmosphere of the place, with foreigners of all sorts intent on acquiring culture. As they pass from Jerusalem to Latakia and on to the village of Masyaf, Dalrymple closely compares his route with that of Polo. He justifies his travels in Syria by noting that Polo discusses a sect known as the Assassins, who had their headquarters at Masyaf in 1271. From Aleppo they cross the border to Turkey without event, other than the usual challenges of dealing with upset stomachs, corrupt officials reeking of alcohol and so on. At the port of Ayas, he finds that there was little in it to reflect its former prosperity, something that Polo had written about. It was here that the two friars who had been sent with the Polos to try and convert the Mongol Khan fled back to Acre, following a rumour that some militant Baibar fanatics were coming there in force.

At Sivas, he realizes that Polo had not distinguished the Seljuk Turks from the nomadic Turcomans, who were their enemies, but instead grouped them together in a province called ‘Turcomania’. He notes that

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15. They were a militant group of the Sh’ia sect, called the Ismailis.
Sir Henry Yule, the famous editor of Polo's *Travels* had not provided any footnotes on this matter. He visits the Ulu Jami, the oldest mosque in Sivas, the Gok madrassah which had been besieged in 1400 A.D. by Tamburlaine, and the village of Sarikli, where the traditional handicraft of carpet-weaving that had been mentioned by Polo still survived.

To enter Iran, which was in the hands of religious extremists and overrun by Iranian Revolutionary Guards, Laura wears a traditional *chador* (resembling a burqa), and poses as Dalrymple's wife. They reach Tabriz, the next town on Polo's route, which had an evil reputation both in the *Travels* and in Ibn Battuta's work. Dalrymple finds that the atmosphere in Tabriz exactly paralleled that at the time of Polo: wealth from oil resources had led to "miles of ugly urban sprawl" (IXAQ 121). At Saveh, he searches for some ancient monuments which Polo had mentioned in connection with Zoroastrianism, but to no avail. Later his researches revealed the possibilities of the natives of Saveh having a traditional religious trip of their own to Bethlehem, independent of the Christian gospel.
On entering Lahore in Pakistan, they realize that the Muslim natives are highly Westernized due to British influence, and Laura is able to discard her chador. They stay with a Pakistani friend whom they had known back in Cambridge; at this stage of the journey, Laura makes her way alone to Delhi, and Dalrymple’s ex-girlfriend Louisa takes her place. As they go up the Karakoram highway, Dalrymple pauses to explore the Pir-Sar and Swat regions that had had such glamorous historicity for Sir Aurel Stein. Dalrymple too shows an easy familiarity with Alexander’s exploits in this region. Coming up against a group of fierce Gujars, Dalrymple manages to turn their hostility aside, and generates interest in his camera instead; he is offered a dish of sticky rice and goat’s leg, a traditional offering that might well have been made to Alexander himself, when he conquered this region.

Driving past Gilgit, they camp in Hunza which reminds Dalrymple of the Scots Borders in February, with its valley of orchards and asphodels. Reaching Tashkurgan, where Polo had stopped sometime in 1272-3, he finds that his impression of the place was even less favourable than Polo’s: “The town was ugly and cold, the people were yawping morons... The caravanserai looked and felt like a refugee camp... I wanted
to be anywhere, anywhere but not Tashkurgan” (Dalrymple, IXAQ 220). They manage to hitch a ride on a bus to Kashgar, where they visit the famous Chini-Bagh, the erstwhile residence of the Macartneys. The once proud building of the British Consulate in the 1890’s was now being used as an overnight stop for long-distance Pakistani truck-drivers, with the garden left wild and the stables turned into rows of “stinking squatter loos” (Dalrymple, IXAQ 229). Dalrymple also finds that Kashgar as a whole had partaken of this general atmosphere of decay, though the Chinese were at pains to prove that it was the most forward of Maoist communities. Having gone to the Kashgar Sunday bazaar with all its attendant filth, noise and crowds, they make their way to Khotan. As they enter the Taklamakan, Dalrymple quotes Polo’s anecdote of the desert’s legendary evil spirits and the pilgrim Hiuen-Tsiang’s vision of ghostly soldiers with lances and horses and camels. The only soldiers Dalrymple saw were real, and of the People’s Liberation Army. At Yarkand, he saw no trace of the disease of goitre that had afflicted the populace in Marco Polo’s time; instead he finds that they have a following of Uighurs, who have a fascination for the Europeans, whom they consider hideous. In Keriya, their next stop, they meet a party of German geomorphologists who were surveying the Tarim Basin with the Chinese. Among them was
a German professor, who had been invited by the local Governor to sleep with two of his most recently-acquired wives. Dalrymple speculates that a similar offer made to Polo may have prompted him to write on the uniquely peculiar terms of marriage of Keriya natives:

