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6 Silk Road

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Notice these expressions in the text.
Infer their meaning from the context.

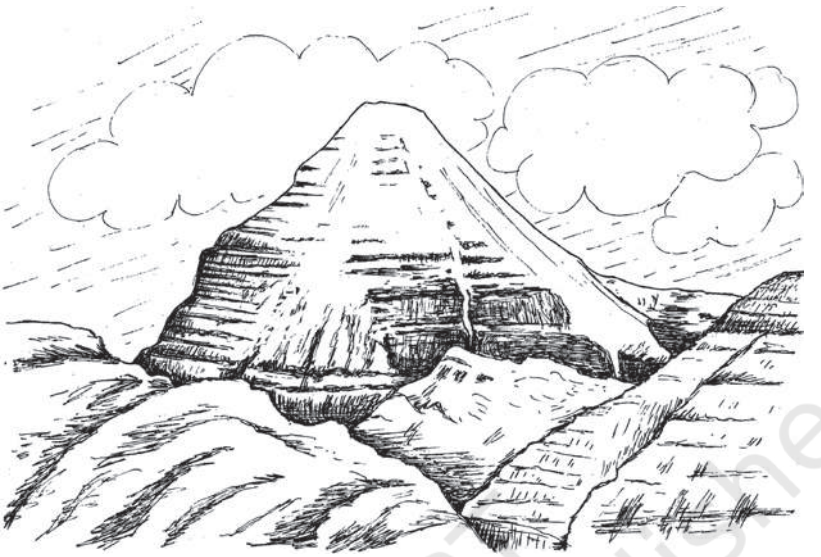
- ducking back
- manoeuvres
- billowed
- swathe
- cairn of rocks
- careered down
- salt flats

A FLAWLESS half-moon floated in a perfect blue sky on the morning we said our goodbyes. Extended banks of cloud like long French loaves glowed pink as the sun emerged to splash the distant mountain tops with a rose-tinted blush. Now that we were leaving Ravu, Lhamo said she wanted to give me a farewell present. One evening I'd told her through Daniel that I was heading towards Mount Kailash to complete the *kora*, and she'd said that I ought to get some warmer clothes. After **ducking back** into her tent, she emerged carrying one of the long-sleeved sheepskin coats that all the men wore. Tsetan sized me up as we clambered into his car. "Ah, yes," he declared, "*drokba*, sir."

We took a short cut to get off the Changtang. Tsetan knew a route that would take us south-west, almost directly towards Mount Kailash. It involved crossing several fairly high mountain passes, he said. "But no problem, sir", he assured us, "if there is no snow." What was the likelihood of that I asked. "Not knowing, sir, until we get there."

From the gently rolling hills of Ravu, the short cut took us across vast open plains with nothing in them except a few gazelles that would look up from nibbling the arid pastures and frown before bounding away into the void. Further on, where the plains became more stony than grassy, a great herd of wild ass came into view. Tsetan told us we

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Sketch of Mount Kailash

were approaching them long before they appeared. "*Kyang*," he said, pointing towards a far-off pall of dust. When we drew near, I could see the herd galloping en masse, wheeling and turning in tight formation as if they were practising **manoeuvres** on some predetermined course. Plumes of dust **billowed** into the crisp, clean air.

As hills started to push up once more from the rocky wilderness, we passed solitary *drokbas* tending their flocks. Sometimes men, sometimes women, these well-wrapped figures would pause and stare at our car, occasionally waving as we passed. When the track took us close to their animals, the sheep would take evasive action, veering away from the speeding vehicle.

We passed nomads' dark tents pitched in splendid isolation, usually with a huge black dog, a Tibetan mastiff, standing guard. These beasts would cock their great big heads when they became aware of our approach and fix us in their sights. As we continued to draw closer, they would explode into action, speeding directly towards us, like a bullet from a gun and nearly as fast.

