

THE ABOMINABLE SNOWMAN

BY

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During the last ten years sensational news, stories, and legends regarding the 'Abominable Snowman', from the lay public as well as from Himalayan expeditionists, have become a feature in the press. On a close examination of these pieces of information, articles, etc., it seems remarkable that there has hardly been a single person who has actually seen one of these creatures or got reliable first-hand knowledge of the same, devoid of legend or exaggeration. Added to this, confusion is worse confounded by the fact that different persons have translated differently, and sometimes grossly mistranslated, the original Tibetan words designating or describing this animal, used by local inhabitants (Tibetans) who, from all accounts, could be presumed to have a more intimate knowledge of this creature than others. For example, the Tibetan expression *mi-te* has been rendered as 'abominable' by Lt.-Col. Howard Bury of the Everest reconnaissance party.¹ Really, however, the Tibetan word *mi-te* connotes 'man-bear'. I heard of the *mi-te* for the first time in August 1935 when I was up at Thugolho gompa (monastery), on the southern shores of the sacred Lake Manasarovar, western Tibet, to select a site for my twelve-month sojourn in that region.

A Tibetan *dokpa* (shepherd) pilgrim from Markham (eastern Province of Tibet) was describing an incident how one of the sheep of his flock was attacked by a *mi-te* at the Kyang Chhu (16,000 ft.), a tributary of the Tamchok Khambab (Brahmaputra). It was dusk time when the dogs began to bark violently. The *dokpas* spotted an animal, which at first sight they thought to be a *changu* (wolf) and immediately fired two shots at the beast with their matchlock guns (literally flintlocks). Both shots missed the target; the animal left the sheep dead and bleeding and ran away. The shepherds saw the creature from a distance of about 100 cubits (50 yards). The animal at first ran on all fours, but after running for some distance it stood up on its hind legs to look back at the place from which the shots came. Seeing a number of men standing together, it disappeared into the upper portions of the valley, walking on its hind legs. The animal was described to be the height of a man and light red or reddish brown in colour. They called it *mi-tre*.

Again, in the month of June 1957, I heard of the *mi-te* for the second time, when I was camping at the traditional source of the

¹ But from the 'Gleaning' published on p. 509 of Vol. 53 (April 1956) it will be seen that Col. Howard Bury's original report of the 'Abominable Snowman' was not intended 'to be taken too seriously'!—Eds.

Tamchok Khambab or the Brahmaputra. A number of *nyakora* (pilgrim) nomads from Bongba and Amdo Province in northern Tibet, on their way to Lake Manasarovar and Kailas, were camping on the banks of the Brahmaputra, four miles below its source. They had gone there to try their luck if they could get a *dong* (wild yak) for a change in their meat. During the course of talk they told me that the source regions of Tamchok Khambab (Brahmaputra) and Kubi Tsangpo abound in wild yak (*dong*), Tibetan gazelle (*goa*), wild sheep (*na* and *nyan*), Tibetan antelope (*cho*), and lynx (*yi*). Incidentally they also told me that they had seen a *mi-te* in the source region of the Kubi (17,000 feet), one of the headstreams of the Brahmaputra. The *mi-te* or the red bear once attempted to attack one of their sheep, while they were grazing on the slopes of a mountain in a deep valley, but was scared away by a pack of watch dogs which began to fiercely bark at it. They further reported that the *mi-te* is found at several places on the Tibetan side of the Nepal border. This and the information gathered by me from other Tibetans go to show that the Tibetans know *mi-te* to be the red bear, one of the three varieties of bear familiar to them.

In my books 'Exploration in Tibet' (published by the Calcutta University) and 'Kailas-Manasarovar' I made mention of three varieties of bear known to the Tibetans, while describing the fauna of the Kailas-Manas region (pages 111 and 69 respectively): black bear (*tom*), brown bear (*te*), and man-bear (*mi-te*) (walks on hind legs like man).

