

# Parikrama

and other trips

# In Tibet

## Excerpts from the book

The little town of Kodari looks like it is trying to hide from the gun-totting Chinese just across the border...refusing to budge from a depression on the road that leads to the heavily guarded iron grills.

He beckoned me to him and to a tale of the severest hardship and heart-rending separation from home. All narrated with a mysterious joy capable only of elevated souls.

Most of the fields clutching to both sides of the road were broken barley patches that merged without a cinch into the surrounding barren landscape.

The harsh weather and unfriendly landscape was almost like the erstwhile sea was not too happy at its newfound status as land.

In a land inhabited by reincarnations of divinity, bounded by mountains from the rest of the world, a pure tableau from where a million prayers float, the soul is citizen.

Here, at the bottom of the valley, like a gilgai, was the emerald green tarn of Gaurikund or the Lake of Mercy – the water is equally powerful to cleanse the sin as that of the Manasarovar.

Everything looked the same, the mountains, the animals, the flowers and the flowing water. But what had changed was the way I looked at them, at my fellow travellers. And at myself.

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## Prologue

There is probably no other place on earth which has latched itself on to popular imagination, flamed feelings, stoked sympathies, and set up inconclusive conscience clashes as Tibet. The country holds different things to different people. Barricaded by the greatest mountain fortress, breathing in a cold plateau of arid indifference, chalking out a formidable geography, the land exists in a time of its own. For some, this is a spiritual place. For others it is mysterious to an extent that it occupied an unshakeable place in popular fiction: Before Sherlock Holmes’s resurrection by public demand, author Conan Doyle choose Tibet as the land where the detective disappeared to during his ‘death’.

It continues to occupy an exalted place in our minds – whether be it due to the awe-inspiring beauty of the landscape or the on-your-face devotion you come across at every turn. It floats, dreamlike, pretty much like the mythical Shambala which the Tibetans believe is next door. But the truth is that the country itself had a violent past where bloody wars were waged against neighbours and enemies within. Shaky treaties and tricky military alliances were the order of the day. It all culminated with the Chinese conquest of Tibet as late as the 1960s followed by the flight of the Dalai Lama fled to exile in India. Over one million Tibetans lost their lives in the ensuing confrontations with the Chinese Red Army and there was large scale destruction of Buddhist monasteries and monuments.

Today, though the Dalai Lama has given up hope for an independent Tibet and even hinted at the possibility of him being the last Dalai Lama, some semblance of normalcy has returned to the region. Some. China continues to be the self-anointed godfather, pumping in billions of dollars into developing its infrastructure. While Tibetans believe that the biggest beneficiaries of these developments are the Chinese immigrants, the fact remains that it has opened up the terrain like never before. Tourism to the region was restarted in the 1980s – 20 years after the so-called ‘liberation’ of Tibet by China. The pilgrim and the traveller have started to ply the land with new-found zeal as if making up for lost time.

The holy lake Manasarovar and Mount Kailas continue to be the biggest lure of the region. Revered by one fifth of the population, the Manasarovar Lake,

as per Hindu and Buddhist cosmology, is the source of the four great Indian rivers – the Indus, Ganges, Brahmaputra and Sutlej. The truth is that only the Sutlej originates from here. Mount Kailas is believed to be the abode of Lord Shiva, and Hindu scriptures regard it as the source of the universe. A dip in the Manasarovar Lake or a circumambulation of the Mount Kailas is believed to wash away sins of a lifetime. Whether to cleanse the soul or a test of physical endurance, a journey through one of the remotest regions of Asia or an inwardly directed one, a trip to Tibet can mean any of these.

*(Chapters 1, 2 and 3 on the sights and stories of Kathmandu, the preferred gateway city for the parikrama, are towards the end of the book.)*

## Chapter 4

### **Border town Kodari and the hidden Lipin village**

Go to Tibet and see many places, as much as you can; then tell the world.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama

From the distance it looks like Lord Shiva is waving a safe passage to those heading for the parikrama; but peer closely and suddenly you are not sure. The gigantic statue of the lord of destruction upright on Kathmandu outskirts wears his trademark indiscernible smile and the eyes are blank – pointing anywhere. That sultry afternoon as I left behind the traffic thinning they seemed to be pointing to the thick grey clouds looming large in the horizon pregnant with August monsoons. Weaving my way out of the rustle and bustle, I set off towards the border town of Kodari along the Arniko Raj Marg also known as the Friendship Highway. The Khasa Port which is the entry point into Tibet is just a kilometre from Kodari. To reach Kodari it will take anywhere up to six hours. It's a 114km winding road carved out from mountainsides. It was built in the 1960s with Chinese assistance. Many parts of the road are regularly wiped out during the monsoon rendering them torturous to traverse.

The highway metamorphoses into gravelly stretches and then to craters dislocating your spine. But you are rewarded with paradise. The verdant glory that undulates forever on either side of the road is punctuated with picturesque waterfalls. Cascading down like the Milky Way, spreading a frothy-white curtain across the

shimmering purple of the gorge, this was just a foretaste of what was in store. It looked like the incessant rains had taken a respite just to show me the picture-perfect waterfalls. With the showers pouring down hard on the windscreen, I wound my way up towards peaks blanketed by a tremulous mist. Several more waterfalls were embroidered across the mountainside like virgin-white laces. All the while, I was trying hard not to blink for fear of missing out on even a flicker of the glorious landscape; I didn't realise I was holding my breath as well.

Rain-washed to a glistening green, slowly shaking off the monsoon lethargy from the limbs, Kodari was getting brisker as dusk approached. It had all the quaint energy and the charming confusion of any mountain town caught at the crossroads of limited development and boundless aspiration. This little town looks like it is trying to hide from the gun-totting Chinese just across the border. It doesn't seem to help much that the bridge across to Khasa Port – the entry point into Tibet (or the 'Tibetan Autonomous Region' which is Tibet occupied by China) – is called 'Friendship' bridge. Like an obstinate child, Kodari refuses to budge from a depression on the road that leads to the heavily guarded iron grills that officially separate Nepal and Tibet. Largely a porter economy, most of the able-bodied men, women and teenagers earn their livelihoods hauling luggage, mostly in baskets secured with straps crossed over their foreheads, across the border into Tibet.

Typical of inhabitants of any mountain town, the people of Kodari too have an easy-going air about them. They don't look like they are worried about anything; tomorrow is the last thing on their mind. It seemed like they have realised the futility of the exercise. After a day of backbreaking work, many of them, especially the younger lot, make it a point to enjoy their hard earned money at snooker parlours and in other more adventurous options where non-natives are neither welcome nor allowed. I decided to stick with the snooker parlour. Here one local dandy who asked me to call him Tango, offered to explain the rules of a strange local game called 'parrasho' as he played with his buddies. But my knowledge of the game continued to be what it was despite the enthusiastic explanations; the best I mustered was that it was a game of chances and Tango was losing money with every roll of the dice.

Not everyone in Kodari was at the gaming parlour or elsewhere enjoying losing money. On my way back to the hotel later that night I met with Umesh the local barber. The extended hours were to facilitate the timings of his customers as he told me later. Umesh turned out to be an enterprising youngster who, like thousands of other Nepalis dreaming to make money in the Gulf went to Qatar. He saved enough to pay off the debts of his family. Even today he nurses fond memories of

the oil kingdom. Saved enough, had his share of fun. Now there was nothing to hold him back. The lure of money didn't stand the tug of the homeland. And Umesh was back.

"Wherever you go, there is nothing like the air here – which is so pure and fresh," he said giving me a much-needed trim.

After taking leave of Umesh, I walked into another dimly-lit room with wooden benches and tables which looked more like a classroom than the 'dine and drive' it called itself. Here in wall-mounted glass shelves was displayed all the parts of a goat except its flesh making the place look like a makeshift forensic lab. I choose the brains which the hostess assured me was a good option; egged on by Dawa, a driver on his way to Kathmandu.

"Is very tasty, very popular," Dawa said. It had to be as the other options were the digestive tract, hoofs and testicles.

Having successfully placed the food order, I began eyeing for options to wash it down with. There were the usual suspects from India. But what caught my eye was a transparent plastic tank with an off-coloured liquid and a plastic tap at the bottom. Inside the tank was a brown coiled rope which occupied almost half the tank.

"Is that some medicinal shrub?" I asked Dawa.



*Tango losing money on parrasho*

“Is better,” he assured. “Is snake.” I waited for Dawa to laugh, but he didn’t. “Everything in bottles comes from China,” he said getting up. “This is pure stuff, you will like it.” I heard the roar of his vehicle and he was gone. Purity was the clincher and I began to eye the sinister canister with a new-found approval.

One thing for lack of many night life options are early mornings. I was up the next morning even as the porters were lining up for their permits which would enable them to cross the border through the day. A bunch of tykes huddled by the threshold of a nearby house, playing cards, their parents too busy fidgeting impatiently in the growing queue for their passes. Obviously nobody would notice even if they bunked school for this evidently more interesting pastime.

With electric supply erratic at best and geysers an unheard-of commodity, needless to say I was pleasantly surprised to hear about the Tatopani Springs. For many local tourists coming from Kathmandu, Tatopani, meaning ‘hot water’, is the end of the road. The Tatopani Hot Springs is by the banks of the gushing Bhote Kosi River which marks the border between Nepal and China. The ‘Friendship Bridge’ where photography is strictly banned (or ‘severely’ banned, I must say – a guard threatened to break my camera and throw it over the bridge) spans across the river connecting the two borders.

“Just the right name for the bridge.” I wanted to tell him, I didn’t.

Warm, medicinal water on one side, a frothy river on the other, the hot spring is also a favoured picnic spot among locals and tourists alike. After a steaming community shower with pilgrims and other fellow travellers, I headed back to Kodari. In the car, I heard about Lipin from one of the locals. Tucked enigmatically away from Kodari, inaccessible by road was this village that sprung around a gompa or a Buddhist monastery. Here, I found Buddhist monks waiting for the situation to change in their homeland just across the border. They have been waiting for over half a century now.

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Not many who pass by Kodari hear about Lipin and thus this little ‘gompa village’ is largely untouched by tourism. Even the corn fields remained motionless, as if surprised at the sight of a stranger. It looked like all the elite of Kodari had relocated here once Kodari became a ‘porter town’. The houses all were of concrete unlike the flailing brick constructions down in Kodari and newly painted in brilliant colours. Newer ones were springing up as I saw from several large foundations as well as some deep excavations under way. Corn fields spread out to either side on large clearings closely bordered by the forest. Brightly attired women were

pounding corn flour to make the local staple, Thiro, a round loaf made like the Indian roti– either on a large pan or barbecued directly over fire. Kagati was what the Nepalis called their lemon – there were large swathes of the plantation which lent a distinctly pleasant tangy aroma to the air. Smiling women pretty in bright starched clothes, corn fields swaying their feathery heads in unison, houses that looked like they sprouted out from a happy earth...it was a picture of agrarian bliss.

The gompa was a little removed from the civilian houses, a short walk of close to a kilometre. But the entire pathway, with corn fields on either side, resembled an allee – nature became a reveur and decided to translate the dreams into limn in various shades of sunny brown, yellow and virid. Not very faraway, across the border, rooftops gleaned like metallic nails driven into the valley. The Tibetan side – the choc-a-bloc township of Zhangmu is built on a mountainside, bared of trees and rendered a monochromatic, merciless brown. The main commercial street is a narrow, winding lane that wriggles its way up with full and empty trucks parked on either side – resulting in limping traffic at peak hours. It was like looking at a beehive of disturbed activity. While in Lipin, hidden from the other side by golden cornfields and blooming orchards, there was peaceful tranquillity. A certain harmony thronged about – something which was found only in places which had worship at its heart. Staying here, in this hidden away mountain hamlet, were a bunch of lamas who fled Tibet when the Dalai Lama took refuge in Dharamshala in India. They set up their god and home here. Colourful creepers acted as pergolas across the cheery, modest houses and brightly painted windows kept out the unhindered sun.

