

Isabella Bird

Among the Tibetans



AMONG THE TIBETANS

This little-known gem by the doyenne of women travellers in the East describes a journey on horseback through the Himalayas and into Tibet, where she spent four months. Enchanted by the Tibetans whom she found 'the pleasantest of people', Bird's is a delightful account of a land of beauty and mystery, encircled by high mountains of vermilion and purple. Among the most striking passages are those that describe the religion of Tibet, which permeated the very atmosphere with a singular sense of the strange and otherworldly. Bird visited palaces, temples and monasteries and her descriptions of the ceremonies, decorations, costumes and music capture a world that is now lost for all time.

ISABELLA LUCY BIRD (MRS BISHOP) was born in 1831. She won fame in her own time as surely the most remarkable woman traveller of the nineteenth century. She published nine books about her travels, and her writing is guaranteed to produce a thirst for adventure and travel. She died in Edinburgh in 1904. Among her books are *Korea and Her Neighbours* and *Six Months in Hawaii*, both published by Kegan Paul.



Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

THE KEGAN PAUL LIBRARY
OF CENTRAL ASIA

THE PATHANS
Olaf Caroe

AMONG THE TIBETANS
Isabella Bird

A THOUSAND YEARS OF THE TARTARS
E. H. Parker



USMAN SHAH

AMONG THE TIBETANS

ISABELLA L. BIRD

WITH MANY ILLUSTRATIONS

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2001 by Kegan Paul Limited

Distributed by:
John Wiley & Sons

&

Columbia University Press

Published 2018 by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN
52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017

First issued in paperback 2018

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

Copyright © 2001 Taylor & Francis

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Notice:

Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Bird, Isabella L. (Isabella Lucy), 1831-1904

Among the Tibetans. – 2nd ed. – (Kegan Paul Library of Central Asia)

1. Bird, Isabella L. (Isabella Lucy), 1831-1904 – Journeys – China – Tibet 2. Tibet (China) – Social life and customs – 19th century 3. Tibet (~China) – Description and travel

I. Title

915.1'5'0434

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Applied for.

ISBN 13: 978-1-138-86358-3 (pbk)

ISBN 13: 978-0-7103-0695-1 (hbk)

CONTENTS



	PAGE
CHAPTER I	
THE START	7
CHAPTER II	
SHERGOL AND LEH	40
CHAPTER III	
NUBBA	73
CHAPTER IV	
MANNERS AND CUSTOMS	101
CHAPTER V	
CLIMATE AND NATURAL FEATURES	130

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

	PAGE
Usman Shah	<i>Frontispiece</i>
The Start from Srinagar	13
Camp at Gagangair	18
Sonamarg	21
A hand Prayer-Cylinder	42
Tibetan Girl	45
Gonpo of Spitak	51
Leh	57
A Chod-Ten	66
A Lama	74
Three Gopas	77
Some Instruments of Buddhist Worship	86
Monastic Buildings at Basgu	93
The Yak (<i>Bos grunniens</i>)	100
A Chang-pa Woman	102
Chang-pa Chief	110
The Castle of Stok	117
First Village in Kulu	125
A Tibetan Farm-house	133
Lahul Valley	141
Gonpo at Kylang	149

CHAPTER I

THE START

THE Vale of Kashmir is too well known to require description. It is the 'happy hunting-ground' of the Anglo-Indian sportsman and tourist, the resort of artists and invalids, the home of *pashm* shawls and exquisitely embroidered fabrics, and the land of Lalla Rookh. Its inhabitants, chiefly Moslems, infamously governed by Hindus, are a feeble race, attracting little interest, valuable to travellers as 'coolies' or porters, and repulsive to them from the mingled cunning and obsequiousness which have been fostered by ages of oppression. But even for them there is the dawn of hope, for the Church Missionary Society has a strong medical and educational mission at the capital, a hospital and dispensary under the charge of a lady M.D. have been opened for women, and a capable

and upright 'settlement officer,' lent by the Indian Government, is investigating the iniquitous land arrangements with a view to a just settlement.

I left the Panjāb railroad system at Rawul Pindi, bought my camp equipage, and travelled through the grand ravines which lead to Kashmir or the Jhelum Valley by hill-cart, on horseback, and by house-boat, reaching Srinagar at the end of April, when the velvet lawns were at their greenest, and the foliage was at its freshest, and the deodar-skirted mountains which enclose this fairest gem of the Himalayas still wore their winter mantle of unsullied snow. Making Srinagar my headquarters, I spent two months in travelling in Kashmir, half the time in a native house-boat on the Jhelum and Pohru rivers, and the other half on horseback, camping wherever the scenery was most attractive.

