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## Pilgrimage to Mt Kailash: The Abode of Lord Shiva

K.T.S. Sarao\*

Pilgrimage to Mt Kailash (henceforth Kailāśa) has become a practice that continues to traverse the boundaries of religion, class and region. Besides Hindus, Buddhists, Jainas, Sikhs, and Bönpos who do the circumambulation<sup>1</sup> of this mountain, many semi-pilgrims are drawn to this place not only because it is a dangerous undertaking, but also because it offers challenge to one's endurance, patience, and financial situation. The cosmologies and myths of origin of each of the four religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Bön) speak of Kailāśa as the mythical Mt Meru, the centre and birth place of the entire universe. Pilgrimage to this mountain, undoubtedly, appears as a recurrent theme at all times in the art and literature of both India and Tibet.

The Hindus, pilgrimage is known as *māyāra* and is one of the five constant sacred duties (*pañca nitya karmas*), the other four being *dharma* (righteousness), *utsavas* (festivals), *samskāras* (sacraments), and *upāsanā* (devotional worship). It appears to have come into existence in the Indian subcontinent earlier than elsewhere in the world. For instance, there are indications that the people of Indus Civilization may have been practising pilgrimage as early as 2500 BCE. Similarly, it has been suggested that the antiquity of Lord Shiva (henceforth Śiva) goes to the period of the Indus Civilization. There is evidence in the Vedic texts for the existence of renunciates who carried out spiritual practices in the Himalayas.<sup>2</sup> During the Vedic period, the

Indian culture embraced a concept of sacred water and pilgrimage became an accepted religious practice.<sup>3</sup> Upper reaches of Indus river i.e., Western Tibet, where Kailāśa<sup>4</sup> [henceforth Kailāśa], the abode of Lord Śiva, is located, formed part of the geography of the *Rg Veda*. For instance, in one of the hymns of the *Rg Veda*, Lord Indra is mentioned as having "made the Indus through his power flow in a northern direction."<sup>5</sup> There is also some evidence that indicates that the different mountainous peaks of the Himalayan region were viewed as having spiritual associations as well as being the home to the Vedic deities (including Rudra, Śiva of the *Rg Veda*). For this reason these mountains, including Kailāśa, may have attracted religious renunciates. Thus, pilgrimage may well have been one of the many features originally introduced into the Brāhmaṇical-Hindu religious system by the renunciates.<sup>6</sup> The earliest textual indication of the existence of a fully-developed institution of pilgrimage is available in the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*, which praises the "Flower-like heels of the wanderer... All his sins disappear, slain by the toil of his journeying."<sup>7</sup> The two Epics, the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*, "fix the normative values of Āryan culture,"<sup>8</sup> and they indicate that by the time they were composed the institution of pilgrimage had become an accepted religious practice within Brāhmaṇical Hinduism.

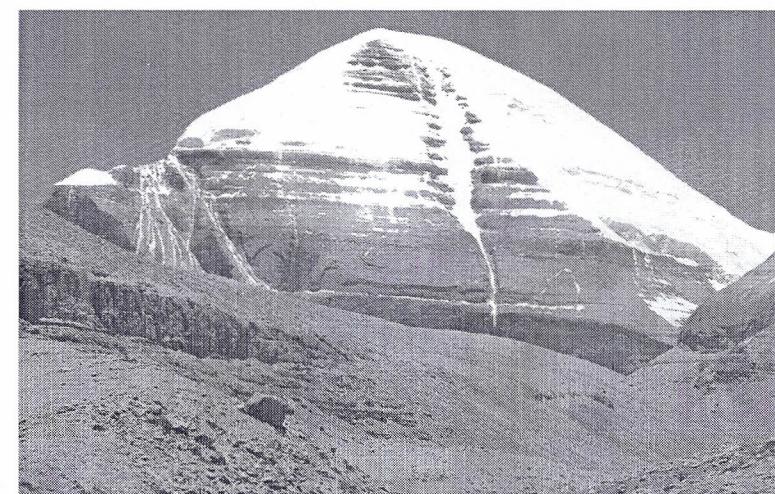


Figure 1 Southern Face of Kailāśa

\*Professor K.T.S. Sarao is Professor and Head, Department of Buddhist Studies, University of Delhi, Delhi-110 007, India. Email: ktssarao@hotmail.com; ktssarao@yahoo.com; Website: www.ktssarao.com

The five Pāṇḍava brothers and their wife, principal characters of the *Mahābhārata*, are known to have embarked upon pilgrimage to Kailāśa towards the end of their earthly lives. However, only Yudhiṣṭhir accompanied by his faithful dog is said to have made it in the end, the rest having perished on the way. Even he lost his toe because his truthfulness had been thrown into doubt due to a paradoxical statement he had made during the Battle of Mahabharata. Similarly, Rāma of the *Rāmāyaṇa* is said to have paid a visit to Kailāśa. In the *Mahābhārata* it is stated that Vyāsa, the legendary systemizer of the Vedas, had also visited Kailāśa (Sabhā Chapter: 43, 17). The Buddha also encouraged his monks and nuns to constantly travel and many *Jātaka* stories speak of the value of the pilgrimage to holy Meru (Mt Kailāśa). The inscriptions of Emperor Aśoka mention him as having given up war in favour of peace and pilgrimage in the third century BCE. Legend has it that Kṛṣṇa paid a visit to Kailāśa. Rāvaṇa, the king of Lanka, is said to have meditated for a *kalpa* in this region at the shores of Rākas Tal, adjoining the Mānasarovar, and succeeded in obtaining a boon of prowess equalling Shiva's own. According to folklore once Rāvaṇa lifted Mt Kailāśa and shook it so hard that scared Pārvatī (who had been upset with Śiva after a quarrel) scrambled back to Shiva's arms. This scene is beautifully described in a sculpture at the Kailāśa Temple at Ellorā.

