



**INDIAN SCHOOL MUSCAT**  
**SENIOR SECTION**  
**DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH**  
**CLASS XI**  
**SILK ROAD**  
**NICK MIDDLETON**



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**ABOUT THE LESSON**

‘Silk Road’ is a detailed account of the author’s visit to Mount Kailash. He visited the place to do the ‘Kora’ (‘Parikarma’ around the holy mountain) with other pilgrims. The Kora was seasonal and he was perhaps the first pilgrim in season to reach Hor town from where he was to start his pilgrimage. He had to encounter several obstacles on the way to reach Hor.

The writer uses picturesque phrases to describe the scenic beauty of the mountains. The whole description is quite interesting as it reveals many unknown facts about a journey up the most difficult terrain in the world.

**LEAVING RAVU**

The author left Ravu in the company of Daniel and Tsetan. Before leaving the place, Lhamo gave him a gift, a long-sleeved sheepskin coat. Their next destination was Mount Kailash and Tsetan knew a short cut. He said the journey would be smooth if there was no snow.

**THE SIGHT OF DROKBAS**

As they passed by the hills, they could see the lonely drokbas tending their flocks. They were men and women, well wrapped. They would pause and stare at their car, occasionally waving as they passed.

**THE TIBETAN MASTIFF**

As they passed the nomad’s tents there were the Tibetan mastiffs. They would explode into action as they neared the tents. They barked furiously and completely fearless. They would chase the car for some distance and would then go back.

**ICE BLOCKING THEIR WAY**

The turns became sharper and bumpier. The sudden and unexpected fall of snow started blocking their way. Both the author and Daniel got out of the car for Tsetan to drive it safely, taking sharp bends. They were at 5210 metres above the sea level. The icy top layer of the snow was very dangerous; the car could slip off the road. The snow continued blocking their way. As they reached 5515 metres above the sea level, the atmospheric pressure became very low and Tsetan opened the lid of the petrol tank to release the evaporated fuel. The author experienced severe headache.

**THE TOWN OF HOR**

By late afternoon, they had reached the small town of Hor. Daniel returned Lhasa and Tsetan repaired the flat tyre of the car. Hor was grim, miserable place. There was no vegetation whatsoever, just dust and rocks. There was the accumulated refuse everywhere. Unlike the past, the place no longer appeared holy.

**REACHING DARCHEN**

By 10:30 p.m., they reached a guest house in Darchen. The author had a very troubled night. His sinus were blocked and he was not able to get enough oxygen and finding it difficult to sleep. Most of the night, he sat up and was not able to sleep.

### **VISITING THE MEDICAL COLLEGE**

The next day, Tsetan took him to the Darchen Medical College. The doctor told him it was just cold and the altitude giving him troubles. He gave him some medicine and that night he was able to sleep well.

### **TSETAN LEAVING FOR LHASA**

Tsetan left the author in Darchen and went away. He did not mind if the author would die in Darchen. He was a good Buddhist and believed in life after death. However, he was worried it could affect his business, as he may not get more tourists to be accompanied.

### **DRY DARCHEN**

Like Hor, Darchen was dusty and heaps of refuse could be seen all around. There were not many shops in Darchen. The town appeared to be sparsely populated. He felt lonely, as they were not any pilgrims. He had reached there very early in the season.

### **MEETING NORBU**

The author wanted to reach Mount Kailash to do Kora. But he didn't want to do it alone. He was looking for someone who could speak or understand English. One day he was sitting in a café. When Norbu saw him rading an English book he came and introduced him to the author. He was a Tibetan, but worked in Beijing at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. He too was there to do Kora. But he was not a religious person. Both of them decided to climb Mount Kailash.

## **ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

### ***1. The article has been titled 'Silk Road'. Justify it.***

The Silk Road refers to a network of overland routes linking Europe with Asia. This has been the trade route followed by the Europeans since ancient times, who had a passion for silk, horses and exotic fauna and fauna of the East. Travellers along the route would buy and sell various items, including silk and spice from China. The author Nick Middleton in his travelogue follows the Silk Road to reach Mount Kailash to do the Kora. Hence, it is titled as 'Silk Road'. There is a long and vivid account of the whole route and of the difficulties people often encounter.

### ***2. What do you know about the Tibetan mastiffs?***

Tibetan mastiffs, huge and ferocious dogs, were quite popular in China's imperial Courts because they were good hunting dogs and also good guards. These Tibetan mastiffs guarded the dark tents of the nomads pitched in isolation. These huge black dogs would raise their big heads when they became aware of people approaching and stared at them. As they drew closer, they would explode into action like bullets and rush towards them and chase them for about a hundred meters. These hairy dogs usually wore bright red collars and barked angrily with enormous jaws. They were absolutely fearless of their vehicle and would run straight onto their way.

