

HIMAL

SOUTH ASIAN

December 1999



Sikhs aboard the S.S. Komagata Maru, Vancouver 1914.

GONE WEST

South Asian Diasporas

FBI's in South Africa

Digital Desis

Club Anglo-Indian

Orthodox Multiculturalism





16

Non-resident South Asians

MAIL	3
COMMENTARY	9

Crackdown
Bangladeshi Battle of Badr
Pride and prejudice
What millennium?

COVER	16
-------	----

South Asian diasporas by Dhiru Patel	
Poonamma and a people's history by Sumita Chatterjee	
Club Anglo-Indian by Lionel Lumb	
Digital desis by Karim H. Karim	
Canada Sikhs by Tarik Ali Khan	
Hi-tech underbelly by Raj Jaidev	
Deceit of the Right by Vijay Prashad & Biju Mathew	
Among FBIs by Amitava Kumar	

FEATURE	42
---------	----

Pre-history of Tibet
by John Vincent Bellezza

OBITUARY	44
----------	----

The matriarch lives on
by Afsan Chowdhury
Death of a vote bank
by Manik de Silva

REVIEW	48
--------	----

Lahori Peer power
by Arif Shamim

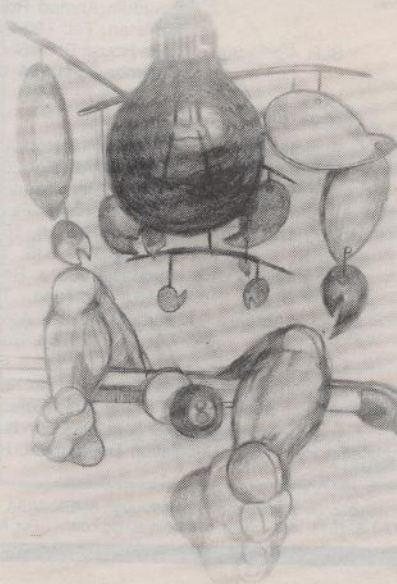
LITSA	49
-------	----

Why I won't play Hamlet ever again
by Sanjeev Mohan
The hanging man's restaurant
by Matt Donahue
Four poems
by Ranjeet Hoskote

ABOMINABLY YOURS	60
------------------	----

Prehistoric Tibet

44



litSA 2000

49

Pre-history of Tibet

When it comes to Tibetan history, the tendency is to begin by focusing on the Buddhist heritage that took root in the early 7th century with King Srongsten Gampo. Civilisation in Tibet, however, originated much earlier and is associated with the lost kingdom of Shang Shung of the north and west of the Changtang Plateau. The character and extent of this mysterious civilisation is only now emerging as scholars search for cultural and archaeological remains of that distant past. **John Vincent Bellezza** has been part of this process of discovery and has used the texts of Bon, the indigenous religion of Tibet, to locate the temples, forts and villages of Shang Shung. Emerging from Tibet one more time recently, he writes of simple discoveries with intriguing antecedents.

A hundred and fifty kilometres north of Lhasa rises Nyenchen Thanglha, the great sacred mountain of Tibet's north country. Standing 7000 metres tall, this massif is the centrepiece of the Trans-Himalayan range and considered the mythical legendary ruler of the 360 neighbouring peaks. According to ancient Tibetan mythology, Nyenchen Thanglha is inhabited by a white archetypal father figure mounted on a white steed, who was worshipped by local rulers.

It was following the decline of the north country that the kings of Tibet came to dominate the entire plateau. Sallying forth from their strongholds in the south of the country at the end of the 6th century, a priority of the Tibetan armies was to conquer the region around Nyenchen Thanglha, which lay on the frontier with Shang Shung.

But the advent of Tibet's imperial period did not lead to the diminishing of the importance of the holy mountain. According to ancient texts, the 8th-century Tibetan king Trisrong Deutsan relied on Nyenchen Thanglha to protect his 'soul force'. After the break-up of the Tibetan empire in mid-9th century,

it is believed that the descendants of King Trisrong were scattered across the Tibetan plateau. Among them, one group, the Ngadag lamas, eventually made their way south into Nupri, in the central Nepal Himalaya, where even today Nyenchen Thanglha is revered as the protective deity.

Enigmatic earthworks

In my bid to understand this obscure period of Tibet's history, I have visited Nyenchen Thanglha a number of times. During these explorations, I have come upon unrecorded archaeological sites at the mountain. Located in the shadow of the south side of the massif, are large man-made earthen platforms. However, since no excavations have been made, it is not possible to conclusively identify these enigmatic earthworks.

Reference to ancient structures in the region are to be found in the elusive text known as *Logyu Chenmo*, where forts are mentioned at places called Dam and Za. It does not seem unlikely that these platforms may have been part of the larger infrastructures of forts.

