

The ancients of Kongur



Chapter 1 The secrets of Kashgar

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Pre-publication draft manuscript

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About the book

Did Shiva come to Kailash from Kashi in India, or did he come from Kashi in China? I think he came from Kashi or Kashgar in China. There were temples to Shiva in north and northwestern China, more than 7000 years ago. If he did, Shiva would have been at Kongur.

About the author

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Chapter 1: Part 1: The ancient hidden village of Kongur

He must be really getting old, for the winter night was beginning to hurt him. This was life, he knew, for the very mountains that had protected him for these many years, they would perhaps betray him in these years when had had weakened with growing age. This was his world. These high mountains on top of the known world were his world. These mountains protected him and his village and his people. This was Kongur.

The old man walked about on the steep crag, peacefully, as much as his body of three hundred years would permit him. This mountain was magic, he thought, and it would not ever betray him. He kept saying it to himself, again and again and again. Kongur would not let him down. He had been asked to stay back, to continue to be the custodian of this ancient and secret and unseen and unknown village, high up in the mountains of Kongur.

He had wanted to be one of the twelve pilgrims to the Sumeru. He had wanted his life to be fulfilled in its entirety in being chosen as one of the twelve who would sit at the circle of stones at the footsteps of the Sumeru. It was not to be for it was his responsibility to choose the twelve who would be the privileged group of pilgrims to the sacred mountain. Over all these years, his great grandfather and grandfather before him, and his father, had been able to be chosen to proceed on the pilgrimage. The great one of the village and the eleven pilgrims had been chosen over nearly two hundred years ago, to proceed to the Sumeru. On that occasion, he had been

chosen to take the place of the great one in the village. And since then, there was none who would permit him to leave the village.

The world had changed very rapidly over these past two hundred years. It had changed even more rapidly over the past fifty years, he thought to himself. Would they be able to stay unseen for more time? What would be the path ahead? How would they stay inviolate of all the miseries of the known world? How would they be able to stay hidden in these high invisible valleys of Kongur? Was it correct to stay hidden? There were children growing up, and they would perhaps be impatient of the ways of their hidden existence. The women were patient, and they aged well, content in the climate of the higher mountains.

The old man looked at the village from his position on the high crag ledge. It was a small village, by any standards, and it had stayed safe from the snow, rain, hail and melting ice rivers over these many hundreds of years. Was it already more than a thousand years that they had settled in here? He knew that his father was more than two hundred years old when he had left the village with the other pilgrims. Some children spotted him from the village and waved at him. The old man walked back down the ledge and returned to the village.

A woman came up to him and bowed in respect, and said, "O great one, O Mirabhe, I salute you. I cannot stop worrying about those who left for the pilgrimage to the sacred Sumeru Mountain. I know that you feel for their absence. My husband of these many years was one of them, and I feel totally lost in the circumstances of my daily life. What am I to do? This is the first time that I

have lost someone from my family and from my house. I fear for how my life would change.”

The old man nodded in agreement. He said, “O Grinshe, you are correct. I know the feeling. I have had to face this situation each time that our men went to the sacred Sumeru Mountain on their pilgrimage. Sometimes I fear for their safety, but then, I know that the spirits of these mountains would not allow any danger to them. We are the souls of these mountains. We are without death and we are not to allow any ownership or affection for those whom we know. But, I know that it is difficult to escape the love and affection that we have for one another.”

Three other women had come around Grinshe and stood quietly, listening to the great old man. One of them said, “O great one, my father, I know how you feel. These many years I have seen you allow the pilgrims to leave our village. But, this time, it was my own brother, your son, and one of them was my husband, as it was Grinshe’s husband. Will we be able to make our lives without them and will we be able to accept the way of our lives as before?”

“My dear daughters, I realise and I feel, the sorrow that you retain within yourselves,” He said, “I am as trapped as you are, but yet, you should feel the pride and happiness in the aspect that we find ourselves in. We are the chosen few, the rarest of the rare. We are those who stay alive in these mountains for hundreds of years. Even some religions are younger than us. Many a nation is younger than us. We have a different responsibility and it is very sacred.”

The old man thought back to as far as his memory would permit. It was getting difficult to remember events from as far back as hundreds of years, and to remember stories and events that had been passed on by his ancients, from an age that was primitive even by their own standards, that it seemed unbelievable. He would often wonder if he was thinking of places, events, peoples and beliefs that did not exist, and had never existed. In spite of having lived all these years in this remote village, he was no different from any other villager in the plains, he thought to himself.

