

# Then the Yak Fell Into The River

**A Roller Coaster Pilgrimage to Kailash-Manasarovar,  
Mostly Driving off Road through the Roof of the World**

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(Memoirs of the Mt. Kailash-Manasarovar trip in  
August 2010 led by Sambodh Foundation)

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The yak is a symbol of sturdiness, steadiness and nimble footedness. A small scale mammoth or a large hairy bull, a shaded huge black boulder or an oversized leafy bush—your imagination runs riot seeing a yak. It is the animal of Tibet—the friend, guide and philosopher of Tibetans. Its milk, meat, dung, wool and hide keep Tibetans alive, mobile and warm. The Yak bones, its bushy tail, hoofs and hones are used variously for medicine, whiskers and decorations. Without the yak Tibet is dead, its character and identity lost. I often felt pity for these silent brooding animals seeing them standing still, uncaring the high altitude subzero temperature, lashing rains and howling winds. The great sage of Tibet Jetsun Milarepa (bn. 1052 AD) might have got his primary lessons in fortitude, austerities and renunciation from this unique, wooly, Tibetan animal.

In our three days 63 KM long circumambulation around Mount Kailash nobody used yak as a mount for riding, but our organizers used them for transporting provisions, sleeping bags and other materials. I watched with great mirth and wonderment as these bulky beasts sauntered down great precipices, jumping over slimy stones and negotiating through narrow pathways. They are like rivers—now fast, now slow, swelling as they shake their thick manes and thinning as they belabor under heavy load.

Akhilesh, a law graduate from Harvard, and the youngest in our group, who has all the American fussiness about hygiene and cleanliness, had brought his sleeping bag, carefully packed and meticulously carted around.



On the circumambulation trail we were allowed to carry only a backpack and hence Akhilesh had to entrust the sleeping bag to the Sherpas (Nepali attendants) who packed it along with other things on the back of a yak. The subzero temperature and the wintry rains at Dirapuk, our first night halt on the trekking trail, and the wet damp mud hut with leaky roof did not depress the ever smiling Akhilesh as he was sure to have a cozy night in the warm embrace of his sleeping bag.

I was dead tired and trembling in the piercing cold, sharpened by biting winds. I contemplated on the grim prospects under cold blankets with a stormy tummy and revolting bowels. Then the news came that one of the yaks fell into the river. We heaved and laughed and consoled ourselves that it could well have been one of us and that Lord Shiva was kind and benevolent to us in pushing the yak and not us.

Then the bad news that Akhilesh's sleeping bag was on the yak and that it got completely wet. The ever smiling Akhilesh continued to smile though I could feel his heart sinking. And we—Akhilesh, Dr. Uma, Prof. Sangeetha and me, all agreed that the falling of the yak with the sleeping bag into the river would be a perfect metaphor for our roller coaster Kailash-Manasarovar pilgrimage, across the barren desolate land of south western Tibet, in search of an elusive Shiva and his consort Shakti. Our journey was a falling into the turbulent river of events that took unexpected twists and turns, roaring high and tumbling low, hitting rocks, getting wet, cold, hungry, but relentlessly moving ahead.

We were 28 pilgrims—19 NRIs from the U.S and 9 resident Indians; among them 11 male and 17 females; two men past seventy; fifteen above 60 years of age; five in their fifties; four in their forties; and the youngest was 28 years old. Some of us were driven by faith, some out of curiosity, a few others for love of nature and adventure, and yet a few came because their friends and relatives were going. The group was well integrated and spiritually oriented, most of them being my friends and students.

Personally I was not much of a pilgrimage freak. My experiences in Shabarimala, Tirupati Balaji, Ma Vaishnav Devi, Kashi Visvanath, Chardhams and Pashupati Nath were not so uplifting and edifying. In my mind Hindu temples meant filth, greed and crowds, chaos and anarchy. But on deep reflection I realized that these ancient temples have their own attractiveness in terms of architecture, location or antiquity. It is true that the cleanliness, silence, order and the gravitas that we see in Christian churches, Muslim mosques or Sikh gurudhvaras are not seen in most Hindu sacred places—but they have a wholeness, balance and timelessness about their unkempt environs.

I like travel and adventure. To me God is revealed in the beauty of nature and the smiles of people. I like to wander in the forest, climb mountains, kayak in rivers, watch waves rising and falling in the ocean, sit and eat and converse with people of different races and languages.

It was Dr. Uma Deperalta, a leading nephrologist from Los Angeles and a trustee of Sambodh Society, who inspired me to organize and lead this pilgrimage to Mount Kailash. Though I had a deep desire to travel to Tibet, it was not to go around Kailash but to meet ordinary Tibetans and study their life and culture. But alas I hardly got any opportunity to do that in this trip. Neither did we have the time, nor the physical strength to walk into villages and talk with ordinary folks. Nor did we see many villages or villagers on our way. Nor would our drivers stop on the way as they were speeding on unpaved and uneven fields to reach destinations. Uma and I talked about this pilgrimage for the last three years and finally Uma told me that it

should be either in 2010 or never. She also reminded me that we were not getting any younger as years roll by.

Naveen Budhreja is my good friend and trusted ally. He and his wife Alka had already organized two successful Vedanta Retreats, one in Sattal, Uttarakhand and another in Simla, Himachal Pradesh on behalf of Sambodh Foundation. People loved Naveen and Alka; their devotion, commitment, friendliness, honesty, humility, meticulousness and organizing skills earned every ones respect and adulation. Naveen had also successfully completed Sambodh Foundation's 'water project' to provide drinking water to a Dalit village in Sattal, costing eight lakhs of rupees. And both Naveen and Alka loved mountains and were deeply spiritual. So naturally I turned to Naveen asking him whether he would be able to organize this pilgrimage on behalf of Sambodh Foundation. With not even a blink he agreed to do that. And there after it was the Naveen juggernaut. This was April 2009. He researched various sites, talked to many travel agents, consulted with people who are veterans in such pilgrimages, and finally prepared a schedule and fixed a travel agent and put the program on the web. And the rest is history. Naveen did a fantastic job.

On the evening of 15<sup>th</sup> August, all of us excluding Uma and Akhilesh met at Naveen's Defence Colony house in Delhi for a briefing from Swaran, V.P. of Shrestha Holidays. She was a pleasant lady who had much experience in Kailash Yatra. She emphasized the importance of acclimatization in high altitude travel. 'A positive non-complaining attitude won't hurt', she chided us when someone asked a pointed question about conveniences in Tibet. She chuckled and remained noncommittal when pressed further. That was the first signal for me about the difficulties of the impending travel. As part of the briefing Naveen had earlier sent mails to all Yatris regarding the things that they should carry for the yatra, like pair of high ankle shoes, woolen socks with linings, rain proof jackets, monkey cap, Swiss knife, enough undergarments, goggles, sun cream, lip balm, medicines, protein bars, glucose biscuits, flash light, Chinese currency Yuans (at least 2500) and what not. He also had emphasized the importance of daily walks and breathing exercises preparatory to the yatra. In my epistles to the pilgrims I had pointed out the importance of abiding faith in Shiva, daily chanting of selected mantras and psychological preparation for any hardship. After the briefing we were given red duffle bags to put all our belongings meant for the yatra. We were also given a back pack each. These were meant essentially for the three day parikrama around Mount Kailash.