These shaggy monsters, blacker than the darkest night, usually wore bright red collars and barked furiously with massive jaws. They were completely fearless of our vehicle, shooting straight into our path, causing Tsetan to brake and swerve. The dog would make chase for a hundred metres or so before easing off, having seen us off the property. It wasn't difficult to understand why ferocious Tibetan mastiffs became

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popular in China's imperial courts as hunting dogs, brought along the Silk Road in ancient times as tribute from Tibet.

By now we could see snow-capped mountains gathering on the horizon. We entered a valley where the river was wide and mostly clogged with ice, brilliant white and glinting in the sunshine. The trail hugged its bank, twisting with the meanders as we gradually gained height and the valley sides closed in.

The turns became sharper and the ride bumpier, Tsetan now in third gear as we continued to climb. The track moved away from the icy river, labouring through steeper slopes that sported big rocks daubed with patches of bright orange lichen. Beneath the rocks, hunks of snow clung on in the near-permanent shade. I felt the pressure building up in my ears, held my nose, snorted and cleared them. We struggled round another tight bend and Tsetan stopped. He had opened his door and jumped out of his seat before I realised what was going on. "Snow," said Daniel as he too exited the vehicle, letting in a breath of cold air as he did so.

A **swathe** of the white stuff lay across the track in front of us, stretching for maybe fifteen metres before it petered out and the dirt trail reappeared. The snow continued on either side of us, smoothing the abrupt bank on the upslope side. The bank was too steep for our vehicle to scale, so there was no way round the snow patch. I joined Daniel as Tsetan stepped on to the encrusted snow and began to slither and slide forward, stamping his foot from time to time to ascertain how sturdy it was. I looked at my wristwatch. We were at 5,210 metres above sea level.

The snow didn't look too deep to me, but the danger wasn't its depth, Daniel said, so much as its icy top layer. "If we slip off, the car could turn over," he suggested, as we saw Tsetan grab handfuls of dirt and fling them across the frozen surface. We both pitched in and, when the snow was spread with soil, Daniel and I stayed out of the vehicle to lighten Tsetan's load. He backed up and drove towards the dirty snow, eased the car on to its icy surface and slowly drove its length without apparent difficulty.

Ten minutes later, we stopped at another blockage. "Not good, sir," Tsetan announced as he jumped out again to survey the scene. This time he decided to try and drive round the snow. The slope was steep and studded with major rocks, but somehow Tsetan negotiated them, his four-wheel drive vehicle lurching from one obstacle to the next. In so doing he cut off one of the hairpin bends, regaining the trail further up where the snow had not drifted.

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I checked my watch again as we continued to climb in the bright sunshine. We crept past 5,400 metres and my head began to throb horribly. I took gulps from my water bottle, which is supposed to help a rapid ascent.

We finally reached the top of the pass at 5,515 metres. It was marked by a large **cairn of rocks** festooned with white silk scarves and ragged prayer flags. We all took a turn round the cairn, in a clockwise direction as is the tradition, and Tsetan checked the tyres on his vehicle. He stopped at the petrol tank and partially unscrewed the top, which emitted a loud hiss. The lower atmospheric pressure was allowing the fuel to expand. It sounded dangerous to me. "Maybe, sir," Tsetan laughed "but no smoking."

My headache soon cleared as we **careered down** the other side of the pass. It was two o'clock by the time we stopped for lunch. We ate hot noodles inside a long canvas tent, part of a workcamp erected beside a dry salt lake. The plateau is pockmarked with **salt flats** and brackish lakes, vestiges of the Tethys Ocean which bordered Tibet before the great continental collision that lifted it skyward. This one was a hive of activity, men with pickaxes and shovels trudging back and forth in their long sheepskin coats and salt-encrusted boots. All wore sunglasses against the glare as a steady stream of blue trucks emerged from the blindingly white lake laden with piles of salt.

