



INDIAN SCHOOL AL WADI AL KABIR

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH (2022-23)

SILK ROAD by Nick Middleton

Class: XI

Subject: ENGLISH

About the Author:

Nick Middleton (born 1960) is a British physical geographer and supernumerary fellow of St Anne's College, Oxford. He specialises in desertification.

Nick Middleton was born in London, England. As a geographer, he has travelled to more than 50 countries. 'Going to Extremes' is a television programme for Channel 4 about extreme lifestyles, in which Middleton experiences life in the hostile conditions.

He won the Royal Geographical Society's Ness Award in 2002.

He has appeared on BBC 2's 'Through the Keyhole'.

The extract 'Silk Road' has been taken from his book 'Extremes Along the Silk Road- Adventures off the World's Oldest Superhighway (2005)'

Characters:

- 1) The Author: He is a Professor of Geography at Oxford University and an environmental consultant. 2) Tsetan: He is the owner of the car hired by the author for the journey as well as a tourist guide.
- 3) Daniel: He is an interpreter from Lhasa who travelled part of the time with the author.
- 4) Norbu: He is a Tibetan working at an academy in Beijing who wants to complete his 'kora' (pilgrimage) at Mount Kailash.

Summary:

Departure from Ravu

The author left Ravu along with Daniel, an interpreter, and Tsetan, who was a tourist guide. Before leaving, Lhamo, the lady who had provided them accommodation at Ravu, gave the author a gift of a long-sleeved sheepskin coat, as they were going to Mount Kailash, where it would be very cold. Tsetan knew a short cut to reach the mountain. He said the journey would be smooth if there was no snow.

They Saw '*Drokbas*' on the Way

As they passed through the hills, they saw individual *drokbas* (nomad shepherds) looking after their flocks. Both men and women were seen. They were wearing thick woollen clothes. They would stop and stare at their car, sometimes waving to them as they passed.

Encounter with Tibetan Mastiffs

As they passed the nomad's tents, they saw some Tibetan mastiffs, the dogs used by the shepherds. When the car came close to their tents, they would bark furiously and fearlessly. They would chase the car for some distance and would calm down only after they have seen the car off their master's property. In earlier

days, Tibetan mastiffs were popular in China's imperial courts as hunting dogs. They were brought along the Silk Road as a tax payment from Tibet.

Ice Blocks the Road

The turns became sharper and more difficult as they climbed. The author started getting a severe headache. Suddenly there was a snow fall that blocked the route. Daniel and the author got out of the car to reduce its load on sharp bends. The altimeter on the author's wrist indicated that they were at a height of 5210 metres above the sea level. The icy top layer of the snow was dangerous, as the car could slip off the road. When they reached a height of 5515 metres, which was the top of the pass, the atmospheric pressure became so low that Tsetan had to open the lid of the petrol tank to release the evaporated fuel.

Back on the Highway

By late afternoon, they had reached the small town of Hor on the shore of Lake Manasarovar, which was on the old trade route between Lhasa and Kashmir. Daniel returned to Lhasa from there. Tsetan got the flat tyre of the car repaired there. Hor was a grim, miserable place. There was no vegetation whatsoever, just dust and rocks. There was accumulated rubbish everywhere. Unlike the past, the place no longer appeared holy.

By 10.30 PM they reached Darchen, where they found a guesthouse to stay in. It was the end of the road. The author had a very troubled night. His nostrils were blocked, and he was not able to get enough air into his lungs. Most of the night he sat up, as he was unable to sleep.

Next Day

The next day Tsetan took the author to the Darchen Medical College. The doctor told him it was just the cold and the altitude which were giving him trouble. The doctor gave him some Tibetan medicine and that night the author was able to sleep well.

Tsetan left the author in Darchen and went back to Lhasa. He did not mind if the author would die in Darchen. He was a devout Buddhist and believed in life after death. However, he was worried that the author's death could affect his business, as he may not get more tourists who required to be accompanied till where the road ended.

The Author Looks for a Companion and Meets Norbu

Like Hor, Darchen was dusty and a lot of rubbish could be seen all around. The town appeared to be sparsely populated. There were no pilgrims there, as the pilgrimage season had not yet started. He had reached there too early. He actually wanted to reach Mount Kailash to complete the 'kora' and get a feel of what a pilgrimage was like. But he didn't want to do it alone. He was looking for someone who could speak or understand English.

When he was sitting in the only cafe at Darchen, Norbu, a plump Tibetan working in Beijing at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in the Institute of Ethnic Literature, saw him reading an English book. Norbu introduced himself to the author. He also was there to do 'kora', although he was not a religious person. So, both decided to do the 'kora' together.