He had to worry each day about getting supplies to each house in the village. He had to make sure that he would be on time to eat his meals. These menial tasks of each day seemed to be more of a trap than the hundreds of years that he had lived. Grinshe and Yarshe, his daughter, sat near him, looking at the peaks of the Kongur Mountains. Yarshe asked the old man, “Father, do tell me, as you have, again and again, have we really come from a different place? We are so peaceful here, in this hidden valley. It seems like we have lived here forever.”

“Yes, my daughters, we did come from other places. But, we chose to come here. We were given these mountain ranges to live in,” the old man replied, “We are those who guard these mountains. The sacred Sumeru Mountain, this Kongur and similarly, other high mountains, are under our care. These places are the gateways to worlds that we do not know anything about. These places are also the guardians of the world below. Little do these people who live for few years around the world realise that it is these mountains that help them live so comfortably.”

“People and religions do not know about us. We do not belong to any religion and neither has any spiritual thought been distributed by any of our ancients,” continued the old man, “We are merely here to retain the magical strength of the high mountains to talk to the skies, to talk to the clouds, to ask them to allow us to take some of their water, and to retain the waters within the hidden vaults in the mountains and below the plains. This is the only religion that we follow.”

The two women, Grinshe and Yarshe, had heard the old man speak of such tasks on several occasions over the hundreds of years that they had known him. They knew of the people on the plains and their way of life. They had gone occasionally and moved around their settlements. Some families had also been given the task of living in villages and towns in different places for some years and they had all returned, for, the joy of living in Kongur was like in no other place. The world elsewhere did not know about their village, and they had had no human visitors.

Yarshe hugged the old man, her father, for she knew of his wisdom and affection and patience, and said, “Sometimes it is indeed difficult to live the way we do, for we know of the manner in which the rest of the world lives in the plains. Is it possible that we can also visit the sacred Sumeru Mountain? Is it restricted in our way of life that women from our village should not go to the sacred mountain?”

The old man smiled, and replied, “Yarshe, sweet one, there is nothing that prevents the women of our village to make the trip to the sacred Sumeru Mountain. The

women have never asked to be allowed to go there. It is the pilgrimage of one's lifetime, except that our lives comprise so many different times of history of this world. The sacred mountain is also known as Mount Kailash to the people of the Hindukush, as the *Kang Renpoche* to the people of Tibe, and as other forms to other religions of the lands nearby. People from all faiths come together around the Sumeru."

"I am waiting for the two pilgrims from our village who accompanied the twelve who went to sit at the circle of stones below the sacred Sumeru. They will bring us the information that we need, of the manner of people who assemble at the sacred mountain and its valleys, of the changes that have taken place, and of the manner in which we need to guard the mountain and its waters."



Chapter 1: Part 2:
At the village of stone houses along
Karakul Lake.

Down in the plains, below the Kongur Mountains, was the magnificent Karakul Lake. It seemed to nestle in the vast valley and almost covered the entire Pamir Plateau. The tourist resort near the Karakul Lake had visitors through the year. There were a bunch of yurts, the round huts of the Kirghiz nomads, who had settled down near the Lake over these many years. The buses stopped at the tourist resort and government guesthouse. On the western shore of the Karakul Lake, and near a second group of yurts, was a village with stone houses.

Shenji Rintao sat at the cash counter of the restaurant at the resort and waited for travelers to finish up their meals before he could close shop for the morning. There was a group of Norwegian trekkers staying at the resort today. They had come to do a trial recce trek on the lower slopes of the Tian Shan Mountain slopes. The trekkers completed their meals and walked over to their bunched up vehicles, two trucks and three land rovers. A group of Kirghiz helpers had been hired by the Norwegians to assist them in setting up their camp alongside the restaurant. They had put up large shed-like tents rather than the alpine ones that they would use in the higher slopes.

Shenji closed the restaurant and drove his motorbike to the village. His wife was watching from the entrance to their house and placed a low bench under a shady tree for him to rest during the afternoon. She knew that he would not enter the house and would sit outside,

watching the Kongur Tagh Mountain. He seemed to be totally fascinated by the mountain. Shenji sat on the bench and had his home-cooked meal that he preferred rather than the food that he served at the tourist restaurant. Shenji's brother came to join him from the neighbouring stone house and sat alongside. They would chat with each other during the noon siesta and would not disturb anyone, thought Shenji's wife, and she went inside to catch her nap.

Kurgan, Shenji's brother, gestured at the stone houses, and said, "Brother, we have to change this routine. I am getting bored with this. We have sat here, year after year, through the noon hours, doing nothing. Somebody is bound to get curious or suspicious about us. How long do we do this? How long do we wait here? Is there anything else that we can do in the noon hours, rather than sit here and do nothing? There is Kongur in front of us. Our people are there, waiting for us."