Before talking about the Kailāśa Pilgrimage itself, it may be worthwhile to look at some of the salient features of the institution of pilgrimage. Its most striking feature as a physical act is the movement of a pilgrim in earthly space. Of course, if the pilgrimage spot is closer to the residence of the pilgrim, the movement shall be short-term and short-distance. But it is perceived that the merit earned from the pilgrimage would be greater if the same pilgrimage spot is farther from the residence of the pilgrim and even better if it is littered with geographical features operating as physical obstructions. The various geographical features, besides bringing merit to the pilgrim, are viewed as providing protection by warding off hostile forces. Interestingly, the merit accrued from pilgrimage gets enhanced if besides the long distance and time taken, it involves undergoing and overcoming life-threatening situations. Thus, the arduous journey and the accompanying hardships and perils undergone by a pilgrim on the way bring correspondingly greater reward. In other words, the spiritual and physical endurance presented by the journey is perceived as directly proportional to merit-making and the alleviation of sin. Thus, mishaps, extremities of weather

(including sub-zero temperatures, snow storms, bitter cold, and blazing sun), bad roads, devastating landslides, avalanches, flooding, torrential rains, turbulent rivers, swept away bridges, hunger and thirst, dangerous passes over high ranges, and occasional attacks by bandits and wild animals are generally seen as enhancing the value and merits of pilgrimage. 'Both the vitality and vulnerability of the traveller give the journey the character of an initiation... the self-inflicted pain to gain entrance into a new physical and metaphysical purification.'<sup>9</sup> In other words, natural and manmade hardships are perceived as instruments that help in cleansing the mind and the body of a pilgrim. Thus, for obvious reasons a genuine pilgrim is expected to choose a more prolonged and arduous route. In the classical Christian pilgrimage hardships and ordeals suffered during pilgrimage were considered so important that sometimes pilgrims carried stones on their backs. Thus, Christian pilgrims were expected to travel far barefoot and nowhere pass a second night and fast and watch much and pray fervently, by day and by night and willingly undergo fatigue and be so squalid that iron come not on hair or on nail.<sup>10</sup> Thus, it is not surprising that considerable distance and extremely difficult accessibility have played an important role in making Mt Kailāśa a classical pilgrimage destination.

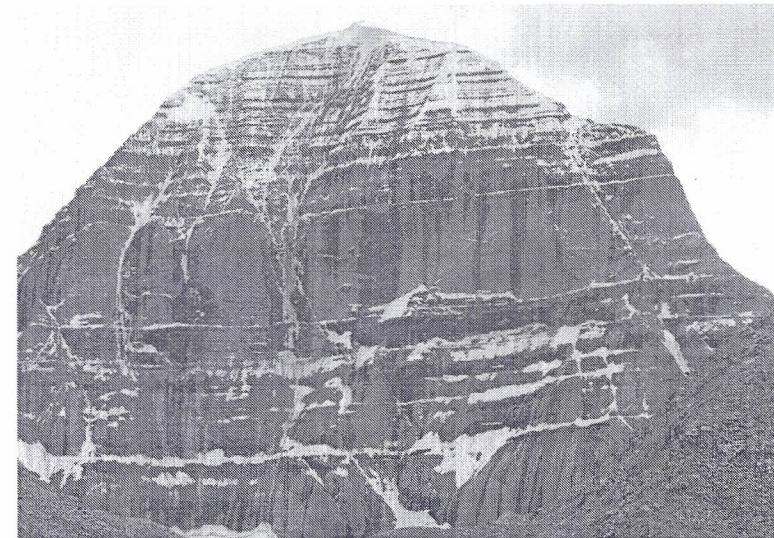


Figure 2 Northern Face of Kailāśa  
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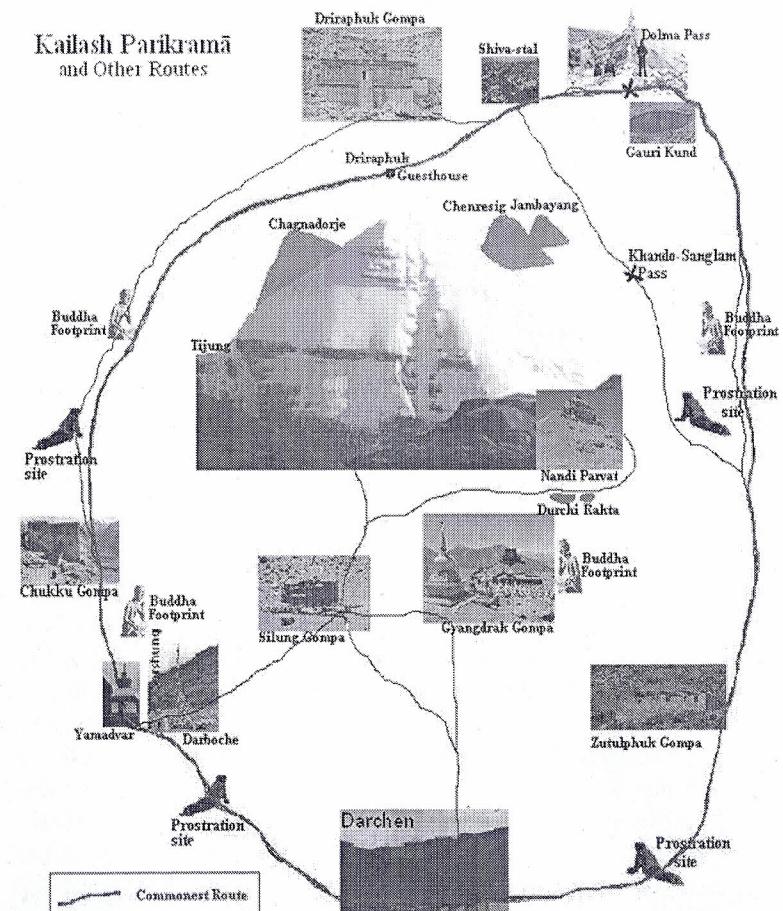
Sven Hedin mentions in his travelogue of having met a caravan of thirty-five pilgrims from Nakchu, who, with six hundred sheep and one hundred yaks, had been to the holy mountain of Gang Rimpoche (Kailāśa), and were travelling so slowly that the round trip took two years.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, H. Tichy, a German, met a bunch of emaciated Sri Lankans who had been travelling for over three years on their way to Mt Kailāśa.<sup>12</sup>

