

POLICY BRIEF

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Ekai Kawaguchi's Expedition Inside Tibet: From the Frontier in July 1900, to Lhasa in March 1901*

Dr. Monika Chansoria

Standing atop the point where the snowcapped heads of the sky-reaching Dhavalgiri ranges get interspersed with the undulating stretch of the northeast prairies of Tibet, scattered with shining streams of water, Ekai Kawaguchi was to keep heading north until arriving at Lake Mānsarovar. Having nothing else to guide him but a compass and a survey that he carried along with, Kawaguchi recalled 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 Tibet on July 4, 1900" filled with mixed feelings of joy, gratitude and hope.

Brahmaputra – the Greatest of Tibetan Rivers

Reaching Tamchok Khanbab that formed the upper course of the Brahmaputra—the greatest of Tibetan rivers, Kawaguchi had to cross this gigantic watercourse. It was a general thing for a Tibetan packhorse to carry on its back, the rider, and approximately 30 pounds of baggage. Starting early morning, and having covered about 17 miles by noon, Kawaguchi arrived on the banks of the Tamchok Khanbab.¹ The river has been described as a mountain stream of considerable breadth, with extensive sand-beaches on either side. On the eastern side alone, the width of the beach was about two and a half miles and that on the opposite side about half as much. The width of the stream, while crossing, was not more than a little over a mile, according to Kawaguchi.²

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* This is the second paper in a continuing series tracing the travels and journey of Japan's first successful explorer inside Tibet in 1900, Ekai Kawaguchi. 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.]

1 Chapter XIX, *The Largest River of Tibet*, pp. 109-110.

2 Ibid., p. 110.

Upon *terra firma* on the other side, the men accompanying Kawaguchi pointed to a gorge between two mountains rising to the northwest, and told him that he was to go through the gorge, and thereafter to Lake Mānsarovar, after traversing an uninhabited region that would take almost a fortnight. The road would take him to Mānsarovar first, and then to Kang Rinpoche.³ The next morning after traversing the bush-land, Kawaguchi arrived at the foot of a mountain. Half way up the slope he saw a mountain stream flowing across, presenting a rather curious sight. For the river, at a very short distance, broadened into a lake, and almost at a right angle when flowing out of this, into another basin. The name of this river was *Chema-yungdung-gi-chu* and its waters flowed and merged into the Brahmaputra.⁴

Further heading northwest in order to adhere to that course, Kawaguchi was now faced with the challenge of climbing a snow-clad peak towering into the sky, and could not avoid it anyhow. Encouraged by the uncertain hope of emerging in the neighborhood of Mount Kailasa, he began the ascent of the great hill, called *Kon Gyn-i Kangri*. It rose 22,650 feet above sea level. By that afternoon Kawaguchi had ascended about ten miles, following which a snow blizzard occurred, turning first north and then east,⁵ forcing him to make a rapid descent and wrapping himself up by managing to smear clove oil on his body to survive the extreme cold and prevent, to some extent, the radiation of the body heat. The intensity of the cold increased after midnight, and Kawaguchi felt his sensations gradually deserting him, sending him to a state of near trance, vaguely close to

the state of a man who is nearing the point of death.⁶

It was the fourth of August 1900. After proceeding about ten miles over an undulating range of mountains, Kawaguchi came in sight of the majestic *Man-ri* peak at an altitude of 25,600 feet above sea level. The view of *Man-ri* covered with perpetual snow, rising majestically high above the surrounding mountains was sublimely grand.⁷ Not bothering him with responsibilities of gathering the yak dung, fetching water, or building a fire, Kawaguchi was requested by the group of locals accompanying him to read the Sacred Text and preach.⁸

Reaching Mānsarovar and Mount Kailasa

It was on the sixth of August that Kawaguchi and his group went up a slope that had an extremely sharp inclination by riding a yak. About 13 miles onwards, the view before Kawaguchi's eyes was mesmerizing. It was the exquisitely grand and scenic, Lake Mānsarovar, in the shape of a huge octagon, with marvelously symmetrical indentations. The Lake, with its clear placid waters, and the mighty Mount Kailasa guarding its northwestern corner, formed a picture that was simultaneously unique and sublime amidst its dignified surroundings—calm, dustless and rugged.⁹ The majestic Mount Kailasa towered the peaks around. Kawaguchi for a moment described that he fancied seeing the image of Lord Buddha calmly addressing 500 disciples.¹⁰

Lake Mānsarovar is generally recognized as the highest body of fresh water in the world,

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., p. 119.