By late afternoon we had reached the small town of Hor, back on the main east-west highway that followed the old trade route from Lhasa to Kashmir. Daniel, who was returning to Lhasa, found a ride in a truck so Tsetan and I bade him farewell outside a tyre-repair shop. We had suffered two punctures in quick succession on the drive down from the salt lake and Tsetan was eager to have them fixed since they left him with no spares. Besides, the second tyre he'd changed had been replaced by one that was as smooth as my bald head.

Hor was a grim, miserable place. There was no vegetation whatsoever, just dust and rocks, liberally scattered with years of accumulated refuse, which was unfortunate given that the town sat on the shore of Lake Manasarovar, Tibet's most venerated stretch of water. Ancient Hindu and Buddhist cosmology pinpoints Manasarovar as the source of four great Indian rivers: the Indus, the Ganges, the Sutlej and the Brahmaputra. Actually only the Sutlej flows from the lake, but the headwaters of the others all rise nearby on the flanks of Mount Kailash. We were within striking distance of the great mountain and I was eager to forge ahead.

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But I had to wait. Tsetan told me to go and drink some tea in Hor's only cafe which, like all the other buildings in town, was constructed from badly painted concrete and had three broken windows. The good view of the lake, through one of them helped to compensate for the draught.

I was served by a Chinese youth in military uniform who spread the grease around on my table with a filthy rag before bringing me a glass and a thermos of tea.

Half an hour later, Tsetan relieved me from my solitary confinement and we drove past a lot more rocks and rubbish westwards out of town towards Mount Kailash.

My experience in Hor came as a stark contrast to accounts I'd read of earlier travellers' first encounters with Lake Manasarovar. Ekai Kawaguchi, a Japanese monk who had arrived there in 1900, was so moved by the sanctity of the lake that he burst into tears. A couple of years later, the hallowed waters had a similar effect on Sven Hedin, a Swede who wasn't prone to sentimental outbursts.

It was dark by the time we finally left again and after 10.30 p.m. we drew up outside a guest house in Darchen for what turned out to be another troubled night. Kicking around in the open-air rubbish dump that passed for the town of Hor had set off my cold once more, though if truth be told it had never quite disappeared with my herbal tea. One of my nostrils was blocked again and as I lay down to sleep, I wasn't convinced that the other would provide me with sufficient oxygen. My watch told me I was at 4,760 metres. It wasn't much higher than Ravu, and there I'd been gasping for oxygen several times every night. I'd grown accustomed to these nocturnal disturbances by now, but they still scared me.

Tired and hungry, I started breathing through my mouth. After a while, I switched to single-nostril power which seemed to be admitting enough oxygen but, just as I was drifting off, I woke up abruptly. Something was wrong. My chest felt strangely heavy and I sat up, a movement that cleared my nasal passages almost instantly and relieved the feeling in my chest. Curious, I thought.

I lay back down and tried again. Same result. I was on the point of disappearing into the land of nod when something told me not to. It must have been those emergency electrical impulses again, but this was not the same as on previous occasions. This time, I wasn't gasping for breath, I was simply not allowed to go to sleep.

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Sitting up once more immediately made me feel better. I could breathe freely and my chest felt fine. But as soon as I lay down, my sinuses filled and my chest was odd. I tried propping myself upright against the wall, but now I couldn't manage to relax enough to drop off. I couldn't put my finger on the reason, but I was afraid to go to sleep. A little voice inside me was saying that if I did I might never wake up again. So I stayed awake all night.

Tsetan took me to the Darchen medical college the following morning. The medical college at Darchen was new and looked like a monastery from the outside with a very solid door that led into a large courtyard. We found the consulting room which was dark and cold and occupied by a Tibetan doctor who wore none of the paraphernalia that I'd been expecting. No white coat, he looked like any other Tibetan with a thick pullover and a woolly hat. When I explained my sleepless symptoms and my sudden aversion to lying down, he shot me a few questions while feeling the veins in my wrist.

"It's a cold," he said finally through Tsetan. "A cold and the effects of altitude. I'll give you something for it."

I asked him if he thought I'd recover enough to be able to do the *kora*. "Oh yes," he said, "you'll be fine."