All the halting-points on the Kailāśa-**Mānasarovar** route on the Indian side of the border have temples and shrines. The pilgrims are expected to rise early in the morning for the first *upāsanā*. Before going to sleep, they are also expected to offer the evening *upāsanā*. Except some of the hard-core ones, most Indian pilgrims are generally satisfied with the evening *upāsanā* at the Gunji and Kalapani temples which are well maintained by the Indian para-military forces. The evening *upāsanā* ceremonies at these two temples are performed through chanting, wild drumming, and singing. In this, they are enthusiastically helped by the soldier-priests of the army.

Ritual bathing is an integral part of Indian pilgrimage though for the Tibetans it does not seem to hold any importance. Since the prehistoric times, Indians have viewed water as containing purificatory qualities. Almost all Indian pilgrims make it a point to have a ritual bath in the freezing waters of **Mānasarovar** and sometimes even Gauri Kund. They believe that such a bath brings both spiritual and physical healing. The medicinal, magical, and supernatural properties of the waters of these two lakes are valued so much that almost all the returning pilgrims undergo enormous hardships in carrying home some quantity of the holy water. In fact, the most precious thing that pilgrims bring with them from a pilgrimage is the holy water for consumption and anointing.

*Parikramā* is another important component of pilgrimage. It is a religious practice of high antiquity in India which is performed by passing clockwise around a person of reverence or holy object. It is called *pradakṣinā* (to go round keeping the object of reverence on the right). This practice is equally old in Tibet where it is known as *kora*. Unlike Hindus, Jainas, and Buddhists, the Tibetan Bönpos do the *kora* anti-clockwise. For the Tibetan pilgrims the ritual *kora* of Mt Kailāśa is the central activity of their pilgrimage. In strict contrast to **Uttarā** for the Indian pilgrims the primary intention of their visit to a **Tirtha** is to venerate the sacred place and to receive the *darśan* of the deity. The

term *darśan* means seeing and/or having a spiritual communion with a deity. This deity may be resident in the form of an image, statue, or icon in a temple's inner sanctum or in an open-air shrine. The image of the deity may be either an iconic or an aniconic form symbolizing the deity. In fact, in many well-known shrines no statues of the deities are found, but only aniconic blocks of stone or such other material. The rituals followed by the Tibetans while doing the *kora* are prostrations (*chaktsal*), offerings and the recitation of *mantra*, during which they follow the instructions prescribed by the pilgrimage treatises.



Indian pilgrims do the *parikramā* of Kailāśa partly in vehicles and partly by riding ponies and yaks. Very few of them manage to do the *parikramā* on foot. However, failure to do the *parikramā* due to inclement weather or bad health is not really viewed by the Indian pilgrims as resulting in incomplete pilgrimage. Tibetan pilgrims believe that it is only by doing the *parikramā* of Mt Kailāśa that they could hope to attain spiritual purification leading to the ultimate liberation. Nonetheless, the potential for enlightenment, which, according to Buddhism, all sentient beings possess, is activated by the mere sight of Kailāśa.

*Parikramā* by prostration (*sāṣṭāṅg danda pradakṣinā*) is a powerful way of showing devotion. No Indian is known to have done the *parikramā* of Kailāśa by prostration. But the Tibetans do it in fairly good numbers. Some even do their *kora* sideways, advancing one side step at a time while facing the holy object. Most Tibetans prefer to do the *kora* of Kailāśa in a single day, a feat lasting fifteen to seventeen hours due to uneven terrain, altitude sickness, and harsh conditions (Reinhold Messner is said to have completed the entire *kora* in twelve hours!). It is known as *nyimo-kora* (afternoon *parikramā*) or even *khyi-kora* (dog *parikramā*) for the great hurry with which it is performed. Talking about the unseemly hurry, it was pointed out by a visitor to Tibet towards the beginning of the twentieth century that one and all condemn the record-breaker, who hurries round in as short a time as possible, and they apply to him the opprobrious epithet of *khyi-kora*, the man who runs round like a dog (Sherring 1906: 280). However, most Tibetans now believe that *khyi-kora* is an efficient means of earning merit as it is easier than walking two or three days saddled with luggage.

