

OBITUARY

SABI LA

Muhammad Shabir, popularly known as Sabi La, died in the early hours of October 20, 1970.

A life full of years and full of honours has ended. Yet to his friends and admirers, who count many, this death at 83 has the grief which one feels when a pet child goes out of this life. While some dispute whether Sabi La was old enough others dispute his nationality. Was he a Sikkimese, a Tibetan or an Indian? He spoke Sikkimese and Tibetan, Urdu and Chinese, Hindi and Nepali. A scholar's finding is that Sabi La was Central Asian par excellence; he was the synthesis of Indic and Mongoloid, Sufi and Sunyata. Sabi La was a link with that rich heritage which expressed itself, among others, in Khache Phalu, the popular mystic poem of Tibet.

For centuries, till the middle of the current one, mercantile families from Ladakh had a welcome home in Shigatse and Lhasa. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century a family from Srinagar came with several Ladakhi migrants to Lhasa. A child born to this family in 1887 had grown into "the seventeen year old Ladakhi Sabi La" at the time of the Younghusband Expedition to Lhasa. Sabi La was then articulated to a Ladakhi mercantile house and was himself a trader on his own at the time of the Expulsion of the Ambans from Lhasa (1913). He had married into a Ladakhi family; the pious consort predeceased Sabi La in 1947. In the early twenties Sabi La shifted to Sikkim and settled down in Gangtok. His imports from Tibet were mostly Yak's wool and exports from Sikkim were cotton goods, cardamom and dry fruits. As in Lhasa so in Gangtok he was held in esteem in the mercantile community.

Sabi La however was great not because he was a merchant. There were in Sikkim many bigger merchants than him and there will be in Sikkim many bigger merchants than him. Sabi La was good, humble and pious. He was truly religious in any sense of the term. His piety was not confined within his own community and significantly he could evoke responsive turns. He built the Gangtok Masjid (1943-

44) and till his death was the President of Anjuman Sikkim. The land for the Mosque was a gift from the late Chogyal Tashi Namgyal who also donated much building materials. Much of the funds was raised in Tibet while the publicity for assistance in English medium was drafted by a Buddhist. Sabi La evinced a deep interest in the work of the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology. While the scholars connected with the Institute would learn from him much about the Central Asian trade or the Dalai-Panchen relations, this writer profited materially and morally from what he would describe as a prize association of life.

Those who love Sikkim and those who loved Sabi La mourn an irreparable loss.

Nirmal C. Sinha