### ***3. The author's experience at Hor was in stark contrast to earlier accounts of the place. How?***

According to the earlier accounts, the place abounds in natural beauty. Hor was situated on the sacred Lake Manasarovar. The narrator had heard how various pilgrims had been moved to tears by the sanctity of the place. But his experience of Hor was in direct contrast with theirs. He felt very bad about the place. He found Hor a dismal, wretched place. There was no vegetation there. The whole place was just dust and rocks scattered with a lot of refuse gathered over the years.

**4. Why was the author disappointed with Darchen?**

Darchen was dusty, partially derelict and punctuated by heaps of rubble and refuse. The slow moving and sleepy town had a couple of simple general stores selling Chinese Cigarettes, soap and other basic necessities, as well as the usual strings of prayer flags. The high altitude was giving him health problems. He had a bad cold and was not able to sleep at night. Since he was one of the early arrivals, there weren't any pilgrims coming to the place. Thus he was disappointed with Darchen.

**5. Why did the author think that his positive thinking strategy worked well after all?**

The author had expected Darchen to be full of life with visitors but it was almost deserted. He had arrived too early. Tsetan had left for Lhasa. He was feeling rather lonely with no pilgrims around. It was then he met Norbu, an English speaking Tibetan who too wanted to visit Kailash. Norbu had been writing academic papers about the Kailash Kora and its importance in various works of Buddhist literature for many years. The writer felt that they could team up well as academicians. He realized that his optimism had not vanished after all, even though he had to face a lot of problems and difficulties.

**6. What was the purpose of the author's journey to Mount Kailash?**

The author went on a journey to Mount Kailash to do the Kora as is the tradition. The Kora signifies a rite of circumambulating the holy mountain., that is taking a full circle around it. For this, the author adopted the Silk route to reach Mount Kailash and faced heavy odds to reach there.

**7. Describe the author's physical condition in Darchen.**

It was a disturbed night. The author had a bad cold and his nostril got blocked. He had to breathe through mouth. He was tired and hungry as well. When he had barely slept, he woke up abruptly. He felt heaviness in his chest. He sat up and cleared his nasal passage. He felt relieved though he felt he was not well. He was unable to sleep. He feared he might die in sleep. So, he kept awake. The next day, Tsetan took him to Darchen Medical College and the doctor there gave him some medicine that gave him some relief.

**8. Comment on Tsetan's support to the author during the journey.**

Tsetan was a good and efficient driver. He drove the car very carefully . During the journey, he spoke to the author giving information about the places they were visiting. He was caring. At Darchen, when he found that the author was not well, he took him to the medical college and got medicine for him. He was a good Buddhist.

**9. As a good Buddhist, he knew that it didn't really matter if I passed away, but he thought it would be bad for business. Substantiate.**

Tsetan was a good Buddhist who believed that death was the final 'Nirvana'. Moreover Kailash was a holy place. However, he felt that his death would demotivate the tourists from coming and hence be bad for their business. It would be bad for his business as his credibility would be at stake in looking after the tourists.

**Answer the following questions in 30 – 40 words.**

1. Who was Lhamo and what did she gift?
2. What were the difficulties on the short cut taken by Tsetan?
3. How did the people in Darchen live?
4. While crossing the rocky wilderness, whom did they see and what was their reaction?

5. How did the author feel when they were at about 5400 metres up the sea level?
6. Why is that on the top of the mountain there is a plateau pockmarked with salt flats?
7. How did the Darchen Medical College appear?
8. What activity was going on in the area where there were flats of salt?

***Answer the following questions in 120-150 words.***

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

Silk Road by Nick Middleton is a detailed account of the author's visit to Mount Kailash. 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 handful of dirt and flung them 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 around, seemed unending shade.

2. Narrate the narrator's meeting with the Tibetan doctor.

(Introduction - uncomfortable and breathless night - Tsetan took the narrator - Darchen Medical College - was new and looked like a monastery from the outside - very solid door that led into a large courtyard- consulting room dark and cold - occupied by a Tibetan doctor - did not have any kit - wore a thick pullover and a woolly hat- narrator explained the symptoms and the doctor shot him a few questions -felt the veins in his wrist- Finally said- cold and the effects of altitude- would be well enough to do the kora- gave him a brown envelope stuffed with fifteen screws of paper - Each package - brown powder - had to be taken with hot water - tasted like cinnamon- contents of the lunchtime and bedtime packages - less obviously identifiable -both contained small, spherical brown pellets- medicine looked like sheep dung- helped him recover quickly)

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

(introduction -. narrator and his companions - took short cut to get off the Changtang -Tsetan knew route that would take them southwest - almost directly towards Mount Kailash- involved crossing several fairly high mountain passes- the gently rising and falling hills of Ravu- short cut took them across vast open plains with nothing in them - except a few gazelles - grazing in the arid pastures- Further ahead the plains -more stony than grassy- great herd of wild ass came into view.- ahead hills became steeper -solitary drokbas were tending their flocks- snowcapped mountains – valley- river was wide and by and large clogged with ice- height of 5515 metres -piles of stones marked the landscape- plateau covered with salty desert area and salty lakes - remnants of the Tethys Ocean- Hor a place with no vegetation- just dust and rocks- liberally scattered with years of accumulated refuse)