Tibetans believe that the merit earned through *parikramā* by prostration is eight times more than the same done on foot. This form of *parikramā* of Kailāśa takes up to four weeks in the open. Pilgrims are not allowed to skip difficult parts, like frozen ground or streams. In Tibet, the country people believe that if they make the... *kora* once, they will be absolved of ordinary sins. To be cleared of murder, two *koras* are required, but if the round is completed thrice, even the murder of a father or mother will be atoned for (Rawat 1973: 48). We are further told that ten *koras* can purify the defilement of one *kalpa* (aeon), after one hundred *koras* a pilgrim will attain Enlightenment in one life time, and instant *nirvāṇa* is guaranteed after 108 *parikramās*. Most Tibetans consider at least three circuits as bare minimum, though thirteen

is considered quite desirable as this makes pilgrims eligible for the prestigious inner *kora* (*nangkor*) of Kailāśa. Those who have not done at least thirteen *parikramās* of Kailāśa, it is considered a sacrilege for them to either do the inner *kora* or take a short cut via the Khando Sangam-la.

In the fifth century BCE, the Buddha's exhortation to members of his organization to travel made pilgrimage an abiding practice for the Buddhists. Pāli literature mentions Kelāśa as one of the five mountain ranges in Himavā standing around Lake Anotatta. Mt Kailāśa (*kelāśakūṭa*) is mentioned as the highest peak of Kelāśa range and is of silver colour, two hundred leagues high, bent inwards "like a crow's beak."<sup>13</sup> Kelāśa is often used in similes in Pāli literature to describe an object that is difficult to destroy,<sup>14</sup> perfectly white,<sup>15</sup> or very stately.<sup>16</sup> The Buddhist text *Mahāvastu*<sup>17</sup> mentions Kailāśa as the abode of the Kinnaras.<sup>18</sup>

Western Tibet, the home to Kailāśa, is generally identified with Uttarakuru<sup>19</sup> of the Pāli and Sanskrit literature. A detailed description of this semi-mythical and semi-historical region is given in the *Ātānātiya Sutta*.<sup>20</sup> According to this description, the people of this region did not own any property nor did men have wives of their own. The region, eight thousand leagues in extent, is always spoken of as being to the north of Jambudīpa (South Asia) and thus, may be identified with Western Tibet and adjacent to the Indian territories in the Himalayas. There are no houses in Uttarakuru; the inhabitants sleep on the earth and are called, therefore, *bhāmisaya* (earth-sleepers).<sup>21</sup> The men of Uttarakuru surpass even the gods of Tāvatīṣa (Heaven of Thirty-Three) in four things: (1) they have no greed (*amamā*), (2) no private property (*apariggahā*), (3) they have a definite term of life (*niyatāyukā*);<sup>22</sup> and (4) they possess great elegance (*visesabhuno*). They are, however, inferior to the men of Jambudīpa in courage, mindfulness, and in the religious life.<sup>23</sup> Several instances are given of the Buddha having gone to Uttarakuru for alms. Having obtained his food there, he would go to the Anotatta Lake, bathe in its waters and, after the meal, spend the afternoon on its banks.<sup>24</sup> The power of going to Uttarakuru for alms is not restricted to the Buddha; Pacceka Buddhas and various ascetics are mentioned as having visited Uttarakuru on their begging rounds.<sup>25</sup> It is considered a mark of great *iddhi*-power (psychic-power) to be able to do this.<sup>26</sup> Jotika's wife was a woman of Uttarakuru; she was brought to Jotika by the gods. She brought with her a single pint

pot of rice and three crystals. The rice pot was never exhausted; whenever a meal was desired, the rice was put in a boiler and the boiler set over the crystals; the heat of the crystals went out as soon as the rice was cooked. The same thing happened with curries.<sup>27</sup> Food never ran short in Uttarakuru; once when there was a famine in Veralā and the Buddha and his monks were finding it difficult to get alms, we find Moggallāna suggesting that they should go to Uttarakuru for alms.<sup>28</sup> The clothes worn by the inhabitants resembled divine robes.<sup>29</sup> It was natural for the men of  Uttarakuru not to transgress virtue as they were endowed with *pakati-sila* (natural or proper virtue).<sup>30</sup>

The Buddha is said to have magically visited Kailāśa.<sup>31</sup> According to Pāli Buddhist mythology, an important battle took place around Kailāśa between a yakkha (Sanskrit, Yakṣa) called Ālavaka and the Buddha, resulting in the conversion of the former to Buddhism. The conversion of Ālavaka is considered one of the chief incidents of the Buddha's life.<sup>32</sup> Ālavaka's name appears in the *Ātānāṭiya Sutta*, among the yakkhas to whom followers of the Buddha should appeal for protection in time of need.<sup>33</sup>

In the present times, Kailāśa pilgrimage has become an important event of commercial importance. At towns such as Darchen; hotels, shops, restaurants, and other commercial establishments thrive primarily due to pilgrimage. Kailāśa pilgrimage helps greatly in Western Tibet in the circulation of goods, particularly small items of value such as semi-precious stones (bought as souvenirs at Darchen and around Mānasarovar). Many transporters, pony herders, horsemen, porters, and guides earn their livelihood by working for the pilgrims, thus their avocation is a matter of interest to the local authority at Dharchula in India and at Darchen in Tibet. There are others whose commercial enterprise means that they play a vital role in what could fairly be described as the pilgrimage industry, such as market vendors, taverners, souvenir sellers, hostel and hospital workers, transporters, and pony owners. Kumaon Mandal Vikas Nigam (KMVN) has set up a large number of guest houses on the Indian side of the Kailāśa pilgrimage route to cater to the needs of the pilgrims.

Kailāśa pilgrimage has also acquired great importance for both the secular and religious authorities in India who in turn seek to control and influence the pilgrims. Some of the members of Indian Parliament raise questions from time to time enquiring about various aspects of the Kailāśa pilgrimage. In fact, the Indian government makes fixed

donations to the KMVN as well as to the para-military forces to defray part of the costs of the Kailāśa pilgrims. Provincial governments of states such as Delhi and Gujarat often offer liberal cash support and travel gear to their domiciled pilgrims. Various religious organizations offer free food materials for the journey, apart from the tumultuous receptions, meals, and religious literature. The Indian Ministry of External Affairs, para-military authorities, and some private organizations in India give the pilgrims medallions, badges, or certificates stamped with the symbol of the shrine so that they and others would know that they have been on the pilgrimage. Some pilgrims actually add the title (Kailāśī) to their names after the successful conclusion of pilgrimage to Mt Kailāśa.