“If the husband of any woman goes away upon a journey and remains away for more than twenty days, as soon as that term is passed the woman may marry another man, and the husband may also marry whoever he pleases.” (qtd. in Dalrymple, IXAQ 267).

Coming to the capital of Peking from the Taklamakan (where they had survived a buran, a deadly sandstorm), they find it an exciting metropolis; they see “…ten thousand…bicycles, wide avenues, past crocodiles of schoolchildren, past groups of tourists photographing each other, past cranes and building sites and department stores” (Dalrymple, IXAQ 284-5). Savouring the city’s modern comforts, Dalrymple wishes that Peking were the end of their journey, but realizes that they must press on to Xanadu, the ancient summer capital of Kublai Khan. (The original name is Shang-tu; it was called Xanadu by Coleridge in his famous poem Kubla Khan.) In 1872, the ruins of the emperor’s palace were
accidentally discovered by a physician Dr. S.W. Bushell of the British legation at Peking, on a botanical expedition north of the Great Wall. Despite his having incorporated his findings in the botanical report that he submitted to the Royal Geographical Society in 1874, the Western world remained largely ignorant of his work. “Despite its mythical fame, Xanadu... seem(ed) to have remained a scholarly lacunae” (Dalrymple, IXAQ 288).

With only Bushell’s article for a guide and twelve hours to find the ancient ruins of Xanadu, they make their way with some difficulty to Zheng Lan Qi, a small hamlet near Xanadu. This was a surprising achievement since Inner Mongolia was a sensitive border region closed to foreigners. After what appears to have been a bribe to the local Mongol Public Security guards, they were driven in a jeep towards their destination and eventually crossed the river Alph, the same mentioned by Coleridge in his immortal poem. As they made for the inner enclosure of the ruined city, Dalrymple remarks: “Our vision of Xanadu was nearer the heath scene in Lear than the exotic pleasure-garden described by Polo” (IXAQ 298). But they had travelled twelve thousand miles to get to this spot, where seven hundred and eleven years before, Marco Polo had also
stood at the end of his journey. Climbing up a ramp, Dalrymple knelt before the place where the throne of the Khan used to stand, and tipped the Holy Oil from Jerusalem onto the ground. The rest of the scene is worth quoting in full: “Then, in the drizzle, halfway across the world from Cambridge, Louisa and I recited in unison the poem that had immortalized the palace in whose wreckage we stood:

_In Xanadu did Kubla Khan_

_A stately pleasure-dome decree:_

_Where Alph, the sacred river, ran_

_Through caverns measureless to man_

_Down to a sunless sea._

_So twice five miles of fertile ground_

_With walls and towers were girdled round:_

_And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,_

_Where blossom’d many an incense-bearing tree;_

_And here were forests ancient as the hills,_

_Enfolding sunny spots of greenery._
“Below, beside the Jeep, the Mongols stood shaking their heads. As we walked back towards them the Party cadre revolved his index finger in his temple. He grunted something in Mongol. Then he translated it for us: ‘Bonkers’, he said. ‘English people, very, very bonkers.’” (Dalrymple, Ixaq 300).

This scene is unique and memorable for many reasons, the most important one being that Dalrymple’s journey symbolized, at an individual level, a tentative return to a sense of the past that had been blanketed for more than half a century of Communist rule. The Mongols’ bewilderment at the foreigners’ enthusiasm over a heap of ruins, and the uncomprehending irreverence displayed by the security guards as Dalrymple performed his quaint little ritual, reflect the stifling influence of Communist ideology on this remote region in innermost Asia.

