

POLICY BRIEF

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Reaching Tibet in July 1900 via British India and Nepal: Journey of the First Japanese, Ekai Kawaguchi*

Dr. Monika Chansoria

Archival accounts of 19th century Tibet describe it as the forbidden, inaccessible, daunting and remotely unreachable territory of the Himalayas. Lhasa, the religious and administrative capital of Tibet since the mid-17th century literally meant “Place of the Gods” located at an elevation of about 3,600 m (11,800 ft) at the center of the Tibetan Plateau with the surrounding mountains rising to 5,500 m (18,000 ft). The air in this part contained only 68 percent oxygen compared to sea level, thereby indicating the geographic difficulties of the terrain. Tibet has stirred the curiosity amongst explorers, adventurers and researchers as being amongst the few places in the world that fired the imagination of adventurers. Owing to Buddhism, Japan, quite evidently had far more incentive than most others to reach Tibet, and ultimately, Lhasa. It was in the backdrop of these existential conditions that Ekai Kawaguchi (1866-1945) a Buddhist monk became the first Japanese explorer to embark upon a journey fraught with danger and uncertainty in May 1897 from Tokyo, to have succeeded in touching the frontier of the roof of the world, as he stepped on Tibetan soil for the first time on July 4, 1900.

Following handing over the Rectorship of the Monastery of Gohyakurakan in Tokyo, and leaving for Kyoto in March 1891, Kawaguchi restarted his life as a hermit for about three years. During this time he fulfilled his long-felt desire to translate Buddhist texts into Japanese in an easy style from what he described as ‘unintelligible Chinese’. Kawaguchi’s motivations arose mainly from his interest in Buddhist textual studies and yearning to find valuable Tibetan sutrās

* This is the first paper of a continuing series on the first successful Japanese explorer, Ekai Kawaguchi’s travel to Tibet, in and after 1900. The narrative, citations, and arguments of this paper are primarily excerpted and based on Kawaguchi’s personal memoir published in 1909, titled *Three Years in Tibet*, [Theosophist Office, Vasanta Press, Adyar (Madras), British India.]

for his scholarly work.¹ While going through this process he realized that comparing these texts with Tibetan translations and original Sanskrit texts contained in Mahāyāna Buddhism was very vital. The Buddhist Sanskrit texts were only to be found in Tibet and Nepal. This, in a way, became the primary driver for Kawaguchi to firm up his mind and conviction of visiting Tibet – a forbidden land that was closed not only by the local government but also the imposingly formidable Himalayan ranges.

Kawaguchi's interactions with Annie Besant

With a pressing aspiration to enter Tibet, which was then closed to foreigners, Kawaguchi left Japan for Tibet in June 1897. Initially struggling with the option of whether to enter Tibet via Bhutan or Nepal, Kawaguchi eventually chose the British India-to-Nepal-to-Tibet route. He diligently made notes of this entire voyage and the experiences that eventually were published as his memoirs. The account of his journey in Japanese was published in two volumes by 1904, followed by the English version titled *Three Years in Tibet* in 1909 by the Theosophist Office, Vasanta Press, Adyar (Madras), British India. Described as the first explorer of Tibet from Japan, Kawaguchi's serialized account of his visit was published in Japanese newspapers in great detail. Tokyo's widely read paper, *Jiji* daily, and Osaka's *Maimichi* daily published his articles every day for 156 issues.

For this memoir, Kawaguchi credited the President of the Theosophical Society, Mrs. Annie Besant (1847-1933) whom he considered an esteemed friend. Besant was the second President of The Theosophical Society from 1907 to 1933, and was a renowned champion of human freedom, education, and challenger to the sexist prejudices of that time. She joined The Theosophical Society on May 21, 1889,

and represented The Theosophical Society at the *World Parliament of Religions* in Chicago in 1893. Subsequently, she landed in colonial India that same year and after touring the country extensively, founded the *Central Hindu School and College* in Benares in 1898. A few years later she launched the *Central Hindu School for Girls*, which was an essential reformation step since girls, and women, were not encouraged to undertake education or participate in public life or movements during that era.