5 Chapter XXII, *22,650 Feet above Sea level*, p. 124.

6 Ibid., p. 126.

7 Chapter XXVI, *Sacred Mānsarovar and its Legends*, p. 139.

8 Ibid., p. 140.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

with an elevation of over 15,500 feet above sea level. In Tibetan it is referred to as *Mapham Yum-tso*. It is the *Anavatapta* of *Sanskrit* (the lake without heat or trouble)–center of the Buddhist legends. It is this *Anavatapta*, which forms the subject of the famous poetic passage in the *Gospel of Keron* (named in Japanese) and in Sanskrit *Ārya-Buddha-Avatan-saka-nāma Mahāvaiṣṭya-Sūtrā*. The passage gives the name of South Zenbu to a certain continent of the world. *Zenbu* is a deflection of *jamb*, a phonetic translation of the sound produced when anything weighty falls into placid water.¹¹

In India, the river that flows from the Lake in an easterly direction is known as the Brahmaputra, while the one that moves from the north towards the south is the Ganga. The Sutlej flows away to the west, and the Sitā (Indus) towards the north. Kawaguchi compared the actual surveys of Lake Mānsarovar made by European travellers to his own personal experience and concluded that the maps he saw representing Mānsarovar were far smaller than it actually was. He depicts it as a very large body of fresh water, with a circumference of some 80 *ri* (about 200 miles).¹² The shape of the lake depicted in the western maps was misleading according to Kawaguchi. He described it to being a fairly regular octagon with various indentations resembling a lotus-flower in shape.¹³

To a certain extent, it would not be inapt to state that Kawaguchi was lost in admiration of the magnificent mountain scenery that surrounded him on all sides. While walking around Lake Mānsarovar he came across a few Hindu and Nepalese devotees belonging to the upper Brahmana caste. Kawaguchi witnessed

them plunging into the Lake to perform religious ceremonies. His understanding of the Hindu religion made him conclude that Lake Mānsarovar is considered to be a sacred sheet of water. The Hindus worship Mount Kailasa rising sky-high above the Lake—as a material manifestation of the sacred Lord Shiva, one of the deities of the Indian Trinity.¹⁴

Bartering System in Tibet

Tradition is to the Tibetans a heavenly dictate, which controlled all social arrangements. This was visible as Tibet, during that time, was trapped in the barter stage era, with very little money being used for trade. People from the interiors would bring butter, marsh-salt, wool, sheep, goats, and yaks' tails, which they exchanged for corn, cotton, sugar and cloth—imported from India by the Nepalese and Tibetans, living in the snowy regions of the Indian frontier. At times, especially while selling wool and butter, they would take Indian currency. Perhaps the greatest problem for the Tibetans, according to Kawaguchi, was being ignorant and incapable of doing arithmetic and calculations. Moreover, they did not possess *abacus* to count with, and resorted to beads of a rosary. For an instance, in order to add five and two, they first counted five and then two beads on the string, and then count the whole number—thus making sure that the total number was seven. Kawaguchi witnessed this and termed it a 'very tedious process'.¹⁵

Unsurprisingly, because of the above, business transactions were rather slow. When it came to larger deals, involving several kinds of goods and varying prices, it was almost distractingly complicated.¹⁶ For such

11 Ibid., p. 141.

12 Ibid., p. 144.

13 Chapter XXVII, *Bartering in Tibet*, p. 144.

14 Ibid., p. 146.

15 Ibid., p. 148.

16 Ibid.

calculations, the locals took the aid of black pebbles, white pebbles, bamboo sticks, and white shells. Each white pebble represented a unit of one. When they counted ten of these, it would be substituted with a black pebble, which meant ten. Ten black pebbles were equivalent to one bamboo stick. Ten bamboo sticks became one shell. And, ten shells became a Tibetan silver coin.¹⁷ Kawaguchi stated that there was no multiplication or division. In comparison, he bragged that a Japanese would take just 30 minutes to do what a Tibetan took three days to calculate. Having stayed on the banks of the river for three days, Kawaguchi watched traders doing their business with the painful and tediousness process of transactions.¹⁸