By the middle of June mosquitos were rampant, the grass was tawny, a brown dust haze hung over the valley, the camp-fires of a multitude glared through the hot nights and misty moonlight of the Munshibagh, English tents dotted the landscape, there was no mountain, valley, or plateau, however remote, free from the clatter of English voices and the trained servility of Hindu servants, and even Sonamarg, at an altitude of 8,000 feet and rough of access, had

capitulated to lawn-tennis. To a traveller this Anglo-Indian hubbub was intolerable, and I left Srinagar and many kind friends on June 20 for the uplifted plateaux of Lesser Tibet. My party consisted of myself, a thoroughly competent servant and passable interpreter, Hassan Khan, a Panjābi; a *seis*, of whom the less that is said the better; and Mando, a Kashmiri lad, a common coolie, who, under Hassan Khan's training, developed into an efficient travelling servant, and later into a smart *khātmatgar*.

Gyalpo, my horse, must not be forgotten—indeed, he cannot be, for he left the marks of his heels or teeth on every one. He was a beautiful creature, Badakshani bred, of Arab blood, a silver-grey, as light as a greyhound and as strong as a cart-horse. He was higher in the scale of intellect than any horse of my acquaintance. His cleverness at times suggested reasoning power, and his mischievousness a sense of humour. He walked five miles an hour, jumped like a deer, climbed like a *yak*, was strong and steady in perilous fords, tireless, hardy, hungry, frolicked along ledges of precipices and over crevassed glaciers, was absolutely fearless, and his slender legs and the use he made of them were the marvel of all. He was an enigma to the end. He was quite untamable, rejected all dainties with indignation, swung his heels into

people's faces when they went near him, ran at them with his teeth, seized unwary passers-by by their *kamar bands*, and shook them as a dog shakes a rat, would let no one go near him but Mando, for whom he formed at first sight a most singular attachment, but kicked and struck with his forefeet, his eyes all the time dancing with fun, so that one could never decide whether his ceaseless pranks were play or vice. He was always tethered in front of my tent with a rope twenty feet long, which left him practically free; he was as good as a watchdog, and his antics and enigmatical savagery were the life and terror of the camp. I was never weary of watching him, the curves of his form were so exquisite, his movements so lithe and rapid, his small head and restless little ears so full of life and expression, the variations in his manner so frequent, one moment savagely attacking some unwary stranger with a scream of rage, the next laying his lovely head against Mando's cheek with a soft cooing sound and a childlike gentleness. When he was attacking anybody or frolicking, his movements and beauty can only be described by a phrase of the Apostle James, 'the grace of the fashion of it.' Colonel Durand, of Gilgit celebrity, to whom I am indebted for many other kindnesses, gave him to me in exchange for a cowardly, heavy Yarkand horse, and

had previously vainly tried to tame him. His wild eyes were like those of a seagull. He had no kinship with humanity.