Hardened by fate, resilient by history and warm by nature, the lamas have been living here for more than 50 years now. Being not a place frequented by tourists, I did indeed appeal to the curiosity of some of these gentle souls. Surrounded by mountains playing peek-a-boo with the joyous clouds, a sun-kissed earth that resounds in all its plentiful glory, fluttering flags sending out a thousand prayers in the wind, chants that seek a happy world, you could almost breathe the positivity that permeated the air. I was standing in the gompa from where the settlement started.

The eldest monk and the leader reached the settlement when the Chinese began the occupation of Tibet and the subsequent ‘cultural revolution’ where thousands of Buddhist monuments and monasteries were razed to the ground. He didn’t speak a word of English but his smile was effusive and disarming. He beckoned me to him and to a tale of the severest hardship and heart-rending separation from home. All narrated with a mysterious joy capable only of elevated souls.

“There, right there just across the mountains,” he said pointing his frail hands towards the mountainous region, “is our own country.” The wispy old monk with an endearing smile, wearing a purple smock, fled Tibet when the Chinese invaded Tibet in 1959; the same year when the Dalai Lama took flight to India. But he didn’t have the heart to go all the way across to India; he chose to stay somewhere close to the border so his homeland was only a gaze away. Where they born and raised, learnt their prayers, built their chortens, embarked on parikramas...where they dreamed of growing old.

“It is right here,” the old lama replied after a long pause. “But still very far away.”

Om Mani Padme Hum... a mild breeze gently wafted over us the chants from the gumpa as I began my climb down from Lipin. It had kept millions of hopes alive for many decades.

And would continue to do so.



*Time is running out - the senior most lama of Lipin*

## Chapter 5

### **Nyalam – where you acclimatise and meet Milarepa**

As the only available porters were teenagers, I decided to carry my own luggage across the border, over the Friendship Bridge, into the Khasa Port. Here, you officially enter Tibet or the politically correct ‘Tibetan Autonomous Region’ from where you have to hire a separate set of wheels. There is no dearth of sturdy sports utility vehicles and workhorses like the Toyota Landcruiser, most of them as old as me, were aplenty. From here, I continued my journey into Nyalam. It was here I picked up my first Tibetan word, the greeting, ‘Tashi Deley’ – which was to earn me numerous friendly nods and perplexed stares over the days to come.

‘Nyalam’ in Tibetan means ‘gateway to hell’. Having passed through luxuriant green covers, frothy waterfalls, a memorable drive with great views, one might wonder at the suitability of the name. ‘Gateway to hell’ sounded a bit uncalled for. There are several stories behind the nomenclature. The road that heads out of Nyalam is so pretty that many laud it as one of Tibet’s natural wonders. There are more than a dozen waterfalls, spreading a satin white from a glorious height of over 200 metres. Several smaller ones have fastened themselves to the snaking road making it look like an emerald necklace studded with intermittent diamonds. However, summers are reputed to bring chaos to these princely roads as they lie submerged in clouds of mist, making passage a nightmare. This was one the reasons for calling it the ‘gateway to hell’. Even today, only experienced drivers can manoeuvre their machines through these roads which loom above sharp ravines on either side.

Another reason for the naming dates back several centuries. Nyalam was an important stopover town for traders plying the commerce route from Kathmandu to Lhasa. There were vast stretches of roads that were covered with impenetrable forests – a favourite hideout for robbers. These bandits waylaid traders and galloped away with their bounty. The roads are bigger and tales of robbery are non-existent today. This leaves the drivers to navigate the banking stretches with their powerful fog lamps.

Covering close to 150 kilometres from Kathmandu, Nyalam is the first major stop within the Tibetan territory. Swathed in overflowing gutters and a drenching humidity, Nyalam has an unambitious as well as an unappealing facade. Chinese government buildings and public utilities dominate both sides of this one-street town. This only street is in need of some major repair and gets mucked up after a rain but no one seemed to mind. Like most mountain towns, Nyalam too seemed to be in no hurry to wake up and get going. The only people on the streets were the street gangs going to work on the highways and bridges. It seemed like Nyalam existed in a time warp, decided its own working and waking hours.

Hard rains from the previous night had left the roads mucky. Puddles of water on the road became play pools for little kids who came running seeing the tourists.



*A trinket seller happy to see tourists*

Regardless of age, small and big, teenager and toddler, all held out their hands and asked for ‘mani’. If you didn’t pay – it didn’t have to be with currency, they asked for everything from Swiss knives to skull caps and candies to camera – they became outright non cooperative, even hostile. While the older ones would physically obstruct you from taking photographs, the smaller ones ran away and hid behind walls, refusing to smile or even look your way. The houses were painted in bright colours which made them look like pretty little toy houses against the gigantic green of the mountains beyond. Most of them belonged to drivers and local merchants. The bigger ones were all hotels and the biggest one belonged to ‘China Post’ and I walked into one. Unlike any government office, especially a post office in India, the place was tidy as a thimble and haunting quiet. It was not like they were immersed in work, in fact nobody was busy. But they all were at their desks; the men’s eyes followed me suspiciously while the women opened new files and readjusted their computer screens.

A shrieking drill pierced the air. As the day progressed work began, mostly in the timber shops of which there were several in the sleepy town. Nature has always been bountiful to Tibet and the locals eke out a living from it. I am told that the wood goes to Nepal and China where they will be converted into furniture for the houses of high-ranking government officials and businessmen. For those headed to the holy lake Manasarovar and the Kailas mountain, the abode of Lord Shiva, Nyalam is an important town. This is usually an overnight halt for the touring groups who are headed out of or towards Kathmandu. The many hotels also serve as a base for those interested in trekking in this mountain-clad territory. Most of the shops offer telephoning facilities from where you can make international calls at reasonable rates. But showering is a dampener. There are quite a number of shower joints which offer warm water and fresh towels. But the 20 Yuan they ask sent my dreams down the drain. I resort to the bone-chilling water from the hotel pipe.

The pilgrims halt here usually for acclimatisation. The town is situated at an altitude of 3,750 metres – making it the highest point in the journey so far. Conditions here are quite extreme compared to Kathmandu. Touring groups usually earmark an extra day in Nyalam in their itineraries for acclimatisation – an absolute non-negotiable especially among groups which has pilgrims of all ages. Almost every hotel in town is taken and tourists and pilgrims roamed the streets familiarising themselves with the altitude and the weather. A much-needed day of rest for everybody.

The highlight of the next leg of my journey, which I began early next day, was the climb to 5000-metres and crossing the passes, the Tong La and the Lung La. I had

to reach Saga, via Zhangmu, covering a total of 300 kilometres. Just as I sat back, about to be mesmerised by the awesome landscape, I spotted this holy place revered by Buddhists the world over. Gangka is a village just 10 kilometres from Nyalam. An otherwise decrepit place, where poverty is on-your-face, most of those passing by prefer to give this one a miss. Here, a Buddhist monastery kneels on a sprawling mountainside that undulates all the way to the Kailas in the west where I was headed to. Founded during the early 1200s, the original one was rubbled during the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Rebuilt in 1983, it was a building of Spartan standards and frugal living. After further renovations and refurbishments, today the monastery is manageably inhabitable; though not one of the caretakers seemed to know how a room could be rented out. Only the practising Buddhists, that too the robust ones, hardcore history buffs and those who like to climb steep flights of stairs were found here.

What was getting the pilgrims to alight from the warm confines of their cars was the Milarepa cave, where the famous Tibetan poet and magician, responsible for bringing Buddhism to these parts, spent his last days before he was poisoned by a jealous contemporary. The life of Milarepa, revered and loved by every Tibetan, is one of vengeance and repentance, travails of the flesh and triumph of the soul. A young Milarepa is said to have killed his evil uncle at the behest of his mother who had stolen his family's land and other property. A guilt-ridden Milarepa spent six years of his life meditating, asking gods for mercy for his actions. Milarepa is believed to have attained enlightenment during the course of a single lifetime; a real folklore stuff.

Among the paintings of all Buddhist saints or bodhisattvas, Milarepa's is the easiest to recognise as in most of the representations he is shown holding one hand to his ear, singing. In some he is even shown in a green tinge as he is believed to have lived on a diet of nettles for several years. While he meditated, Milarepa wore the barest cotton robe and thus he came to be called Milarepa or the 'cotton-clad Mila'. The poet is the author of the 'Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa' which revolved around his quest for enlightenment.

In a gnawing cold drizzle, I stood outside a cave where the saint spent the last years of his life – a cave which is believed to have been built with his own hands. Inside the caves, the devout had already lighted up some tsampa lamps for the holy poet. A fragile structure, sprawled on an exposed mountainside, this Buddhist hotspot was very much susceptible to the ravages of nature. The cave was dark and even still photography was discouraged because of the use of flash. There were some Japanese Buddhists who were going breathless with excitement. One of them

pointed out small dents on the cave ceiling where Milarepa lifted the rock up and another which was his footprint. His stone trident, partially destroyed by the revolutionary army, was the epicentre for the most reverential acts. There was a small rock protrusion which is believed to protect anybody who caressed it. There was a stampede near it, everyone, including me it seemed was rubbing the knob for the entire family.

From where I stood, I espied the monastery being re-built – standing stark against barren, fuscous mountains in bright red eaves and ochrous yellow walls. This monastery too, like all the other Tibetan monasteries, had a conservative design with high walls to defend the treasures from bandits or even rival monasteries. It was undergoing some much-needed renovation work on the inside. Nevertheless, the doors opened to me a body of the most exquisite Buddhist paintings – from mythology as well as history. Here, in the main prayer hall with rows of low seats and tables arranged all around, artists and craftsmen were still at work. The singeing smell of varnish and wood dust hung suspended in the air.

Tibetan paintings have a rich history with strong influences from neighbouring India and China. The earlier forms of paintings usually had a uniform pattern with the Buddha at the centre, the supreme figure, surrounded by the lesser deities. Later on, revered lamas came to be depicted – paintings which also showed images from the main incidents in the lama's life. Padmasambhava and Milarepa were the favourites among the painters. It was around the 15th century that the Chinese influence began to make an impression on Tibetan paintings. The thrust was on landscapes – which came to be employed as a symbolic motif that celebrated the Buddha or other saints. A new wave was unleashed in Tibetan art by the Chinese and several artists used the opportunity to break free from the stereotyped and formalised aspects of painting that existed till then. The newly introduced Chinese forms coexisted without conflict with the prevalent forms of art. This harmonious existence has been attributed to the fact that painting skills and styles in Tibet are passed on from artist to the apprentice.