In the word 'tre', the letter 'r' is so very lightly pronounced that it is almost inaudible. So, for all practical purposes I prefer to use the word as 'te' only. I have not seen the *mi-te* myself, but collected this information from a number of local Tibetans, and from shepherds and pilgrims going to this region from eastern and central Tibet, contiguous with the Himalayas. Since the Abominable Snowman became such a prominent and sensational topic in the press in connection with almost all the Himalayan expeditions of the year 1950, I instructed some of my Tibetan friends in the Manas region to collect firsthand information by offering a substantial reward in cash. As a result of this I got the following information in July 1953. One *mi-te* visited the Tomo-mopo camp (15,000 ft.) on the Tag Tsangpo on the south-eastern side of Manasarovar. In February 1953, the *mi-te* passed that way in the evening. The shepherds camping at Tomo-mopo witnessed with great curiosity the animal moving in the Tag Valley, sometimes on all fours and sometimes on its two hind legs. At that part of the year the upper regions of the valley, and even the vast plains of the Tag Tsangpo, were under snow. It was perhaps for this reason that the animal came down so near the shepherd camps, obviously in search of food. Not finding an opportunity of snatching away any sheep since the shepherds were all alert, it disappeared into the upper region of the valley.

The following is the account given by my informant. The footprints of the *mi-te* left on the hard ground scantily covered by sand

measured 16 fingers or 11 inches in length and 7 fingers or 5 inches in breadth. The 'feet' had 5 toes each and the 'hands' only 4 toes—at least only 4 could be seen in the imprints. In Tibetan, the front legs of an animal are called *lhakpa* or hands and the hind ones *kangba* or legs. The toes were two fingers or $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches long; all the toes are almost of the same size, excepting the little toe which was a bit shorter than the rest. The animal when up on its hind legs was described as being a little taller than a tall man. The colour of the bear was deep brown, like that of the *ngaruserchung* (brahminy duck), though the shade varied from one part of the body to another. The body of the animal was covered with a thick coat of reddish brown hair and the hairs on the face were pretty long. Ten days after, when the shepherds had gone up the valley for grazing their sheep, they noted the footprints of the *mi-te* on the snow-fields to be about a cubit (18 inches) in length and correspondingly wide with no trace of the toes whatsoever. This, obviously, was due to the melting of the snow at the edges of the imprints and the consequent enlargement of the whole.

It was also reported that the *mi-te* sometimes attacks the yak and even man, when found alone. In the Manas region *mi-te* is found near about the sources of the Brahmaputra and the Kubi. Much like the wild yak, the *mi-te* often makes excursions into the snow fields and on to the glaciers.

Shrubs, grass, moss, rhubarb, *champa-estella* (*pang*), small plants, and flowers are found growing on either side of glaciers beginning from the snout right up to the head after the winter snows have melted. As a matter of fact, I have seen vegetation right up to an altitude of 20,000 feet or so. The question, therefore, does not arise as to what the *mi-te* or any other animal wandering in these regions may be after. I have actually seen wild asses and domesticated yaks digging snow with their hoofs and pushing aside sizeable stones with their noses for picking up grass and its roots.

It may be noted in this connection that the *mi-te* (red bear), like wild yak, kyang (Tibetan wild ass), lynx, snow leopard, wolf, ibex, bharal, ghural, Tibetan antelope, musk-deer, and other animals, often make excursions far on to the snow fields and glaciers, both during winter and at other seasons, in search of food and sometimes apparently for wandering's sake. So it is no wonder or a mystery that the footprints and tracks of these and other animals are seen on snow and glaciers, freshly made or old and distorted. As a matter of fact I actually saw, during my winter sojourns in Tibet during the years 1936-37 and 1943-44, tracks of wild yaks, wolves, and the other animals mentioned above for miles together. When the whole of the Manasarovar region was covered with heavy snow in winter, on two occasions a number of domestic yaks, belonging to the shepherds of Nonokur camping on the Tag, travelled on snow the whole night up to Selung Hurdung, a distance of 13 miles. Even as recently as 1 October 1954, when there was a heavy snow fall on Manasarovar, yaks from Riljen camp trekked on snow for seven long

miles to Shushup Tso in search of grass. During my stay at Gangotri in the winter of 1934-1935 I saw the black bear wandering on snow. Also musk-deer and bharal were seen moving about leisurely and aimlessly on the vast expanse of snow round about the Gangotri Temple at midday.

Since the *mi-te* walks sometimes on all fours and sometimes on hind legs only, it is but natural that the tracks of footprints are sometimes seen in pairs and sometimes in single files.

When the footprints are observed after they have long been exposed to sun, it is no wonder that, due to the melting of the snow along the edges, the marks become enlarged to a length of nearly 18 inches with a corresponding width in case of the *mi-te*. Thus, Eric Shipton's footprints 'of the size of a young elephant's' could well be those of a lynx, snow leopard, or wolf, greatly magnified by the melting snow between the time they were made by the animal and the moment of observation. Footprints on the snow can be defaced, deformed, or decreased in dimensions, with the details of the finger marks etc. obliterated as a result of blizzards or by the blowing of strong winds.