Theme:

This chapter is part of a travelogue about the author's travel along the ancient trade route called 'Silk

Road'. This account of the Silk Road, with its contrasts and exotic detail, describes the challenges and hardships the author faced while undertaking his journey to Mount Kailash on a pilgrimage.

Textual Questions: (Use the key points to write your answers)

I. Give reasons for the following statements.

1) The article has been titled 'Silk Road.'

Ans: network of overland routes linking Europe with Asia- trade route followed by the Europeans since ancient times- silk, horses and exotic fauna and flora of the East- links East and West- a fabled route- trodden by innumerable adventurers through the ages- author follows their footsteps- hence named 'Silk Road'

2) Tibetan mastiffs were popular in China's imperial courts.

Ans: popular as hunting dogs- brought along the Silk Road- as payment of tax from Tibet- huge black dogs- used as watchdogs- exploded into action when roused- furious and fearless

3) The author's experience at Hor was in stark contrast to earlier accounts of the place.

Ans: stark contrast to the accounts of Ekai Kawaguchi and Sven Hedin the author had read earlier- grim and miserable- no vegetation- only dust and rocks- years of accumulated rubbish left by tourists

4) The author was disappointed with Darchen.

Ans: high altitude- health problems- bad cold- not able to sleep at night- arrived early- there weren't any pilgrims in the place- place was dusty, partially derelict and punctuated by heaps of rubble and rubbish left behind by tourists

5) The author thought that his positive thinking strategy worked well after all.

Ans: author disappointed with Darchen- bad health, Tsetan left- lonely with no pilgrims- met Norbu, a Tibetan who also wanted to visit Kailash- would make a good team- author started thinking positively- found delight and new enthusiasm

II. Briefly comment on.

1) The purpose of the author's journey to Mount Kailash.

Ans: to complete the 'kora' - a sacred religious ritual according to Hindu and Buddhist tradition.

2) The author's physical condition in Darchen.

Ans: not well- sinuses blocked- not able to sleep well at night- positive effect of the Tibetan medicine

3) The author's meeting with Norbu.

Ans: at the cafe in Darchen- delighted to meet Norbu - decided to complete the 'kora' together

4) Tsetan's support to the author during the journey.

Ans: Tsetan drove the car very carefully- gave information about the places- very caring- took him to the Darchen medical college- was also a good Buddhist

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."

Ans: Tsetan wanted to go back to Lhasa- he firmly stated that he was a Buddhist- believed that physical death was not death in the real sense- However, thought- death of a tourist could affect his business- credibility will be at stake- he may not get any more customer

Extra Questions:

1) Justify the title 'Silk Road'.

Ans: The 'Silk Road' is not a single highway, but a network of overland routes linking Europe with Asia, making trade possible between those with a passion for silk, horses and exotic fauna and flora. It's a thread that links East and West, a network of veins that pumped new lifeblood into mighty empires, a fabled route trodden by innumerable adventurers through the ages.

Yet, underlying this trail is one of the most extraordinary tracts of land on this planet, a vast region separating China from the Mediterranean world that rates as one of the least hospitable areas on Earth. It was the difficulty of crossing such unforgiving territory that kept East and West apart for so long, allowing them to develop in their own distinct ways.

The author records the challenges and hardships he faced in the Silk Road regions as they are now. The reader finds it refreshing to traverse such vast tracts of the natural world that remain largely unchanged from earlier days. Thus, the title is justified.

2) "He's an adventurer, but at heart more a meticulous academic than a daredevil". Explain the truth of the statement about the author based on your reading of the travelogue 'Silk Road' by Nick Middleton.

Ans: Oxford professor and travel writer, Nick Middleton is truly an adventurer, but at heart more a meticulous academic than a daredevil adventurer. He is an environmental consultant who has written many articles in journals, magazines and newspapers-as well as 16 books. Nick Middleton teaches geography at Oxford University and is a fellow of St Anne's College. His main research interest is in the nature and human use of deserts and their margins.

After reaching Hor, what he was struck by was not the natural beauty of the place but the litter all around the area left by tourists. He was disappointed to see how man was ruining the environment. Being an environmental consultant, he was much disturbed at how the environment is slowly deteriorating due to human activity.

He gives a graphic detail of the mountain terrain, the snow-covered mountains and the calm and relaxed people he met there. He strongly believes that travel broadens our mind.