One country in which the Soviet regime met with the staunchest and bloodiest resistance was Afghanistan. The Soviet invasion of the country had taken place in December 1979, but the war-like Afghans had put up a stiff opposition to Sovietization from the beginning, with the result that the decade-long Soviet occupation of Afghanistan had been synonymous with
war. As many as five million people were forced to become refugees on the country’s borders. The war itself was nothing new to the Afghans; to them it was a fight for liberation from the Soviet authorities. Various resistance groups (religious and others) formed to drive Soviet invaders, with weapons and funds from American, Middle Eastern, European and Chinese sources. By 1989 they had been successful in their war-drive; Soviet troops, leaving at least fifty thousand of their dead behind them, withdrew from Afghanistan’s troubled interiors. The war then moved to major cities like Kabul, where the Communists held on for three more years before giving up. Jason Elliot, author of *An Unexpected Light* (hereafter AUL), first visited this country, incredibly, during the Soviet occupation. All foreigners were forbidden to enter this last Communist holding; but inspired by various travel-accounts and his own fascination for the country, Elliot had managed to smuggle himself, at nineteen, into war-torn Afghanistan. The sudden transition from a well-ordered tranquil world into a land of strife, bloodshed, senseless slaughter, revenge, banditry and general lawlessness, leaves an indelible impression on the young man’s mind. Deciding to write a book on the country that fascinated him so deeply, Elliot made two more determined trips to
Afghanistan, with the help of various political contacts, and other friends who were working as reporters within the country.

His first visit coincided with the period during which Soviet Russia was at war with Afghanistan, trying to forcibly turn this unique melting-pot of races and cultures into a single Communist entity, just as they had done with the ethnic minorities of Turkestan. The second and third visits enable him to witness the internal conflicts of the country, largely generated by the frictions between the wide-ranging ethnic diversity of the peoples and the growing power of various militant religious groups, such as the Taliban and the mujahedden. Elliot is at pains to show that the latter group were not the violent drug-crazed mercenaries that the Soviets and the rest of the Western world had constructed; they were “ordinary Afghans.” Among them were farmers, businessmen, merchants, university teachers, shepherds, or soldiers who had fled the army; there were the rich and the poor, the educated and illiterates. The name itself means ‘those who struggle’ but is mistakenly understood by the West as ‘holy warriors’ (Elliot, AUL 31). The Muslim term for this holy war is ‘jihad’, and it is aimed at ridding the country of all foreign infiltration. The repression of the Taliban (meaning ‘students of religion’) regime, their clashes with the
mujaheddin and other rival groups, and the extreme fundamentalism they sought to propagate is all part of Afghanistan’s recent history. With the September 11 (2001) terrorist attack on America, Afghanistan became the target of a swift and terrible retribution, with the ultimate fall of the Taliban regime. Post-Taliban Afghanistan is fraught with unresolved political tensions, millions of displaced or dead people, and the mushrooming of refugee camps where starvation, disease and crime stalk the masses and human life has no value.

Jason Elliot’s work is not so much a travel-account, as a sensitive perception describing the terrible beauty of this war-torn country, with its stoic war-like peoples and their fierce independent spirit. As a post-colonial writer, Elliot is only too keenly aware that “(l)andscape and traveller are sites of indeterminacy, so that travel is not the simple inscription of an established meaning over a neutralised identityless other” (Clark, TWAE 39). He finds himself caught up in the confusion: now meeting with warmth and friendliness from the poorest of the poor, and simultaneously, suspicion of his presence there at such a time. This suspicion deepens into open hostility on many an occasion, when he is forced to explain his intention of writing a book based on his experience in
Afghanistan. One irate old gentleman demands to know what picture of Afghans in general Elliot is creating for his Western audience; his guide Ali Khan is filled with incredulity that anyone should spend all his hard-earned money just to travel and write a book of his experiences. Ali Khan asks Elliot how much his government was going to pay him for the book; when he learns that the author was on his own shoe-string budget, he immediately concludes that Elliot was a very rich man, with unlimited leisure on his hands. Elliot comments: “Again I was reminded of what a very Western pursuit is the business of travel – what a strange and improbable liberty it really is to be able to wander about a country halfway across the world from one’s own” (Elliot, AUL 160).

