



The Apricot Road to Yarkand

By Salman Rashid

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Editorial Review

Review

Is there anything more beguiling than a true tale of high adventure well told? Stories about places like Pakistan and China sides of Muztang Pass, braving difficult odds under overwhelming conditions in far flung locales, relating to people of Pakistan and Chinese Turkistan who had been in the area centuries ago, can keep anyone glued to The Apricot Road to Yarkand by Salman Rashid. The Apricot Road to Yarkand is a spellbinding tale of journey from Shigar Valley to Yarkand in the North, over the glaciated Muztagh Pass by Salman Rashid. The author is master of conveying what seems to be going on in his heads in gripping prose that is never clichéd. First, a word about the author. Salman Salman is Pakistan's foremost travel writer. His passion for writing is matched by his passion for photography. His research, range of visual subjects and narratives make a remarkable and powerful combination. In addition to eight travel books, his work appears in leading English language journals. In The Apricot Road to Yarkand, Salman Rashid has also told how he switched his career in the army to become a full time researcher and a writer. (I keep thinking how Salman Rashid would have been in 'appreciation of tactical situations' on battle grounds if he was still in army?) Salman Rashid is a historian in the truest sense. He writes from a knowledge standpoint as opposed to a position biased toward the dominant paradigm and its conquests. A moving writer, Salman reminds the heart of its search for power in a world which has forgotten its purpose for existence. As usual, Salman Rashid, 54 when he undertook the journey, delivers a ton of current information all based on historical research. No one else seems to have half the energy of this man. What is more, Salman Rashid is currently translating the book into Urdu language. In The Apricot Road to Yarkand, Salman Rashid recounts his journey from Shigar Valley to Yarkand and he does so in frank and honest terms. Result of sixteen years of dreaming about everything that sits on the historic route from Baltistan to Yarkand, The Apricot Road to Yarkand is an epic to the essence of exploring mighty mountains, but it is also about of the cultural, geological, and biological make up of mountains, people of that area, human behavior in difficult situations, and history; and about joy of watching purple-gray clouds spreading out like an atmospheric ocean in all directions as far as the eye can see. Alan Hovaness once wrote, "Mountains are symbols of mankind's search for God," and Allen Ginsberg told us, "Things are symbols for themselves" In The Apricot Road to Yarkand, Salman Rashid allows the mountains to be symbols of the seeking soul and at the same time symbols of themselves - they are encountered as we internalize them in our quest, and they are encountered as they really are: cold, hard, lonely, mighty and sometime hazardous. The Apricot Road to Yarkand inspires its readers to explore the less explored areas and experience for themselves what only a few had the fortune to discover. Well-written and wonderfully presented, the book is a must read for anyone remotely interested in mountains, adventures or for those who want to find out why a chunk of land was handed over to our best friends. I highly recommend it. -S A J Shirazi --Light Within, Shirazi's Blog, 28th Feb, 2011.

With so much of the vast Himalaya still a blank on the map, our first privilege is to explore rather than to climb, wrote Eric Shipton, the twentieth-century British explorer-climber. But as Salman Rashid wistfully notes in The Apricot Road to Yarkand, In the world of the beginning of the 21st century, there were no blanks on the map to fill and be celebrated. Yet this in no way diminishes the romance of retracing historical routes, and not solely for the sheer joy of adventure. Rashid's account of the mediaeval route from Baltistan to Yarkand (now in the Chinese province of Xinjiang) has its roots in Francoise Bernier's Travels in the Mogul Empire. A wandering French doctor who found service at the court of Aurangzeb, Bernier explains why the older trading route between Kashmir and Tartary (as it was then known) by way of the un-glaciated Karakoram Pass was abandoned on the order of the ruler of Ladakh. A new route, reports Bernier, was established from Skardu to Kashgar and Yarkand by way of the Muztagh Pass. For Rashid, the idea that caravans were routinely crossing a heavily glaciated, high-altitude pass was the germ of an expedition.

Although he had picked out his two travel companions as early as 2001, it took him five years to organise the expedition. Corporations or governments are loath to finance journeys that appear to serve no visible purpose. Hawkish diplomats are wary of potential skullduggery; as he ruefully notes, Pakistanis have done little to endear themselves to their Chinese neighbors since a political-religious group's crusade to free the largely Muslim Uighur population of Kashgar in 1988. Nonetheless, by 2005, he was able to secure the requisite funds from the Pakistan government. Resigned to the Chinese government's refusal to allow them to cross over into Xinjiang from the Pakistani side, he decided to cross the Muztagh Pass on to the Sarpo Laggo Glacier and continue as far as possible. Then, armed with a Chinese visa, he would complete the traverse from the other side. Rashid's account of the expedition is peppered with sharp albeit good-humoured caricatures of his companions and the people they meet en route: the bored young army captain in Skardu, who is apt to think of Rashid and his party as useless layabouts; Ali the Hunter, who promises in vain to shoot (quite illegally) an ibex for supper; and Oblat, the rotund Uighur lieutenant who insists on offering his father's hospitality even as he deftly ransacks Rashid's belongings for objectionable material. But Rashid's journey spans more than just geography; it charts the movement of language, of names. Long before the highest peak in the region was named Godwin-Austen or even the unimaginably dull K-2, it was Chhogho Ri or Great Mountain to the Baltis. This became Chogor for the Tukistanis who were traveling the Muztagh route from Yarkand to Baltistan and encountered the north face of the mountain. The name then passed into the Chinese as Chongoli. There are less forgivable instances of the corruption of language too. The pass Conway Saddle, named for the pioneering surveyor Martin W. Conway, becomes Convoy Saddle, snorts Rashid, for ill-read Pakistani army officers who vaguely assume that the saddle is so named for the convoy of mules used to transport supplies when the post was first established. As Rashid notes, the Baltis are, on the whole, a genial people with a sharp sense of humour, and always willing to encourage straggling charges with the blithe untruth that the arduous climb expected ahead is nothing more than an easy level plain. It is thus surprising, as he says, that Balti guides and porters do not figure popularly in exploration literature (as opposed to the Nepali Sherpas), and are often ill-naturedly painted as cowardly and dour. By Maheen Paracha --Dawn Books&Authors, March 6th, 2001.

About the Author

Salman Rashid is a Lahore based travel writer who has authored seven books. Among Pakistanis, he is the one individual who has seen the most of his country. His travel writing appears regularly in two of the country's leading English language journals. He is a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Henry Major:

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