



TRAIN TO UZBEKHISTAN

Fortnightly Take off on Bestsellers

● **TRAIN TO UZBEKHISTAN** by Dukhwant Singh. Published by Occident Shortmans Ltd. 72 pages. Library Edition: 15 Roubles. Paperback Edition: 10 Roubles.

A short, spicy travelogue-cum-novel, 'Train To Uzbekistan' is replete with descriptions of the locomotive that hauls the assortment of bogies, one of which holds Dukhwant Singh. The author has drawn obvious inspiration from Agatha Christie and we find him attempting half-heartedly to describe the distribution of the compartments, just like Christie did in 'Murder On The Orient Express.' Mr Singh is also profuse in his adjectives when describing the countryside he passed through; he sounds more like a Geography lecturer than a novelist. Russia through Punjabi eyes, so to speak.

Mr Singh takes care to point out to his reader the fact that till Srinagar, the train was hauled by a steam locomotive. From Srinagar till Dushanbe, the capital of the USSR's Tadzhik region, the train is hauled by a diesel locomotive. And on the final lap, between Dushanbe and Tashkent (the capital of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic) the train is hauled by an electric locomotive.

The principal characters in the story are a couple — an ordinary Madras gentleman called Tiruchirapalli Ramanujachariar, and his spouse, tongue-twistingly called Meenakshambigai-ammal. T. R. Chariar, (as I shall call the hero for the benefit of the non-Dravidian readers) has won this trip to

Uzbekistan for giving the correct answer to a Question he heard over Radio Moscow. The question, Mr Singh tells us, asks: "In which Russian city did the late Indian Prime Minister, Lal Bahadur Shastri, breathe his last?"

The novel is a pleasant mixture of Tourism and Tamil-accented English. The attempts by Chariar to read out phrases from his "Russian For The Casual Tourist" are highlighted with typical Sardarji wit. For instance, when the train passes by Mount Communism, Chariar is told by his genial guide that the peak is the highest in the USSR — 24,590 feet. Chariar responds by exclaiming that it's only a few thousand feet shorter than Mt. Everest which, he informs his guide with schoolboyish pride, is 29,028 feet high. The guide bursts out laughing and we discover that Chariar has unwittingly used the Russian equivalent of 'toes' when he meant 'feet'.

After a week in Tashkent, during which Singh takes Chariar around the city of detente, and shows him the bedroom in which Shastriji died, the train rattles on to Samarkhand, passing through the eastern fringes of the Kyzyl-Pum Desert. Chariar is familiar with Samarkhand, and he believes that this was where Tamerla went lame, trying to negotiate the tricky stairs of the Royal Baths.

After allowing the reader to browse through five pages of the Turkish/Afghan influence evident in the architecture of the Samarkhand build-

ings, and the Tamerlane influence evident in the public taps, Mr Singh decides that it's time to move on to Bukhara. Bukhara, as we all know, is famous for its rugs, and Singh makes Chariar buy one for his pooja room back home.

Chariar goes into ecstasies of Vanakams (the Tamil form of greeting) when he discovers a fellow-countryman in Bukhara — the Reverend Antony Tiruvengadachalapathy. The Reverend takes him around the only cathedral in the place and Singh tells us, unnecessarily, that Bukhara is thus a one-church town.

From Bukhara, the Train embarks on the final lap of the Uzbekistan journey, arriving at Karshi after a twelve-hour haul. Here, Chariar is shocked to discover that there are no ghats and no mandira, his impression being that Karshi is a Russian Varanasi.

The last two chapters of the book cover just three pages and 4000 miles across breath-taking mountain ranges back to good old Srinagar. And in the Epilogue, Mr Dukhwant Singh tells us facetiously that his book has been bought by Trader-Ebony Productions to be made into a film, with Tashi Shakoor and Shamiana Tehmi in the lead roles.

P. S. Latest reports indicate that Dalal Kreegah has bagged the role of the tourist guide.

CHAITANYA KALBAG

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