Shenji nodded, pretending to be smoking a cheap cigarette. In actual fact, as Kurgan knew, they had never and would never smoke cigarettes. It was prohibited of them in Kongur and they would never break the custom on their own, even as an experiment. The elder brother replied, "Kurshi, we do what we do, because we have been told to do so. The old man Mirabhe watches us with his sharp eyes from the Kongur crags out there. We have been sent here as custodians of our village and of our way of life. We watch out for our families of so many years. We have our duty. What is sitting out here for twenty to twenty-five years compared to our life of more than three hundred years? We sit here during these years, and later, Mirabhe may ask us to return to our

village, up there, in Kongur. Someone else may take our place, to do what we do.”

Kurgan nodded irritably. He knew that his elder brother was always correct. He also knew that they would never disobey the old man Mirabhe’s instructions. He was not only the head of their hidden village in Kongur, but he was also their father. They missed their village and their dedicated way of life. This task was also important. They lived here, on the banks of the Karakul Lake, within the very primitive village, in stone houses, alongside the yurts of the Kirghiz nomads. The construction of the fast highway below the Kongur Tagh had opened up the threat to their ancient village that had stayed hidden for hundreds of years. Mirabhe had decided that they would need to participate in the life at the foothills to know if there would be any threat to their way of life and their village.

It seemed so unreal, thought Shenji. He said, “Brother, look at the slopes of our mountain. It seems so totally unreal. Can there be a better place on this planet than where we live? The great lake and this vast plateau, the various mountain ranges that meet up here, are all unique by themselves. The people call them nowadays as the Pamir Mountains. Those ranges behind the Pamir, are now known as the Tian Shan. These ranges to the west are called the Kunlun Shan.”

“It sounds strange, does it not, Kurshi,” asked Shenji, for he called Kurgan by the name that he had always used, for the previous three hundred years and more, “we have known these mountains by many names and yet, we need to know them by the names that are used today. What is the use of such names, for after all, they will be

called by some other name after sixty to hundred years. We have seen so many kings and nations here, in this great plains of the Pamir, south of Kashgar and Xinjiang and towards the strange nations to the South.”

Kurgan looked on quietly at the great mountains. This was the same discussion that they would have after every ten days or so, sad about the changing times, and worrying about the terribly rapid changes that they had seen in the world over the past fifty years. The old man Mirabhe had insisted that the ancient people of Kongur should stay informed of the world outside and should never have to defend against any other people due to ignorance. Kurgan was most sad about the Muztagh Ata Mountain Peak. It seemed like a perfect twin to the Kongur Tagh and Kongur. He had traveled through the hidden valleys of the Muztagh Ata and knew its beauty was like no other place. He yearned to return to being able to walk through these peaks, their valleys and their upper slopes, as he loved to do, and as he had done, for hundreds of years.


“We need to be careful, and we need to make sure that no wandering group of trekkers or mountain climbers are able to discover our village,” said Shenji, “Remember, what happened with us during the previous year? Those stubborn and very persistent Russian climbers managed to climb up the Kongur. We cannot prevent them, but we were able to warn Mirabhe and he was able to call upon the spirits of the great Mountain to hide our village. We have been successful in preventing more than thirty climbing groups from going up the Kongur. But, this group was very different and they were successful.”

Kurgan shivered at the thought. That climb had frightened the both of them. There had been one another successful expedition, by a Britisher or some Englishman, they did not remember clearly, but thirty other groups had failed, until these Russians came to the Kongur slopes. Once there had been a Japanese group who tried, but the spirits of Kongur had confused the climb thoroughly. Nobody knew if the Japanese group had succeeded. Mirabhe had sought out the spirits of each valley and each path of the Kongur Peaks, and there had been very mysterious changes in the weather at that time. Icefalls and small avalanches had begun to occur, and they had helped block the easier paths to the summit.

Shenji said, "Remember, Kurshi, how the weather worsened. The first avalanche hit the team of Russian climbers, and they had to move away from the route that they had chosen. Yet, they were persistent. They continued with their climb. The second avalanche hit them later, and they had to lose their tent, supplies, gear, food and other stuff. Their entire stock of supplies went down the Kongur slopes. They had to return to the base camp."