Elliot’s condition as a post-colonial travel-writer is akin to that identified by the critic Meaghan Morris in his reading of the Australian travel-writer Ernestine Hill. Morris sees the traveller as “wavering between two worlds: one of the concrete, of the objective, of desire satisfied through the written record of possession; the other is a world of frustration and derealisation, populated by mirages, spectres and ghosts, where the fantasies of possessing and occupying the other – of knowing, with any certainty – simply vanish” (Clark, TWAE 40). Elliot finds it
infinitely difficult to comprehend or accept the phenomenon of war itself: the mind-numbing fear of unexpected bomb explosions, artillery attacks, guns being thrust at one’s head for no reason, and the constant awareness of the valuelessness of human life. With every attempt he makes to move to a further place on his journey within Afghanistan, he is met by dire warnings, to the effect that lone travel anywhere in the country, that too for a white man, was suicide. He asks himself how the Afghans had become inured to this impossible situation of constant and immediate peril: “Were they... all mad or suicidal?” (Elliot, AUL 139). For himself, he never grew accustomed or indifferent to the sight of so much deliberate destruction and death; he found it heart-rending and shameful. His own experiences, which included several brushes with death, leave him feeling unnerved and defenceless. One such was upon his entry into the capital Mazar-i-Sharief, when a group of free-roaming ragged teenagers, armed to the teeth, cock a rifle at him ‘for fun’ (Elliot, AUL 244). Another time, he just managed to jump aside and evade a buried shell in a mined mountainside. At every crisis-point of his journey, he has political contacts, European friends and the Red cross to extricate him from his troubles; he feels a sense of failure each time.
The simple faith in Islam, where he sees it tinged by fanaticism, shows up the, to him, inadequacies of Christianity:

"Few non-Moslems are aware of the profound reverence throughout the Islamic world for Jesus, or of the high esteem in which Maryam, Mary, is held by practising Moslems. There is no historical equivalent, in the reverse sense, to the centuries of derogation in the West of Islam as a system of faith, or the calumny heaped upon its Prophet. And whereas Christianity has distanced itself from Islam, there remains in the Islamic world a deep consciousness of the intertwining roots of both religions, which once flourished on the same soils" (Elliot, AUL 351).

Curiously enough, Elliot senses an unmistakable atmosphere of ‘tasleem’ (submission to Fate) pervading a proud and fierce nation. A young Afghan who offers him hospitality speaks sadly of the effects of war:

"...the saddest thing about this war is that we have lost the old way of travelling in Afghanistan. Before, a Hazara could travel in a
Pushtun area without any fear whatsoever. A Pushtun could travel in Panjshir and be sure of real hospitality. It was the same with the Uzbeks, and the peoples in the north. Nowadays none of that is possible. The tension between these peoples is too great... before the war ... ethnic differences... were secondary. We were all Afghans... The war has changed all that” (Elliot, AUL 81).

A certain marked sympathy for the oppressed and poor in Afghanistan is to be seen throughout Elliot’s narrative. He aches with frustrated helplessness as he sees a Taliban soldier bullying a man in the street; in Kabul he had been offered hospitality by people who he knew had very little themselves. At one point, he feels that it was a futile undertaking to attempt any written record of the many and varied experiences he had in this remarkable land; he asks:

“What, after all, was a travel book? That young Italian had started it all in the thirteenth century, and had given the telling of tall tales from foreign parts its subsequent respectability. On the whole it

16. On a lighter note, Elliot attributes this trait in his personality to the experience of having older brothers.
had not changed much since Polo’s time: a man or a woman sets off for foreign parts ignorant of both the language and geography of the place, with an out-of-date map and borrowed phrase book, preys shamelessly for as long as the family trust fund will allow on the hospitality of the native people, and returns home to hastily record his or her first impressions in a semi-fictional collection of descriptions that affirm the prejudices of the day. Then, ... he or she retrospectively invents a fashionable ‘quest’ around which the narrative can be twisted in every direction except towards the truth, fits it tidily with invented dialogues, speculative history, sweeping inaccuracies, mistranslations, verbose accounts of having braved hazards endured daily by ordinary local people without complaint, portrays as revelation long lists of trivial facts known to every local schoolchild, and bludgeons the original spirit of the endeavour in an attempt to appear erudite with the academic verbiage of out-of-print encyclopaedias, disguising all the while the discomfort of being at sea in an alien culture by resorting to the quirky, condescending humour that its couch-bound audience will think of as funny. The result? Only a confirmation of what
"everybody already knows: better to stay at home" (Elliot, AUL 289-290).