Having read Kawaguchi's detailed account, Besant advised him to publish it sooner. However, Kawaguchi apparently did not seem too keen. Primarily because by this time he had learnt from sources that Swedish geographer and illustrator, Sven Anders Hedin was soon going to publish his book that recorded his expeditions through the mountains and deserts of Central Asia, parts of East Turkestan, and Tibet, conducted via three expeditions: 1893-1897, 1905-1909 and 1927-1935, during which, he mapped big parts of Tibet. Holding a doctorate in geography, Hedin was a skilled cartoonist and writer who managed to carefully document what he saw in Tibet from many different aspects during these expeditions. Hedin and his team made surprisingly accurate and detailed maps of large parts of Tibet along with extensive documentation of their observations. All the above notwithstanding, Annie Besant was firm on her suggestion to Kawaguchi, asserting that while Hedin's account on Tibet would primarily put forth a western perspective, Kawaguchi's book would entice readers being an Asian point of view, depicting familiarity with reference to customs, lifestyle and people, at large.

Besides, the adventures and dangers that Kawaguchi confronted during the course of the journey was a story worth sharing with the world, according to Besant. And therefore, while writing the preface of *Three Years in Tibet* at the Staff Quarters, Central Hindu College, Benares

¹ Paul Hyer, "Narita Yasuteru: First Japanese to Enter Tibet" *The Tibet Journal*, Autumn 1979, p. 13.

City in 1909, Kawaguchi credited Mrs. Besant for overseeing the translation, and rendering help in the publication of his book to the extent that “...were it not for her, this book would not have seen the light of day.” Another individual whom Kawaguchi considered his friend was Indian academic, Jamshedji N. Unwalla of the Central Hindu College, Benares. Unwalla composed the verses of the entire book from free English prose translation, and supervised the proofs carefully along with the author.

Stay at Calcutta, British India, 1897 and the Vital Connect with Sarat Chandra Das

Arriving in the eastern Indian city of Calcutta on July 25, 1897, Kawaguchi got enrolled in the Māhābodhi Society of Calcutta and spent several days in the city. It was here that he got convinced with the advice of the Secretary of the Society, Chandra Bose that he could not do better for his own purpose than to go to Darjeeling, and become a pupil of Rai Bahadur Sarat Chandra Das, the very well-known Tibetologist, who served in the Bengal Educational Service and was also a member of the Asiatic Society in Bengal. Establishing friendly relations with the Maharaja of Sikkim made it possible for Sarat Chandra Das to gain expertise having studied the Tibetan language. Das worked on papers on the history, religion, ethnology and folklore of Tibet, drawn from the extensive data collected during his journeys. Most of these papers were of great value to Oriental studies, and have since appeared in the *Journal of the Bengal Asiatic Society* and in that of the *Buddhist Text Society of India*, which Sarat Chandra founded in 1892.²

A student of Buddhist studies, Sarat Chandra Das was commissioned to go to Tashilhunpo in June 1879 by the Bengal government in British India. He was accompanied by lama Ugyen-gyatso, and remained there for nearly six months. Das made careful and detailed examination of the rich collections of books in the libraries, and brought back with him to India a large and valuable collection of works both in Sanskrit and Tibetan. In November 1881, Sarat Chandra started on his second journey to Tibet, during which he visited the capital of Tibet, Lhasa.³

While describing Lhasa, Das noted that at the Yu-tog zamba the city proper began with the street on both sides lined with several stories high native, Chinese, and Nepalese shops. In front of each was a pyramidal structure, where juniper spines and dried leaves obtained from Tsari that were burnt as an offering to the Gods.⁴ Das mentioned the presence silk fabrics, porcelain, and various kinds of brick-tea products that had been put up for sale.⁵ In addition, he also explored the valley of the Yarlung, where the Tibetan civilization is said to have first made its appearance.⁶ The works of Das were distinct owing to his meticulousness that distinguished his work from the rest. Having collected valuable details concerning each locality he traversed in Tibet, Das returned to India in January 1883 after an absence of about 14 months.⁷ The report of Sarat Chandra’s journey was printed in two separate publications by the Government of Bengal, namely: 1) *Narrative of a Journey to Lhasa*, and 2) *Narrative of a Journey Round Lake Palti (Yamdok), and in Lhokha, Yarlung, and Sakya*. The British Indian Government kept these reports as

2 Sarat Chandra Das, *The Journey to Lhasa and Central Tibet*, ed. by W.W. Rockhill, (New York: E.P. Button & Company, 1902) p. vi.