Besides, in Tibet, as in other countries, taxes were assessed on cultivated fields. However, mathematics not being a strong point among the average Tibetan, as elaborated by Kawaguchi earlier, a rather primitive method was adopted for land measuring that formed the basis of assessment. The method consisted of setting two yaks drawing a plough, to work upon a given area. The assessment was made according to the time taken during the tillage. In other words, the different plots of cultivated lands were classified as lands of half a day's tillage, or a full day's tillage, and assessed accordingly.¹⁹

Lharche to Shigatze Town

By the 22nd of November, Kawaguchi proceeded about 12 miles over a steep slope and after crossing yet another stretch of plains arrived on the northern bank of the Brahmaputra. The river in this spot was about 200 yards wide and not as quite in comparison to earlier stretches. It appeared quite fathomless

with its azure-blue waters. Landing on the opposite bank of the river, Kawaguchi found himself at the outskirts of Lharche—the third city of importance in Tibet at that time. Kawaguchi claimed that upon reaching Lharche, he had reached far into the interiors of the forbidden country, as Tibet was known during that period. From Lharche, it would take around five days of journey to Shigatze—Tibet's second significant city.²⁰ Looking southward, what could be seen by Kawaguchi was a caravan *serai* erected by the Chinese that served the double purpose of accommodating the migrant Chinese traders and native soldiers on march.²¹

Of all the districts in Tibet, Lharche supplied barley, wheat, beans, and butter at the lowest possible prices, which testified its position with regards to agricultural products. Moving on, Kawaguchi ascended a rapid slope for another five miles and traversed cultivated fields for about 11 miles going in a southeasterly direction, and arrived at a hamlet called *Rendah*. The next day, proceeding along the river for some 18 miles, Kawaguchi stood before the imposing Buddhist monastery of Sakya. Surrounded by high stonewalls of about 220 square yards, 20 feet high and six feet thick, the structures were of stone, painted white, with the main edifice alone measuring 60 feet in height, 200 feet from east to west, and 240 feet from south to north. Over the bow-shaped walls rose a dark-colored castle crowned with *Saisho-doban* (the victorious Standard of Buddhism), and *rodai* (the disc for the dew of nectar) in dazzling gold.²²

On the fifth of December, Kawaguchi proceeded about eight miles across plains in a southeasterly direction, till he arrived upon to see a gold-colored roof of a palatial building,

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid., pp. 148-149.

19 Chapter XXXIX, *The Third Metropolis of Tibet*, p. 237.

20 Ibid., p. 238.

21 Ibid., pp. 238-239.

22 Ibid., pp. 239-240.

with many white-painted dormitories for priests close by. The town before him was none other than Shigatze—the second capital of Tibet. The palatial building described above was the Tashi Lhunpo Temple—meaning ‘a glorious mass’ or ‘Mount Sumeru’ the legendary mountain alluded to in Buddhist Scriptures. The monastery owes its name to its founder, Gendun Tub, who thought that the mountain at the rear of the temple resembled Sumeru.²³

The secular part of Shigatze lay beyond the temple and consisted of some 3,500 dwellings. The number of the inhabitants as stated by the natives was over 30,000, however Kawaguchi placed his doubts on the calculations that arrived on this figure, given that the ‘science of statistics was utterly unknown in Tibet’ according to him.²⁴ The Lama Superior of this temple was regarded as the second Grand Lama of Tibet. Though he did not possess any political influence, yet was regarded superior, at times even to the Dalai Lama himself, owing to the rank that was bestowed by the Chinese Emperor. Significantly, at times, a kind of regency under this ‘Second Grand Lama’ took place during the interval between the Dalai Lama’s death and the enthronement of what in Tibet is believed to be his re-incarnated self. The Second Grand Lama, commonly called Panchen Rinpoche, holds the real title of *Kyab-kon Chen-bo*, meaning ‘Great Protector’. His name was Lobsang Choe-ki Nima—the ‘noble-minded religious sun’, and locals told Kawaguchi that Panchen Rinpoche was eighteen years old, and apparently was born in the year of the “sheep”.²⁵

After staying at the temple for several days, Kawaguchi was contemplating about leaving the town, when he was informed that the

Second Grand Lama was expected home in a procession. Due to the absence of roads in Tibet the procession passed through the more beaten parts of the country, which served as roads.²⁶ The Grand Lama was borne in a palanquin decorated with gold brocades and gorgeous kinds of silk, accompanied by about 300 mounted attendants who, instead of being armed, carried Buddhist utensils.²⁷ The native band that used wind instruments and drums heralded the procession. Kawaguchi considered himself lucky having the good fortune of being able to witness this grand spectacle.