This conjecture is also supported

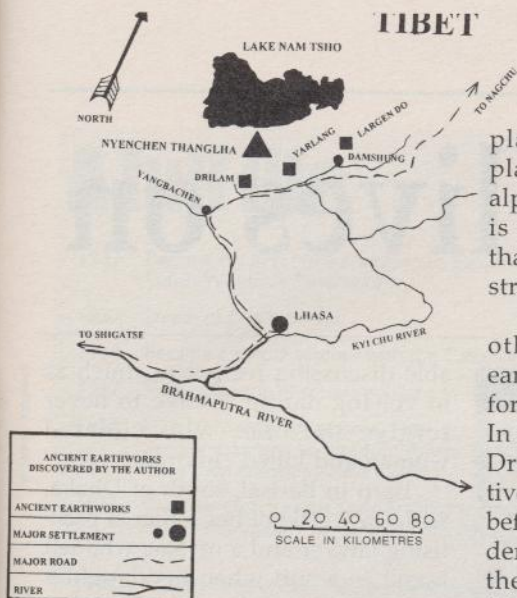


Lake Nam Tsho with Nyenchen Thanglha providing the backdrop (above); remains of stone wall near "Incense Nook of Lhamo Drugmo"

by the oral histories of the region which indicate that the region around Nyenchen Thanglha was far more powerful and densely populated in ancient times than it is today, when all one sees are small plots of barley and peas such as around the villages of Largen Do and Tre Do.

Another reference hinting at large settlements in the neighbourhood of Nyenchen Thanglha is found in the *Old Tibet Chronicle*, written about the 8th century. This is about Ngepo, perhaps a feudatory of Shang Shung, which was ruled by Prince Zingpo Je Tag Kyawa with his capital at Nyenkar Nyingpa, somewhere near the great mountain. According to the *Chronicle*, this supposedly wicked

PICTURES BY JOHN VINCENT BELLEZZA



platform. Like the surrounding plain, the platform is covered in alpine turf. Level with its surface, is a small stone wall—evidence that it had at one time supported structures.

The local spirit medium and others would have it that this earthwork were built as a platform for the giant tent of Lhamo Drugmo. In the Tibetan Gesar epic, Lhamo Drugmo and Ling Gesar were active in the region for several years before they were able to defeat its demonic ruler, Dud Lutshan, with the help of Nyenchen Thanglha. The legend echoes Tibet's martial past and could very well be rooted in fact, and the platform itself may have had a military function. As it is a broad platform and not a mound I did not get the impression that this was a burial site—it seems too large and flat, although it is recorded that burial tumuli are found in many places in Tibet.

About 300 metres to the south is another earthworks about 30 metres square. This specimen is called Lhamo Drugmo Sang Khug, the "Incense Nook of Lhamo Drugmo", and is where the heroine is supposed to have made incense offerings to Nyenchen Thanglha. Since it is more heavily eroded than its larger neighbour, its dimensions are not so clear. Remains of walls at ground level are visible on both the south and the northeast part of the platform.

Drugmoi Dora

Paralleling Nyenchen Thanglha, I trekked southwest from Yarlang. Having covered about 30 kilometres on a wide plain, several kilometres from the settlement of Drilam, I found another earthen platform. The local herders who guided me there told the same story of the structure being used by Lhamo Drugmo to erect her tent. The Drilam platform is also approximately 70 metres square and rises about two metres above the surrounding plain. This one, too, is much more eroded than the one in Yarlang and surface has been corroded into a concavity. No

walls are visible at this site.

I also learnt of another, larger, earthen platform on the outskirts of the village of Largen Do, located near the county seat of Damshung. Traveling thither, I found this time a much-larger earthwork platform measuring about 80 metres by 250 metres. This structure is called Drugmoi Dora ("Stone Perimeter of Drugmo") and it, too, is said by the locals to be the site where the consort of the epic hero pitched her tent.

Within the perimeter are the remains of rocky tumuli, depressions and terraces. Drugmoi Dora is located no more than a few metres from the road to the popular tourist destination of Nam Tsho, but because of the terrain it is very hard to spot. According to information collected some 60 years ago by Hugh Richardson, the last British resident at Lhasa and himself a well-known Tibetologist, the tumuli at Largen Do are the final resting place of an ancient Mongol army.

While surveying Drugmoi Dora I came to learn of ancient earthworks just a few kilometres south at Kyang Ragkha Yog. This is another large complex consisting of mounds, terraces and long walls built of earth.

In the Changtang Plateau, in the shadow of the Nyenchen Thanglha range, these earthen structures hint at a past in Tibet which has yet to generate interest among those who tend to see Tibet's past as purely Buddhist. Even local Tibetans are unaware and uninterested in the story that these mounds and platforms as yet hold in their wombs. Their associations with the Tibetan epic and ancient battles and power struggles have all been relegated to a silent chapter of Tibetan history. Are there burial chambers here, and will excavations throw up town plans and fortifications? We will know only when there are scientific excavations. These simple structures have survived the harsh climate of millennia and will doubtless survive for several more, while they await for those whose interest in human civilisation in the high plateau goes back beyond the 7th century. ▲

prince had been deposed by one of his ministers with the help of another local prince.

Celtic architecture

It was quite by accident I came upon the platforms of earth. They are near Nyingdrung, a group of villages off the main road to Damshung, north of Lhasa. I was in the area interviewing an elderly spirit medium and during our conversation the medium suggested that I visit an obscure holy site said to have been occupied by Lhamo Drugmo, the wife of the Tibetan epic hero Ling Gesar.

With a couple of companions I set off from the village of Yarlang. We had been walking for about one hour when they pointed to a small rise in the plain far off in the distance. At first, I did not see anything significant, but before long we came upon the square platform of earth, all of 70 metres square and elevated two to three metres above the surrounding plain. Its perfect regularity and the fragments of walls found at the site showed without doubt that this was a man-made structure.

In all my extensive travels through Tibet, I had never seen anything like this platform, which seemed to have more in common with Iron Age Celtic hill forts. My companions suggested that this platform would have been even higher, and that the erosion of centuries had taken its toll. This seemed possible, given the undulating surface and water channels on the surface of the