"But what we had not realized, was that they would be joined by more climbers and they would be able to procure more gear and supplies in a short while," replied Kurgan, "They were also able to pick up their gear and supplies that had fallen down the Kongur slopes, and they continued with the expedition. It was very frightening. What do you think, Shenji, would the old man have used violence or killed the group? Would we need to kill these poor mortals because we do not want them to find us or discover our way of life?"

Shenji replied, “I remember the way we have managed to stay away from disclosure. There were different methods used by our people in different times and in different places. I can recollect the great efforts of Sima Qian and Ban Biao, long many years ago, while they attempted to collect the records to write the history of the people of these areas, our people were able to enter all the sacred collections of texts and bring away any vague or visual reference to contacts between the natives of the Pamir Plateau, Kashgar and Xinjiang with our activities. We managed to stay hidden, and we continue to do so, even if we sit here, openly, amidst them.”



Chapter 1: Part 3:
At Tashkurgan, in the no-mans land of
history and geography.

They called him the Sultan of Tashkurgan. He accepted the title with humility, and never allowed it to take over his simple personality. His father had named him Sultan, and his grandfather from his mother's side, had added the name, Mubarak, to indicate his happiness that his daughter had agreed to adopt this child, given to him by the strange people at Karakul. The people of Tashkurgan respected Sultan Mubarak Altaf Khan. Everyone knew him, men, women, boys and girls. He had affected their lives, directly or indirectly, at one time or the other. For, Sultan Mubarak Altaf Khan was the teacher and postmaster of Tashkurgan.

He had lived his entire life at Tashkurgan and loved the mountains that surrounded it. Everyone remembered him as part of their lives and did not seem to be able to recollect a day when he had not been in this remote part of the world. Government clerks, agriculture officers, military commanders and veterinary assistants alike, at Kashgar and in the Akto County offices knew him and relied on him to assist them with news and gossip and advice and counsel about Tashkurgan. He seemed to know everything about the place and the mountains, rivers and the villages in the remote valleys. The village secretaries would come down the hills and valleys and meet Sultan, pay their respects and seek his blessings before they would proceed on government business.

One traveled through the Khunjerab Pass on the border of China with the part of the occupied and disputed

territory of Kashmir that was controlled by Pakistan. The Pamir Mountains, Tian Shan and Kunlun Shan mountain ranges seemed to dwarf the area of Tashkurgan. The Karakoram Highway had brought the amazing world of the twentieth and twenty-first Centuries closer to this remote land. Sultan often remarked on the aspect that the diverse cultures of Pakistan, India, Kashmir, Tibet, China, Afghanistan and Tazikistan converged at Tashkurgan. The world could have met here in peace, and yet, this land had only been witness to violence over several centuries.

Nations were born and newer nations took over the earlier ones. Sultan had seen history pass through this land, and he knew from the books and newspapers that he read, that modern geography had imprisoned this beautiful land. From Sost in Kashmir, the Karakoram highway came out of the Khunjerab Pass to Tashkurgan before moving northwards to the Muztagh Ata and Kongur Tagh peaks and the Karakul Lake. Sultan's house was located at the northern edge of Tashkurgan, and he could see the massive peaks on most days from his house.

He had made himself a quiet corner, hidden behind massive bamboo clumps and other trees around his house. He would sit here, pretending that the Karakoram highway did not exist, and would keep looking at the Kongur ranges. People would visit him through the day and would not hesitate to disturb him at night with their problems and worries. He would listen to them, seated on his extremely comfortable armchair made of walnut pulp and gifted to him in gratitude by a warlord from Afghanistan. He would look at the Kongur peak, think about his village, hidden in the high valleys, think about

his village elder, Mirabhe, and would give his advice to his visitors.

Sultan had lived in the villages above Tashkurgan until his father had got him married to the girl from Kongur and taken him to visit Mirabhe. He had known about the secret manner of living of his people, and of the ease with which some families lived within the different communities of the region. They were living in the modern world as was permitted by Mirabhe, and as had been required by the elders before him. It had been thought appropriate by the ancients of Kongur that there would always be families who would live like normal mortals in the modern world.

He had fallen in love with the remoteness and the solitude and the peace of the ancient village of Kongur and had visited Mirabhe with every excuse that he could think of. Of course, it had made his wife extremely happy to be able to return to her mother's house again and again. Sultan's village above Tashkurgan had stayed hidden in a river valley in the remote mountains on the border of Afghanistan and Tajikistan. Nobody had ever thought of visiting the valley and they had lived in peace through hundreds of years.