When I was crossing the Khandosanglam Pass in 1941 I came across giant footprints as long as 21 inches. Khandosanglam is a pass east of Kailas peak. According to Tibetan traditions it could be negotiated only by those pious pilgrims who have completed twelve circumambulations of the Holy Kailas Peak by the regular Parikrama route. As such, hardly one or two pilgrims in a year negotiate this pass. My guide from Diraphuk gompa (second monastery of Kailas) informed me that a lama from Kham crossed the pass some twenty-five days before we did. The glacier was about a mile long and full of treacherous crevasses. The footprints left by my predecessor, the lama, on the deep snow had melted away a good deal along the edges by the warm sun of July, with the result that a trail of footprints, each 21 inches long with corresponding width, was before us when we were crossing the pass. A credulous or a superstitious pilgrim would have easily described the footprints as those of a great Himalayan Yogi a thousand years old, or of Asvatthama or Hanuman (one of the seven immortal *chirajivis*) of Mahabharata fame; they might as well have been described by some Himalayan expedition party as those of an 'Abominable Snowman'!

It may be recalled in this connection that Col. A. Waddell was the first Westerner to mark the footprints of the *mi-te* in 1899, in the north-east of Sikkim. Later, members of different Himalayan expeditions also noted similar footprints at heights ranging from 10,000 to 21,000 ft. above sea-level, in the Karakoram Range, Salween Valley in Burma, Kulu Valley, Garhwal, Nepal, Sikkim, Chumbi Valley, Bhutan, Assam, etc., and a few others in regions contiguous with Bhutan, Sikkim, and East Nepal on the Tibetan side. Much of the information regarding the origin of the footprints was, however, not firsthand, being based on hearsay, which in turn was a mixture of myth, legend, superstition, exaggeration, and imagination.

Let us now closely examine the real meaning of the Tibetan words used for the so-called Abominable Snowman. The following table

indicates the different ways in which the expressions and words are translated by the various expeditionists:—

mi-te=abominable; filthy; disgusting to a repulsive degree; dirty.

miteh-kangmi=abominable snowman.

mih-teh=teh *par excellence* of the Sherpas.

me-te=man-bear.

me-tre=man-bear.

mih=man.

yeh-teh=rocky area-animal; animal which lives in a rocky area.

yeti=mi-te.

yite=mi-te.

kangmi=snowman.

gangmi=snowman.

mi-go=wild man.

mi-do=which goes like man; dangerous to man; man-bear.

mi-chempo=big man.

mi-bompo=strong man.

dzu-teh=livestock-animal; animal which is dangerous to livestock; red bear.

chhu-mung=water goblin.

lho-mung=mountain goblin.

The following are the correct meanings of the corresponding terms:—

mi	}	= man.
mih		
me		
meh		

te	}	= bear.
teh		
tre		

kang	}	= snow.
gang		

mi-gve, mi-go=beast that walks like man; these terms are used for snowman (man-bear) in Amdo and Kham Provinces of Tibet (now China); these terms are also used by or known to Tibetans on the Indian border adjoining the Province of Kham.

Yeh-da, Yih-da, Yeh-te, Yi-te—these terms are used for a mythological being with the

throat as thin as a needle and stomach as big as a mountain; hence, a glutton; therefore, a contemptible being. Some people use these terms to 'mi-te' also; since due to ignorance of facts, they believe it, to be a dreaded creature.

tu-do, thu-do dhu-dho—a general term for a beast or a four-legged creature.

lho-mung, lho-mung=wild witch or goblin.

chhu-mung=snow (literally water) goblin; since many have not actually seen the 'mi-te' or man-bear and since they consider the same to be a fearful or dreaded being connected with witchcraft, they wrongly dubbed the 'mi-te' or red bear as lho-mung or chhu-mung.

As a matter of fact, Tibetan words are pronounced with a wide range of sound, sometimes beyond recognition; for example:

t is pronounced as th, d, and dh,

k is pronounced as kh, g, and gh,

p is pronounced as ph, b, and bh, and so on.