3 Ibid., p. vii.

4 Ibid., p. 148.

5 Ibid., p. 149.

6 Ibid., p. vii.

7 Ibid.

strictly confidential and classified documents until about 1890, when selections from them, bearing exclusively upon the ethnology of Tibet, appeared in an article in the July edition of *Contemporary Review*. Five years later, in 1895, further extracts from the narratives were published in the August edition of the publication, *Nineteenth Century*.⁸ Having spent several months in Tibet, Das began compiling a Tibetan-English dictionary at his country house in Darjeeling.

Ekai Kawaguchi proceeded to Siligree via train and finally reached Darjeeling – a distance of 380 miles from Calcutta. He had arrived soon after a major earthquake that had occurred in the northeastern region of Assam. Kawaguchi describes his arrival in Darjeeling by witnessing a large number of entirely collapsed and partly destroyed houses, and other symbols of seismic disturbances.

Interestingly, Sarat Chandra Das has been a significant reference in Kawaguchi’s journey not just before entering Tibet, but also after returning from Tibet and proceeding back to Japan in 1903. When another Japanese explorer, Narita Yasuteru whose visit to Tibet nearly overlapped with that of Kawaguchi, even though the two never met, raised queries over a few claims made by Kawaguchi, the validation of Sarat Chandra Das in favor of Kawaguchi was vital. Upon returning to Tokyo, Narita Yasuteru drafted a letter to Das. Interestingly, Yasuteru’s letter carried the signature of S. Inoma, belonging to the Tokyo Geographical Society. The intent, as noted in Yasuteru’s July 30, 1903 letter to Das was “... to know the exact truth in the matter regarding Kawaguchi’s trip and his claims... Many, who are interested in the

subject, are desirous of having the judgment of yourself, a recognized authority, as to the validity of some of his statements.”⁹ The questions raised, were rather technical in nature. Among many, few significant ones were as follows:¹⁰

- 1) The claim that the Parti Fort is up on a hill, not down near a lake, as Kawaguchi recorded
- 2) Questioning the possibility that one could see the city of Lhasa or Potala Palace from Khambala Pass, as noted by Kawaguchi
- 3) Inquiring about the town of Nam and its exact situation
- 4) Questioning Kawaguchi’s claims that he had temporarily stayed in a tent after arriving at Lhasa
- 5) Inquiring the credibility of Kawaguchi’s claim to have been invited by the Dalai Lama in the audience
- 6) And, whether there was, in fact, a great university of Buddhism in the capital known as Se-Ra

Sarat Chandra Das replied to Yasuteru’s letter on September 2, 1903, and in virtually every case, Das supported the claims made by Kawaguchi, adding additional comments when it seemed necessary. Das confirmed that Kawaguchi had resided at the great monastery of Se-Ra and also affirmed that the alleged meeting of Kawaguchi with the Dalai Lama appeared to be true.¹¹ Further, in his reply, he wrote that it was well known in Darjeeling that Kawaguchi resided there for few years before proceeding to Tibet, during which, he studied both English and Tibetan at the Darjeeling High School. Das stated, “Revd. Lama Kawaguchi studied Tibetan under my supervision for two years before proceeding to Tibet – he is a truthful narrator, not a scientific discoverer...

8 It was these reports, which, with only slight modifications in order to make the narrative connected, that were published in the 1902 volume, *The Journey to Lhasa and Central Tibet*.

9 According to the copy of Narita Yasuteru’s letter signed by S. Inoma to Sarat Chandra Das in possession of Hyer (n. 1, p. 16) July 30, 1903, Tokyo.