The Kirghiz nomads from Karakul visited Sultan regularly and brought him news about Kongur. Mirabhe had advised him to avoid frequent travel in these troubled days when the smell of war and deceit was all around them. The nomads would carry newspapers, magazines, books and medicines with them to Karakul. Later, these supplies would find their own way to the village of the ancients of Kongur. Mirabhe's grandfather had helped hundreds of Kirghiz nomads to escape the

anger of the Tazik warlords at some ancient time. The Kirghiz had not forgotten the timely help and had always stayed around Karakul to help Mirabhe.

The nomads had called Mirabhe's grandfather as the 'Father of the Snowy Mountains' and, Sultan suspected that the Muztagh Ata peak was probably named in his honour. There were other families from the village of the ancients of Kongur, invisible to the modern world, and yet, living openly in Tashkurgan. They would come to meet Sultan on a weekly basis, and would sit silently in the house, if he had other visitors. Sultan would see them and feel happy, and would assure himself that everything was good about the world, inspite of the war and violence in the region.

Sultan's sons had been sent away in their youth to live in Kongur and had married the girls who had arrived from other places. Mirabhe had sent the young families to study in the ancient universities to the Far East, and had made sure that they would learn several languages, would become experts at science and agriculture. Sultan was proud of his eldest son, who had studied in Osaka in Japan and in Beijing and had begun to be recognized for his scientific research and discoveries in exploring the secrets of the old age gene. The world of science had wondered about his rapid progress in debunking most of the earlier theories of old age in humans.

Mirabhe had called Sultan and his scientist son, Khalid Umer, to Kongur. They had been told that Umer's fame and progress in science was welcome, but his popularity and recognition was worrisome. Umer would have to undergo a transition and would need to change his lifestyle while retaining his interest in science. Sultan


had agreed, and Mirabhe had got Umer married to a young girl from Kongur, and had asked them to go into exile for some years into the peaceful cities to the south of the Ganges. Umer stayed at Varanasi and taught at the science colleges for some decades before moving on to Lahore, Jammu and Kathmandu.

Sultan felt sorry for Umer but had kept in touch with him and had traveled to meet him on some occasions. The exile had stretched for nearly two hundred years before Mirabhe had asked him to return to the high plateau lands of Tibet and to the Pamir Mountains that Umer loved so very dearly. To his credit, Umer had never been resentful of the exile, but had gone about happily in living out several years in these different cities and had understood the people and their beliefs. Umer had taken a house near Sultan, and this had made his mother and his wife extremely happy.

Tauseef Rasheed, Sultan's second son, had become an expert carpet weaver, in the Persian style, in absolute contrast to Umer, the scientist. Neither had shown resentment about each other. It had been an advantage, actually, thought Sultan. For Tauseef would travel regularly with his carpets, and had taken Sultan along with him, like a good rich neighbour, paying for the pilgrimage of the poor. Tauseef's carpets were well known and his designs were extremely intricate. There were fascinating aspects of Iranian, Tibetan and Chinese cultures and religions that could be seen on his carpets.

Tauseef's carpet manufacturing sheds had people from all faiths working within. There were the Iranians, Taziks, Kirghiz and Tibetans. These workers would come to sit around Sultan, near the comfortable fireplace

in his house, and would stay contentedly without any discussion or talk. Sultan would have visitors from all religions, and there would be monks from the Bon and Buddhist faiths, maulvis from the various muslim communities, including the Uighurs and the Taziks, the Afghans and the Kashmiris. The women of the Kirghiz nomads would cook huge meals in their yurts on the vast grounds of Sultan's house and this would be made available to all visitors, including Tauseef's carpet workers. Sultan's wife from Kongur would move about silently with Umer's wife, helping the Kirghiz women feed the visitors, who would number more than a hundred on some days. Every single visitor was asked to visit again, and was welcome to eat.



**Chapter 1: Part 4:
In Kashgar, the guardians who move through
portals in time.**

Inside the inner city of Kashgar, amidst the ancient narrow lanes of the old city, are settlements of houses that lead to an old world. This is the Kashgar that has not changed in about a thousand years or thereabouts. The ancient neighbourhood is referred to as Kashi. The residents would proudly refer to themselves as the residents of the real Kashi, not the Kashi of Kashgar or the Kashgar of Kashi. The inner city would probably have been built upon, layer upon layer, from sometime around 300 BC or earlier. This much, we know. It could be much older, and that story can be left to those who know.

They were different communities, inside this ancient neighbourhood. The older inner city of Kashgar was more typical of the outer areas. The ancient community of Kashi did not seem to be similar to the Uighurs, the Han or the Tibetan groups. They did not seem to be Kirghiz and certainly were not similar to the various nomad tribes of the northwest and west of Kashgar. Nobody knew of them, and nobody bothered about these people. They did not matter. They were too few and did not seem to amount to any sense of relevance, economy or productivity. They lived their lives, though they did not seem to work at anything.