The following day, on 16<sup>th</sup> August, in the wee hours of early morning, 3.00 AM to be precise, we left for the brand new Delhi Indira Gandhi International Airport, for the 6.00 AM flight to Kathmandu. By the time the yatris had started forming groups and being veteran travelers they had no problem negotiating the long lines, checking luggage, cumbersome security and long walk to the boarding gate. After an hour's flight our plane descended on the beautiful verdant mountain hugged valley of Kathmandu. The brick and tiled three story houses and buildings enhanced the charm of the city. I instantly fell in love with this queen of the Himalayan valleys. The Tribhuvan International Airport is an exquisitely pleasing building. As in other cases this structure also is made of bricks, wood and tiled roof. Being from Kerala, I instinctively liked the colors, shapes, spaces and simplicity of the building.

Kathmandu, on the Bagmati River, nestled at an elevation of 5000 feet amidst thickly wooded mountains, was pleasant and welcoming. King Gyanendra, the traditional ruler of Nepal, was recently deposed by Maoists insurgents, supported by traditional democratic parties, at the end of a bloody violent 12 year campaign. The hapless country was ruled by a ragtag coalition under an interim arrangement brokered by the U.N. The chaos and neglect caused by the long civil unrest was painfully seen all over the city. Roads were in a state of disrepair and traffic snarled along the narrow curvy roads. Filthy garbage accumulated on road sides, people with masks struggling and sidestepping pot holes and puddles of rain water and clumps of animal dung. The torrent of gleaming cars and air conditioned low floor buses that you are used to in Delhi are visibly absent; So too the leafy boulevards and giant skyscrapers. But people on an average looked happier, well fed, dressed and groomed. They seemed more relaxed and content. Nepalese are small in size, fair complexioned, with less facial hair, sturdy and strong. Women seemed more energetic than men and also ubiquitous, and in charge. Houses looked Victorian in style with large framed glass windows—a large number of them three storied. I didn't see any straight street in this fabled city of marijuana and nirvana.

Nepali Gurkhas with their kukrees, sharp crooked knives, are famous for valor and daredevilry. The Gurkha regiment is the prized possession of the British and the Indian armies. An itinerant street vendor pursued me tirelessly to sell one of his special 'kukree' with rhino horn handle. Finally I had to explain to him that I am a nonviolent monk from India and that I had no use for a sharp deadly knife and my interest was only idle curiosity. Nepal being the only Hindu monarchy till then, average people had some respect for ochre robed monks. The vendor left dejected. I loved Nepal that rested in the lap of mighty Himalayas and caressed by two powerful rivers, Kali on the west and Kosi on the east. The southern Terai region bordering India is thickly forested and infested with wild animals.

Gautam, the young, energetic, soft spoken, unflappable manager from Shreshta Holidays was waiting for us outside the airport exit gate. After the high jacking of an Indian Airlines plane by Islamic terrorists during the Vajapayee regime, security has been beefed up and made stringent in Tribuvan Airport. No agent could come inside the airport. We were greeted outside the airport with garlands and were whisked away for an hour long drive through the winding thorough fares of the city to our hotel in the heart of Kathmandu. Hotel Soaltee Crown Plaza is a fabulous refuge, with excellent service and food. Rooms were clean, well appointed, with courtesy gifts. Room services were excellent. We strolled in the garden around the hotel building and shopped in the gift and curio shops. It is said that all is well if the beginning and end are well, and I experienced the truism of that statement in this trip. During the first and last days of our grueling pilgrimage, this hotel was our welcome refuge. On our way back after crossing the border to Nepal we also had a wonderful luncheon party at the Borderland Resort, on the lush, sprawling grounds beside the gurgling, dancing river Buddh-kosi, near Kodari. These travel agents know human psychology pretty well. With this lavish lunch we forgot all our anger and disappointments and all the negative comments we were composing in our

minds and were sure will be posting in the web and we started narrating the wonder of Borderland luncheon party.



The same evening, on the day we reached Kathmandu from Delhi, we had a grand puja of Shiva and Shakti with a thousand repetition of the mantra "OM NAMA SHIVAYA; OM NAMA SHIVAYAI" accompanied by floral offerings. With this puja we set the tone, the temper and the tempo for the arduous pilgrimage through the roof of the world.

Our visit to the beautiful Pasupatinath Temple was an anti climax. Pasupati, the Lord of creatures, Shiva, is the patron Deity of Nepal and the most revered God of Hindus.

A devout Hindu's religious duty is not complete without a visit to this temple and worship at the sanctum. Our visit was marred by incessant rain. The approach to the temple was wide and paved with cobble stones, but filthy, wet, slippery, crowded and noisy. Bulls and baby bulls with oozing wounds wander in the temple premises adding to the pandemonium and the sense of apathy and inertia. Naveen ever a compassionate lover of animals who revolts seeing them suffering offered to pay for their treatment, but nobody bothered to heed to his entreaties. What catches your attention as you enter the temple premises is the huge 20 ft bronze bull looking intently at the 3 ft Shiva.

We stood in a long line for a fleeting glimpse of the five faced Lord of animals. Later, I watched in detached sadness several dead bodies draped in white cloths being burnt on the river bank. I was told that half burnt corpses will be pushed into the river. The most unusual sight was that of a young sturdy woman standing on her head chanting aloud mantras from a book which was spread open in front of her. Obviously she could see the script in that position. I stood watching the performance for a while. What inspires her to do this difficult form of penance? Some onlookers threw coins in front of her. Was she trying to wash off her guilt and sins, or accumulate merit for a future life, or persuade gods in her favor and fulfill her wishes, or pushing the limits of her physical endurance, or looking for an adrenaline rush, or making herself relevant, or making a personal statement, or taking revenge on someone who ditched or spurned her love? My wily mind raced wildly. But we had more places and wonders to see and had to reluctantly leave her upside down.

We enjoyed the architectural marvel of the temple. The main temple roof in the shape of a boat, I was not sure, whether Chinese borrowed this style from Nepal or the other way round. If only there was discipline, order and cleanliness this temple would have been a gem on the heart of the Hindu religion. We came back disappointed and saddened. I was not sure whether I ever want to go back to this temple in this condition.



Our next visit was to the hill top temple—Swayambhunath and Boudhanath. This temple was a mixture of Hindu and Buddhist architecture and iconography. The self manifested Shiva pillar has five faces, one looking upward. There were Buddha statues and prayer wheels everywhere. The sleeping Buddha, or was it Vishnu lying in cosmic waters, was an exquisite piece of sculpture. The sight gave me a feeling of my primordial existence in the misty womb of creation.

It was a soothing, healing, homecoming experience. From the temple hill we could get a 360 degree view of Kathmandu city. It was a sea of green laced with sheets of brown. The sky was azure blue and air crisp.