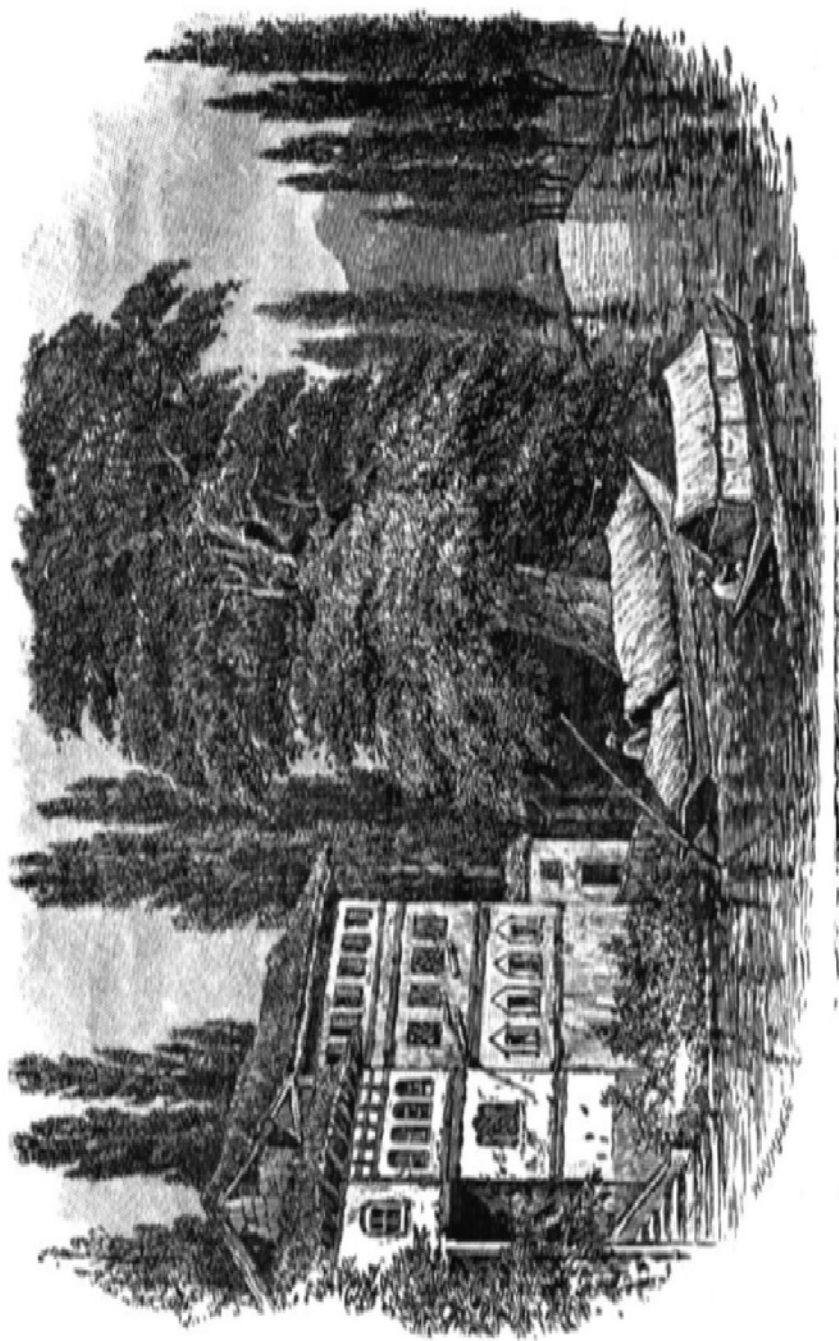
In addition, I had as escort an Afghan or Pathan, a soldier of the Maharajah's irregular force of foreign mercenaries, who had been sent to meet me when I entered Kashmir. This man, Usman Shah, was a stage ruffian in appearance. He wore a turban of prodigious height ornamented with poppies or birds' feathers, loved fantastic colours and ceaseless change of raiment, walked in front of me carrying a big sword over his shoulder, plundered and beat the people, terrified the women, and was eventually recognised at Leh as a murderer, and as great a ruffian in reality as he was in appearance. An attendant of this kind is a mistake. The brutality and rapacity he exercises naturally make the people cowardly or surly, and disinclined to trust a traveller so accompanied.

Finally, I had a Cabul tent, 7 ft. 6 in. by 8 ft. 6 in., weighing, with poles and iron pins, 75 lbs., a trestle bed and cork mattress, a folding table and chair, and an Indian *dhurrie* as a carpet.

My servants had a tent 5 ft. 6 in. square, weighing only 10 lbs., which served as a shelter tent for me during the noonday halt. A kettle, copper pot, and

frying pan, a few enamelled iron table equipments, bedding, clothing, working and sketching materials, completed my outfit. The servants carried wadded quilts for beds and bedding, and their own cooking utensils, unwillingness to use those belonging to a Christian being nearly the last rag of religion which they retained. The only stores I carried were tea, a quantity of Edwards' desiccated soup, and a little saccharin. The 'house,' furniture, clothing, &c., were a light load for three mules, engaged at a shilling a day each, including the muleteer. Sheep, coarse flour, milk, and barley were procurable at very moderate prices on the road.

Leh, the capital of Ladakh or Lesser Tibet, is nineteen marches from Srinagar, but I occupied twenty-six days on the journey, and made the first 'march' by water, taking my house-boat to Ganderbal, a few hours from Srinagar, *via* the Mar Nullah and Anchar Lake. Never had this Venice of the Himalayas, with a broad rushing river for its high street and winding canals for its back streets, looked so entrancingly beautiful as in the slant sunshine of the late June afternoon. The light fell brightly on the river at the Residency stairs where I embarked, on *perindas* and state barges, with their painted arabesques, gay canopies, and 'banks' of



THE STAFF FROM BRINAGAR



Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>