



Book Review

Touching My Father's Soul

Jamling Tenzing Norgay with Broughton Coburn

Penguin Random House, UK, 2001. 314 pages.

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The Mount Everest disaster of May 10, 1996, has been known as the deadliest tragedy in the history of Everest climbing signifying a cautionary tale for anyone obsessed to attain the peak of Everest. It took away the lives of at least twelve climbers including the world-renowned vastly experienced mountaineering guides like Scott Fischer and Rob Hall. According to Jon Krakauer, as mentioned in the introduction to Jamling Tenzing Norgay's book, *Touching my father's soul* (2001), this infamous catastrophe, became the subject matter of at least seventeen books, let alone newspaper articles. As a climbing member during the disaster, Krakauer himself was one of the firsthand witnesses of that calamitous disaster, which he details in *Into thin air* (1997). The book became a best seller immediately after the publication.

When one of my students opted Krakauer's book for Master's thesis, I needfully went to Pilgrims Book House, Thamel, and bagged one copy for myself. On flipping one page after another, I got impressed with its portrayal of different factors that have caused disasters on Everest such as the climbing obsession of inexperienced but wealthy and celebrity people;



unhealthy competition among the commercial expeditions; heedless but income-oriented governments; and job-seeking Sherpas. After it, my interest was drawn towards mountaineering narratives. I went to Pilgrims Book House again and collected a few mountaineering narratives including Jamling's *Touching my father's soul*. I chose Jamling's narrative as an opener ahead of others primarily because it is the product of the son of the legendary mountaineer, Tenzing Norgay Sherpa, who, making a world record, summited Mt. Everest first in 1953 together with Sir Edmund Hillary. Despite choice, however, I had an impression that the book lacked the literary flavor of a book written by a Western writer like Krakauer. But the moment I noticed the book's introduction written by Krakauer himself, I sensed it should not be dry as such. Importantly, I could now juxtapose it with Krakauer's narrative so as to understand antithetical views, if any, of an insider and an outsider on the same events, Everest ecology and Sherpa life.

Like Krakauer, Jamling was the firsthand witness of the very terrible tragedy of May 10, 1996, but from a different expedition team. Jamling was up Everest as a member of the IMAX film expedition team that looked for making a historical film at the top of Everest with the high-resolution IMAX camera. The team's leader, David Breashears, desperately needed the involvement of Jamling so that he could embellish the film with the stories of Jamling, his father and the Sherpas. The team scheduled to summit the peak on May 9, but retreated to Base Camp due to bad weathers, and kept waiting for better weathers.

As a professional journalist for *Outside* magazine, Krakauer was asked to cover the commercial impacts of mountain tourism in Base Camp of Everest in 1995. He took this opportunity to summit the mountain that he had longed for long. Not to climb, he thought "would be unbearably frustrating to spend two months in the shadow of Everest without ascending higher than Base Camp" (p. 27). Guided by that responsibility, his narrative focuses



on delineating the commercialization of mountaineering and its tangible effects on Mt. Everest, Sherpa culture, and non-local climbing fanatics. It highlights the need of containing mushrooming commercialization by formulating effective government policies in order to maintain a balance between tourism and mountain life. On the other hand, Jamling's narrative too addresses the commercialization of mountain, without doubt, but beyond that, it stresses more on the reverence and devotion that a traveler was expected to offer to Mt. Everest as per the Tibetan Buddhist traditions. Needless to say, the narrative weaves, as Pierce (2002) contends, "Sherpa history, family history, and climbing history" (p. 56) as well as Jamling's tribute to his famed father.