Nobody noticed them. The local police would not even be able to describe anything about them. The traders and local businesses and markets knew that they would purchase regularly from the local shops and markets.

That was all. They never seemed to be selling anything. Their children attended a school inside the inner city. The strange aspect of the inner city was that nobody prevented anyone from entering the area. But, nobody did so.

Their neighbours were a community of ancient Uighurs. They called themselves the Manichaeans Uighurs. The Han Chinese government officers did not worry about these distinctions between these communities. To the Uighurs, it mattered. You need to know who you were. An Uighur saying went, “You needed to know who you were, and where you came from, for you need to know where you will go to, for you carry the strength of your people with you.”

The Manichaeans Uighurs maintained that the ancient community living inside the old settlements of Kashi were similar to themselves, but were also unlike their people who had moved through history from pre-Buddhist followings, to different schools of Buddhist thought and later, as Moslem Uighur and Buddhist Uighur. Strangely, nobody had seen the ancient community visiting any local mosque or any monastery. They did not seem to pray or follow a religion like the others living in the region.

In one of these ancient houses, Sangra Ma, sat at the windows on the higher storeys, looking out at the skyline of the outer city of Kashgar. He could see the distant hill ranges outside the city, to its South, and he could see the smog and dust-filled clouds hanging above various areas. What could he do? On some days, looking at the new Kashgar, he could feel his age. His thoughts went out to the open lands of Kongur, and to his brother,

Mirabhe, and their village, high up on the slopes of the great mountain. Their father had bestowed upon Sangra Ma, the responsibility to stay at the ancient settlement at Kashi, and keep the community together.

They lived peacefully, and tried to avoid any conflict or convergence with the other people in the inner city of Kashi within Kashgar. To all the other people in the city, and to the government, an inner city concept had never been established. The city of Kashgar was Kashi, and it was the same to the people who came from different regions and settled here, and sought their future.

The world was changing forever, thought Sangra Ma. He had seen the changes over the more than four hundred years that he had lived. For Sangra Ma and his father, the long life-periods did not seem to be important. It was the ancient city of Kashi, and this ancient settlement and old houses that were more important. Sangra Ma's father had thought it necessary for his elder son to travel out of Kongur and enter the mofussil small settlement, four hundred years ago, to take over as custodian of this group of houses and lands inside the place, known as Kashi.

Sangra Ma walked down the stairs of his house to the inner courtyard. It was not like any inner courtyard that you would have known from the house designs and dimensions from places that you would have visited. This inner courtyard was huge. The house had been constructed all around the courtyard. The other houses had been constructed around the central house. The architecture was representative of the nearly thousand years of construction and re-construction, add-ons and changes that had happened in the narrow lanes between

these four perimeters of settlements around Sangra Ma's house.

The inner courtyard had gardens, a small forest, and a sort-of-hillock, stone remnants of ancient houses, stables, wells and cobbled streets. The house was constructed around it, comprising three to four storeys in different corners, and depending upon the slope of the inner courtyard. Even the old settlements of the Uighurs nearby could never locate the courtyard. Sangra Ma's great grandson, Kuju La, had taken on the contemporary Han Chinese and Uighur name, and called himself, Kuiu Lan Chao, had learnt modern sciences and gained expertise in understanding modern nations.

Kuju La was waiting for Sangra Ma at the inner courtyard. Sangra Ma's father and grandfather had said that it had been called *Sa-may-daa-rae*, the Gates of Time. Sangra Ma walked with his great grandson, as part of his daily ritual, through the remnant cobbled path towards the small forest and hillock. As they walked, they looked about at the inner side of the house, and they could see the thousands of years of construction that had taken place upon earlier construction levels. The lowermost plinth had been laid in large blocks of local stone, each one larger than a yak. The stone had been dug out of the land from the neighbourhood.

They walked through the forested path, beyond the hillock and entered the large house at the other end of the courtyard. This house seemed to have been constructed around an earlier, much ancient, stone building. They climbed a flight of stairs to reach the porch at the plinth level. The porch ran around most of the building, and to the outer areas, towards the other


houses inside the inner courtyard. Sangra Ma and Kuju La entered the premises from the porch. Here, a flight of stairs ran downward, much deeper than the level of the inner courtyard. These premises were well lit, with modern electricity, and helped them move faster than they would have done so, about a hundred years earlier.