A lot of water has flowed since Milarepa walked these lands building his caves and composing his poems, on his way to enlightenment. Most of the monasteries and monuments, the chortens, the mani walls and the prayer flags that once adorned the land are no more due to cultural intolerance from across the border. The Gangka village is predominantly Buddhist and there are prayer flags everywhere. The flags are of five primary colours signifying earth, air, water, fire and sky. The frequent gushes of wind see to it that the flags are fluttering always, sending out prayers



*One restored painting of Milarepa from Gangka village*

into the world. These prayers are believed to ease everybody's suffering. But it seemed to me that the immediate cessation of suffering had to be granted to the village itself: poverty was stifling and little children in sooty, tattered and oversized woollens were running from one tourist to another begging. Though these caves are high on the 'must see' list of all Buddhists, most of the tourists give it a miss. However for anyone who is familiar with Milarepa and his life would find a visit to the cave a transcending experience. Where do myths end and history begin? Does one give way to the other? Do they ever come together?

## Chapter 6

### Onward to Saga

Most places in the world have certain months labelled 'off season' – a period when you are advised not to visit. Most tourists prefer to be in Tibet during spring, early summer and late autumn. July and August, the months where roads are temporarily washed away and landslides are everyday, are among the most ill-advised months to be here. I was cruising the mountain country during the peak monsoon season, in August.

I had begun my day's journey from Nyalam and my destination was Saga, 300 kilometres away, through a threnody of a landscape – one of the best slices of Tibet I was to see. The Tibetan landscape in all its poignant glory was first revealed to me during this leg of the journey. Hours pass by without realising and you can just sit inside the car watching the changing scenery. Tranquillity with a notable degree of sadness washes over you, lulls you into introspection. You just sit staring at the monotonous patterns drawn by the dreary hills. My camera lay forgotten on my lap. Spotless white clouds hung over mountains with sparse vegetations. Stray cattle stood unmoving by the roadside with hung heads. An occasional village ensconced in oases of limestone white and planted green painted a pretty contrast with the multi-hued prayer flags. Their fluttering seemed to be protractic to reach further inside and go further beyond rather than a reveille from the solemn inward journey. The reverie is broken by raucous road gangs who pass by in their colourful two-wheelers on their way to work. Development works provided the only eyesore; which, thankfully, was restricted to the road and its immediate surrounds.

This leg of the journey also highlights a more physical aspect, an interesting feature of Tibetan climate – changing from mild drizzles to misty blizzards, in a few minutes. This stretch of the road had my driver Mortu understandably worried. When I pointed my camera at him, he gave a forced smile. By the time I reached Saga, I would have climbed to an altitude of 4600 metres. And en route crested the wildernesses of snow and lush – the passes of Tong La and Lung La at altitudes of 4950 and 4845 metres respectively.

Most of the highways in Tibet have been built by the Chinese which the locals say is a strategic move to facilitate migration from its most populous neighbour. The roads which stretch all the way to other international borders have also been attributed with military intentions. Though the builders themselves cite the reason to be altruism and development for a country that is still caught in a time warp, the fact is that these roads are seldom used by Tibetans themselves. Most of them are beyond even the farthest mountains, content with their fields and kitchen gardens, flocks and woolly yaks. The roads, thus, remain for the almost-exclusive use of pilgrims and high ranking Chinese military officers who whiz by in their swanky trucks.



*The Pikitsa Lake*

Most of the stretches are deserted and the only time you come across some semblance of civilisation are in the form of check posts where the passing-by pilgrims and travellers too would have congregated taking a break or just producing their passage documents. The Chinese government, as part of its 'great leap west' has so far spent over 10 billion dollars in developing Tibetan infrastructure, bulk of which goes to constructing roads. Seasoned travellers and Tibetologists contend that with all the money that is being pumped in, the face of Tibet is changing – it's beginning to look more and more like China. Ironically, the more the situations change, the more they remain the same. While the Chinese authorities level charges of creating political rifts against the Dharamshala-based Tibetan government-in-exile headed by the Dalai Lama, the Dalai Lama himself has given up hopes of a separate nationhood.

As wondrous is the landscape of this mountain-locked country, so are the legends like the origin of the Tibetan people. They believe that the whole of the earth was covered with water which receded eventually to reveal the land which is Tibet today. Manifestations of Avalokiteshwara or the Compassionate Buddha and the goddess Tara appeared as a monkey and an ogress who had children together. Tibetans believe they are the descendants of these children.

Passing through this two-tone region, you also cross into Western Tibet or Ngari, the holy region. This was the land of Mount Kailas and Lake Manasarovar. Though it is only those headed to Kailas and Manasarovar come this way, of late this region is becoming an intrepid favourite – being one of the remotest regions in Asia making it a favourite with extreme travellers. The endless salt lakes of the Changtang plateau lie towards the north and the Himalayas to the south. In between are the stony deserts, stretches of steppe and the trans-Himalayan ranges. Odd-shaped stones and mineral laden rocks fringe both sides of the road. It was a virtual mine of fossilised rocks – just lying there to be spotted and picked up.

Besides having the holy mountain and the lake, Ngari also has the distinction of being the welcome point of Christianity into Tibet. When Jesuit priests from Goa reached Tsaparang in 1624, the king Namde Wosung welcomed them warmly and allowed them to set up a mission. The lamas of the region, were, however enraged by their king's increasing fondness for the strange religion and dispossessed him of his throne. The hapless Jesuits were thrown into prison. From then onwards Ngari seemed to slip off the surface of existence itself. No one heard of it anymore and Kailas and Manasarovar became the stuff of legends. It was not until 1908 when the Swedish explorer Sven Hedin proved their existence that the interest in Ngari was rekindled.

As we neared Tung La, and climbed close to 5000 metres, it began to snow. Though it greatly hampered our progress, Mortu just peered closer through the visors, all his creases bunched around the eyes, and lunged on. The shepherds we passed by were ubiquitously in transparent raincoats and looked at us disinterestedly. At times their flock would come on to the road and no honking would bade them give us way. All the while their masters would just stand by the side of the road and wave their staff at their wards in a ‘move-but-take-your-time’ manner. For stretches of kilometres, mounds of earth had been dug up for expanding the road. The Chinese were building a highway to Kailas, making for faster and more comfortable travel.

“They will make Kailas the next Disneyland,” rued a pilgrim I met when I stopped for lunch at a dzong (fort) ruins. The stunning Pukitso Lake was visible in the faraway horizon. Disneyland or not, the drive would be heaven.

The ruins we had stopped was actually a living village – the Pikitso village. It was perched at 4591 metres is a preferred camping site for tourists and trekkers for obvious reasons. However those who plan to halt here have to be properly acclimatised – which is what an extra day in Nyalam takes care of. Drinking water here, as with the rest of the villages or habitations along the way, is at a premium and it would be best if you carry your own supply. One word of caution: if you are planning to spend a night here, do opt to stay in one of the brick buildings and not in camps – the winds here whip up vicious speeds during the second half of the day and goes on howling well into the night.

Before the daylight went out, I had to my fill views of the mountain range where the Shishapangma stood. Visible on a clear day, this mountain known to the Nepalese as Gosainthan, is the only 8,000-plus feet high mountain that is squarely inside Tibet. The shimmering turquoise blue of the Pikitso Lake is one of the less visited gems in Tibetan landscape. Most vehicles just whiz past this marvel of nature.

I passed by the scenic Kyirong Valley from where I began a steep climb down to the Yarlung Tsenpo. I was on some real historic grounds. Nyatri Tsenpo, the first king of Tibet, who was believed to have built the first building in Tibet, founded his Yarlung dynasty here during the 6th century. By late afternoon, the weather had cleared for a squinty sun beating down harsh on the landscape. I approached the township of Saga.

Saga looked like an extension of the desolate landscape which we were passing through for the last eight hours. It looked like all the shops were either closed or impatiently looking forward to down the shutters. All the pilgrims’ vehicles had treaded in tons of muck which were laid across the streets in a thousand zigzags.

Leaking drainages had slushed up most of the lanes and it was a sea of leapfrogging humanity. The signboards were mostly in Chinese with some subtitled in English almost as an afterthought. Some of them straight out of a Chinese-English dictionary, translated verbatim – ‘Showers the wooden barrel bath’ for one. The youngsters of the town were all dressed up chic – in faux leather jackets and bright coloured canvas shoes, definitely Chinese. They also seemed to be bolder in their display of affections; there were couples walking with hands wound around each other. One I even spotted necking in an open square right at the town centre.



*Intriguing signages like this are aplenty in Saga*

The biggest buildings were a department store whose name I couldn't read and the Saga Hotel and Moon Star Restaurant. The entire town was compressed on both sides of a dirty T-shaped lane. Everything looked like they were hastily set up, ready to dismantle and leave anytime the whistle blew. There was one pink building with a yellow finial and blue shutters at the ground level which caught my attention for its distinct lack of aesthetics. A typical pilgrim-dependent economy, there were several hotels and lodges in various stages of construction. The apparent prosperity was explained by the fact that this was the last chance to have a sumptuous meal and a warm shower. The Saga Hotel, though with a confusingly garish facade, is the one decent accommodation available. However, during peak season there is every possibility that it will be full and travel agents have to be informed accordingly. This hotel is at the north-east part of the T-junction on the road that heads out of town. The road that heads out to the north is towards Mount Kailas and the one south is to Lhatse. Saga is where those heading towards the Manasarovar Lake and the Mount Kailas parikrama gear up for the long haul ahead. Every second shop is a supermarket from where you can stack up with energy bars and candies.

At the Moon Star Restaurant, I met a group from Mumbai who were on their way back from the Parikrama. Sanket, the tour organiser was a strapping laddie in his twenties who had, including this time, done the Parikrama for five consecutive years. While some looked relieved some looked a bit confused. But everybody looked pleased that the slate was clear.

"Oh, it was really bad up there," Sanket said by way of explanation. "It's raining in Kailas for the past week now."

I was a little stunned by the news. Maybe it was the way he said it. He might have as well said, 'they serve good momos here'.

"Looks like it will continue for some more days," he said. "You are in for some serious shit up there man."

As if seconding him, swords of lightning streaked the sky followed by deep, ominous growl of the thunder.

"See what I mean?" Sanket said walking away.

## Chapter 7

### **Divine waters: Manasarovar**

Saga is the last major stopover town as you head to the holy Manasarovar Lake and the Kailas Mountain. Supermarkets are aplenty from where you can stack up for the long haul ahead. I piled up candies and cookies, bought windcheaters and raincoats – extra ones. And generally lounged about, doing nothing, stocking up on energy reserves. However, the reports on the conditions up in Mount Kailas were a nagging worry.

The parikrama around the Mount Kailas is a long, arduous trek of 54 kilometres. No amount of preparation could shield me if Nature wasn't benign. The gales were known to be furious and the rains rendered you bone-cold. And facilities along the way were basic, at best. However, I didn't let it dampen my enthusiasm. I set off in high spirits towards the next destination – the Manasarovar Lake. A real feast for the eyes, panacea for the soul, the mythology surrounding it was just the bonus.

Some 50 million years ago, India was a separate continent. And the Tethys Sea was still flowing. The Himalayan range was formed when the tectonic plate of India crashed into Asia. The Tethys Sea was drained and formed what we know as Tibet today. On this frosty morning, my journey continued funnelling through the mist-laden landscape. The harsh weather and unfriendly landscape was almost like the erstwhile sea was not too happy at its newfound status as land. In a land so sumptuous in its natural resources, you would expect at least the water to be pure, drinkable. Not so. I lost count the number of times I was hit by diarrhoea.

"In Tibet, the tissue paper is a man's best friend," I tended to agree to this wry remark from a practising Buddhist from Canada I met on the way.