Leaving the temple on the morning of December 15th, Kawaguchi proceeded about two miles across the city of Shigatze, reaching the Tsanchu River. The great bridge erected over the river was called *Samba Shar*, meaning eastern bridge. The bridge measured about 360 yards in length and eight yards in breadth. Kawaguchi makes a comparison of these bridges with those in Japan saying that unlike bridges in Japan, it consisted of slabs of stones covered with earth, which are placed upon rows of long wooden boards, spanning stone structures erected in the water at equal distances of about ten yards. The bridge has parapets made of stone. Passing over the bridge, he proceeded few more miles to the north, till he found himself on the bank of the Brahmaputra again.²⁸

On the 31st of December 1900, Kawaguchi reminisces that he thanked Lord Buddha for his grace that saved him through so many calamities and afflictions during the year—it being the last day of the 33rd year of the Meiji, according to the Japanese mode of reckoning (A.D. 1900). Not knowing what adversities were yet in store for him, Kawaguchi remained

23 Chapter XLI, *Shigatze*, p. 249.

24 Ibid., p. 250.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid., pp. 251-252.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid., p. 253.

determined for the cause of Buddhism.²⁹

On Route to Lhasa

While travelling between Lhasa and Shigatze, he encountered many travellers, including a soldier from Nepal, who happened to be one of the Legation Guards of the Minister of Nepal at Lhasa. Kawaguchi enquired from the Nepalese soldier, how many soldiers did the Nepalese Government station at Lhasa? The explanation was that only a few years ago, Nepal first sent a guard to the Tibetan capital, adding further that a great calamity befell the capital over ten years ago.³⁰ It seems that there were about 300 merchants of the Palpo tribe of Nepal at Lhasa—the most active and alert of the Nepalese tribes, with regard to trading, who follow Indian, not Tibetan Buddhism. They engaged in trade at Lhasa in woolen cloth, cotton, silk, coral, jewels, dry goods, rice, beans and corn.³¹ Following these traders, a party of 25 Nepalese soldiers came to be stationed at Lhasa. The chief diplomatist in this affair on the Nepal side was Jibbahadur, who was the Clerk of the Nepalese Government earlier, and now was the Nepalese Minister to Tibet.³²

Walking further, Kawaguchi and his Nepalese companion found themselves at the foot of a steep hill called Genpala, which had an inclination of about two and a half miles to its top. It is from here that Kawaguchi saw, for the first time ever, a view of Lhasa. From that point he saw the Brahmaputra running southeast with a large tributary called Kichu running from the northeast that flows into the river. It ran through a large plain, in the middle of which was a mountain with a high building shining strikingly in the golden sunshine. This was the residence

of the Dalai Lama of Lhasa, called Tse Potala. Beyond the castle were roofs that towered high in the air looking like those of a town. These were, in fact, the streets of Lhasa that looked very small when seen so far off.³³

The following day, Kawaguchi descended for another few miles and found himself on the southern banks of the Brahmaputra. Arriving to the ferry of Chaksam, he had to cross the river. Formerly, there was an iron bridge at that place, the remaining chains of which could still be seen a little lower down the stream. The ferryboats described by Kawaguchi were rectangular in shape like Indian boats. But it was only in the winters that these boats were used. For in the summers, large vessels could not pass across. In Tibetan, the word *Kowa* (meaning 'hide') signified a boat. The Tibetans instead used the yak-hide canoe *kowas* made by sewing together the hides of three yaks, with the seams painted over with a sort of lacquer, thus making them waterproof. These hide canoes floated in the waters, and were used as ferryboats even in the winters when there were not as many passengers.³⁴

Arrival in Lhasa, the Capital

Heading further in the northeast direction for about four miles, Kawaguchi reached the village named Sing Zonkha, where he stopped over for the night, and arrived finally at Lhasa, the capital of the country, on the following day, the 21st of March 1901. He hired a horse at the village, and rode on amid the beautiful scenes of the place. Soon enough Kawaguchi saw a splendid monastery, which at first sight seemed more like a large village. This was the Rebung monastery—the largest of its kind in the vicinity