It may be mentioned that these wild, exaggerated, false, snowman stories are heard mostly on the Indian and not on the Tibetan side. Very likely the first mistranslation made by Henry Newman in 1921 of the word 'meteh' (in meteh kangmi) as filthy, dirty, disgusting to

a repulsive degree, hence abominable, may be responsible for the misconception which has prevailed ever since and misled others into repeating and perpetuating the mistake. Thirdly, the fact that the matter was not investigated thoroughly on the Tibetan side, where the local population have a correct knowledge of the identity of the animal and several persons have actually been eyewitnesses to it as the red bear, has helped the perpetuation of the wrong notion.

The terminology given above boils down to two expressions 'mi-te' and 'kang-mi', which respectively mean 'man-bear' and 'snowman'. These two terms connote the same object and they are the alternative terms used for the same animal, just as people call the orang-outang as bana-manas or wild man. On this score the so-called 'Abominable Snowman' is no other than the red bear of the Himalayas, the colour of the animal varying from light brown to reddish brown. The indisputable evidence from all sides points to this conclusion. All speculations, exaggeration, fanciful hypotheses, and fantastic stories and legends, believed or woven in this regard must be set at rest.

It is just possible that the 'te' (brown bear) and the 'mi-te' (man-bear or red bear) might be identical; or it may be that these two are confounded one for the other by the Tibetans on the Indian side of the Himalayas, and that it is the footprints of these animals that have been puzzling the brains of so many expeditionists, scientists, and laymen at large.

I have also got a report, not so far confirmed by a firsthand informant, that the 'te' and the 'mi-te' both go into hibernation under some rocks protected from wind, or in a cave, from the middle of November or December to the end of February, that getting up from hibernation they sometimes dig deep into the snow in search of grass and roots, and they sometimes make excursions on avalanches in spring for excavating the bodies of bharal, blue sheep, and gazelle, killed and buried under avalanches. I mention this here, as it may throw some light on the occurrence of the footprints of the *mi-te* in snow at high altitudes.

So far as my knowledge goes, the langur or the black-faced monkey of the Himalayas has never been seen wandering on snow, as it is seldom or never seen beyond the tree-line. As a matter of fact most of the langurs in the upper Himalayas are seen getting down to warmer regions much before the snowfall. So the footprints, resembling human footprints, observed on the snows by some of the Himalayan expeditionists could not be those of langurs.

Two years after the conquest of Everest and soon after my first article on the 'Abominable Snowman' appeared in the press, Sir Edmund Hillary opined that 'the snowman might be an unknown species of bear with super strength, but no man has ever seen it' [June 3, 1955]. And Sri Ten Zing still believes 'in the existence of "Yeti" or some queer animal', though he has never seen one.

Sri M. Lutroffle and Sri Pierre Bordet, French geologists exploring in the Makalu Range, still assert the existence (reality) of the snowman.

Dr. Charles Evans, leader of the British Kanchenjunga Expedition, says that in his opinion the mysterious yeti or Abominable Snowman is either a bear or a large sized monkey.

For years, the lamas of the famous Tyangboche (or Dangboche) monastery, situated in the Everest region, had been showing their special guests, the skull of an unknown animal as that of a 'yeti' or 'snowman'. Dr. Evans reverentially picked up two hairs from the said skull and sent them to the British Museum for examination. The experts' verdict was 'pig bristles'!

Dr. Strafford Mathews, member of the Kanchenjunga Reconnaissance, declared that the Abominable Snowman does not exist, and that it is an animal, and that it was nonsense to give opinion on the 'yeti', when you know that every bear has five toes (22-7-55).

Dr. Eggler, of 1956 Swiss expedition, does not believe in the existence of the 'yeti' and says: 'all the sherpas had heard stories of the yeti but none of them had seen one. No young man among the sherpas believes in the Snowman' (1-7-56).

Col. Huerta, leader of the Argentine expedition to Dhaulagiri, says that he did not believe in the existence of yeti and that he had always thought that the animal was nothing but a high altitude bear. He said that he did come across a bear, which he described as a 'living symbol of the yeti myth' during one of their base camp days, when they were out wild goat shooting at about 10,000 ft. He said that he had the animal killed by a Shikari to prove that the yeti was really a bear. The expedition's photographer, Mr. Bertone, had taken several photographs of the dead bear, which were available for any expert examination. It is cent per cent like an ordinary bear, a rough fellow with shaggy hair and hooked claws, Col. Huerta said.



Pranavananda, S. 1957. "The Abominable Snowman." *The journal of the Bombay Natural History Society* 54, 358–364.

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