After the Tung La and the Lung La, I crested several other smaller passes, nosed through cotton-white clouds, descried enormous mountain barriers that circle the highest country on earth. Vertiginously locked by the Karakoram in the west and the Kunlun to the north, Tibet's landscape is among the most merciless anywhere. Over the coming few weeks I was to experience the most excruciatingly alternating climes – from scorching sun to a blizzard and snowfall – all over the course of a single day! Most of the fields clutching to both sides of the road were broken barley patches that merged without a cinch into the surrounding barren landscape. Save for the occasional nomad and the road gangs, there weren't many people around. The only colour and sound were provided by the garishly decorated Chinese 'Jia Jin' bikes used to transport labourers which plied the dusty roads with music blaring from specially fitted loud speakers.

Because of its erstwhile status as a sea, there are fossilised marine stones all over glittering blue, green and maroon in the unforgiving sun. Many of them contoured vaguely for the pilgrims to attribute shapes of a 'linga' or a 'Ganesha'. Among the fossil-strewn landscape, I espied a discarded carton on which was the longest word I had seen in my life: KUANGMIANZHUANGSHIXISHENGBAN. Nobody – neither Mortu nor anybody from the village – was able to tell me what it meant.

The roadside village of Paryang looked like an extension of the vast sand dunes that encircled it. My original itinerary had an unappealing night halt in this broken down village. More than a village, the place resembled a refugee camp that too one recently evacuated. With not much by way of amenities, I nevertheless used the stopover for a quick lunch. And to make some new friends. This friendly little one told me, with Mortu acting as translator, that his parents had gone over the mountains to graze the sheep. Villages like these dot the route. Mostly inhabited by road gangs and other menial labourers, the only adults you find here during the daytime are those who are either ill or handicapped. This explained the empty, desolate look the village wore.

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As I neared the Manasarovar Lake, I saw its towering backdrop first – the 25,000-foot snowlit massif of Gurla Mandhata – standing aloof and away from the Himalayas, in a world of its own. On the other end was the Mount Kailas, hidden somewhere behind an envelope of drippy-grey clouds, visible on a clear day. Through a sweeping shower, we roller-coasted along a soak, past concrete blocks which I was later told were hotels under construction (giving weight to the 'Disneyland theory' albeit, an ungainly one) and reached the Manasarovar Lake. I



*First sight of the holy Lake Manasarovar*

expected to see an azure blue body of water, gently washing the banks in tranquil white ripples. The azure blue was there, but it looked like it was receding fast – giving way to an expanding fuscous frill. The delayed pilgrim season was in full bloom and the charred remnants from numerous havans dotted the banks. Burnt ghee, pooja flowers, holy ash – all found their way into the lake along with the insensitively discarded charcoal embers. Not to mention the human waste: the campsite was littered with discarded batteries, empty cigarette packets, white and brown cigarette butts, potato chips' packets and broken liquor bottles. The tenets of responsible travel were yet to reach the pilgrims. Or the manning locals.

"The pilgrims visit once in a lifetime." Dendi Sherpa informed me sagely picking his words. Dendi was the camp in-charge. "So they don't feel the need to keep the place clean." I had brought up the issue of safe and sustainable waste disposal and had pointed out that though it was the holiest lake in the world, there was a shockingly cavalier attitude towards its cleanliness. The locals skirted the issue with impunity. Their justification was that they stayed there only during the duration of the pilgrim season. They were mostly nomads who dismantled the tents and left these thin-air shores soon as the weather turned. They all had their patches of farms in the fertile

valleys which lay towards the south-east with their own brick houses and a sizeable number of cattle and children. They stayed there for most part of the year. This was quick money for them and nothing more.

The rain finally petered out and the sun peered perkily through the rolling boulders of clouds that suddenly seemed to be in a hurry to go. Between the Gurla Mandhata and the now vaguely visible Kailas appeared a hazy rainbow like an arched bridge as if extending a magical welcome. I stepped out of my tent for my first proper sight of the lake, holy to one-fifth of the world population. The lake, called Mapham Yum-tso or the 'Victorious Lake' by the locals, is the source of the four great Indian rivers – the Indus, Ganges, Brahmaputra and the Sutlej – as per Hindu and Buddhist cosmology. But in truth only the Sutlej originates here. Hindu scriptures say the 'Manas' which means the mind refers to that of the supreme creator Brahma and the lake is its worldly manifestation. A group of sages came to worship Lord Shiva, the god of destruction, who is believed to be meditating atop the Mount Kailas. Brahma, the creator, to help them in their endeavours, empowered their prayers by creating the lake from his blessings.

Lord Shiva himself sometimes floats here taking the form of a golden swan. Unseen by mortal eyes is the Tree of Life at its centre, on which the King of the Serpents and his subjects feast. The fruits from the Tree of Life, when dropped into the water, mixes with it giving it immortal qualities. The sixth century religious texts have described the lake as a paradise in itself. Poet Kalidasa compared the waters of Lake Manasarovar to pearls and said that drinking it would erase the sins of a hundred lifetimes. The popular Buddhist legend around here goes that Buddha's mother Queen Maya was bathed here before she gave birth to her son. Both Hindu and Buddhist pilgrims have been doing the circumambulation around it for close to 2000 years. Vastly augmenting its fantastic qualities is a geological wonder: Manasarovar Lake is an intact fragment of the Tethys Sea which disappeared 50 million years ago to tectonic shifts.

History too has contributed to the near-mythical status the Manasarovar enjoys. The slopes surrounding the lake were a favourite spot with gold prospectors who dug it up only to be struck down by a mysterious plague of smallpox. So, when one of the prospectors dug up a huge gold nugget, it was hurriedly put back for fear of divine retribution. The flora around the area is at best scanty. But magical powers have been attributed to most of the herbs found in the area. It is considered sacrilege to row a boat or fish in these waters. Sven Hedin, the explorer who rowed his own hastily assembled boat over a hundred years ago for scientific purposes

over the Manasarovar Lake died in ignominy and obscurity for all his exploits. Dead fishes that are found washed up are used as ingredients in incense which are burnt to repel evil spirits. The water, served to the dying, ensures a place for the soul in paradise. Here, it must be said that all the pilgrim groups collect holy water to carry back to their homelands in five and ten-litre cans – a few kilometres away from the camp shores where the water is not muddled by their own activities. The authorities, however, had restricted setting up camp at one side of the lake only. Except from the bank closest to camp, everywhere else the Manasarovar is a blue wonder.

The banks were already brimming with pilgrims. Some are straining their eyes through the drawing dusk for a darshan of the Kailas. There are excited cries when the white peak of the holy mountain peers back absentmindedly through the few remaining strands of tremulous cloud. Some of the pilgrims immediately prostrated on the wet ground chanting mantras. The terns and the grebes keep a studied silence and a distance from all the teeming activity. I started for a headland a little far from the pious congregation. At 15,000 feet and rarefied air, you tend to miscalculate distances. So what I thought to be a 30-minute walk lasted a full hour. By the time I reached the foot of the headland, it was quite dark. I had to start back if I were not to step into watery ditches camouflaged by soft wavy grass.

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"I would take a dip in the lake to freshen myself up than wash my sins away," said Bruno.

But Sathyanathan 'wouldn't even want to do that going by the state of the water and whatever that was going into it'.

Bruno, a male nurse from Australia and Sathyanathan, a brand manager with a petroleum company in Indonesia, met at Thamel in Kathmandu. They hit it off so well that they bid adieu to their respective travelling companions – Bruno's live-in girlfriend for five years and 'somebody' Sathyanathan 'just met at the Rum Doodle Bar in Thamel'. The girls hooked up with a bunch of guys headed to Pokhara for a spot of adventure. They would all meet in Thamel by the end of two weeks. Bruno was soft-spoken and gentle-looking with green eyes and craggy beard while Sathyanathan was over six feet and built like a rugby player – the ultimate tall, dark charmer. Corporeal contrasts apart they struck common ground on many fronts – outlook, beliefs and the quest.

"There is more to life than what we all go through – education, job, marriage, kids and old age." Bruno told me. "I am trying to at least get to the tip of what we all are missing."

“I didn’t like my life one bit – there was too much of everything, be it money, women, booze, drugs,” Sathyanathan said. “I knew the real me was not in all that...it was somewhere else.”

“Are you looking?” I asked.

“I have started.”

“What are the chances you will find it?”

“I may or may not. But the fact that I have started looking gives me a peace I haven’t experienced in so many years.” He said eyes transfixed dreamily at the faraway bluish grey mountains with white sheets of snow drawn just over their peaks. Wild ducks wiggled over the shimmering ripples of the emerald green water. It was 8am and we were up since four in the morning trying to catch the famous ‘star showers’ – a ‘divine show’ of shooting stars falling into the water which Hindus believe are gods descending to bathe. But scientifically explained by friction electricity prevalent in high altitudes. Faith or fact, we were disappointed the three mornings we tried to capture it at the appointed Brahma mahurat or the ‘divine hour’ – around 4am.



*Distant mountains from the banks of the Manasarovar*

“Looked like the gods are camera shy,” I remarked.

“That’s the beauty of the place,” Bruno said. “There is so much myth and mystery. You cannot easily separate fact from belief. Some beliefs are not to be questioned, but just respected.” Bruno, who had just returned from a walk, left for another. Bruno and Sathyanathan had pitched their tents close to the lake and the area was now bristling with preparations for pooja and the pilgrims were lighting umpteen fires all along the bank. I spent some more time with Sathyanathan who was trying to draw parallels with the journey of the Buddha himself.

In a land inhabited by reincarnations of divinity, bounded by mountains from the rest of the world, a pure tableau from where a million prayers float, the soul is citizen. It had a voice but an abstract tongue – one you could fathom only if the mind was blank, eager to draw upon everything and anything around you. It spoke through the mountains that constantly changed colours, through the gushing stream that stilled and shuddered your palm, through the gaze of a little boy in red tattered woollens, through a glass of salted tsampa tea that was put in front of you with a smile, through the billowy clouds that scattered away just when you hoped it wouldn’t rain. What the parikrama did, or what we all hoped it would do, was to prepare the mind for the lessons. A temporary unlearning. For more permanent learning.

“I am off to the Mount Kailas,” he said. “The parikrama, I hope, will bring me closer to that me I lost somewhere down the years.”

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“I have acted with Rajnikant when he was struggling to make his mark. Now I am trying to direct a movie with him. But being the big star and all he is, you know it is very difficult to get his dates.” Ravi was from Chennai, south India. He still dressed like a costume rehearsal for a movie – head to toe in black. A thick felt coat hung from his shoulders like a flattened sheep. After acting in a handful of movies, he married a fairly successful character actress of the time. He turned to direction and became an assistant producer, tried his hand in scripting and direction and finally settled down with a textile shop. He still maintained close contacts with the industry by supplying dresses for song and dance sequences. Whatever left, it looked like he wore them himself.

“So you are doing the parikrama for Rajnikant’s dates?” I asked in jest.

“No,” he replied seriously. “I am actually doing research for my film with Rajni.”

“Oh, that is cool,” I was impressed. “Can you tell me what the story is about?”

“Why not? I will tell you the story if you promise to give me a honest feedback.” I swore I would.

It was to be a period film. The south Indian superstar would play a happy-go-lucky adventurer commissioned by a mysterious raja to explore the source of the great rivers – the Indus, Sutlej, Ganges and the Brahmaputra. It was the age when sorcery and black magic prevailed in Tibet. Though the British and Tibetan authorities had warned anybody from entering Tibet with dire consequences, Rajni would slip through the Zaskar Pass disguised as a shepherd. Surmounting great difficulties he gets into Tibet and meets with bandits and black magicians on the way. He is saved from near-death by a Chinese princess who falls in love with him (This romance bit, Ravi pointed out, was to foster better relations between India and China.) He returns after successful completion of the mission and is invited to present his findings at the Royal Geographic Society in London. And the ‘final climax’ of the story is revealed here. Ravi didn’t let me in on the ‘final climax’. For that I had to wait till the script got to the matinees. Now what did I think about the story?