I walked out of the medical college clutching a brown envelope stuffed with fifteen screws of paper. I had a five-day course of Tibetan medicine which I started right away. I opened an after-breakfast package and found it contained a brown powder that I had to take with hot water. It tasted just like cinnamon. The contents of the lunchtime and bedtime packages were less obviously identifiable. Both contained small, spherical brown pellets. They looked suspiciously like sheep dung, but of course I took them. That night, after my first full day's course, I slept very soundly. Like a log, not a dead man.

Once he saw that I was going to live Tsetan left me, to return to Lhasa. As a Buddhist, he told me, he knew that it didn't really matter if I passed away, but he thought it would be bad for business.

Darchen didn't look so horrible after a good night's sleep. It was still dusty, partially derelict and punctuated by heaps of rubble and refuse, but the sun shone brilliantly in a clear blue sky and the outlook across the plain to the south gave me a vision of the Himalayas, commanded by a huge, snow-capped mountain, Gurla Mandhata, with just a wisp of cloud suspended over its summit.

The town had a couple of rudimentary general stores selling Chinese cigarettes, soap and other basic provisions, as well as the usual strings

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of prayer flags. In front of one, men gathered in the afternoon for a game of pool, the battered table looking supremely incongruous in the open air, while nearby women washed their long hair in the icy water of a narrow brook that babbled down past my guest house. Darchen felt relaxed and unhurried but, for me, it came with a significant drawback. There were no pilgrims.

I'd been told that at the height of the pilgrimage season, the town was bustling with visitors. Many brought their own accommodation, enlarging the settlement round its edges as they set up their tents which spilled down on to the plain. I'd timed my arrival for the beginning of the season, but it seemed I was too early.

One afternoon I sat pondering my options over a glass of tea in Darchen's only cafe. After a little consideration, I concluded they were severely limited. Clearly I hadn't made much progress with my self-help programme on positive thinking.

In my defence, it hadn't been easy with all my sleeping difficulties, but however I looked at it, I could only wait. The pilgrimage trail was well-trodden, but I didn't fancy doing it alone. The *kora* was seasonal because parts of the route were liable to blockage by snow. I had no idea whether or not the snow had cleared, but I wasn't encouraged by the chunks of dirty ice that still clung to the banks of Darchen's brook. Since Tsetan had left, I hadn't come across anyone in Darchen with enough English to answer even this most basic question.

Until, that is, I met Norbu. The cafe was small, dark and cavernous, with a long metal stove that ran down the middle. The walls and ceiling were wreathed in sheets of multi-coloured plastic, of the striped variety— broad blue, red and white—that is made into stout, voluminous shopping bags sold all over China, and in many other countries of Asia as well as Europe. As such, plastic must rate as one of China's most successful exports along the Silk Road today.

The cafe had a single window beside which I'd taken up position so that I could see the pages of my notebook. I'd also brought a novel with me to help pass the time.

Norbu saw my book when he came in and asked with a gesture if he could sit opposite me at my rickety table. "You English?" he enquired, after he'd ordered tea. I told him I was, and we struck up a conversation.

I didn't think he was from those parts because he was wearing a windcheater and metal-rimmed spectacles of a Western style. He was Tibetan, he told me, but worked in Beijing at the Chinese Academy

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of Social Sciences, in the Institute of Ethnic Literature. I assumed he was on some sort of fieldwork.

"Yes and no," he said. "I have come to do the *kora*." My heart jumped. Norbu had been writing academic papers about the Kailash *kora* and its importance in various works of Buddhist literature for many years, he told me, but he had never actually done it himself.

When the time came for me to tell him what brought me to Darchen, his eyes lit up. "We could be a team," he said excitedly. "Two academics who have escaped from the library." Perhaps my positive-thinking strategy was working after all.