3) The narrator on his way to Mount Kailash came across a lot of topographic variation. Comment.

Ans: The narrator and his companions took a short cut to get off the Changtang. Tsetan knew a route that would take them southwest, almost directly towards Mount Kailash. It involved crossing several fairly high mountain passes. From the gently rising and falling hills of Ravu, the short cut took them across vast open plains with nothing in them except a few gazelles that were grazing in the arid pastures. Further ahead, the plains became more stony than grassy, and there a great herd of wild ass came into view.

Still ahead hills became steeper where solitary drokbas were tending their flocks. This led them to the snow-capped mountains and then to the valley where the river was wide and by and large clogged with ice. At a height of 5,515 metres, piles of stones marked the landscape. Next was the plateau which was covered with salty desert area and salty lakes that were remnants of the Tethys Ocean. Hor was next in line. It was a wretched place with no vegetation just dust and rocks, liberally scattered with years of accumulated refuse.

4) The narrator realized that the snow was both dangerous as well as beautiful. Justify.

Ans: Tsetan on his way surveyed the snow on the path by stamping on it. It was not deep. But in case they slipped the car could turn over. Hence to cover the risk, they flung handfuls of dirt across the frozen surface. When the snow was spread with soil, they drove without difficulty. Ten minutes later, they stopped at another blockage. This time they decided to drive round the snow.

However, the risks did not undermine the scenic beauty of the place. In the valley, they saw snow-capped mountains and the river was wide but mostly blocked with ice that was sparkling in the sunshine. As they moved ahead, on their upward track, the turns became sharper and the ride bumpier. The rocks around were covered with patches of bright orange lichen. Under the rocks, seemed unending shade.

5) Enumerate the difficulties that the group faced in Hor.

Ans: The group reached the small town of Hor by late afternoon. Daniel, who was returning to Lhasa, found a ride in a truck and left. They had suffered two punctures in quick succession on the drive down from the salt lake and they got them replaced. Hor was a gloomy place devoid of vegetation. It only had dust and rocks, liberally scattered with years of accumulated refuse.

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. The narrator was served by a Chinese youth in military uniform who spread the grease around on his table with a filthy rag before bringing him a glass and a thermos of tea.

6) Describe in detail the narrator's miserable night in Darchen.

Ans: The narrator reached the Darchen guesthouse after 10.30 p.m. This was just the beginning of a troubled night. The open-air rubbish dump in Hor had set off his cold once more. One of his nostrils was blocked again and he was tired and hungry. He started breathing through his mouth. After a while, he woke up abruptly. His chest felt strangely heavy but when he sat up, his nasal passages cleared almost instantly and relieved the feeling in his chest. He lay down again. Just as he was about to doze something told him not to.

He was not gasping for breath, but could not go to sleep. He sat up but as soon as he lay down, his sinuses filled and his chest felt strange. He tried supporting himself against the wall, but could not manage to relax enough to sleep. He did not know what was wrong but had a feeling that if he slept he would not wake up again. So he stayed awake all night.

7) Narrate the narrator's meeting with the Tibetan doctor.

Ans: After an awfully uncomfortable and breathless night, Tsetan took the narrator to the Darchen Medical College. The college was new and looked like a monastery from the outside with a very solid door that led into a large courtyard. The consulting room was dark and cold and occupied by a Tibetan doctor who did not have any kit that the narrator had been expecting.

He wore a thick pullover and a woolly hat. The narrator explained the symptoms and the doctor shot him a few questions while feeling the veins in his wrist. Finally he said, it was the cold and the effects of altitude. He said that the narrator would be well enough to do the kora. He gave him a brown envelope stuffed with fifteen screws of paper. Each package had a brown powder that had to be taken 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. Though the medicine looked like sheep dung, it helped him recover quickly.

8) Meeting Norbu came as an immense relief to the narrator. Why?

Ans: The narrator was not only disappointed with the filth in Darchen but also because of the lack of pilgrims. Moreover, since Tsetan had left, he had not come across anyone in Darchen with enough English to answer even this most basic question. It was then that he met Norbu in a cafe. He was Tibetan, he told him, but worked in Beijing at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, in the Institute of Ethnic Literature.

He had also come to do the kora. Norbu had been writing academic papers about the Kailash kora and its importance in various works of Buddhist literature for many years, but he had never actually done it himself. He was relieved to form a team with another academician. This apart, Norbu, wasn't really a practicing Buddhist, though he was a Tibetan. He suggested that they hire some yaks to carry their luggage, as he had no intention of prostrating himself all around the mountain.