We were sitting in the midst of taut canvass tents that pointed blue skywards like sails of meandering yachts. Our metal frame chairs sunk into the moist ground, crushing the grass, squishing out water. Pakodas and chai were ready in the kitchen, someone came and announced. Desideri, Moorcroft, Kawaguchi, Hedin... the storyboard brought together all the great explorers who crossed perilous passes and risked life and limb for gratification and glory.

In India, movies, especially superstar movies, had to be larger than life. Here, it was larger than not one, but four lives. It would work, I told Ravi.

“Om Namah Shiva,” Ravi muttered, getting up from a half sunk chair and headed towards the kitchen for pakodas and chai.

## Chapter 8

### Chiu Gompa or ‘The Bird’ Monastery

A new day dawned on the camp that felt definitely lighter and happier. Providing a most befitting backdrop were the cerulean clouds which merged with the ebony-blue mountains which in turn flowed into the argent-blue waters. Having washed off the burden of a lifetime of sins in the holy lake the pilgrims were justifiably happy. The locals too joined in, shaking a leg to popular Hindi film numbers, making the Lord Shiva himself proud.

Munni badnam huin... blared bravely through static of an ancient radio.

Definitely a gay abandon fuelled by the unpredictability of the parikrama everyone was about to embark on. Where a dangerous, rough terrain that stretched on for miles, with no basic amenities, awaited. While we celebrated the blanking out of our sin slates, our capable and attentive camp staff led by Dendi Sherpa ensured that everyone left on time. It was also that a bigger delegation led by a godman from Chennai was reaching soon; the locals and the drivers were excited as the godman was rumoured to be driving himself – all the way from Kathmandu! If staying back was an option, I would have, gladly. Nothing less than a wrench could pluck me off the inviting quietude of the banks and the shimmering diamond waters. Well, I was also intrigued by this self-driven godman.

The drive from Manasarovar was a dream. Though I was motoring up an untarred, bumpy stretch, the holy lake pursued with all the passion of an unrelenting paramour. With sights divine. I was privy to the oft-neglected or unseen views of

the Manasarovar from here. This road, along the uninhabited bank of the lake, was rarely used by vehicles. It was, till recent, reserved for those doing the circumambulation. With a circumference of 88 kilometres, a near-perfect circle, a parikrama or kora of the lake would take up to three or four days for the able-bodied. There lay the holy lake, in all her blue and green, white and gold glory, refusing to let go of me. Trust me, here is a sight you can never have your fill of. That filled you up with so much joy bringing you to near-tears. One that made you believe it is worth it all (the sinning included). Beautiful wild flowers, exotic life, a scenic beauty that tugged at your heart, I was passing through a terrain blessed in every sense.

There were groups of picnicking locals who sat on pockmarked boulders, feet swinging in the water. Another one had removed his shirt and was thrashing about in the water trying to persuade a girl, who was collecting water into a bottle and drinking it, to join him. Seeing that his entreaties were ignored, he splashed to her and dragged her by force into the water. This created much mirth among the others while the girl struggled up sputtering for breath, water pouring out of her nostrils. This only made two other guys who were sitting on the boulder bodily lift her and plonk her into the water again. The Tibetans surely had their own brand of fun. Before things got out of hand, Mortu tapped his watch – it was time to go.



*Up there is the Chiu gompa*

On the way we passed by a Tibetan pilgrim who was doing the parikrama of the lake, covering the distance with prostrations on the stony path. I asked Mortu to slow down so that we didn't kick up much dust. The woman had padded her knees with some old clothes and she held a piece of wood with a bulbous knob which was the grip, like the sandals used by the ancient sadhus. As we passed by, she turned to look at us and in return to my sombre, unbelieving nod she gave me a cheerful smile. It was superhuman, to be able to smile under the circumstances. I asked Mortu what she would have done to undertake such a penance. Would she be forgiven for whatever when she completes it?

"Bad...hmmm... bad...hmmm... bad lady." He managed a barely comprehensible answer drying up his reservoir of English.

Traditionally, Tibetan society can be divided into three distinct segments: the drokpa or nomads, rongpa or farmers and the sanghka or monks and nuns. What unifies them is a deep faith in Buddhism as represented by the omnipresent cairn. The cairns are symbolic of chortens. The chortens were originally built to house the cremated relics of Buddha and have now become a powerful symbol of the Buddha and his teachings. These are the representations of the path to enlightenment. At times even physically representing the Buddha himself. The side of the Manasarovar I was passing on, was riddled with these cairns, some rising even a full four feet. Adding a stone to these cairns goes a long way in your afterworld prospects, I added to several of them. I wasn't taking any chances here.

We passed by a tourist bus whose rear tyres had submerged deep in the muck formed by the night rain and passing traffic. These were local pilgrims who were headed to the holy mountain from Kathmandu. The passengers had abandoned the driver whose attempts to extricate the vehicle from the quagmire was only sinking it deeper. They had assembled in groups of five and six and were chanting. I told Mortu we should stop to help. Adept in sign language by now, I understood without much difficulty when he said that the driver should wait till the day gets warmer – and the muck harder. He also added that the other driver was crazy.

There is a certain rhythm with which the Tibetans handle their machines; right from the way they get in to the driver seat, buckling up, engaging the gear, one can almost feel a whispered conversation going on between the machine and the man. A trait probably got over centuries of taming wild horses – they were all exceptional on horseback as well. The only time I saw some real joy and pride in Mortu's eyes was when I told him that he was a good driver; he almost blushed and walked away inadvertently assuming his driving posture – hunched and pulling up the falling

sleeves of his cheap sweater. He never pushed his vehicle, but it did what it could, almost with the air of Hidalgo. So it came as no surprise when Mortu took the vehicle up a near-vertical slope, hunched over and hugging the wheel, and the almost-bald tyres held! I had half expected all of us to come sliding down like an avalanche and turning turtle when we hit the bottom. Just as I began to enjoy the adrenaline of the 'slope taming' we had reached the top of the tricky knoll.

What lay there sprawled a little distance away mesmerised me: the Rakshas Tal, like a sultry vixen sure of her seductive prowess, challenging me to make up my mind on where to place my loyalties – the pacific expanse of her unadulterated blue or the sullied but holy Manasarovar. Rakshas Tal, meaning the lake of demons, was once the house evil Hindu spirits who ate human flesh. Together with the Manasarovar Lake, the Rakshas Tal symbolises the sun and the moon which is among the supreme symbols in Tantric Buddhism. Before the Cultural Revolution, there used to be one monastery which was studiously avoided by the pilgrims – Buddhists, especially, as Hindu pilgrims mostly head straight to the Mount Kailas. The water in the lake was supposed to be poisonous, not allowing any life form to survive in it. Some believe that the lake is over sunken mountains. There is a small channel which the locals call the Ganga Chu which connects the Rakshas Tal to the Manasarovar. This channel, the Tibetans believe, was carved out by a golden fish. Water flowed from the holy lake to the lake of the demons and it was redeemed. Flowers sprouted around it and life blossomed in it. Taking the esoteric one step ahead is another local belief that for 30 years since the Chinese Cultural Revolution, the channel remained dry. Today, water has started to flow again through the Ganga Chu and thus the Rakshas Tal is not demonic anymore. In fact, it is quite friendly. As if to make up for centuries of alienation, there are hot springs around the lake which are popular pilgrim bathhouses. Any opportunity to bathe, that too in mineral-rich natural springs, I suggest strongly, should not be missed.

Just as I was about to leave, a couple in transparent raincoats appeared with the suddenness of an apparition in front of us. They were staying with a local family at the nearby Chiu village where the famous Chiu Gompa or the Bird Monastery was and could we give them a lift as they didn't want to wet their camera. David and Alex were from the United Kingdom; David was a photographer and Alex was a journalism student. They met each other through a 'free Tibet' site and got together for the Kailas parikrama.

"How is your journey so far?" I asked David.

"We are both activists for the Free Tibet movement and we have participated in many campaigns for the cause," he replied. "So we thought for once go and see the

land we are trying to liberate."

"And what do you expect from the road ahead?" This time I pointed my question at Alex. Alex was the firebrand among the two, when she spoke her orange mane – tied up in an out-of-hand bundle – bobbed, making it look like a forest fire welling up.

"The more we see of Tibet the firmer we stand by our cause," she said, the fiery mane now quivering furiously like an oil rig on fire. "Look around, what an exhilarating piece of earth. How can anybody commit such atrocities here?" She said calling it a 'cultural revolution' was degrading the whole idea of a revolution; what happened in the country was organised vandalism. What was unforgivable was that the biggest crime against humanity was committed right next door to the biggest democracy in the world – which just stood back and watched.

From where I dropped the activist couple – near the Chiu village – Darchen was just a couple of hours away. I was in no hurry. In fact, right there, like an outgrowth of the craggy mountainside, was something so high up in my 'must-see' list. In fact, high up on everybody's 'must-see' list.

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The Chiu Gompa or 'The Bird' Monastery is in the Chiu Village – a popular tourist stopover. This is where the famous Tibetan saint, Padmasambhava, spent the last days of his life in prayer and meditation. During the Chinese Cultural Revolution, much of the gompa was destroyed and what remains today are what the Red Army left behind probably due to lack of time.

A boulder-strewn path leads up the gompa. The first thing that catches the eye as you climb is the multicoloured prayer flags fastened on to impossibly positioned sandstone outcrops. The carnival of colours paints a radiant contrast against the red crags. However, don't be misled to take it as a testimony to monks living here – after the Cultural Revolution, most of them fled. Today it is dilapidated, almost haunted.

There once used to be eight monasteries around the Manasarovar Lake, symbolising the Wheel of Life. Most of them were razed down by the ravaging Reds. The only surviving one is the Chiu Gompa, located on the northwest side of the lake. As you climb higher to reach the gompa, you will be privy to breathtaking sights of the holy lake – each better than the last. The once-celebrated gompa wears a deserted look, which it is. I met only a couple of monks – both of whom were weary of visitors and preferred to keep themselves indoors.

Perched high on the forgotten bluff, the Chiu Gompa oozes history and mythology,



*One of the shut caves - where Padmasambhava spent his twilight years*

much like the holy lake it gazes out to. As I walked around the gompa, I saw nothing much by way of life, but wrecked or bolted chambers with a mysterious, mouldy air about them. One of the caves with the locked door was where Padmasambhava spent the last seven days of his life in a trance. The greatest of Tibetan saints, Padmasambhava was here with his faithful consort Yeshe Tsogyal by his side when he ‘took rainbow body’. After his passing on, his bereaved widow sat down to pen his biography in the rooms and corridors of this historic monastery.

Padmasambhava hailed from the Swat valley which is in today’s Pakistan. He is believed to have been born from a lotus and later on, adopted by a king from north India. His life draws very striking similarity to that of the Buddha. When he reached Tibet, he found that Bon religion had gained sway over the land and Buddhism was on its way out. Performing miracles, escaping immolation on pyres, converting kings, he traversed the length and breadth of the land.

Take a look over the baked mud walls that encloses the gompa and you will understand why the holiest person in the land chose to spend the last days of his life here. There, gleaming a lustrous shimmering silver as far as the eye can see, lies the holy Manasarovar Lake – shimmering veneration and inspiring prayers.