10 Ibid.

11 Reply of Sarat Chandra Das to Inoma and Yasuteru, The Park, Chittagong, Bengal, September 2, 1903, n. 1, p. 16.

And, he was pretty well known to the Tibetan traders who frequented Darjeeling.” Das went on to state in his reply that he met Kawaguchi at Calcutta in the winter and heard a detailed report of his travels and experiences.¹²

In fact, Das went on to recommend that Japan’s Geographical Society should work with Kawaguchi to produce a map of Tibet¹³ and ended his letter with the hope that the account of Kawaguchi’s travels published in English would be forthcoming so that the world may “know of the achievements of the first Japanese priest-traveller in Tibet.”¹⁴

Studying Tibetan at Darjeeling, 1897-1899

Kawaguchi recalled having 300 Japanese Yen with him upon arriving in Darjeeling – an amount that sustained him for 17 months of stay there. Eventually, Kawaguchi was able to convince Sarat Das of his desire to learn the Tibetan language as he matriculated into the Government School of Darjeeling under Tumi Onden, the Head Teacher of the language department for Tibetan. Kawaguchi soon started taking rigorous lessons in the Tibetan language, and became a regular attendant at the temple, walking three miles back and forth to the Sarat mansion daily. All through this period, Sarat Das consistently warned the Japanese monk to give up his intention of going to Tibet given the risks involved, including the ‘closed door’ policy that was in full force. Kawaguchi attributed his Tibetan language skills to the children at Shabdung household by calling them the ‘best teachers of everyday language’. Led on by their instinctive curiosity and kindness, not unmingled with a sense of pride, children are always the most anxious and untiring teachers, and that in their innocence they are the most exacting and intolerant teachers. In about six

to seven months of being in the Shabdung household, Kawaguchi became proficient to the extent of being able to converse an ordinary conversation in Tibetan, with far more ease as compared to English.

Kawaguchi admits becoming fairly confident of his proficiency in the use of Tibetan, both, in its literary and vernacular forms, and beginning to firm up his resolve to embark upon the next leg of his journey for the final destination, Tibet, in 1899. This immediately sprung the key question of deciding upon the route to undertake in reaching Tibet. Kawaguchi outlined three highways that could be taken to reach Tibet from Darjeeling. These included:

- 1) First, the main road, which turned north-east directly after leaving Darjeeling and running through Nyatong
- 2) Second, the one which traversed the western slope of Kanchenjunga mountain range reaching Warong, a village on the frontier of Tibet; and
- 3) Third, the one that took off directly from Sikkim through Khainpa-Jong to Lhasa

All these roads and highways were guarded with a fortified gate. Studying the pros and cons of proceeding either through the Kingdom of Bhutan or Nepal, Kawaguchi finally decided that the most advantageous route for him would be by the way of Nepal – more so since no Japanese had ever been to Nepal before Kawaguchi.

Journey to and through Nepal, 1899

Having studied the Tibetan language in Darjeeling, British India, Kawaguchi arrived in Nepal in 1899 as a 33-year-old by taking a rail to Sagauli station, a two days’ journey from the Nepalese border. Ironically for Kawaguchi,

12 Ibid., pp. 16-17.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid; for related reading also see, Paul Hyer, “A Half-Century of Japanese-Tibetan Contact, 1900-1950” *Bulletin of the Institute of China Border Area Studies*, no. 3, Cheng-chi University, Taipei, July 1972.

beyond this point, neither English nor Tibetan appeared to be of any use, as one had to be conversant in either ‘Hindustani’ or Nepalese. Kawaguchi knew neither. And thus, it became mandatory for him to stop a while at Sagauli and master at least working Nepalese. At the outset of dawn on January 25, 1899, Kawaguchi began his journey, and proceeded due north across the plains in which Sagauli stands, and arrived the following day at Beelganji – the first guarded gate of the Nepalese frontier.

Around this period, the rule in force in Tibet was to deny admission any Chinaman coming via sea. Accordingly, Kawaguchi, while he was in disguise, was granted a pass as a Chinaman living in Tibet. Following crossing a jungle stretching eight miles, Kawaguchi came to a village on the banks of a mountain stream called Bichagori and climbed the peak Tisgari, from the top of which he, for the first time, watched with awe the ‘sublime sight of the mighty Himalayas, shining majestically with their snow of ages’. The grandeur of the scene according to Kawaguchi’s account was ‘beyond imagination’. Ordinarily, after leaving the Nepalese capital, it would be the northeast course in order to make a direct journey and entry to Lhasa. However, Kawaguchi decided to take the bypass route. This was the opposite northwest direction through Lo, a border province of Nepal across Jangtang (the western plain of Tibet) and finally around the Mansarovar Lake. A pilgrim party from Kham accompanied Kawaguchi. This consisted of three men and an elderly woman, who in spite of her advanced age was strong enough to brave the hardships of what was an exceptionally difficult terrain. And so, finally, at the beginning of March 1899, Kawaguchi sat atop a white pony and left the Kasyapa Buddha tower in Kathmandu. During the onward journey through the Himalayas, Kawaguchi narrates many fascinating travelogues including his claim that being an extra-territorial country, no European or American had trodden this precipitous path before him.