Buddhism and Hinduism coexist in Nepal seamlessly. Tantric form of worship and animal sacrifice had a subliminal appeal to Nepali religiosity. Historically Murti puja and temple circumambulation came to Hinduism via Buddhism. The sleeping Vishnu (anantasayanam) of Thiruvanathapuram and Tiruvattar (in yoga-nidra) and the reclining Vishnu of Tiruchirappilly are variations of the reclining Buddha.



Our visit to Patan, the old capital, 5 KM south east of Kathmandu, was quite rewarding. Elegant temples stood on both sides of the main boulevard. Some of the tiled roofs had moss and grass growing on them. The Krishna temple built in granite was achingly cute and perfect. I was told that in the Durga temple, which is part of the old palace, hundreds of buffaloes and goats are butchered and offered during the Durga puja in the month of October.

The ruins of a Buddhist monastery were breathtaking with its chiseled doors and windows and murtis. Overall I felt at home and nostalgic in Kathmandu. I felt a strange ache, as though being tugged at my heart strings.

The following morning at 9.00 P.M. on the 18<sup>th</sup> August we left for Nyalam a Tibetan town bordering Nepal. I wish I knew what was in store for us! The sphinx like silence and occasional Mona Lisa like smile of Gautam, our Nepali tour guide, spoke

little of our impending travails and thrills. But that was not yet. Though we had paid for an air conditioned coach (Rs.6000 in addition to the the usual payment) Gautam argued himself out of that obligation by saying that the air conditioned buses have low bottoms and will hit on the uneven and land slide prone mountain roads. Then why did they charge us? Gautam looked the other way to that question. I even made an empty threat that we will call off the trip. But the much experienced Gautam knew better. He offered me and my three team members an air conditioned car up to Kodari, a small boarder town on the bank of Son river, from where we had to cross the friendship bridge to Tibet through the Chinese customs. The custom point was utter chaos, porters and coolies shouting and grabbing your bags running hither and thither. Every bag had to be scanned. Our Chinese agent had already collected our passports for collective visa stamping and once that was done the lady immigration officer didn't take much time to grant us entry through the custom into Tibet. The chaotic condition continued on the Chinese side too. It was raining, and our Chinese guide and accompanying Nepali Sherpas helped us collect our hand bags from the porters and after a furlong of walking we were ushered into the presence of Chinese drivers and were allotted land cruisers. By the time we settled in the car it was evening four o' clock.



The drive to Nyalam along the mountain passes was an unforgettable experience. It took almost three hours, covering both sides of the Himalayas. The mountain ranges (both on the Nepali and Chinese sides) were lusciously green; the Son River skirting along, roaring and dancing. All along on the way we passed hundreds of waterfalls. Each one of them was unique in style, like symphonies, cathedrals, poems, dance compositions stunning to the eye and mesmerizing to the mind. Some fell like a sad smile, other roaring laughter, yet others like mermaids, some like colorful paintings and a few like molten gold and silver in the sun. The valleys and gorges on the Tibetan side covered with mist looked vessels of boiling milk and at one point a waterfall jumped over our caravan and yet on another spot the powerful jet spray washed our vehicles clean.



At one point on the Nepali side there was a landslide and we were held up for two hours. The traffic built up but a land-mover came from nowhere and cleared the debris and leveled the road and our vehicle passed.

The one street small town of Nyalam sat vertically on a river. The landscape was dramatically morphed into treeless desolation. Trapped in the folds of surrounding hills Nyalam felt like a helpless pray in the coils of a python. Myself, Sangeetha and Akhilesh enjoyed an evening walk from one end of the town to the other end up to the river. On the Tibetan side roads from the border to Nyalam were impeccable.



Our accommodation at Nyalam was very poor. The so called hotel, Xixapangma, was a two story mud structure with six rooms and two Indian style toilets on each floor. The flush was not working. Apart from our 28 members there were another 15 people in our hotel. Four non-flush toilets for 43 growling leaking bowls were a recipe for pandemonium.

The fourteen days that I spent in Tibet only once I could shower that too on my way back in Nyalam after secretly checking into an expensive hotel (120 yuan a night). I could hardly brush my teeth because of scarcity of clean water. Nor did I change my seven layered attire, except the undergarments, throughout the 14 days journey. But it didn't matter since it was subzero temperature with minimal bacterial activity. There was no facility for laundering and hence I would advise prospective pilgrims to keep at least three dozen undergarments in stock.

Nyalam is nestled at an elevation of 13000 feet. Landscape is desolate. I could count hardly seven oak trees. The hills have a brooding, laidback disposition. They seem to have character and emotions and often looked like pythons, crocodiles and turtles enjoying the cool sun. Though oxygen was less in the air, I didn't have any breathing difficulties. The difficulty was only when climbing hills or steps. Uma gave us diamox and calcium tablets to cope with the high altitude sickness with symptoms such as headache, nausea, loss of appetite, sleeplessness and difficulty in breathing. May be due to Uma's care none in my group had any of those discomforts. My constant problem was an upset stomach, gas and loose motion. You sometimes lose control of the bowls as you run shamelessly to the toilet and find it occupied. One or two of our pilgrims got severe diarrhea and another dysentery. But the faith in Shiva kept them going.

The unflinching mantras for high altitude travel are: acclimatization, slow and steady pace and moderation in eating. Since we had Sherpas cooking for us the food was simple and nourishing except in inaccessible places like during the parikrama. But because of fear of toilets we were very careful in eating.

On the second day of our stay in Nyalam we went for acclimatization walk climbing the nearby hill. It didn't seem formidable from a distance, but as I started climbing with five layers of clothing and high ankle shoes, walking stick, sun glasses and monkey cap weighing down on me, every step became increasingly difficult as I



climbed up. Sometimes I had to crawl on my stomach and knees and yet other times get help from younger members of the group. A few of us climbed up to the top. I found the last few steep meters impossible and grudgingly decided to go back by sliding, falling and crawling which was in fact a pleasant experience. But I discovered that it was not such an impossible task to climb up given sufficient time to practice. Except the constantly blowing wind that blasted on your face and ears there was no other physical difficulties on our acclimatization drive.

Nyalam and surrounding areas had good roads and the Chinese made it a point to keep their image high in the foreigner's eyes. We found some Tibetan children playing on the road, in their dirty clothes. Tibetan children had chubby sun burnt and snow bitten cheeks. I wondered whether Tibetans ever bathed.

After spending two days in Nyalam to acclimatize we proceeded to Saga on the 20<sup>th</sup> of August. Saga was 250 km west of Nyalam on the Brahmaputra River and is relatively a bigger town, with many streets and multistory buildings and considerable presence of Chinese military. The drive to Saga was enjoyable as we passed green valleys and calm blue lakes. On the way we visited the Milerapa caves where the mystic Tibetan monk meditated. These caves overlooked a beautiful green valley bordered by a river. That was the only farming that I saw in the entire trip in Tibet. Milerapa was instrumental in popularizing Buddhism in Tibet and vanquishing the native religion Bon Pa by defeating Shenrab Miwoche, the Bon Pa guru, in magical deeds. Tibetans believe that Milerapa could fly and become invisible at will. We danced in circles chanting the great Bodhi mantra from the Heart Sutra at the Milerapa cave and absorbed and circulated his energy.