## Chapter 9

### **Base camp Darchen and Parikrama begins**

Believed to be the highest island over the long-ago Tethys Sea, the 6714-metre Mount Kailas is pyramidal in shape with each side a cardinal direction. For a long time it was believed that a mythical river flowed from the mountain to the Manasarovar Lake from where four mythical rivers flowed in the four compass directions. However, the truth is that four real rivers do flow from the holy mountain in more or less the four cardinal directions and not from the holy lake. They are the Brahmaputra (east), Sutlej (west), Indus (north) and Karnali (south).

Early explorers tracing the origin of these great rivers were wonderstruck to find that they all rose from a cardinal point on the mountain – adding to its growing mysticism. The mountain is considered the holiest in Asia and scriptures regard it as the source of the universe. Ardent devotees believed that the continents radiated from the centre and the sun and all the planets orbited around it. It found reverential references in the early Hindu holy books as the mystical Mount Meru – the axis of all creation, created from the mind of the creator himself, Brahma. Eventually, Mount Meru merged with the earthly Kailas and legends flew. Astral or of the earth, the mountain is held in awe for its spectacular beauty and divine intent ascribed for it being located away from its other snow-clad companions in the Himalayas.

As you near Darchen, the base camp of the Mount Kailas, thoughts of the holy mountain transfix you and you are overwhelmed by its reputation. So much so that



*All gung-bo about the parikrama - first day, first hour*

all you want to do here will be to wait for the morning and head off for the parikrama. An otherwise drab town, Darchen is livened up by troops and snooker.

The last checkpoint before the parikrama is in Darchen outskirts. But this time, it was an unmanned one. Uniforms with dangling golden-thread epaulettes hung over a camouflage bivouac, apparently the office some distance away over the outcrop of a barren mesa. Mortu went inside carrying the file containing the line passes with all the trepidation of a first-time jobseeker. Further ahead, scribbling the other gravelly sides, there were more tents – all camouflaged. We were close to the Indian border and the prevalent tensions hung in the air. It also explained the presence of armoured vehicles that rumbled by raising dust and splotching water from drainages that opened out to the streets of the dusty Darchen. Groups of militia swarmed the town in green formations as if looking for something to scourge, somebody to arrest. While some directed at the pilgrims looks of undiluted animosity, most of them just looked through or ignored the curious darting glances. Darchen was a town of strategic importance and photography in general was frowned upon. After a few minutes Mortu came out of the tent followed by a vested Chinese soldier, both of them had cigarettes clamped in their mouths and Mortu lighted up – first for the vest and then for himself.

We rolled into town late evening and I was greeted by a strange sight – people on the streets. Normally in Tibet everyone goes to bed quite early. But here life was spilling out – even after dusk, well into dark, under moth-clad street lamps. The gaming parlours were teeming and a jovial air prevailed. Most of the guys were porters and guides whom the pilgrims hired for the parikrama.

A blue signage with a picture of the Mount Kailas saying ‘Tibet India Novelty Shop’ and a red one with ‘Jixiangruiyiboutique’ stood side by side. An open air snooker parlour was manned by a busy-looking plump woman who went around plucking money from the reluctant clutches of players peering over peeling cues. Being the pilgrim season, several wild-haired Tibetan youngsters had come down from the mountains with their wilder-haired mares to ferry pilgrims over the peaks and the passes – the Drolma La, the highest at 5,630 metres – being a particularly feared one. Trekkers and pilgrims have reportedly collapsed here and died due to lack of oxygen with exhaustion not even allowing time to reach inside your rucksack for the emergency oxygen cylinder. (‘Drolma’ in Tibetan means ‘she who liberates’ – yet another enigma of Tibetan nomenclature.) The players were all hunched, frowned in focus, gazing over table edges. Right from Nyalam by the Nepal-Tibet border, I had seen that snooker was a favourite.

“Why is the game so popular here?” I asked the guy who was holding a large wad of Yuan in his hands – he was the assistant croupier to the woman who evidently was the boss.

“It is popular because there is nothing else here,” he replied matter-of-factly. Maybe true as I was told that didn’t play parrasho here – the only Tibetan game I could boast of playing.

But the proprietor of the curio shop I walked into had a different reason for the popularity of snooker. Having done his schooling in India, he was well-versed in English and was a staunch supporter of the Tibetan cause. He had an opinion on most things:

“I studied in Shimla, was in a boarding school. I didn’t want to come back but my father asked me to (come back and) take care of this shop.”

“When in India I used to go to the Dharamshala often to see the Dalai Lama and to hear his lectures and seek his blessings.”

“I had several Indian girlfriends – from Punjab, Kolkatta, Kashmir and one even from your Kerala.”

“Indian girls want to have fun but you guys are too busy watching cricket.”

“Here they play snooker as it is popular all over the world; they hope that some tourist will join them and they can easily sell their services.”

“Prostitution is very widespread here – right from tourists to trekkers, drivers to guides, use their services. Pilgrims do it on their way back from the parikrama.”

“We had a huge statue of Padmasambhava right next to this place which was destroyed by the Chinese.”

“But that happened before I came back or I don’t know what would have happened.”

“I will give my life for my country. But who will take care of my little daughter?”

For most of the travellers, the town doesn’t offer much else. It is a very basic town, an overgrown village actually, with not much stock given to hygiene and basic facilities. Individuals or groups have to get their travel permits stamped from here on arrival. However, there are ample options to pick up any last minute provision. Most of the shops also have facilities to make phone calls. You would be spoilt with choice if you are looking for souvenirs. Bundle your memories into semi precious stones, trinkets, necklaces, bangles, paintings or ancient scrolls. However, bring along a trained eye if you are planning to throw money. Tales abound of unwary travellers fishing out a fortune for forged scrolls and duplicate stones.

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The night was the slowest one in my life; the anticipation of the parikrama the next day kept me awake almost throughout. I was up with first light. To begin the highlight of the entire journey. For many, the highlight of an entire life. Parikrama for Hindus and kora for Buddhists; for everybody, the trip of a lifetime.

Usually those doing the parikrama start from a point called Tarboche, but nonstop rains had made the road inaccessible. We were to proceed to another place further ahead, a featureless and foreboding valley called Sirchun. Far away from where we stopped, at the foot of a mountain which looked like a gigantic termite hill, stood the Sirchun Gompa. As a symbol of thriving faith were the unending strings of flapping prayer flags and dish antennae busy catching signals. We had stopped near a Buddhist stupa which was gift wrapped in translucent, multi-coloured prayer flags. Pilgrims went around the stupa praying for safe passage through the parikrama. The Mount Kailas was hidden somewhere behind clouds sluggish with rain struggling to keep afloat.

Locals and Buddhists believe that the holy mountain is guarded by a deity called Demchog who stays at the top of the mountain, in a palace carved out of ice. In

ancient Tibetan texts Demchog is portrayed as a furious god with many arms, brandishing skulls, trident and a drum. Not only is he strikingly similar to Kala Bhairav – Lord Shiva in his destructive avatar (a local favourite at the Kathmandu Durbar Square in Nepal), he is believed to be a tantric variant of Lord Shiva. Furthering the similarities, Demchog too has his consort Phagmo entwined around him symbolising his shakti or strength. Buddhists offer prayers to Demchog here while Hindus walk around the stupa chanting ‘Om Namah Shiva’.

During the time of Ramayana and the Mahabharata, the Himalayan region was believed to be a divine territory and the mythical Mount Meru a separate kingdom. Over the centuries, even before the invasion by Aryans, the sadhus made daring forays tracing the origin of rivers and reached Kailas. Eventually the holy mountain was deigned the abode of Lord Shiva and the Mount Meru was merged with it. Shiva, the god of destruction, symbolises both the hope and the despair of change with his dance, the tandava. It seemed like he was on to one now. Reports of hailstorms and blizzards over the Drolma Pass had settled a palpable air of anxiety over the pilgrims. Understandably some pilgrims had tearfully dropped out – mostly the elder lot and those with some history of illness. Not many were able to hire



*The beginning of the parikrama trail*

horses for the entire parikrama as it was prohibitively expensive and were in short supply.

Sure-footed yaks, plangent with the tin bells hanging from the shock that was their necks, descended from the surrounding hills. These beasts of burden would soon be loaded up with unimaginable quantities of camp stuff: one I was watching had three domestic gas cylinders and two 50-litre drums filled with grocery and pilgrim luggage hoisted on it. While the yaks cut a straight path, over mountains, across stony streams, we began along a semblance of a trail flanked by canyon walls like brown stilettos pointed towards the sky. The first day would be easy compared to the second and the third days; we would be covering just 14 km till Dera Phuk which stood at an altitude of 4900 metres.

It was 11am and rain clouds were groaning over the horizon and a freezing gale tore down bodily pushing some pilgrims off balance. The pilgrims were embarking on a journey of their lifetime; a gamut of emotions was on display there. There was excitement, extremes of piety – some were rolling on the ground in the direction of the Mount Kailas and breaking down. Taking my first tentative steps along the billowy landscape, I was soon surrounded by towering sandstone bulwarks with itchy boulders perched precariously at the top. There is a smattering of snow only at the peak of this red and rust curtain – from everywhere else it was wrung out, washed or blown away. There were some pilgrims, Tibetans, coming the other way.

“Tashi Deley,” I greeted with all the enthusiasm of first day, first hour. I wanted to ask them about the weather conditions as I presumed that they had completed their kora or parikrama. While most of my ‘Tashi Deleys’ have been responded to with equal and more vigour, at least a smile, this time I was stumped; the group of three walked by me without as much as even a glimpse in my direction. It dawned on me that they were followers of the Bon religion who preferred to keep themselves away from the crowd, generally. And they did the parikrama in the anti-clockwise direction.

For the Bonpo, Kailas belonged to them even before Buddha came. The holy mountain was the pivotal pole on which the universe hinged upon, manifesting itself as a crystal palace. The origins of Bon can be traced back to the time of shamanism and other animistic rites and is believed to have been brought from Persia. Their god, Shenrab, killed the demons that had invaded the mountain and made it his throne, thus investing it with holiness. Bon as a religion thrived on sorcery and black magic. Legends abound of yogis who turned themselves into eagles, soaring high, keeping an eye on the abode of their god. Buddha, the Bon

claim goes, is an incarnation of Shenrab. The Bon cult is divided into ‘white’ and ‘black’. While the ‘white’ offshoot is accepted by the Tibetan Buddhists, the ‘black’ Bon continues to be ostracised for their heavy dependence on animal rites and shamanistic practices. One could say the dislike or the distance was mutual.

Clutching the hood of the windbreaker against an icy gale, I began the arduous part of the climb. Scattered shrubs gave way to ochrous red disarrayed shale. The pilgrims progressed, an epicene mass in the bulky warm gear, pointing out rock formations which eerily took on familiar forms from the religious texts; a particular favourite was the Ganesha – with its flappy ear, eye and tusk carefully etched out. Soon it became a test of imagination and almost every figure from the puranas found a place along the ridge that canyoned us in across the opposite side of the Kailas. They were all lined up paying obeisance to the dancing god.

As I trudged along, prayerful chants wafted up from all around me from the pilgrims. My thoughts naturally drifted towards the mystique of the holy mountain. It remains unknown when the first parikrama or kora took place. But Buddhist shepherds and Hindu sadhus would have been circling the mountain as a religious rite for many centuries. The benedictions they accrued eventually must have become



*Mythology cut on rock - amazingly shaped mountains*

sacred lore leading to the first circumambulation – or so I read somewhere. Quite possible.

