

INTRODUCTION.

For the reader's initiation and guidance, I think it essential briefly to give an indication of the plan and arrangement of the following four geographical volumes. The object I have in view, is to show in what ways, during the course of the centuries, the knowledge of Tibet has slowly gained the ears of Europe. When first heard of, the news of its existence came in the shape of vague and mysterious rumours which, already in the middle ages, were receiving a more fixed form and, later on, in times not too far remote, were succeeded by narratives of more or less fantastical colour. My intention is to expose in how unwieldy lines, labouriously drawn up, the notion of Tibet appears on the maps, how unsteadily and vacillatingly it hovers above the dark expanses North of the Himalayas, and how long it is able to shield, as in a fortress, its secrets from the insatiable explorative spirit of the Europeans. The situation of Tibet, among the highest and most inaccessible mountains of the globe, was by itself a guarantee to the effect that, of all countries on the earth — the polar regions excepted — it should last be conquered by the European attacks for discovery.

I go back as far as to the Indian antiquity and endeavour to search out from its epic songs, legends and religious tales, the foundation of geographical reality on which they are built up, though even in a poetic mould. The Indian cosmographers allow their myths to soar around the legendary mountain of Meru, on whose dizzy height the great city of Brahma raises its shining bastions. Their hymns seek out Himavanta, the sacred, and love to dwell amid the dazzling splendour encircling the home of Siva on Kailāsa, the king of mountains. They sing the praises of Māna-sarovara with a charm mighty of arousing the surprise and admiration even of present-day occidentals. It is true, the geographical knowledge which can be disentangled from all this splendour of ancient lore, is very uncertain and vague, but still it is sufficient to convince us that the Hindoos were no strangers to the country to their North,