We crossed the 16000 feet pass on the way and passed by the Pigu Cha Lake, large and calm in the background of snow capped Himalayan Mountains in the south. These lakes, indolently rippling in the lap of Tibetan plateau, reflecting snow capped mountains, have such ethereal beauty that the mind evaporates into an all encompassing stillness. The Chinese driver assigned to me was young and smart and exuded confidence and expertly negotiated his way through on road, off road and marshes and occasionally cutting through shallow rivers. He spoke not even a word of English and the only word we mutually understood was the Hindi word for 'go', 'chalo'. I picked up one Chinese word from him as he periodically barked into the phone, 'wah', meaning, may be 'hello'. By 5.30 PM Chinese time we reached Saga, the last stretch of drive being along the mighty Brahmaputra.

Saga on the banks of Brahmaputra was medium town with good hotels. The hotel that we stayed was overcrowded that day. We four were herded into one room with two beds and one extra mattress. Water ran out and electricity went off by 8.30 pm and we were plunged in darkness. Water collected in the bathroom around toilet and the flush didn't work. But at least we had privacy and felt human again. Though I wished to stroll around the town and watch people and see shops, due to extreme tiredness just hit the bed at 9.30 and slept. Early morning the following day, on 21 August, after a slight breakfast we left for Paryang, another 230 km of grueling offroad drive.



Drive to Paryang was the most exhausting that I have ever experienced. Once on the way, one member of our caravan got stuck in the slushy river and it took hours before the drivers could pull out the landcruiser from knee deep water. But, waiting there for an hour, we could have good view of the land and the meandering river. This stretch of drive was a roller coaster of on road and off road adventure. Getting on the road and getting off into deep ditches and pushing through mud and water was a herculean task.



I really admired the silent concentration and sense of direction of the Chinese drivers. There were absolutely no road marks or sign posts across endless stretches of desolate bleak plains and hills, not even a single tree or boulder. There were lonely houses, far and few, on both sides of the road. Houses, mostly two storied were compounded. Windows were big and colorful.

I saw animals herded in some compounds. Roof and compound wall tops were used as storage space for dry twigs and cakes made of animal waste. It is only in one place that I met and talked with a Tibetan family, a woman and her two children. We talked in gestures.

At one point on our painful drive we got stuck almost three hours in black mud. The Chinese were paving a new stretch of road. State of the art gleaming heavy equipment were used for digging and spreading mud and stones and leveling followed by tar topping and further leveling and final curing. In three hours a mile length of fine road was ready for us to pass. I envied those Japanese machines and Chinese workers together working miracles. The last several hours of our drive to Paryang was hell: because of road work or what I couldn't make out, we were driving along swaths of mud, cutting through shivering darkness; I felt I was flying in outer space, the driver strained his eyes to feel the treacherous ground beneath, mostly trusting his instinct, the vehicle swaying violently as though in choppy waters in a turbulent sea, my stomach violent and stormy, my bowels and bladder bursting, nobody spoke, all breathing heavy, the air inside the car stuffy and murderous. In that enclosed moving space, silence, darkness, and the cloud of unknowingness seemed conspiring the darkest deeds. I didn't even have the strength to call up

Shiva for help. I just gave up and braced up for the worst. The time froze and distance stretched infinitely.

But somewhere in a deep corner of my being I was calm.

By the time we reached Paryang it was 9.30 pm, pitch dark, bitterly cold, raining and we were ushered into a courtyard surrounded by one story buildings. Looked like a large Haveli. While dumping my luggage my thought was to find a corner to empty my bowls and bladder. How and where will I go in the rainy unseeing darkness? I was already forewarned by Gautam about the ferocious black dogs with bushy tails, flaming eyes and sword like canines in cavernous mouths, lurking in the dark night. I rushed out and had a look, in pale yellow light, at the regular toilet, a hole in the cold wet cement floor and almost threw up and ran out of the security of the compound to the dog infested open fields. Wading through water with my high ankle shoes and seven layers of clothing I spotted a raised ground in dim light and holding precariously on the edge of the ground lowered my weary body down while pushing the pant and underwear when I saw dozens of flaming eyes and blazing canines rushing towards me followed by thundering barks. I froze and sweated profusely in the cold night, in an unknown and unseen corner of a strange land, and almost fell on my back to the filthy mud behind. But miraculously a strange power lifted me straight and pushed me forward and I pulled my pants and ran like a feverish athlete in an Olympic match. I could almost feel the dogs lapping at my heels by the time I crashed into the compound and only to hear someone shouting the dogs away. I didn't eat anything that day and ignoring Sangeetha's question why I was panting and looking scared, just slumped into the bed inside the cold 'rajai' trying hard to wipe out unsuccessfully the thought of the gnarling dogs.

After spending a cold hungry night in Paryang we started early morning of 22<sup>nd</sup> March to our final destination, the holiest of holy Manasarovar Lake, the abode of Shakti and the mind energy of Brahma. It was another 223 km of drive. But this stretch was relatively pleasant. We could see wide swaths of sand and sand dunes curling in wind. All along we also saw large herds of sheep and yaks gracing on the sparse growth of tiny grass. They from a distance looked like black and white shrubs and flowers. In an otherwise bleak landscape they added color and motion. We also saw all along our way electric and telephone posts and wires. They were the only standing objects in an otherwise undulating flat land. On the whole, throughout the trip, we have seen three large lakes. One lake seemed endless, embracing the waistline of a long mountain range. Could they be romancing in the cold silence of starlit nights? Gods alone would know!

Paryang is a relatively big town which we saw in daylight on our way back from Manasarovar to Zhongpa. We wandered for a while in the town square surrounded by shops, waiting for one of our team that lost their way in the wilderness. Tibetans and Chinese on motorbikes and pickup vans were seen on the road. Tibetan children were playing. Shops were well stocked and managed and perhaps owned by Chinese. One of the Amins bought an ice-cream bar which tasted bad, but the Chinese lady on the counter refused to exchange it and scared him by her ghoulish look. The man simply squirmed and withdrew.

The roads were good and our caravan reached on a hilltop overlooking a vast body of water surrounded by snow capped mountains. In the middle of the hill were Tibetan flags and festoons tied to a central pole. Then Gautam announced triumphantly that we were on Lake Manasarovar. I couldn't believe my eyes. I ran to the edge of the hill to get a better view of the lake. It was bitter cold in mid afternoon. Chilly winds blew fiercely across my face. I could never reach the edge however far I walked. But I could see the lake stretching endlessly in front of me, a blue expanse of calmness and serenity.

Lake Manasarovar lies at the foot of Shesha Pagma and Gurla Mandhata ranges. On the northern side is Mount Kailash. The lake shares a border with another lake called Rakshastal. It is believed that Ravana when did tapas to propitiate Lord Shiva took daily bath in Rakshastal. So now no pilgrim wants to dip in Rakshastal. There could be other better reasons why pilgrims avoid this beautiful lake. However we didn't have time to go near Rakshastal. We just had a distant view while driving.