A billowy landscape with bone-chilling winds, smattering of icy rain and generally slush for path. But I am in luck as on the first day as all I had to cover was 14 kilometres to the first camp. However, the climb was commendable – 4,900 metres. The camp was called Dera Phuk. The most basic, no frill construction you could imagine, the camp was a dampener in every sense. With the rain not giving up, and roofs in need of urgent repair, by morning I had gotten we through my thermals. There was some confusion as advance reservations were shrugged off by the proprietors as each pilgrim was hustled off to every available nook and cranny. But the morning was to present one of the most unforgettable sights ever.

Of the Mount Kailas itself!

## Chapter 10

### **Parikrama: The experience of a lifetime**

The closest view of the Mount Kailas during the parikrama I got was from Dera Phuk where I was halted for the night. The thrill of journey usually keeps me awake or I am up early morning. Even before the sun, I was on the balcony of the room, staring intently, unblinking at the north face of the Mount Kailas. I couldn't see anything but I could feel a magnificent presence wash over me. As dawn broke unhurriedly, I was looking directly at the shiny black face of the holy mountain which was covered with a fine sheet of powdery snow. Between me and the holy mountain hung several strands of prayer flags fluttering up supplications.

'Of excessive height and great circumference, always enveloped in cloud, covered with snow and ice, most horrible, barren and bitterly cold.' This was how Ippolito Desideri, the first Westerner to see the holy mountain Kailas described it. While his words were of ardent wonder, it was also tinged with a bit of inconvenience. Though Desideri nearly lost his eyesight to an inflammation by excessive snowfall, I wasn't half as unlucky. Yes, save for each gust of wind that froze me over each time and seemingly unrelated diarrhoea and hunger, I was better off. There stood the holy mountain, smouldering in a grey blanket and breathing out large gusts of snowy winds. A far cry from the photographs I was so used to seeing on books and the internet – where it is shown like a cloudy diamond, so white and stately it is both painful and humbling to look at. But Desideri had written what I was seeing now: 'excessive height, great circumference, enveloped in cloud, covered with snow and bitter cold'.

Across the valley from the building where I was standing was the famous Dera Phuk monastery; Dera Phuk meaning ‘cave of the female yak horns’. This monastery, at one time, was the richest one around Kailas and celebrates the parikrama; ‘kora’ for Buddhists. It is believed that the first person to circumambulate the mountain was the sage Gotsangpa who was shown the way by a female yak. He followed her into a cave where she disappeared. It so transpired that the yak was really a dakini or a sky fairy / seductress. The sage stayed put in the cave to meditate and thus the tradition of kora began among the Buddhists. Just like the cave of Milarepa, here too is a gilded statue of the Gotsangpa. Buddhist travellers and pilgrims still light an occasional tsampa lamp here. Rebuilt with better facilities in 1985, beds are available for overnight camping. However, to reach here you have to walk down a slippery valley cross the bridge and then climb a steep ascent to the other side. It also has to be booked well in advance. The views accorded by the guest house where we were staying were same as the monastery: the Kailas peering nonchalantly through its magnificent vanguards, the Vajrapani and Avalokiteshwara.



*Drolma La - the highest point of the parikrama*

The yaks were piled up and were already on their way; I had taken some tentative steps towards the Khangkhyam Glacier which is between the Chenresig and the Chana Dorje, along the steep descent of the north face of the Kailas. What spurred me on was a brief lull in the rain to undertake this eventually aborted attempt. On a clear day, the trek would have taken only three hours; but under the present conditions, it would take at least the better part of the day. A local boy, in a black pony whose hair was tied in multi-coloured ribbons began to gesticulate animatedly while speaking, pointing in the general direction I was heading to. Apparently the previous night's rain had swamped a large part of the descent making it infinitely dangerous. He knew it as he had just come up that way. He also wanted to know if I wanted to hire his pony to go up the Drolma La. And it would cost only one thousand Yuan. No? Tourists have been slipping and falling up there including one German who survived a near-fatal fall just yesterday morning. I was still good to go, thank you.

From the Dera Phuk, I cut across the Lha Chu towards the east, climbed the Valley of Incense; my ascent to the Drolma La had begun. After almost an hour of steady climbing, it started to rain again. In the midst of the laboured breathing and the cold drizzle, I stumbled on a cheerful group of French Buddhists who had done 12 koras over 12 days. The place actually a meadow called Jarokh Dokang, was an auspicious stop for the Buddhist devout. From here, there is a shortcut which leads to the east face of the Mount Kailas, which cuts the distance through the Drolma La by a few hours. However, this bypass is to be used only by those who are onto their 13th kora. And the French were. They were unshaven, looked haggard, unnaturally thin and one was limping. But all of them exuded an air of celestial grace, their faces looked marked out for benevolence, with smiles so saintly you almost checked for the halo.

“You have to be on your 13th kora to be able to take this shortcut,” told Pierre, who was limping with a ballooned blister that was his left toe. “The same dakini, who led the saint Gotsangpa into the cave, ensures that.” Pierre didn't elaborate on how she ensured it. But the power wielded by the dakinis was immeasurable, revered by Buddhists across sects. These sky fairies were also the fierce protectors of the mountains. They had their own secret passages traversed only by the enlightened ones, to whom the dakinis bestow the power to pass through rocks, or in some case, even fly. The French were, understandably, in a hurry to leave: tents were dismantled with clockwork precision, and in less than five minutes, Jarokh Dokang was again the empty meadow. As they bounded across the soft grass, icy sheets of rain pierced their sunburnt faces, I stood there, agape: 13 koras in 13 days!

The energy from the French saw me till the next point – the Shiva Tsal. While it is more popular as the Shiva Tsal, the Buddhists call it the Vajra Yogini burial ground. The plateau above this rocky expanse was once a place for sky burial – the ritual Tibetan burial where bodies of the dead are chopped up, bones pounded and fed to vultures. Numerous cairns cover the area to please the dakinis. Even today unclaimed bodies of dead pilgrims are left here for the birds and other animals. For many pilgrims, this is the heart of their kora: they are expected to undergo a symbolic death here to be reborn as they reach the Drolma La. This symbolic death is achieved by leaving a piece of clothing, shock of hair or some other material possession close to them. More fervent ones are also known to leave behind drops of blood and some even a tooth. These offerings are for Yama, the god of death. Everything that could possibly be in the possession of a pilgrim or a trekker was arrayed there: from rucksacks to shrivelled socks, partially worn-out shoes to imitation North Face jackets. One cairn even had a boxer shorts draped around it like a window display. I wore a facemask on one of the rocks – something which was indeed useful for me in the biting cold. Well, useful it definitely was. Truth? I had spare.

From Shiva Tsal, the weather progressively worsened. The freezing wind was a prelude to a snowfall which made many pilgrims turn back and head to Dera Phuk and on to Darchen. Climbing became difficult – the ground was knee deep in snow. The slush made every step dangerously slippery. I was told that though the Drolma La is not exactly known to be friendly, it generally refrains from unleashing such an assault. It seemed like Shiva, the lord of havoc and regeneration, was not too happy. Maybe I hadn't been cleaned proper at the Manasarovar. There appeared neither a dakinis to help me nor any wolf.

When Gotsangpa, whose wandering led by a dakini was the original kora, was taken along a wrong path, there appeared 21 wolves who showed him the correct route. These 21 wolves were 21 manifestations of Drolma, the goddess of kindness and the protector of the pass. When Gotsangpa reached the pass safely, the 21 wolves merged into each other and formed the Drolma Do under which I was sitting now. Even today Drolma helps good people in their ascent. It was there, under the Drolma Do, I realised that I had never been so scared in my entire life.

From home you have reached  
the Horizon here.  
From here to another  
here you go.

From 'Horizon' by Tenzin Tsundue

The Drolma Do marked the highest point of the parikrama. Despite repeated warnings from the passing Buddhists not to linger at the pass for long – prolonged rain and snow was known to cause avalanches – I waited for the briefest lull in the storm which would enable me to take photographs of the pass; the wind was so strong I felt like somebody was yanking off my camera from me. I was panting more out of relief than shortage of oxygen, I was glad to be alive. I peered over the precipitous ridge on the other side. It was a plummeting trail strewn with shale and pointy flints too dangerous for even yaks. Here, at the bottom of the valley, like a gilgai, was the emerald green tarn of Gaurikund or the Lake of Mercy – the water is equally powerful to cleanse the sin as that of the Manasarovar. But few try it for the dangerous descent and the adverse weather. This is where Buddhist sky fairies as well as Parvati, wife of Lord Shiva, perform their ablutions. The tarn is as powerful as the Manasarovar Lake to cleanse you of your sins. The sight of the Gaurikund helped me not lose heart entirely at the unforgiving conditions. While most pilgrims walk away quickly from the Drolma La or duck their heads more fiercely into their windcheater hoods, not many really bothers to look around, over the other side. Take note, however inconvenienced you are, the effort is worth more than words can price it.



*Just peer over and there is the Gaurikund*

Descending gingerly along the slippery slope, strewn with shale and pointy flints, I decided to take a shortcut over a frozen lake. The worst part was over. I warmed myself over the eternally Tibetan tsampa tea – tea made from yak butter and salt. Nevertheless, a great warmer and energy-giver. A few hours later, I reached the plains where life went on as if nothing had happened. Everything looked the same, the mountains, the animals, the flowers and the flowing water. But what had changed was the way I looked at them, at my fellow travellers. And at myself.

As with anything we embark upon knowing fully well will be one of life's highlights, the parikrama too was over, too soon. Wiping away memories of the arduous ascent and healing physical failings, day three dawned on the camp. The snow-capped mountains around me strangely seemed as if eyeing me with a newfound respect. I had climbed the highest and the most dangerous pass in the region. That too, on foot. Probably the adulation was not entirely imagined. A sudden elation gripped me. So did some niggling questions.

Yes, I had completed the much-awaited parikrama. What did I expect from it? If you are not exactly a devout Hindu or Buddhist, you may not be impressed by promises of liberation. But still, at least something holy? Profoundly moving? Me, on my part, experienced courage when I thought it was all over. I touched the divine in Nature.

Towering on my right, almost touching the holy-blue skies, was an uninterrupted cobalt-coloured canyon. On a jutting purple crag was a gompa from where prayers fluttered out. Holes, quite deep ones, were dug out across the wall face. Exploring them with all the enthusiasm of a spelunker, I was told that these were made by pilgrims hunting for stones – to take home in memory of the parikrama. Somebody offered to dig out one for me.

No, I didn't want to take anything with me. My memory of the parikrama was what I was leaving behind.

## Epilogue

If experiences make life worth living, the parikrama makes it quite a memorable ride. Memories are captured by cameras, documented on film. But the truly enriching ones are carried in that pounding casket called heart. The parikrama is a trip that will last a lifetime. Sightings of the Mount Kailas, even the absolving of sins are mere bonuses. Meeting other pilgrims, being surrounded by a spiritual zeal, ensconced in so much piety, breathing in a landscape that invokes fervour, tests your resolve, strengthens your will...these are what truly makes up for this once-in-a-lifetime experience. The exhaustion is nothing short of an unbearable torment, squeezing out the last of the atoms, which, when beaded together, makes for the drudgery of living. Soon you cease to exist – as what you were. For a fleeting instant the god in you is revealed. And you are reborn.