Deep underground, they arrived at a flowing stream of water, as wide as a small river, and they walked along this riverbank. They must have walked through for about 500 metres or somewhat, and reached a properly constructed stone-cut platform, with brickwork for prayer fires, burning at four corners. These fires had been burning without any interruption, deep here, underground, for more than a thousand years or so. Sangra Ma and Kuju La bowed in reverence at each corner, and moved to the center of the platform.

Here, in the center of the platform, with the thousand-year old fires at the four corners, was a stone structure, in shining black granite. It was a smooth circular column of stone, more than five metres in diameter, and going deeper and deeper inside the platform. Sangra Ma and Kuju La could only see the column at the stone platform, and the portion that rose above it, for about ten metres in height. Within the confined underground perspective, they knew that the portion that they saw was only a minor portion of the rest of the column that disappeared deeper within the platform. Sangra Ma had never known of the depth of the column and he had never asked.

The river stream poured out from a stone ledge, and streamed on to the granite column at its top. Around the column, at the location where it went underground and disappeared, there was a black granite grip-like designed

stone, established flat over the stone platform. The black granite grip design was all around the stone column, except for allowing an opening that permitted the falling water to drip out to flow away as the river that Sangra Ma and Kuju La had walked along. This was the most sacred of all places, Sangra Ma's father had told him, for it was in this location that one could move through the portals of time, and this was where the ancient gods had come, when they had first come to the most sacred of all lands, where the first river had emerged.



Chapter 1: Part 5: At the Muztagh Ata Pamirs, the guardians of the sages

South of the Karakul Lake, and before the Karakoram Highway reached Tashkurgan, a small dirt road turned eastwards to the slopes of the Muztagh Ata Mountains. The peaks in these ranges equaled the Kongur and its neighbouring ones in majesty and awe-inspiring panorama. The small dirt road was usually noticed by the passing traffic going north-south, for a very brief moment, and then, immediately forgotten. This road was hardly used. And if anyone would wander in by mistake, or curiosity, or on government mission, they would reach the tiny hamlet of Ka Usi.

There were about ten large huts, mostly Yurts, in the Kirghiz style, circular, and made of different types of materials. Some huts were made of mud-bricks, stone and had extensions made of asbestos and tin-sheets. The small dirt road ended at Ka Usi. Strangely, there did not seem to be any vehicles of any type, including a cycle or a motorcycle, leave alone a truck or a car or jeep. The transport buses would stop on request at the junction where the small dirt road met the Karakoram Highway. Some trucks helped the villagers of Ka Usi to travel to the Karakul Lake with their sheep and goats, to allow for trade and barter for vegetables and oil.

Nearby, the Subash Pass, allowed access for mountaineers and tourists to travel through to the Muztagh Ata slopes and the Pamir Mountains. The tourists were usually dropped at the Subash Pass, and they would climb up the Pamir Mountains and camp for

the night, before walking down to the Karakul Lake on the following day. A small settlement near the Subash Pass helped the tourists with their needs. These were also Kirghiz nomads, as were some of those who lived at the hamlet of Ka Usi. Some tourists would camp on the Pamirs for four to six days, and there were those who would come for shorter visits.

The Kirghiz at the village near the Subash Pass had Bactrian camels. The Ka Usi villagers found it amusing and had never kept camels in their settlement. They usually discouraged tourists from wandering about in their village, and therefore, they bred large Tibetan Mastiff dogs. Some Kirghiz at the Karakul Lake claimed that the villagers at Ka Usi knew that the wolves from the higher slopes came down to mate with the Mastiffs, and how else could one explain the unusually larger size of these dogs, in comparison to other regions. The villagers at Ka Usi denied such stories. But, of course, they would.

Mian Humayun Khoja, the village headman at Ka Usi, was of the ancient families of the Khojas of Kashgar. He was a Moslem, and his father before him and his grandfather before him. His neighbour, Soheli Beg, a Kirghiz nomad, could never explain to the officers from Kashgar about the native origins of his family. The government officers had stopped bothering about the villagers of Ka Usi, and came rarely, except when it was time to conduct a census, or to search for source of any epidemic that would break out among the livestock along the Karakul Lake.

Mian Humayun and Soheli prepared for the day like any other day of their lives. They never gave a thought to the

aspect that they could perhaps change the pattern of their days and their lives. They could never do that. They had gone through the same routine, for more than three hundred years, since they had come to this remote hamlet. The settlements at the Subash Pass had not existed in those years, and the Karakoram Highway had also only been a caravan path, a mighty dusty road. The caravans had moved from Kashgar to Tashkurgan to the Khunjerab Pass and on southwards to Quetta to Lahore to Amritsar to Delhi and further.