Lake Manasarovar is 230 sq km wide and 300 feet deep. From the hill where we had our first glimpse of the lake we had to drive another two hours on good road to reach our guest house, a series of mud huts, right on the lake. When reached late evening it was still day light. Since the guest house was on a high elevation, that being a sunny rainless day we could see the lake close by. There was an ancient Tibetan monastery on a steep hill behind our quarters. The valley was vast and enchanting. After quickly settling down we rushed to the lake, hardly ten minutes walk.



Unnikrishnan and Anil, the two Malayalees in our group, decided to take a dip and in their undergarments rushed into the lake shivering and grinding. A few others waded into the water behind them. Several cameras clicked. The approach to the lake was muddy.

I saw an old woman being helped to wobble and wade into the water, who took several dips regardless of the cold. It was a matter of faith for her, her life time goal, the final door to liberation. The following day more people took their dips. A few of us did not. Keeping physically healthy was more important than cleansing the soul of

all sins. Later I found that all those who took dip except the younger ones got cold, sore-throat, fever or diarrhea.

I didn't see any blue lotus or any kind of flowery plants in or around Lake Manasarovar. Few brown ducks floated on the edge of the lake. No big white swans or ducks were seen anywhere.

That night we sat around looking at Lake Manasarovar first glowing in the sunset and then slowly engulfed in darkness. I told them the story of Parvathy defying her father Himavan, performing severe penance on the lake for getting Shiva as her husband. Also I told them enchanting stories of celestial nymphs descending to the lake in their golden chariots for taking early morning bath and Gandharvas performing musicals in moonlit nights to entertain the bathing beauties and Kubera's minions drawing water from the lake for the people of Alakapuri. Some among our ardent believers kept awake to see the heavenly cavalcade, white horses tethered to golden chariots, descending. Later some claimed that they saw streams of light cascading to the lake, yet others were disappointed, and a few just dozed off in the cold night. You see what you believe.



We spent one whole day in Manasarovar region visiting the Buddhist temple, an ancient structure with colorful deities, on the hill and taking a breathtaking view of the valley, the lake and the mountains beyond. The Mount Kailash also was visible for a while when the clouds were not hindering our view. The view (darshan) of Kailash and Manasarovar together was most fulfilling experience for all us.



The experience was an aesthetic and spiritual extravaganza. The bright evening colors, swift moving clouds, blue lake teasing the steel gray sky, white bearded mountains grinning at the setting sun, the large golden disc of the moon climbing slowly on the horizon, and the cold wind blowing wildly: I lost consciousness of time and space and weariness of the long journey and unpleasantness of tormenting bowls, and was drowned in pure bliss.

It was a borderless expanse of deep blue and violet, woven with crisscrossing gold, red and green wavy lines and I saw giant sized old wizards with long flowing manes and matted hair dancing with full bosomed thick lipped raven haired celestials of exquisite beauty accompanied by long necked buck teethed dinosaurs and trumpeting tuskers while adoring white bulls and hairy yaks looked on. The snow

capped mountains shadowed by dark clouds pierced and enlivened by golden rays of the setting sun unfolded a magical world of celebration and reverie. My heart raced, blood rushed, adrenaline quickened, stomach heaved, muscles toned, skin shone, mind exploded—I forgot who I was in that enchanting evening. It was a mesmerizing riot and festival of sensate feast. I felt totally transmuted and transported.

The following day on 23<sup>rd</sup> August we departed to our next destination. The drive to Darchan, on the foot hills of Mount Kailash, was very comfortable as the road was well made. Darchan is an old caravanserai where east west and north south trade and traffic met. It was a base camp, the last post of civilization, for pilgrims going for the parikrama. From here they stock all provisions and gadgets necessary for the three days' grueling walk. You find good hotels and restaurants and shops selling shoes, garments and woolens here. The horses and yaks for the pilgrims are fetched from here. The hotel that Shreshta booked for us had no attached bathrooms (not a surprise) but the toilet provided was abysmal. Uma almost swooned seeing the toilet and I couldn't even think of going into it. There was no open field like in Paryang or Manasarovar. We couldn't take the privation anymore. So my team that includes Uma, Akhilesh and Sangeetha checked into another hotel with attached bath and toilet. Though it gave us privacy, the condition of the toilet was pretty bad, cold, wet and flush out of order. But it was better than the open overflowing sink shown to us earlier.

All these days we were living from the duffle bag. Often the bags reached many hours after our arrival. In the limited space, in dim light or no light, in cold shivering night, every inch of the body aching, finding out any item from the duffle bag was in itself an exercise in patience, a chore worse than finding a needle in a hay stack. We spend hours in packing unpacking and repacking. Often we forgot to put small items back, like socks, whistle, lighter, nail clipper, pen, underwear, biscuit packs, water bottle, medicines etc. Since many people shared single rooms, we could borrow from one another and hence manage the loss. This pilgrimage was a big lesson in patience, accommodation and sharing.



In Darchan we had a full clear view of Mount Kailash. The sky was clear and the view stayed from where ever we looked. Kailash from Darchan looked similar to a Hindu temple, a huge dome and a long tail. The steps or marks around the dome and tail must be the work of snow and sun and wind. The first time I saw Kailash it was a sudden feeling of squeeze on my shoulders—so near and clear and so immense and abrupt.

I was startled as though a long awaited friend suddenly shook you by the shoulder from behind. The Kailash range dominated Darchan. Darchan was a pretty big town and where ever you go Kailash was there, like a Himalayan Yati, tall and towering, accompanying you.

Mount Kailash, the inspiration for us to take this arduous pilgrimage, at 24000 feet height, is a solid dome of black granite with a perimeter of 56 miles. It is a steep rock and its crown permanently covered with snow. The mount is in a state of eternal arousal. Lord Shiva sits here as 'urdhva retus'—meditating celibate ascetic. The black granite mount is surrounded by a deep snow filled ravine, as the Yoni or base for Shiva Linga. No one dares to cross this boundary to defile the holiest of holy Kailash, the abode of Shiva. Girdling Kailash and the encircling ravine is series of brown windswept mountains. They are supposedly Shiva's minions, guarding the sanctity of the sanctum sanctorum. There are obviously no trees on these brown mountains. Wind, snow and sun jointly sculpture breath taking images on these hills. Devotees see their respective deities on these carvings—Ganesha, Nandi, Shiva Linga, OUM syllable, Hanuman, Vishnu on the Serpent, as you think so the hill appears.

The same evening we went to Ashtapad, a two hour drive into the mountain from Darchan, for a closer view of mount Kailash. After climbing the hills for a while we started driving virtually through a fast flowing shallow river for almost an hour. Then we crossed the river to reach Ashtapad. This is the point where one of the Jain Tirthankara merged with Lord Shiva. But as we reached, the sky darkened, mammoth clouds clashed and cracked, cleaving the sky with lightening shafts, followed by torrential ice storm that lashed and shook the ground, and Mount Kailash totally disappeared from view. Hail stones hit our car windows and it was half an hour shower of white pearls. I felt that Shiva appeared to us in the form of hail storm, beating vigorously on his little drum. We returned to Darchan before it was dark after saluting the invisible Shiva and His consort Parvathi.