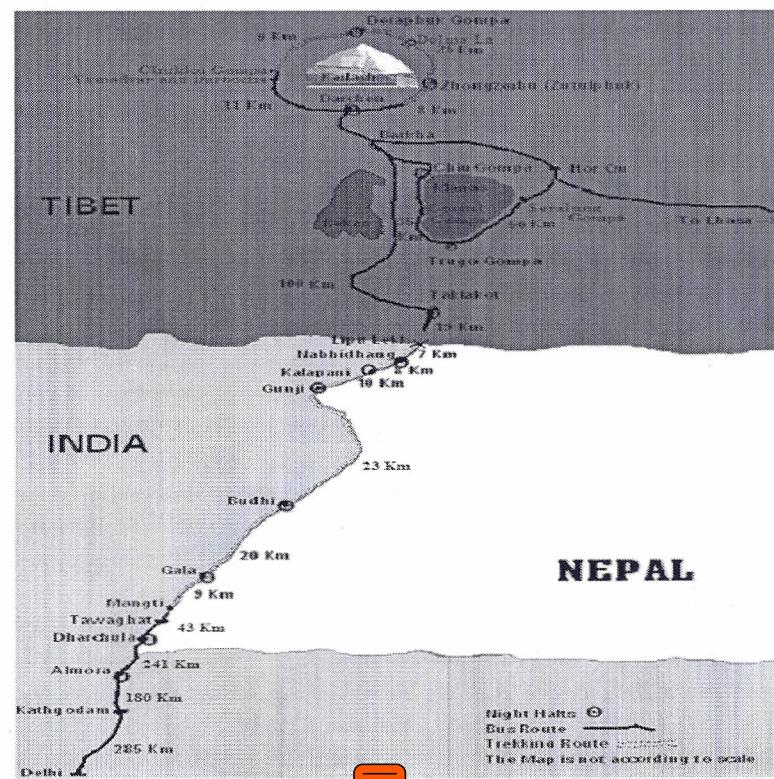


Figure 3 Route of the Kailaúia-Manasarovar Yatra organized by the Indian Government

The Government of India maintains a tight control over this pilgrimage. As the whole of trekking on the Indian side takes place in notified territory, pilgrims have to apply for a permit from the Government of India to pass through this region. The Ministry of External Affairs makes selection of the pilgrims and appoints its Liaison Officer to lead each batch on pilgrimage. This ministry also negotiates with the Chinese government from time to time regarding management of the pilgrimage in Tibet. Through the process of systemization, the Government of India in coordination with KMVN and para-military forces has also been establishing institutions to house, feed, and instruct pilgrims. In the Indian ascetical tradition it is believed that in order to attain profound spiritual vision one must meditate and practise severe austerities by leading a life away from the mundane world of the ordinary. Leading a life in complete isolation and under extreme conditions requires mental and physical discipline of the highest order. Thus, it is not surprising that the trans-Himalayan region of Mt Kailāśa is viewed as the ultimate place of extraordinary and superhuman endeavour. For instance, when Arjuna arrived at the boundaries of the Himalayas this fact is made clear to him in full measure. He is reminded that this is a place where a mortal man cannot disport himself (*Mahābhārata*.III.152.5-10) and where one who has failed in austerities cannot reach (*Mahābhārata*. III.142.25-30). In fact, this region is viewed as being beyond the course of humans (*Mahābhārata*.III.156.21-23). Within this kind of thinking Kailāśa-Manasarovar became the ultimate goal for ascetics. The extreme climatic conditions, rarefied atmosphere, and difficult terrain have added to the sublime beauty of Kailāśa to such an extent that even many self-professed non-believers are known to have been deeply touched by their sight and some have even been moved to tears of joy by the sheer impression of these spots.

Political events had prevented access to Kailāśa for Indian pilgrims between 1962 and 1981. But a limited number of Indian pilgrims in strictly controlled groups are now permitted every year to visit the Kailāśa region via the Lipu Lekh crossing. Since 1984, other foreign travellers have also begun to travel to this region via different parts of China and Nepal. But still only a few thousand pilgrims each year visit this supremely sacred site. This has given Mt Kailāśa the unique distinction of being the world's most venerated place which is the least visited. The reason for this unusual fact is that Mt Kailāśa and the two associated lakes (Mānasarovara and Rākas/Rākṣas) are located in a

bleak and remote corner of Western Tibet. No planes or trains reach anywhere near the region. Pilgrims who take the Indian route have to traverse some of the remotest and toughest regions of the Himalayas. The journey requires over four weeks of difficult and often dangerous travel. The rarefied atmosphere and continuously cold weather can be unexpectedly treacherous. Pilgrims also have to carry most of the supplies that they need for the journey. Pilgrims to Kailāśa, after the difficult journey of getting there, are then confronted with the equally arduous task of circumambulating the sacred peak which includes scaling the 18,600 feet high Drölma<sup>34</sup> Pass. Before the Chinese Communists took control of Tibet, Ngari was infested with bandits. As a result of the menace of these bandits, very few people from India ventured on pilgrimage to Kailāśa. Generally, it was the sādhus who were prepared to take the risk.