The team including Kawaguchi started on the northwestern path leading to Pokhara covering a distance of approximately 40 miles in three days, passing the villages Bareng-Bareng and Sareng and crossing the river Agu. The first major town they arrived at was called Algata, situated on the west bank of the river that the natives called Buri-Ganga. The river had to be crossed by an iron hanging bridge. The significance of this town lay on account of its trade with Tibet. On that particular day, Kawaguchi witnessed more than fifty people from Tibet and Nishang – the northern frontier province of Nepal. Following his arrival in the mountain-village of Malba, Kawaguchi received a letter from Rai Bahadur Sarat Chandra Das, through a trader of Tukje. Along with the letter was a Mahabodhi Society’s journal that contained the account of an unsuccessful attempt by another Japanese Buddhist to reach Tibet. Das, in all his earnestness, advised Kawaguchi for a rethink, with words to the effect that he must not put his life in danger.

Nonetheless, a determined Kawaguchi left Malba village on June 12, 1900, by taking the direct route to Tibet. This was through the northwest grassland of Tibet that could be reached from Malba in 10 days. However, Kawaguchi wished to visit many places sacred to Buddhist pilgrims, and thus set aside 23 days for what would be the last leg of his long, arduous journey. Taking the northwest route from Malba up a gradual ascent along the banks of the river Kaliganga, Kawaguchi had to survive without a drop of water and chewing on some buckwheat biscuits made from herbs and roots. Naturally, this led to acute exhaustion, especially since the team was facing a treacherous slope. As days kept progressing Kawaguchi and team kept facing the northwest and proceeded through many scenic nature paths that grew more fascinating in their picturesque grandeur. Finally, the team reached near the great peak of Dhavalgiri. By the time Kawaguchi reached the head of a slope of the great snow-clad mountain named Tashila, the extremely cold

atmosphere and general exhaustion began to show, rendering him so weak that he was unable to shoulder any luggage. Upon reaching the outer edge of the skirts of Mount Dhawalgiri, Kawaguchi turned to his last remaining guide, requesting him to go back, as he intended to make a lonely pilgrimage to Khambuthang – the Sacred Peach Valley alone.

Tibet on July 4, 1900” filled with mixed feelings of joy, gratitude and hope.¹⁶

In the wee hours of the morning of July 1, 1900, Kawaguchi stood and watched his faithful guide return until he disappeared behind a projecting rock. Subsequently, he turned around and proceeded due north. Owing to the complete absence of rugged rocks he was delighted to note that the pathway was not as difficult as he expected it to be. Pushing his way over the trackless field of deep snow, with a solitary compass and the mountain peak as the only pointers, Kawaguchi slept the following days on the snow under the sky, in the hollow of a cliff, and finally after three days of journey crossed over via a pass to the other side of the northern peak of Dhawalgiri. It is here that the dominion of Nepal ended and the frontier of Tibet began.

Frontier of Tibet Begins, July 1900

Standing atop the point where the snowcapped heads of the sky-reaching Dhawalgiri got interspersed with the undulating stretch of the northeast prairies of Tibet, scattered with shining streams of water, Kawaguchi was overwhelmed with emotions. From thereon, Kawaguchi knew that was always to head north until arriving at Lake Mansarovar. Noteworthy was that he had nothing else to guide him but a compass and a survey he carried along with.¹⁵ He recalls in his account that at the time of bidding adieu to his folks and friends back home in Japan, he had claimed to enter Tibet in three years. That day was June 26, 1897, and, “... here I was, stepping on the soil of

¹⁵ Ekai Kawaguchi, *Three Years in Tibet*, n. *, p. 77.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 76.