The following day on 24<sup>th</sup> August, we all drove up to Yamadhvar (Tarboche) the point where horses, their attendants and porters were waiting to take us for our trek around Mount Kailash. It was a big mess—haggling, matching pilgrims with porters and horses, and last minute adjustments. I was allotted a girl porter who snatched my backpack and moved fast. As I was running behind the girl who suddenly disappeared in the crowd, another girl appeared with my backpack. Her name was Wangmu. She was strong, dressed in bright colors, and gave me a helping hand whenever I had to climb as well as get off the horse and to walk down steep slopes. I don't remember the name of the Tibetan boy who was leading my horse. The cost for the trek was 2500 Yuan per person. The porter carries your backpack and you ride the horse. Some of us chose to walk though they had hired the pony, in case they needed. All porters were Tibetans, mainly underage girls and boys. Some were as young as twelve or thirteen years old. These porters were so familiar with the terrain that they walked swiftly going ahead of us and I had to often call them back to help me walk. Sometimes they watch and rush to our help. In general they were extremely helpful.

The Yamadhvar, the door of Lord Death, was a temple like simple structure with two opposing doors through which all pilgrims pass ringing a bell and sighting the blood dripping head of a goat. It was a way of propitiating Lord Yama to get rid of fear of death and to avert the possibility of death. Yamadvar tucked between two mountains was a formidable place and was a forewarning to us of the impending struggles and travails. The entire Amin clan and Uma went back to Darchan. So did Poonam Jain who earlier had a severe attack of migraine at Saga. But I heard that she and another old man had bit of adventure climbing a hill on their way back. Alka who was very ill for few days managed to come as well as Anil who was suffering from dysentery. And the 12 km horse ride to Dirapuk started. It was a mesmerizing journey though the entrails of mountains along the bank of a crystalline river. Numberless waterfalls whispered greetings to us all along the path. Mountains on both sides on our route had a quality of aliveness. They seemingly walked with us and told us ancient stories. After six hours of ride we reached Dirapuk by evening.



I didn't get off the horse during the entire journey, but Sangeetha fell off the horse twice and decided to walk, so did Unnikrishnan. The surprising thing was that they also reached Dirapuk along with us. I was totally exhausted by the time I reached Dirapuk. I couldn't even put one more step forward. With much difficulty and with the help of Wangmu I reached our guest house (again a line of leaky huts), walking across a bridge on a narrow stream.

I got into my room and by the time Akhilesh and Sangeetha also reached. We settled our belongings in the small room and chatted for while. Then the sun brightened and we went out. And what do we behold—the full splendor of Mount Kailash in a cloudless bright sun!



Shiva's Dome was almost over us, so near that I could touch it, smell it, breathe it and merge into it. Kailash looked the massive forehead of Indra's white elephant, Iravata. The Dome of Saint Peter or Capitol Hill would pale into pebbles compared to this gigantic Dome of Lord Shiva. As we were immersed and drunk of the special blessings of Lord Shiva, dark clouds gathered from nowhere and Kailash withdrew its darshan. We looked around and saw bulky Yaks shivering in rain and people running helter skelter.



It rained the whole night. I had to go several times in the night to the wilderness with my boots and woolens and rain coat on, searching for rocks to hide and attend to my growling stomach. The headlight that Sangeetha brought helped me most. I noticed a Gompa, Buddhist monastery across the river from our shed. I was so disoriented that I was not in a mood to enjoy the wonderful scenery around me. The diamox, blood thinner, kept us breathing and going.

All the fourteen days that we were in Tibet no one could take a bath, except for the dip in Manasarovar. The following day, on 25<sup>th</sup> August, at 9.00 am, we were ready to climb Dolma La pass, at a height of 19000 feet, the most difficult and dangerous part of our pilgrimage. The climb started barely an hour or two after we started from Dirapuk. In such journeys each one is supposed to mend for him/herself. Nobody had the energy or attention to care for others.



I was way behind. I could see the caravan crawling up like a line of ants. It was so far yet felt so near. The illusions of a disoriented mind, coupled with visual distortions as the bright sun reflected in ubiquitous snow. From below I thought I will never reach there on the top. Akhilesh was kind to swap his horse with Sangeetha's so that she can ride up without difficulty. But I could see Akhilesh struggling with his old stubborn pony. Though it looked far away, we reached the top of Dolma La pass before we realized it.

It must have been hardly three hours from Dirapuk. As my horse was dragging its feet and shaking its mains, snorting and frothing, I realized I was on dangerous ground.



It was boulders and boulders all the way up. The narrow path snaked through between these huge stones. It was snow all over, slushy and slippery. We were in a sea of snow—up, below, besides and sun's multidimensional reflections accentuated the surreal feeling. Mercifully it was not raining. The group that went before us the previous day had to return and that went after us had two casualties. It is not safe to go around this part of the mountain in rain.

As I reached the zenith and surveyed the flat white glowing ground and Tibetan festoons and mantra flags from the back of the horse I felt a disembodied floating sensation. I dismounted and plunged my boot in the snowy slush.

At this elevation oxygen is dangerously thin in the air. Breathing becomes difficult and strenuous. Metabolism slows down. I was ready to die, the boundary between

death and life evaporates, and both felt the same at that level of consciousness. Body, breath, mountains, snow, people and horses, sun and clouds and the gray sky all experienced together as one soup.

I just gave up struggling, having no energy to think, feel or move an inch. I wanted to sit on a rock and merge and be one among them. A strange bright darkness enveloped me. And in that cool light I saw a tiny sparrow sitting still in front of me, swathed in snow, shivering in its brown plume. I saw my soul in its shiny big liquid eyes—a tiny expression of warmth in an ocean of rippling cold. I breathed deep. Then the sparrow was gone, might have gone into me with my inhalation. I felt rejuvenated.



And I started the 4 km steep walk down to the valley. I carried the magic of Dolma La in my soul. As I was climbing the descend I could see the three ponds 1000 feet below on my right side, like three eyes of Shiva. It is believed that Gauri, Shiva's consort takes her daily bath in these ponds. None dared to walk down and touch the water, but Kelu our Sherpa ran down and fetched water for us for a price.

The walk down the steep descend, skirting the slimy boulders, was a delicate dance in itself. Half way through I felt exhausted and my stomach churned violently. Naveen and Sangeetha helped me to hide behind a boulder and relieve. I also had to briefly inhale oxygen. But when Kelu, the Sherpa who was attending me, seeing an old man from another group struggling to breath gave the oxygen cylinder to him without which he would have died. I appreciated the presence of mind of Kelu and his promptness and natural compassion.

It is only when I saw Deepti crying uncontrollably that I noticed Kamala in a terrible condition. She was pale and struggling to breath in spite of the oxygen cylinder attached to her. Kamala later told me that she was almost ready to die and mingle with the snow and find her peace with Shiva. It was the thought of her grandchildren that gave her strength to live and get going. Kamala is a fighter and had iron-will and steel in her soul. Gopal, Kamala's husband, later told me that it was the first time he felt totally helpless and powerless when the person who he loved most and needed his care most was in danger and he couldn't do nothing. The omnipresent Kelu put her on his shoulder and ran on the slippery slope to safety. But I did not notice much of this commotion as I was lost in the emptiness of my mind, dragging on like a zombie. My porter girl was way ahead and was no help when I needed her most. Sangeetha was there to cheer me up. Naveen had the whole group to take care of.