Various religious, economic, and geo-political forces on both sides of the Himalayas have not only been affected by the Kailāśa pilgrimage but this pilgrimage itself has also been affected by them. Besides, regional concepts of political identity have been shaped by this pilgrimage. Historically speaking, from the Indian perspective Western Tibet developed from a mythical region known as Uttarakuru to the Ladakh kingdom when Zorawar Singh conquered it. And from Tibetan point of view, the Kailāśa region developed from tribal territory to an independent kingdom. Eventually, this kingdom became part of both the greater Indian and greater Tibetan polity and identity. The Kailāśa region is firmly rooted within the sacred geography of the Indian subcontinent. We might therefore, ask why the region did not become part of an Indian polity. Preliminary research suggests that Kailāśa was, in the Indian perspective, what we might call an idealized pilgrimage site; sanctified, yet rarely visited by the ordinary pilgrim. Within Indian traditions, the site appears to have principally attracted sādhus, who, while by no means an unsystemized phenomena, were not primarily concerned with the construction of religious structures, or with involvement in local political and economic matters; and the difficulties of travel there, altitude, scarce resources, bandits and the like, discouraged non-renunciates.

Kailāśa originally was a Bōn sacred place which was Buddhacised with the arrival of Buddhism. This process of Buddhacisation involved the construction of new understandings of place through the ritual appropriation of existing sacred space, often by means of transferring

concepts of sacred geography from Indian sources.<sup>35</sup> In this process pre-existing indigenous deities were subjugated or converted into Buddhist deities and Buddhist concepts were superimposed onto the cult of the territorial god (*yul lha*). This involved the mandalization of the landscape within the Buddhist understanding (often with the *yul lha* being incorporated into the *mandala* as a protective deity) and an opening of the sacred centre, involving the discovery of the circumambulation path by a charismatic Buddhist figure. At Kailāśa the territorial god though may have been subjugated but was not completely converted. Thus, the original *yul lha* deity was not completely superseded by the Buddhist deity (Milarepa) and the Indian model of circumambulation (moving clockwise, thus, keeping the holy object/person always on the right)—an essential ritual act of Buddhist pilgrimage—continued along with the bon *kora* of moving anti-clockwise.

According to McKay, modern Hindu understanding of Kailāśa is strongly influenced by the British frontier officers at the turn of the twentieth century. “They constructed an image of Kailāśa which presented it as a desirable pilgrimage centre for all types of Hindus; a construction designed to stimulate the pilgrimage in order to bring revenue to frontier districts. In the preceding centuries, however, it was apparently a site visited only by a small group of renunciates of a particular sect.”<sup>36</sup> Kailāśa was largely an ideal pilgrimage place, and not seen as a destination for ordinary Indian pilgrims. In the early Indian perspective it was located beyond the periphery of the ordered world, in the wilderness which might be drawn into the known by the presence and power of Hindu renunciates travelling and practising there. But this transformation process never progressed to the point where the region developed the structures associated with a Hindu pilgrimage site, although under the British patronage that process had begun by the 1930s and 40s, only to be prevented by the Chinese takeover. Kailāśa thus remained outside of the political boundaries of India.

The establishment of Anglo-Tibetan ties at the turn of the twentieth century transformed the modern pilgrimage to Kailāśa-Maṇasarovar. The British felt that pilgrims would work as harbingers of trade and commerce. Thus, they ‘constructed an image of Kailāśa which presented it as a desirable pilgrimage centre for all types of Hindus; a construction designed to stimulate the pilgrimage in order to bring revenue to frontier districts. In the preceding centuries, however, it was apparently a site

visited only by a small group of renunciates of a particular sect.’<sup>37</sup> ‘British patronage led to dramatic increase in the number of Indian pilgrims to the Kailāśa region after the 1920s. But it appears that whereas the early pilgrims were renunciates, Kailāśa increasingly came within the range of tours of wealthy and educated Hindu pilgrims, who returned to their worldly lives after their pilgrimage. What was once a land of heroes and ascetics was now open to anyone with the necessary fitness, desire, and money.’<sup>38</sup>

Lieutenant Henry Strachey, who travelled to Western Tibet in 1846, records having met two Hindu sādhus. The first, described as an ‘intelligent, smart, and decent *sanyasi*,’ had been roughly apprehended by the Tibetan authorities on arrival and only permitted to perform the *upāsanā* and ritual bathing at ~~Mānasarovar~~<sup>39</sup> under escort. He had been refused permission to do the *parikramā* of either the lake, or of Mount Kailāśa. The second sādhu, whom Strachey describes as a ‘yogi’ of poor appearance and a half-fool, had no such problems. Strachey attributed this to the Tibetans’ not unreasonable suspicion that an intelligent sādhu could be a British agent (H. Strachey, 1848: 84). It was not so easy even for sādhus to perform pilgrimage as not only dacoits but also the Tibetan authorities created hurdles in their way. Strachey’s report suggests that what we might call the ‘hard-core’ of pilgrims to Kailāśa were still sādhus, and it is consistent with the textual evidence suggesting that this was, historically a renunciate pilgrimage.<sup>39</sup> It could be that only people with resources or those ‘who did not have anything to lose’ took the risk to go. A family man with poor resources could not afford either the expenses or the risks and hardships. Thus, in the pre-1959 period, commoners generally avoided going on pilgrimage to Kailāśa. Wealthy people, however, were known sometimes to have hired others to perform the pilgrimage for them. Pilgrimage to Tibet besides being dangerous and expensive was also time-consuming. In the pre-1959 days, it used to take as much as three months. Now it can be performed in less than a month via the Lipu Lekh and in about two weeks via the Kodari-Zhangmu Pass of Nepal.