29 CHAPTER XLII, *A Supposed Miracle*, p. 260.

30 Chapter XLIV, *On to Lhasa*, p. 280.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid., p. 281.

33 Ibid., pp. 281-282.

34 Ibid.

of Lhasa and in the ecclesiastical district under the Dalai Lama. It had an army of priests that numbered some 7,700 as a general rule, though at times, their number rose as high as 9,000. When the priests went out to the country on pilgrimage during the summers, the remaining number in the monastery came down to around 6,000 only. The Rebung monastery was the center of Tibetan learning and had a college. In all, Kawaguchi saw three colleges in Central Tibet, with the other two being the Sera College in Lhasa and one at Ganden. The former had 5,500 students, and the latter 3,300.³⁵

The grandeur of the Tse Potala did in fact strike Kawaguchi considerably. Going along half a mile southeast of the palace hill, he came to a bridge called Yuthok Samba—that was 120 feet by 15 feet, over which was a roof built in Chinese style. He crossed the bridge and went on for another 120 yards, and found himself at the western gate of Lhasa, constructed somewhat in the Chinese fashion.³⁶ Passing through this western gate and riding on another 250 yards Kawaguchi reached a large open court. It was the large temple of Lord Buddha. Enquiring how the image of the Buddha came to be placed in the temple, Kawaguchi was told that when King Srong-tsan Gambo (who later introduced Buddhism into the country) was engaged to Princess Un-ching, the daughter of Chinese Emperor, Ta-sung of the Thang dynasty, she demanded a promise from the father that Buddhism should be widely preached in Tibet. It was a belief that she might have been permitted to take with her an image of Buddha, which

had just been brought from India. After her request was granted, the Princess took it along to the city of Lhasa, where it has remained ever since.³⁷ The Princess thus brought the image into the country at the same time as Buddhism itself. A group of nearly 16 learned men were sent to India to study Buddhism, and invent new characters.

Consequently, new Tibetan letters were formed, and Buddhist doctrines were translated into Tibetan. Buddhism was taught for over 13 centuries, to the great advantage of both, Tibet, and Buddhism. Kawaguchi further elaborated that the image of Buddha was not originally carved in China, but made by a Buddhist sculptor, Vishvakarma, in India—from where it was introduced into Tibet through China.³⁸ Kawaguchi was overwhelmed with emotion at this sight and lifted his hands in gratitude before the image of Buddha for his safe arrival in Tibet, and Lhasa. Once in Lhasa, he decided to stay³⁹ at the Sera monastery. Kawaguchi successfully passed off for being a Chinaman, more so as his command over the Tibetan language was almost as good as a native and he was often treated like one.

The Sera monastery drew a similarity with the Rebung monastery, since it too was built on the slope of a hill, and resembled a village when seen from a distance.⁴⁰ The Sera College, in particular, was divided into three departments—Je Ta-tsang, Maye Ta-tsang, and Ngakpa Ta-tsang. The first department contained 3,800 priests, the second 2,500 and the third 500. The

35 Chapter XLY, *Arrival in Lhasa*, p. 285.

36 Ibid., p. 287.

37 Ibid., pp. 287-288.

38 Ibid.

39 Although, there were many cheap inns and hotels in Lhasa, but Kawaguchi was informed that they were not respectable and thus he desired to stay with a friend, who was the son of the premier of Tibet. While at Darjeeling, Kawaguchi was acquainted with this young noble, who had offered Kawaguchi to stay at his home in Lhasa known as Bandesha—a magnificent 360 square feet mansion whenever Kawaguchi decided to arrive there; read more at pp. 288-289.

40 Ibid., pp. 289-290.

former two departments had 18 dormitories, named Khamtsan, which differed in size, for the small ones had about 50 priests in them, while there were over a 1,000 priests in the largest ones. There were 200 priests in the house in which Kawaguchi stayed.⁴¹ Each Khamtsan had its own property, and all the Khamtsans were collectively called Sera.

Upon arriving and settling in Lhasa, Kawaguchi acknowledged that it was the blessings of Lord Buddha that enabled him to see the Lord's image at the temple in Lhasa as well as at Bodhgaya in eastern India⁴²—so profound was his faith in Buddha that Kawaguchi was entirely devoted to Buddha and Buddhism.

41 Ibid., p. 291.

42 Ibid., p. 288.