After reaching the valley we rested for a while and continued the walk along the bank of a river. This was an anticlimax. The excitement gone, but the exertions continued. It was a four hour walk, punctuated with occasional rides on the pony, on plain ground followed by slushy hills and slimy rocks, sometimes wading through rivers and under waterfalls, along narrow strip of slippery tracks, every inch a challenge, every jump a crisis and every slip a calamity.

One portion over a hill was extremely unpleasant and dangerous.

Finally by evening we reached our destination, a cluster of leaking mud huts, in a desolate place called Zutulpuk. It started raining. Accommodation was most primitive. And Akhilesh, Sangeetha, Gopal Singh, Kamala and I occupied one small room. After dumping my bag in a corner I rushed out to answer my bowls; puddles of water and human and animal excreta made the immediate environ revolting. But the river in front and hill behind made a perfect Feng Shui setting.

If you had the energy and the leisure it was the place to savor the beauty and perfection of nature. There was an old Buddhist monastery behind on the hill. I had to walk a mile in the rain to find a big enough boulder to hide and ease myself. Our ladies were non-complaining and innovative in such delicate matters. They will form a ring around the person who wanted to ease and do it in turn. How they managed it was still a mystery to me. We ate a frugal meal that late night. Kamala was too exhausted and fell asleep. Gopal, Sangeetha, Akhilesh and I shared some stories and anecdotes and before long we were all asleep.

The following morning on 26<sup>th</sup> August, after breakfast, we started on the last leg of our circumambulation. After Dirapuk, for two days, we had no sight of Mount Kailash. This segment from Zutulpuk was made mainly on horseback, though Sangeetha chose to walk the entire distance. Finally we reached a hill where our drivers with landcruisers were waiting. I felt so relieved to see them. We paid tips to our helpers and quickly got into the vehicles and in two hours reached Darchan to join Uma and others who chose not to come for the parikrama. We again had good view of Kailash from Darchan. That was our last darshan of Mount Kailash.

The following day on 27<sup>th</sup> May we left for Manasarovar circling the lake anti-clock wise. The place we stayed the night was like a marsh surrounded by water. Facility was better. But Sulochana Bhalla who was quite a spirited lady and walked quite a bit during the parikrama had a bad fall off the horse. She was in agonizing pain. Uma checked her and found couple of her ribs were broken. Sulochana was unfit for the four days roller coaster ride back to Nyalam and we decided to send her by a better road to Kalapani, a small town on the border and from there to Kathmandu by helicopter. Insurance would pay the expenses. Naveen talked to Shreshta and made

all arrangements for the drive and later flight by helicopter. Insurance or no insurance we had no choice. Sharada Lanka volunteered to accompany Sulochana. Gautam and the Chinese guide also joined them. Their story on the road and on helicopter was another saga in itself.

Our next stop on return was at Zhongpa. The facility here was a neatly built row of rooms on a hill overlooking a vast valley. I instantly fell in love with this place. But as usual toilets were abominable. One thing I learnt from the Kailash journey was that clean toilets were an inalienable mark of civilization and culture.

At Zhongpa we had the whole day to relax. Uma, Akhilesh, Sangeetha and I spent time telling jokes and guessing words from cues. We started the following day, August 28<sup>th</sup>, early morning from Zhongpa but were held up on the way for about three hours in the rain and mud due to a van that broke down on the road. Two dozen trucks were seen in front and behind us. I saw people with spanners running up and down. Finally the road was cleared and we went ahead. This time the drive was less problematic and without any other hassles we reached Nyalam via Saga. This time in Nyalam we stayed in a good clean hotel with running hot water and uninterrupted power. I was totally disoriented and weak. Sangeetha and I bought some bitter gourd from the market and asked Kelu to boil the red rice we brought with us and make some dal and a dish. After eating what Kelu made I got some energy and felt to walk around the market and buy few underwears.



Thus the curtain came down on one of the most exciting pilgrimages that I ever undertook. It was Shiva and Shakti and the power of mantras and pujas that guided us through this most adventurous and risky journey. We started with a Shiva Shakti Sahasranama Archana at Kathmandu, followed by a Havan at Nyalam. We recited all the seven hundred verses of the Bhagavad Gita chanting serially at three locations — Nyalam, Manasarovar, and Darchan. We also performed Shraadhha-bali for ancestors on the bank of Manasarovar lake.

The following morning, on 29 August, we were on our way to Kathmandu from Nyalam. We reached Kodari by noon and had a grand luncheon party at Borderland Resort. It was a fabulous setting on the gurgling river Son and we enjoyed every minute of our stay there. It was a fitting finale to our roller coaster ride across the vast Tibetan plains. We forgot all our previous travails with that one communal meal on a beautiful sunny day.

The difficulties of our group was yet not over. We insisted for an air conditioned car for the sake of Uma who was asthmatic. Akhilesh used all his persuasive skills to get us a car which arrived after all others left on the bus. Kelu joined us in the car because he wanted to reach early and catch bus to his village. Earlier on our way to the resort there was a landslide on the way and we all had to get down and walk through mud and water while the duffle bags were being brought by the porters. We had to lug our own backpacks. Leeches bit Akhilesh and Gopal. But that was not a serious health hazard, just minor irritant. This was just after Kodari and before the lunch. We enjoyed the break and the fun.

So we five took off in a car to Kathmandu. We all were praise for Akhilesh for his persistence and persuasive powers. The drive was thrilling. I was counting the waterfalls while Uma and Sangeetha clicked their cameras constantly. Suddenly our car stopped. The driver went around the car couple of times and announced that there was no petrol in the tank. We were aghast. It was getting dark. We didn't see a single soul or a point of light anywhere! It is no fun in the middle of nowhere in a terrorist stricken countryside. As we were angrily staring the driver jumped into a passing truck with a bottle to get petrol. We—two ladies and two men with a Sherpa sat in the car looking at each other unbelievably. After waiting for an hour which seemed eternity to me I got out of the car and looked around for some house in case we were forced to stay overnight. By the time Kelu stopped a passing van and talked up with the driver who took a long chain and tied our car to his van. Kelu steered while the van pulled the car. We must have driven in that precarious condition for about 20 km before we saw and stopped at a petrol station. We hoped to see the long gone driver there. But he was nowhere seen. We waited almost an hour. Uma and Sangeetha were getting restless. I was thinking about how to protect the two ladies in the middle of wilderness. I trusted Kelu, but who knows what was going on in his mind? I chatted up with few people who came to the only grocery cum tea shop. I was hoping to strike friendship with some local whom I can trust. The owner of the petrol station was a Muslim and he owned a motorbike. I went up to him and told him our story, how we got stranded and all. He seemed a nice man. Meanwhile Sangeetha and Kelu were calling up Shreshta to send another car. But nothing worked. We expected to see the driver on our way, failing which we hoped he would come searching for the car and us. Perhaps it was a mistake on our part to have left with the car in haste. Then an idea struck me. I requested the Muslim gentleman to take Kelu behind his motorbike looking for the driver. He readily agreed on condition that we fill petrol. In another half an hour of anxious wait, Kelu arrived behind the motorbike with the driver. Kelu told us that the foolish puzzled driver was sitting blank, cursing his fate, on the spot where he left the car. He sat there paralyzed unable to figure out what happened to his car and the passengers. Uma and Sangeetha were livid seeing the driver. But they kept quiet. I heaved a sigh of relief. I didn't want to scold him because we all agreed that he has to drive us safely with a calm mind. By the time we reached our hotel in Kathmandu it was 12 pm. Other tired pilgrims had all gone to bed.

