CHAPTER TWELVE

ELEVENTH AND TWELFTH DALAI LAMAS;
THE DOGRA WAR IN LADAKH; REGENT SHEDRA
AND TREASURER PELDEN DÖNDRUP

TRANSLATOR’S INTRODUCTION

The ninth to twelfth Dalai Lamas (1806–1875) all died as youths, and it has been darkly suspected that they were murdered, perhaps by the ambans seeking to advance Qing power, perhaps by their monastic retainers hoping to maintain control over resources, or perhaps by nobles intent on enhancing the interests of their class. Shakabpa does not advance any of these theories, instead accepting that the deaths were a result of natural causes. As the 19th century advanced, changes swirled all around Tibet. Britain was establishing a presence all along Tibet’s southern borders, Russia was encroaching through Central Asia and the Mongolian lands, and the Qing found their power in dramatic decline within China. These external shifts contributed to a period of change within Tibet, as well. A series of weak regents ruling in place of the youthful Dalai Lamas ultimately gave way to more powerful figures able to consolidate power and resist incursions from without. This trend reached fulfillment with the ascension of the thirteenth Dalai Lama, a figure charismatic and powerful enough to be compared to the great fifth Dalai Lama.

The chapter opens with the by now familiar process of identifying a new Dalai Lama, this time the eleventh in the lineage. According to Shakabpa, the child, born in 1838, had already been determined to be the correct incarnation when the Golden Urn Lottery was performed confirming the selection. As we saw in Chapter 11, he was anxious to provide evidence that the Golden Urn method, an unwelcome intrusion in Tibetan religious matters, was of little consequence. He further minimizes the significance of its use in the case of the eleventh Dalai Lama by pointing out that there are no records of a rival candidate. Yet, the young incarnation, Khedrup Gyatso (1838–1855), would not survive to adulthood, barely ruling for six months.

Meanwhile, turmoil in India bubbled up over the edge of the Himalayas to influence events in Tibet. Tibet is often wrongly depicted as
having been more isolated, more homogenous, and more monolithic in religious identity than it was. In fact, there has long been a considerable presence of people from other religions. Beginning in the 12th century, Kashmiri immigrants arrived in Western and Central Tibet by way of Ladakh, their homeland providing the toponym employed in Tibetan to refer to all Muslims, “Khachê.” It was to the descendants of these people that the fifth Dalai Lama famously provided land grants for both a cemetery and a mosque, the latter being built as early as 1650. In the process, he also legitimized and normalized the status of Muslims in Lhasa. Moreover, Hui people, Muslim descendents from Central Asian traders, made their way to Lhasa from northeastern Tibet; especially in the early 18th century, a significant number of Hui arrived in the capital as support troops for the invading Dzungar Mongolians.

The present chapter recounts how another population of foreigners came to complicate the religious landscape in Tibet even more. A member of a declining family of Hindu princes in Jammu in northern India, Mahārāja Gulab Singh (1792–1857) managed to revitalize his family’s fortunes by attaching himself to the ascendant Sikh king, Ranjit Singh. By the 1820s, Gulab and his brothers had become such a powerful force in Jammu and Kashmir that they inspired British apprehensions, fearing that a powerful independent force in Kashmir might disrupt British aspirations in Afghanistan, the Himalayas, Gurkha Nepal, and elsewhere. The Mahārāja made his move against Ladakh by dispatching his general Wazir Zorawar Singh (1786–1841) with an army, led by Hindu officers and composed mainly of soldiers of the Sikh faith. The Buddhist Ladakhis, with long ties to Tibet, found themselves unprepared to resist, whereupon their king Tsepel Namgyel was deposed. Despite this setback for Tibetan interests, British records also register some ambivalence in that they hoped a belligerent Dogra attitude towards Tibet might serve to drive the Tibetan shawl wool trade into markets controlled by the East India Company.

In 1841, the emboldened Zorawar Singh attacked Tibet itself with Ladakhi and Sikh troops under his command. While the more well-