This tirade, admitted by the author himself to be somewhat cynical, nevertheless does highlight some of the major pitfalls of the genre of travel-writing, in a way that very few travellers or travel-writers have done before. The drawbacks that Elliot pinpoints as being almost characteristic of the genre, were present in a great many travel-accounts on Central Asia, even in the 20th century. In an argument with a Dutchman who wanted to know the purpose of his journey, Elliot defensively suggests that “a journey was a kind of story in itself... just as a story too could be a journey...” (AUL 290). His ideas about the entire genre of travel-writing seem to be in keeping with Michel Butor's comment: “...[if] travel leads to the composition of a book, this is because in writing a book one is engaged in the act of travelling” (Clark, TWAE 35).

Contemporary travel-writing has progressed beyond the simple, linear representation of the traveller’s movements from his home ground to an unfamiliar land, and his experiences there. This travel-paradigm was a convention of the genre of travel-writing until the last decades of the 20th
century. A cursory look at the works of Elliot and Thubron shows that
the genre has grown, to admit a good deal of post-modern self-questioning in
the background of attempting to convey post-colonial realities. In Central
Asia, this newer manifestation of travel-writing more or less formed a
parallel with the breakup of the Soviet superstructure and the subsequent
political, economic and cultural uncertainties that the land has had to face.
Colin Thubron has described the (20th century) travel book as a
“postmodern collage” (CCTW 10), which his own work *The Lost heart of
Asia* (hereafter TLHOA) exemplifies. Thubron’s travel-account was born
of a journey he made through the various Central Asian countries in the
first summer of their independence from Moscow. Little vignettes of
experience told in anecdotal style make up the narrative structure of the
travologue. His technique is distinctly post-colonial in implication: he lets
the empire write back, with the natives he meets talking about themselves
and their countries. He does not intrude as omniscient narrator. For
instance in Ashkhabad, he speaks to a woman who was half-Russian and
half -Armenian, and was married to a Turcoman; she wanted to go to
Russia because in her own country (Turkmenistan) finding employment
meant having a good knowledge of the Turcoman language, which had
replaced Russian after the Soviet collapse. Thubron realizes from her story that overnight she had become a foreigner in her own birthplace.

Thubron’s narrative projects Central Asian countries in terms of destruction: his journey is an almost exclusive itinerary of forgotten or desecrated tombs, places of long-suppressed legend, remains of holy mosques and so on. His work throws up the paradoxical fact that Central Asian countries were having to rebuild their new-found identities, in political, religious and cultural terms, out of the dead and forgotten past. For instance, he finds that every man who had died defending his ethnic culture from enemies is now a hero (some were even canonized as saints), with his tomb sanctified as a holy shrine. In Bukhara, he comes upon the mausoleum of a Sufi saint which had been turned into a Museum of Atheism during Stalin’s time. Now it was being rapidly restored, and thronged with fervent pilgrims. In the silk town of Margilan, he finds that somebody had pulled down the town’s main statue of Lenin under cover of night, to make way for the restoration of a holy man’s tomb. From this and other details, it would appear that resurgent nationalism, however reactionary, was still largely surreptitious and furtive in nature, because people were caught between two worlds, one dead, and the other just
born. It is clear that most places in Central Asian countries are inseparable from their original culture, the Soviet rewriting of it, and now a confused resurgent nationalism. Thubron’s interactions with people and his travels are suffused with the emerging elements of a strange new culture: a confused sense of nationhood (in which Stalin had played a major role), a vague recollection of ethnic pasts long since buried in obscurity, and a new economic imperialism brought about by American dollars. This new state of affairs had with it its own problems: uncontrolled inflation, a lack of conviction or principles, and a frightening rise in crime rates. He hears of apartments costing a million and a half rubles; meat and vodka, which had been three rubles each originally were now ninety and hundred respectively. The price of petrol had gone up 150 per cent in less than a year, while flour, cooking oil, butter and sugar were all rationed. As Thubron puts it, money was on everybody’s lips, except his own (TLHOA 298). Oman, a man who drives him from Termez to Shakhrisabz, struggles with an overheated engine, which he feels was entirely due to the cheating of the mechanics. He shouts, in a fresh invective against crime: “It’s the Russians who brought in this thieving and prostitution!” (Thubron, TLHOA 298).
As he proceeds from one erstwhile Soviet republic to the next, each struggling with its new-found independence, Thubron comes up against the same questions: whether the Soviet collapse was a disaster, or if a long-looked-for dream had come true. His narrative cuts across a cross-section of Central Asian peoples, each with a unique ethnic past and unique problems of the present. A conspicuous and painful absence of a sense of belonging to one’s country and tribe, and of a sense of direction in a suddenly ‘free’ world are the most common problems that people face. In a memorable incident, in which Thubron rescues a drunken Oman from a police lock-up, it turns out that Oman had been abused as “a Soviet sheep”; Thubron realises that to “be Soviet was to be a traitor” (TLHOA 302). The problems of unemployment and a fierce desire to return to one’s ethnic roots characterise the talk of many people he meets. He realizes that the problem of ethnicity had only increased in complexity: Central Asia (whether Soviet or free) has always had one of the largest concentrations of intermixed races and cultures in human history. The limitations of the Stalinist divisions of Central Asia come into pitiless light.