We made a second attempt the following morning, 30 August, for an aerial view of the Everest which didn't materialize due to rain and fog. We consoled ourselves with

the thought that we have one more reason to visit this beautiful country and its enchanting capital city.

We left Kathmandu for Delhi on the evening of 30 August.

The Kailash Yatra was a seminal lesson in faith and fortitude, tolerance and mutual accommodation and over all a test of human endurance. Sangeeta Ahuja, Madhu Gandhi, Sharada Lanka and Usha Kapoor were our cheer leaders who kept the spirit alive when we were all tired and worn out. They managed the worst situations the best way possible, not even once did they complain. Sangeeta Ahuja's yogic calm impressed me most. Sulochana Bhalla showed the strength of faith by walking miles after miles even when she was suffering from excruciating pain from the fall. Poonam Jain was the firebrand, with her backache and migraine she managed to take the best photos soaking in the beauty of nature and simplicity of natives. Suman Jain though seemed amused by noise and excitement kept her dignity under extreme deprivations. Gopal Singh and Vijay Bhat ably assisted Naveen in the logistics and crisis management. Kamala, Deepti and her husband Brij Bhargava mostly kept to themselves and were great help to me in conducting the rituals. Nilima was the spiritual resource of the group, praying and invoking the Reiki energy for healing whenever someone fell ill. Naveen was as usual the calm controlled energy, meticulously planning every move without being authoritarian or throwing his weight around. Coordinating with the tour guides and Sherpas and a group whose average age was 65 in an unknown terrain and uncertain situation was not easy. But Naveen did a superb job. Alka would have been a great help to Naveen and a source of inspiration for the group had she been well, but unfortunately she was sick most of the trip. The Amin group kept to themselves, not mingling with others, as though pilgrimage was a serious affair. I didn't get much time to interact with them. But they never murmured any discontent and flowed with the flow. Anil and Unnikrishnan were known to me for long time and help in my work in Kerala and I felt special about them but hardly had time to talk or sit with them. I am sure they enjoyed and took maximum advantage from the trip. Uma was the only physician in our group and her supply of medicines and advices were of immense help for the group. But for her timely and stern prescriptions we would have had more and worse sick people during the journey. Sangeetha Menon and Akhilesh Ayyar were great personal help to me and but for them I could not have made the Yatra the way I did.

My personal philosophy is to trust people and delegate power and responsibilities and intervene only if an insoluble crisis arises. That is what I did this time too and in the able charge of Naveen my policy worked wonders. The Yatra was a resounding success. We accomplished all our goals.

The Chinese Government is building new roads all the way to Manasarovar from Nyalam and I am sure they would be doing the same from Nyalam to Lhasa, the capital of Tibetan Autonomous Region. Kailash in the west to Lhasa in the east must be a distance of about 3000 km. These first class roads must be ready in three years time and that would bring better facilities all across Tibet and make cross country journey from Lhasa to Kailash pleasant and exciting. The parikrama would

remain arduous and only able bodied people will be able to undertake it. There is inner parikrama which is much more difficult and adventurous and takes more days. Only young people in their twenties and thirties should venture on this pilgrimage. I met a couple who were doing this at Darchan. Because of bad weather they had to return midway, but they hoped to attempt again the following day. They were young IT professional couples from Bangalore.

The Chinese has completely overwhelmed Tibet and almost decimated Tibetan language and culture. There are only 3 million Tibetans in Tibet. The rest, another three million, is outside Tibet, mostly in India. The Tibetan Government in Exile works from Dharmasala, in the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh. The Dalai Lama, their spiritual and temporal head escaped clandestinely from Lhasa in 1957 into India. Tibet covers an area of 474300 sq miles, almost one third of India's land mass. Tibetans follow the Vajrayana form of Buddhism which reached Tibet in the 7 century AD. There are four major sects of Buddhism headed by many variations of Lamas. The Dalai Lama, Panchan Lama and Karmapa are prominent among them. The native religion known as 'Bon-pa' is almost extinct. A few remaining members are most primitive and I saw couple of Bon-pas measuring the entire 63 kilometers around Mount Kailash with their body length, prostrating all the way beginning to end. Bon-pas do parikrama anticlockwise while Buddhist do it clockwise. I could not even see one Buddhist temple in the entire trip, except a small makeshift one on the way side and another on top of the hill at Manasarovar.

All the shops were owned by Chinese and all sign posts on the road and shops were in Chinese characters. Tibetan, which is written similar to Bengali script, was inconspicuous on the sides in small letters. I almost felt crying at the reckless destruction of a precious culture and faith. Sun-Yat-sen, the president of first Kuomintang Nationalist Government in China, famously claimed that there were five Chinas—Tibet, Manchuria, Xianjing, Inner Mongolia and the Han. The first four constitute 2 million square miles or two thirds of China. They are home respectively of Tibetans, Tartars, Turks and Mongols. The Hans, original Chinese, occupies only 1.3 million square miles nourished by the Yangtze and Yellow rivers. 93 percent of Chinese live there. The rest of the 7 percent live on two thirds of present China, which was conquered territories. Rich in minerals and oil these vast territories are completely overtaken by the Hans, and Mandarin is imposed at the expense of local language on the native people. I found that Chinese control over Tibet is complete and irrevocable. Guerrilla activity is not possible against a well trained and organized army in the flat treeless Tibetan landscape. I think given the present geopolitical conditions and China's economic and military might it would be strategically wise for the Tibetans to learn Mandarin and the ways of secular market driven scientific economic development and join the mainstream Chinese culture. Dalai Lama's seems to be a lost cause.

Ancient Indian thinkers considered Tibet as India's head and Kailash its crown. It was strategically unwise of Nehru to accept Chinese sovereignty over Tibet. Four major rivers of India have their origin in the Kailash-Mansarovar region. They are Sutlej, Indus, Kali and Brahmaputra. Kali is one of the main tributaries of Ganga. That is why our Rishis considered Kailash the abode of Shiva and Shakti, India's

patron deities. Kubera's capital Alakapuri is on the foothills of Kailash, meaning the rich mineral and water resources of Tibetan region is vital to India's survival, security and prosperity.

I felt that my pilgrimage to Tibet was symbolic of the need for renewal of the immemorial geostrategic, economic, religious and cultural bond between India and Tibet. I imagined standing on the cusp of history, enjoying the oceanic consciousness that the unity of Tibet, Nepal and India represent.



KAILASH YATRIS 2010

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*Pictures Credit: Sharada Lanka, Suman Jain and Naveen Budhraja*