They had seen the slow moving caravans for hundreds of years, and now they did not wish to see the fast moving oil-driven vehicles. They did not wish for anyone to explain that there were different types of oils, and that the vehicles went by on petrol or diesel. Mian Humayun always said, it is only a matter of another hundred years, and man would have found some other fuel or method to travel. Man had to always go from some place to the other, but for Mian Humayun and Soheli, it had been the mission in their lives, to stay at the village of Ka Usi, and never to travel outside, even for a day or half a day. They had done so, for these hundreds of years, and had never thought that their lives could have been different, and perhaps, have gone out of the village.

Others at the village of Ka Usi regularly visited the Sunday Bazaar at Kashgar. The open market at Kashgar was one of the oldest events and traditions of the region, perhaps since the times of the Silk Route or even earlier. It was a day when several hundreds or thousands of Uighurs, Kirghiz, Tibetans and Afghans came together, under the open scrutiny of the Han Chinese. There were Khojas from Kashgar and from other regions as there were the many different communities of Kirghiz nomads

who came together. This was the best location for gathering news, gossip and rumours. All tradesmen came together to exchange news and ideas, including those whom Mirabhe, the old man of Kongur, permitted to come together.

Mian Humayun sent his sons to the Sunday Bazaar to trade, buy or sell their stock of yaks, goats and sheep and camels. The herds and animals were located in many Kirghiz and other nomad villages and settlements along the Kashgar to Tashkurgan Highway. One and all, the traders and herdsmen from Kashgar to Tashkurgan knew of the sons of Mian Humayun, but none had ever met the old man. They knew that these tradesmen came from the Muztagh Ata, and they spoke of them, as the ‘Old herders from the Ice Mountain Father’. The Muztagh Ata was locally spoken of as ‘Ice Mountain Father’, and Mian Humayun’s sons were definitely old men, actually, more than two hundred years old.

The villagers of Ka Usi smiled when they heard the name, ‘Ice Mountain Father’, and seemed to be proud of the translation. Mian Humayun stood with his chest pumped out in pride, for he deemed the title to be like an award given by history. Little did these people realize, thought Mian Humayun, that the Muztagh Ata was indeed the ‘Ice Mountain Father’. The old man of Kongur, Mirabhe, had assigned the task of protecting the secrets of the Muztagh Ata to Mian Humayun, and he had succeeded in doing so, and continued to protect the knowledge, for the past several hundred years that he had been at Ka Usi.

Up in the hills of the Muztagh Ata, as the slopes folded and curved about and around them, were hidden canyons

and rock walls that could not be seen to those who did not know how to search for them. It was to these hidden canyons and rock walls that Mian Humayun and Soheli Beg walked to, every day, following the herd of sheep and goats that wandered in random manner, up the lower slopes of the Muztagh Ata. The forest line stood, as guardians of the slopes and the sheep and goats never entered them. The young boys of Ka Usi ran about among the herd, and would find their usual spot in the trees to sit through the day and keep a watch.

Mian Humayun and Soheli Beg walked past the forest line and through to a small lake, sheltered inside a narrow canyon. A faint foot-trail allowed them to walk around the lake and climb up to a ledge on the canyon's sheer walls. Any newcomer would never have been able to spot the ledge, and if indeed seen, nobody would have had the courage to walk on it. For these two old men of Ka Usi, the ledge had been their foot-trail for hundreds of years, and they could walk on it at night, with their eyes blindfolded. The trail led them upwards through a steady slope, within the forest, until it disappeared behind a fold in the canyon. Here, there was a small platform, smoothed over the years, and the two old men sat and waited.

Up ahead, they could see four cave openings on one wall, and three cave openings on the opposite wall of the canyon. These caves were high up on the canyon, and yet, the mesa top of the walls was much higher, and was capped with snow. The two old men sat at the platform and looked up at the cave openings. This was their responsibility. These inaccessible hidden caves were to be protected, and they had done so, for hundreds of years, as had their ancestors, before them, for thousands

of years. Mian Humayun and Soheli Beg stood up and walked along the platform towards a stone slab that protruded from the canyon wall. A narrow opening behind the stone slab allowed them to enter a cave, similar to the ones above. A flight of stone cut stairs led them to climb within the canyon, probably going up more than a hundred feet inside the mountain.

They reached the first of the caves that were set high up. They stood together and bowed in reverence. Here, sat a man, bearded, in meditation, naked and covered with mud. Each cave had one such sage, deep in meditation. They had come here, hundreds of years ago, from the south.