The Sherpas, who are basically the followers of Tibetan Buddhism, regard Mt. Everest, (Chomolungma in their language), as the abode of mother goddess, Miyolangsangma. Until the 1950s, they did not think of stepping onto her bosom. Only after their contact with the Western climbers, they were drawn to climbing just for financial motive. However, each time they climb, they celebrate puja (worship) in reverence and gratitude to her for granting safe passage and providing income. Jamling comments that Everest for most of the Westerners is something of personal ego gratification: "to prove something to someone, or to gain something" whereas for the Sherpas "of respect, awareness, humility and devotion" (p. 80). The Westerners want to exert their bravery, perseverance and sense of superiority on climbing Everest whereas the Sherpas climb it out of reverence and love: "the way a child climbs into the lap of its mother" (p. 257). The disrespectful attitude of the Westerners to the goddess, Jamling contends, has brought "so much hardship on the climbs" (p. 80). For the very reason, Jamling wants to keep himself distant from the Westerners.

In the introduction to Jamling's narrative, Krakauer, acknowledges the book on two accounts: one as "a story of spiritual evolution" and another as "a story of son's quest to make



things right with a father” (p. xvii). Krakauer rightly points out that Jamling’s narrative delineates his spiritual evolution from a sceptic to a devout Buddhist because while studying at St. Paul’s School, Darjeeling, he took Buddhism lightly, which was entirely altered after he was prepared for Mt. Everest climb. Consequently, before climbing, he visits the respected high lamas for blessings and divinations, and celebrated puja as per their instructions. He embraces a conviction that Miyolangsangma will protect his team from impending peril. Moreover, as a true Buddhist devotee, he will reconcile with his father (touch his soul) at the peak out of familial piety.

On May 23, his team summits the peak. Needless to say, how exuberant they all are! But interestingly, while the Westerners sense a feeling of triumph to have taken shots with their IMAX camera at the highest peak of the world, Jamling senses the presence of his father behind him. He remarks, “Then I turned back and saw him—my father” (p. 255). He believes his father has been all along with him to encourage and show him the way up Everest. He feels, he is “touching his soul, his mind, his destiny, and his dreams” (p. 256). More so, he feels the mountain has come alive for him as it had for his father. It changes “from a lifeless, uncaring, and dangerous mound of rock—a rock that had with indifference taken the lives of so many—into a warm, friendly, and life-sustaining being, Miyolangsangma” (p. 256). Out of faith, Jamling places his hands together to express “thank you” to Miyalangsanga and the mountain, recites mantras, and spreads the blessed relics given by Geshe Rimpoche around the summit. This is the point that unfolds how Everest has been viewed antithetically by insiders and outsiders. For the outsiders, it is an object to conquer and test their bravery, whereas for the insiders, it is something to respect and uphold their faith to the abode of their goddess.

Divided into ten chapters, Jamling’s narrative covers a myriad of topics such as hardships of climbing, commercialization of mountaineering, indifference of the government



on Everest ecology, his familial relations, life of the Sherpas, spiritual connection to the mountain, politicization of his father's identity and so on. The narrative begins with Chatral Rimpoche's (a respected lama of Tibetan Buddhism) ominous forecast about the coming season, and ends in Jamling's realization of freedom from desire. After Chatral's premonition gets corrected by Geshe Rimpoche (another respected lama), Jamling, having divination and blessings from him, departs for the mountain and successfully completes his mission. He meets his father on the summit and finally gets free from the desire of having him back. Buddhists believe to sever their "connection to the deceased" (p. 310) so that the deceased's soul fully departs. The detachment is normally expected in the fifth anniversary but for Jamling, it takes nine years until he summits the peak.

Among many, the most important issue the narrative raises, is the spiritual connection of the Tibetan Buddhism with Mt. Everest and climb on it. Jamling urges the aspiring mountaineers to sincerely acknowledge it and regard the Everest climb as a pilgrimage made in respect for Miyosanglangma. If so, they will find the "spirit and blessings of the mountain" and "be protected" by her (pp. 303-304). Otherwise, they will have to face the wrathful revenge of her.

Finally, Jamling's narrative can be a wonderful read for those who want to learn about the infamous disaster of 1996 from a Sherpa's perspective along with the Sherpa life, culture, rituals, and faith connected to Everest and Miyosanglangma.



References

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