My initial relief at meeting Norbu, who was also staying in the guest house, was tempered by the realisation that he was almost as ill-equipped as I was for the pilgrimage. He kept telling me how fat he was and how hard it was going to be. "Very high up," he kept reminding me, "so tiresome to walk." He wasn't really a practising Buddhist, it transpired, but he had enthusiasm and he was, of course, Tibetan.

Although I'd originally envisaged making the trek in the company of devout believers, on reflection I decided that perhaps Norbu would turn out to be the ideal companion. He suggested we hire some yaks to carry our luggage, which I interpreted as a good sign, and he had no intention of prostrating himself all round the mountain. "Not possible," he cried, collapsing across the table in hysterical laughter. It wasn't his style, and anyway his tummy was too big.

Understanding the text

I. Give reasons for the following statements.

1. The article has been titled 'Silk Road.'
2. Tibetan mastiffs were popular in China's imperial courts.
3. The author's experience at Hor was in stark contrast to earlier accounts of the place.
4. The author was disappointed with Darchen.
5. The author thought that his positive thinking strategy worked well after all.

II. Briefly comment on

1. The purpose of the author's journey to Mount Kailash.
2. The author's physical condition in Darchen.
3. The author's meeting with Norbu.

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4. Tsetan's support to the author during the journey.
5. "As a Buddhist, he told me, he knew that it didn't really matter if I passed away, but he thought it would be bad for business."

Talking about the text

Discuss in groups of four

1. The sensitive behaviour of hill-folk.
2. The reasons why people willingly undergo the travails of difficult journeys.
3. The accounts of exotic places in legends and the reality.

Thinking about language

1. Notice the kind of English Tsetan uses while talking to the author. How do you think he picked it up?
2. What do the following utterances indicate?
   (i) "I told her, *through* Daniel …"
   (ii) "It's a cold," he said finally *through* Tsetan.
3. Guess the meaning of the following words.

kora	*drokba*	*kyang*

In which language are these words found?

Working with words

1. The narrative has many phrases to describe the scenic beauty of the mountainside like:

   A flawless half-moon floated in a perfect blue sky.

   Scan the text to locate other such picturesque phrases.
2. Explain the use of the adjectives in the following phrases.
   (i) shaggy monsters
   (ii) brackish lakes
   (iii) rickety table
   (iv) hairpin bend
   (v) rudimentary general stores

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Noticing form

1. The account has only a few passive voice sentences. Locate them. In what way does the use of active voice contribute to the style of the narrative.
2. Notice this construction: Tsetan was eager to have them fixed. Write five sentences with a similar structure.

Things to do

"The plateau is pockmarked with salt flats and brackish lakes, vestiges of the Tethys Ocean which bordered Tibet before the continental collision that lifted it skyward."

Given below is an extract from an account of the Tethys Ocean downloaded from the Internet. Go online, key in Tethys Ocean in Google search and you will find exhaustive information on this geological event. You can also consult an encyclopedia.

> Today, India, Indonesia and the Indian Ocean cover the area once occupied by the Tethys Ocean. Turkey, Iraq, and Tibet sit on the land once known as Cimmeria. Most of the floor of the Tethys Ocean disappeared under Cimmeria and Laurasia. We only know that Tethys existed because geologists like Suess have found fossils of ocean creatures in rocks in the Himalayas. So, we know those rocks were underwater, before the Indian continental shelf began pushing upward as it smashed into Cimmeria. We can see similar geologic evidence in Europe, where the movement of Africa raised the Alps.

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Notes

A travelogue presenting a panoramic view of Mt Kailash.

Understanding the text

- Factual comprehension
- Author's adventurous experiences while scaling the hilly terrain

Talking about the text

- Lifestyle of hill-folk
- Author's description of exotic places

Thinking about language

- English spoken by guides
- Communicating with strangers
- Guessing the meanings of words from other languages from the context

Working with words

- Noticing picturesque phrases
- Use of uncommon adjectives

Noticing form

Predominant use of active voice as a contributor to the style of narration

Things to do

Getting information about geological formations from the Internet/encyclopedia

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