The perils faced by pilgrims are many, especially the high altitude, difficult terrain, and unpredictable weather. In earlier times, the problems faced by travellers, who mostly travelled alone, were even worse not only because there were hardly any good means of transport in those days, but also because not much was available by way of accommodation, food, roads, and emergency aid. One traveller towards

the beginning of the twentieth century had this to say about his experience:

Once we missed our way through a forest and had to wander seven days without meeting a single human being, living only on the tender leaves of trees. I thought these things happened that I might be trained for the still more arduous labours of my visit to Mount Kailāśa and lake Manas (Hamsa nd: 50).

Paucity of evidence makes it almost impossible to assess number of pilgrims, trading or otherwise, visiting Kailāśa and Mānasarovara up to the twentieth century. It is hard, for instance, to know whether the treaty negotiated by the British at Lhasa in 1904 which gave Indian pilgrims free entry into Tibet had any real effect upon numbers entering. In 1907, Sherring was told that about 150 pilgrims (almost entirely sañnyāsins) visited annually but that every twelve years during the Kumbha year up to 400 attended.<sup>40</sup> Bharati gives the figure of 600 pilgrims visiting in 1951.<sup>41</sup> ‘British patronage led to dramatic increase in the number of Indian pilgrims to the Kailāśa region after the 1920s. But it appears that whereas the early pilgrims were renunciates, Kailāśa-Mānasarovara increasingly came within the range of tours of wealthy and educated Hindu pilgrimage.’<sup>42</sup> Interestingly, the religious practice and pilgrimages of women are not properly documented. Before the takeover of Tibet by China, the only Indian female pilgrim known is the wife of General Zorawar Singh who seems to have lived on the banks of Mānasarovara for a couple of years during the early 1840s.

To the Jains, Kailāśa is Aṣṭapada, the place where the first Tīrthankara Rṣabha attained liberation. We are told that he retired to the peak of Mount Aṣṭapada together with 10,000 monks. There he went into final liberation after having fasted for six and a half days. The gods cremated his body there and this made Mt Kailāśa the first cremation ground of the world period. Rṣabha’s son, Bharata, considered the first cakravartin of India, built a temple on Aṣṭapada. He also attained his liberation there by fasting to death. When the second Tīrthankara Ajita renounced the world, his nephew Sāgara became the second cakravartin. On seeing the richness of the temple which Bharata had built, Jahnu, the eldest son of Sāgara, was afraid that the temple might be robbed. Therefore he built a ravine around the temple and filled it with the water of the Gaṅgā. Yet, by this action, the dwelling places of the Nāgas were filled with water. In revenge, the Nāga king sent an army who burnt with their poisoned eyes all the

60,000 sons of Sāgara. After the death ceremony king Sāgara sent Bhagiratha to Aṣṭapada, who again directed the Gaṅgā towards the ocean. Thus, in the Jain tradition Kailāśa is a *tīrtha*. The mountain is mentioned in their hagiographies under the name of Aṣṭapada as the first liberation mountain. As in the Hindu tradition, a Jain pilgrim prepares himself by fasting, meditation, and performing virtuous deeds. During the pilgrimage he should take food only once daily, sleep on the ground, walk on foot, and remain chaste. At the holy site the pilgrims are supposed to circumambulate and make offerings. The completion of a pilgrimage to Aṣṭapada promises Jain adepts the highest transcendental rewards.<sup>43</sup>

Though pilgrimages to Kailāśa were made since the earliest times, yet, historically, the region does not appear to have had the structures typically associated with Hindu pilgrimage sites. Such sites are usually institutionalized. They have some sort of *dharamśālās/aśramas* to house pilgrims; there are temples or at least sacred images, and there are bathing ghats. Resident *purohitas* or priests advise pilgrims of the appropriate prayers to be made at the site, the most auspicious days to visit, and the type of offerings to be made there, as well as the benefits deriving from these actions. But there is no record of any such structures existing in the Kailāśa-Mānasarovara region, at least until the 1930s. The lack of structures may partly reflect the fact that the region has been outside the political boundaries of what is now India, although theoretically it is within Indian religious geography. It is also true that there are other Hindu pilgrimage sites without such structures. Ādi-Kailāśa and Amarnath Cave in the Himalayas also do not have any *aśramas* or other symbols of a pilgrimage site. The lack of structures in the Kailāśa region raises the question of how many Hindu pilgrims actually visited this region.

As a consequence of Chinese occupation, individual mobility was greatly reduced and local practices were brought to a halt. Various policies of the Chinese authorities became an effective means to control the flow of population. In particular, the label of ‘class’ served to differentiate ‘bad elements’ from the general populace. The ‘bad elements’ were former chieftains, big landowners, former government officials, and monks. Pilgrimage was condemned not only as ‘feudal remains,’ but also as a ‘waste of time’ which was harmful to production. Popular pilgrimage practices among the Tibetans, though not officially prohibited, are discouraged as they may pose a potential or real threat

to the clearly demarcated administrative boundaries in Tibetan regions. Now pilgrimage within the Tibetan society is declining in the sense that some locals and the Han immigrants have developed a sense of market economy with the growth of tourism. In the opinion of the authorities, this has proved the Marxian idea that “superstition will vanish as economy grows.”