A Tartar woman who was a teacher, married to a man who was half-Chechen, voices the dilemma of one of her students: “A boy came to me yesterday and said, “My father is Ukrainian, my mother Tartar, so what
am I? I suppose I'm just Russian” and I couldn't answer him.” As for Central Asian Muslims now bereft of their Soviet status, she says “they don’t feel any identity really. They may call themselves Uzbeks or Tajiks, but it doesn’t mean much to them. They were Soviet before... (they) all had this idea that (they) were one people... And now we’re left with nothing” (Thubron, TLHOA 87).

In Samarkand, the young caretaker of Tamburlaine’s tomb says: “I may be an Uzbek... but above all I am a Turk”, and then complains of not being able to “feel Uzbek” (Thubron, TLHOA 167).

Thubron finds that countries like America, Saudi Arabia and England have come to gain immense stature for economic reasons in the eyes of Central Asian peoples. Often the inflation in their own country and the lure of American dollars lead men to question the entire Soviet system and show it up for the monstrous mistake it has become today. In a maze of mixed reactions to a failed philosophy, Thubron meets with both hysterical despair and a wistful optimism about the future. In Bukhara he meets an old lady who was famous in her locality for her fierce faith in the old order of Communism. She views the Soviet collapse
as a total disaster, and holds forth on the spiralling prices of tomatoes and cabbages. Her daughter-in-law sadly pointed out that the question of nationality was hopelessly complicated: “In some families one brother’s registered as an Uzbek and another as Tajik... Maybe people are too interbred to become nationalists” (Thubron, TLHOA 69). Elsewhere, near Lake Issyk-kul in Kyrgyzstan, he meets an old woman in a threadbare coat and split boots who insisted that the new order was not without its comforts:

“... Everything’s fine, it’s wonderful! ... When people say how terrible everything is, I ask why? What does everybody want? .... Why can’t people be content? I have a little garden..... where I grow cherries and nuts, and there’s a plot of land for pensioners where we plant potatoes. I’ve got everything I need. My teacher’s pension is just nine hundred and five roubles a month but it’s all right. The sun’s good, the earth’s good and the winters are mild here!” (qtd. in Thubron, TLHOA 364).
It is difficult to believe that the younger generation in Central Asia, restless in their peculiar situation, could possibly achieve this level of contentment.

An uneasy freedom pervades most of the capitals he visits, such as Samarkand, Bukhara and Khiva. People are uncertain how to react to the new political situation and often turn to religion for guidance and comfort. Islam, the predominant religion in Central Asian countries for many centuries, is shown up to have had a covert existence even during the repression of the Soviet era. Now, more than ever, it is the one factor that helps to bind people of such diverse cultural backgrounds. [This is true despite the troubling divide between the Shi’a and Sunni sects of Islam.] A group of young scholars at the Ulug Beg madrassah in Bukhara, among whom were an Uzbek, a Tashkent native, an Azeri, a Kyrgyz, a Turk and an Afghan Tajik, assure him that they believe “in the end everybody will become a Moslem” (Thubron, TLHOA 74).

Thubron’s narrative describes the immediate effects of Soviet collapse on Central Asia, and the problems thereof. These problems have increased in complexity with Central Asia’s re-emergence into the world
in the global context. The immense natural wealth of Central Asia, especially its oil and gas reserves, is now a site of contestation among Russia, the United States, Iran, Turkey, Pakistan and China; Russia, China and the U.S. have attempted to establish pipelines that would give them both access to Central Asia’s wealth, and influence over its peoples. This power-struggle has come to be called by analysts the “new Great Game” (Rashid, Jihad 7).

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