#### Notes :

1. Called *kora* by the Tibetans and *parikramā* or *pradakṣinā* by the Indians.
2. D. Frawley, Gods, Sages and Kings : *Vedic Secrets of Ancient Civilization*, 1st Indian edn, Delhi: Motilal Banarsi das, 1995: 92.
3. Alex McKay (ed.), *Pilgrimage in Tibet*, Richmond Surrey: Curzon Press, 1998: 167.
4. Mt Kailash, various spelt as Kailāśa, Kailāś, Kelāś, is known as Gang Rimpoché and Gang Tiséto the Tibetans.
5. 2.15.6. As Frits Staal has pointed out that if the Vedic people had followed the Indus north to the point where it flows in a northerly direction, they could hardly have failed to continue to its nearby source, which lies around 16 kilometres from Mount Kailāśa (F. Staal, “The Lake of the Yakṣa Chief,” in T. Skorupski (ed), *Indo-Tibetan Studies: Papers in Honour and Appreciation of Professor David L. Snellgrove’s Contribution to Indo-Tibetan Studies*, Buddhica Britannica Series Continua 11, Tring: Institute of Buddhist Studies, 1990: 290).
6. McKay, Op. Cit.168.
7. *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*.7-15, quoted in S.M. Bhardwaj, *Hindu Places of Pilgrimage: A Study in Cultural Geography*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973: 3.
8. R. Varma, *Meru and Kailasa: Reflections on a Tangible “Sacred Space”*, unpublished MA thesis, London University: SOAS, 1988-89: 13.
9. T. Lemaire, *Filosofie van het landschap*, Baarn: Ambo, 1970: 99 (quoted at McKay, Op. Cit., 36).
10. B. Thorpe, *Ancient Laws and Institutes of England*, London: George E. Eyre & Andrew Spottiswoode, 1849: 411-12.
11. S. Hedin, *My Life as an Explorer*, reprint, New York: Kodansha International, 1925: 403.
12. McKay, Op. Cit. 46.
13. *The Āmatthajotikā*, Pali Text Society edn. (henceforth SnA).II.437f; the *Papañcasūda*, Pali Text Society edn. (henceforth MA).II.585; the *Paramattha-Dīpanī*, *Udānatthabāṇī*, Pali Text Society edn. (henceforth UdA).300; the *Manorathapūraṇa*, Pali Text Society edn. (henceforth AA).II.759.
14. E.g., *The Jātaka*, Pali Text Society edn. (henceforth J).V.39.
15. E.g., J.IV.232; VI.490, 515; the horse Kanthaka, the *Dhammapadatthakathā* Pali Text Society edn. (henceforth DhA).I.192.
16. E.g., an elephant’s head or a big building, J.I.321; V.52, 53.
17. II.97, 109; III.309, 438.
18. According to Pāli Buddhist mythology, a kinnara is a little bird with a head like a man’s (J.IV.106, 254; V.456).
19. Uttarakuṛu is mentioned in the Pāli literature as one of the four continents, the others being Aparagoṇā, Pubbavideha and Jambudīpa (*The Ariyuttara Nikāya*, Pali Text Society edn. (henceforth A).I.227; V.59; *The Sumangalavilāśini*, Pali Text Society edn. (henceforth DA).II.623; the *Maddhuratthavilāśini*, Pali Text Society edn. (henceforth BuA).113; SnA.II.443). These four make up a Cakkavāla, with Mount Meru (Kailāśa) in their midst, a flat world system. A cakkavatti’s rule extends over all these four continents (*The Dāgavāṇi Nikāya*, Pali Text Society edn. (henceforth D).II.173; DA.II.623) and his chief queen comes either from the race of King Madda/Madra (of Punjab) or from Uttarakuṛu; in the latter case she appears before him of her own accord, urged on by her good fortune (DA.II.626; KhA.173).
20. D.iii.199ff. See also E.W. Hopkins, *Epic Mythology*, reprint, Delhi: Indological Book House, 1968: 186.
21. *The Paramattha-Dīpanī*, Pali Text Society edn. (henceforth ThA).II.187f.
22. One thousand years, after which they are born in heaven, says Buddhaghosa (AA.II.80).
23. A.IV.396; the *Cūḍâhvatti*, Pali Text Society edn.,99.
24. The *Vinaya* *Āvaraṇa*, Pali Text Society edn. (henceforth Vin).I.27 8; DhA.III.222.
25. J.V.316; VI.100; M.300; SnA.II.420.
26. The *Sārattha* *Upakāśu*, Pali Text Society edn. (henceforth SA).i.93; Mil.84.
27. DhA.IV.209ff.
28. Vin.III.7.
29. The *Petavatthu Commentary*, Pali Text Society edn. (henceforth PvA).76.
30. The *Visuddhimagga* of Buddhaghosācāriya, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Oriental Series, vol. 41: 1951.I.15.
31. Though Buddhism entered Tibet only in the seventh century CE.
32. J.IV.180; VI.329.
33. D.III.205.
34. Drölma/Dolma is another name of Tāra. With rarefied atmosphere and very windy and snowy conditions, this pass is particularly challenging to cross.
35. T. Huber, “Where exactly are Cāritra, Devikoma and Himavat? A sacred

geography controversy and the development of Tantric Buddhist pilgrimage sites in Tibet," *Kailash: A Journal of Himalayan Studies*, vol. XVI, nos. 3-4, 1990.

- <sup>36.</sup> McKay, *Op. Cit.* 13.
- <sup>37.</sup> *Ibid.* 13.
- <sup>38.</sup> *Ibid.* 180.
- <sup>39.</sup> *Ibid.* 177.
- <sup>40.</sup> Charles A. Sherring, *Western Tibet and the Indian Borderland*, First Indian Edition, Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1974 (originally published, 1906): 144.
- <sup>41.</sup> S.A. Bharati, "Pilgrimage in the Indian Tradition," *History of Religions*, 3.1, 1963: 96.
- <sup>42.</sup> S. Stevenson, *The Heart of Jainism*, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1995 (originally published 1915): 180.
- <sup>43.</sup> *Ibid.* 254.