I began my journey back to Kathmandu in high spirits. The sandpaper landscape had daubed itself a pleasant green. In the distant town, the riddled mud houses appeared cheerier than usual. The desultory winds whooshing over our windscreen, I headed to Dongma. While most of the roadside towns along the way looked like a ghetto of those on the verge of giving up, Dongma was a town with a difference. Doors and lintels showcased traditional carvings and overlapping roof tiles turned otherwise characterless buildings into pieces of art. Friendly on the eye, as these places were – they were used for residence as well as commerce. The town seemed definitely cleaner from those I had seen till now. Finally there seemed to be some living around. Businesses seemed to be thriving and the people were generally a happier lot. Kids went to school and were curious, like everywhere else, and for a change, weren't tugging at you asking for 'money'. And of course, there were the walled-in, officious-looking Chinese quarters. Dongma was prosperous by most Tibetan standards. Arrival of pilgrims is always good news for the locals. Preparations went on full swing, to satiate the enhanced appetites and preferences that were on hold for a while.

The Tibetan plateau is among the most isolated regions of the world. It is bound by the 2500km long Himalayas to the south, the Karakoram to the west and Kunlun and Altyn Tagh to the north. This makes it among the least explored regions in the world. The Tibetan plateau has a global ecological significance. It is the highest ecosystem on the planet and is also one of the last remaining great wildernesses. The source of Asia's great rivers, it has a prominent say in India's monsoons. The Dalai Lama has even called the country the 'world's largest national park'.

The nomads of Tibet live in fine harmony with their environment even though it is harsh. Tibetan Buddhism always stressed the importance of the long-standing and

undeniable connection between the natural world and humans. The religion, widely practised in these regions, also forbids hunting, fishing and taking of animal life. It promotes, besides peaceful coexistence with Nature, Spartan living. Moderation, harmonious coexistence, peace...I found all these in the roadside hamlets on my way back to Kathmandu.

The landscape of Tibet, however harsh and intimidating, is of breathtaking beauty. Four of the 10 highest mountains in the world can be found straddling its southern border with Nepal. The result of a geological upheaval 100 million years ago, the region was once occupied by the Tethys Sea. The country has an average altitude of 4,000 metres with large areas well above 5,000 metres; takes the lid off the claim to 'the roof of the world'.

By lunchtime, I found myself in a building that doubled up as a mechanic shop cum restaurant cum residence cum lots of warmth and happiness. Here, I had spicy hot thukpas and washed it down with lots of local beer. I decided that I had earned it. Pretty ladies passed me and Mortu the readymade food with the ubiquitous tsampa tea. The children kept mostly to themselves and an amused eye on me. Passing tourists were obviously no big deal out here. Everybody went about their regular chores after making sure that we were comfortable.

Way back, I stopped by the Tung La, the highest point on the return journey. Buddhist flags were fastened over a welcome post – prayers for a safe journey. An enterprising lad had set up a souvenir shop – in the biting cold of the pass. The keepsakes on sale were indicative of a land that was once under water – marine stones and fossilised sea creatures. It is when you realise that you are checking out remnants from sea life at an altitude of close to 5,000 metres that the incongruity of it all strikes you.

Then, that is what Tibet is all about. A geological wonder that sprang up from tectonic shifts, still gawking at a world from a lonely, lofty height. Inhabited by a people who would happily herd their yaks over far-flung plateaus than be caught at the crossroads of modernisation. Little wonder, the creeping denim culture had a tough time taking root. In better-off townships the harmonious coexistence, the oneness with Nature, the seamless integration of body and spirit with the land, was missing. Then, prosperity is not always what you can see.

I meandered through a tremulous mist, down a road etched on the side of a mountain. As I neared Kathmandu, the landscape became lushly verdant and waterfalls gushed with a vengeance. On the way I passed by several groups headed towards Lake Manasarovar and Mount Kailas. I envied them – they had just embarked on their trip of a lifetime.

## Chapter 1

### **Gateway city Kathmandu: The Kathmandu durbar square**

Those going to the Kailas and Manasarovar can transit through Chengdu in China or Lhasa in Tibet. The other option is Kathmandu, the Nepal capital, which is the preferred gateway city for its easier access, more touristy attractions and wider options for stay and transport. This bustling city is the commercial centre as well as the tourism hub of Nepal. Explosive urbanisation during the past decade has led to rising pollution levels, milling crowds and traffic congestions. Nevertheless, Kathmandu continues to enthral visitors with its architectural marvels – which include some of the finest display of craftsmanship in metal, stone and wood.

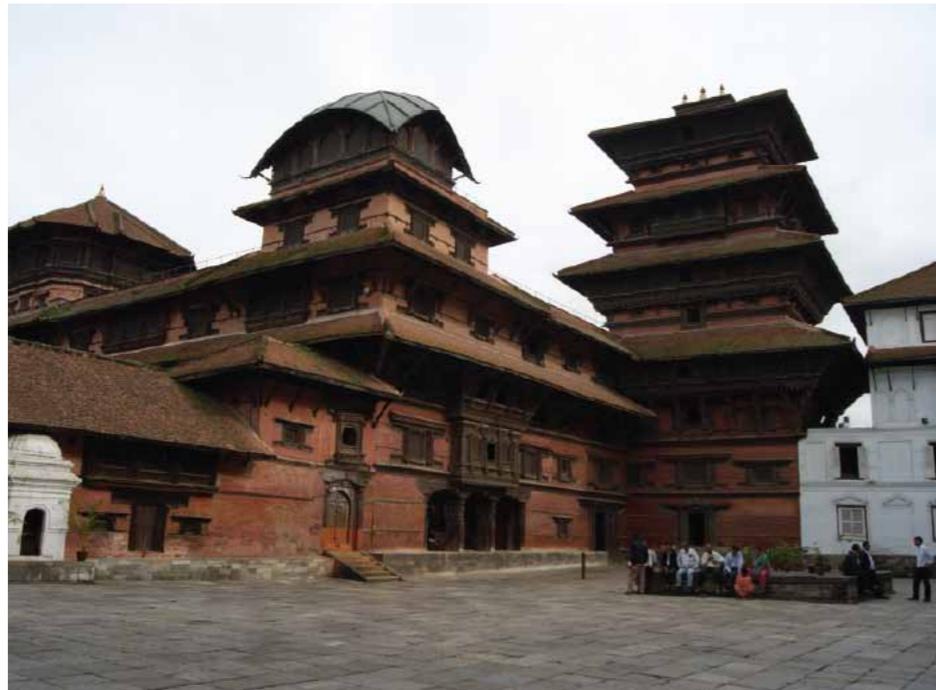
In Kathmandu, heritage lives. It is revered and celebrated. It embodies not just the culture and the traditions of the land, but epitomises a way of life. It is a source of pride and forms the crux of many conversations. The grandeur takes you by surprise, the intricacy holds you in awe and the legends leave you spellbound. Here, religion plays a very important part in everyday life. The gods and goddesses are shown in their myriad avatars and deified in temples which congregate mostly around the durbar squares of Kathmandu, Patan and Bhaktapur. Between these three durbar squares, there are close to 150 temples, stupas and other religious monuments which earned Kathmandu the epithet of 'temple town'.

Nepal, with more than 60 linguistic groups, has always nurtured the reputation of being a country of contrasts, where gods and mortals live together. A rugged terrain protected by the Himalayan peaks also adds to its rich diversity and

traditions. The geographic contrasts are wondrous at the same time appalling – you find tropical jungles, frozen peaks and high altitude deserts – all within this mountain-clad country. Besides predominance of Hinduism in the south and Buddhism in the north, there exists also Shamanism, Tantrism and other animistic rites.

Though heavily influenced by its neighbours, cultural heavyweights, India and China, Nepal has, over the centuries woven its own unique and rich inter-cultural tapestry. The country is known for the harmonious coexistence of different tribes and traditions, culture and architecture making the society dynamic and progressive yet firmly moored in traditions. Over the centuries different ethnicities with different languages, culture and religion settled here. The country is a cauldron of cultures and beliefs, heritage and history.

The original inhabitants, the Newars, are an outcome of this cosmopolitan heritage and are believed to have descended from Indo-Europeans and Burmese and Tibetan-speaking people. Patronised by the rulers of the country over the ages, the Newars, as a tribe, were exceptionally skilful artisans and craftsmen. With a history that goes back over 2000 years, little wonder the traditions are at times fascinating,



*The Kathmandu durbar square at dusk*

at times arcane. The culture is colourful and dynamic. Festivals are an integral part of life. And worship takes on mythical and sometimes mysterious dimensions.

Kathmandu, situated in a valley surrounded by hills, is a picturesque city. It is renowned as the land with the largest congregation of magnificent monuments and temples ever built. The city is a treasure trove of history and architectural marvels holding some of the finest examples of craftsmanship in stone, metal and wood. Religion and art play a very important role in the Kathmandu Valley. Art, most of the time – be it painting or sculpture, dance or any other rituals – is dedicated to the deification of a favourite god. Anywhere you visit you find paintings of gods and goddesses in their different avatars and poses. These gods are usually shown in their peaceful manifestations and at times vengeful, spitting wrath.

The master sculptors from the kingdom were adept in using stone as their favoured medium. Don't be surprised to find stone sculptures strewn all over the Valley. There are still some pieces left from the Licchavi-era which continue to enthrall for their intricacy and attention to detail. You might literally stumble across some as you saunter across the city. These sculptures usually are that of Hindu deities with the local favourite being Vishnu who is the creator and the keeper.

The gods and goddesses are venerated in temples and shrines found mostly in the durbar squares of Kathmandu and its two sister cities, Patan and Bhaktapur. These temples built of bricks with tiered roofs are some of the most outstanding contributions of the Newars to the architecture of the country. Some reports by early historians and travellers show that these were inspired by the ancient Indian temples. While the basic concept remains the same in each of the durbar square, the structures vary only in size and shape. The main structures are of brick and the regal timber struts support the multi-tiered roofs that come slanting down. Most of the temples, especially the more important ones, have three-tiered roofs. The temples as well as the sculptures and stupas, pagodas and palaces of the durbar squares were designated UNESCO World Heritage Sights in 1979. All the durbar squares showcase the skills of the Newar artists and craftsmen.

Of the three durbar squares, the Kathmandu durbar square is the biggest and is right in the heart of the city. All the temples here have a unique style which hasn't changed much over several centuries. The locals refer to the place as Hanuman Dhoka, after the monkey god who is revered as the protector of the Square. There are over 50 monuments and temples here and this is on the top of any tourist's sight-seeing list.

The Kathmandu durbar square also houses the palaces of the Malla and the Shah

dynasties who ruled over the country. This durbar square was the preferred place for constructing the palaces from the period of the Licchavi kings who ruled over Nepal during the third century. However, it was under the rule of King Ratna Malla, under whom Kathmandu became independent, that the durbar square witnessed an architectural revival.

At the north eastern end of the durbar square is the magnificent Taleju Temple, standing 40 metres high and built on a huge stepped platform. Dedicated to the royal deity Taleju Bhawani, the temple is off limit to ordinary Hindus except during the Durga Pooja that falls between September and October. The temple built in 1562 by King Mahendra Malla used to have even human sacrifices till the practise was outlawed in 1780. The Shiva Parvati temple is an attraction not to be missed at the durbar square. This temple, built in the distinctive Newar style, has a single roof and holds the Navadurga, a group of goddesses, inside.

The relief of Kala Bhairav, believed to be Lord Shiva in his destructive avatar, is a masterpiece. Here locals throng with prayers and offerings. This fiery god has eight arms, holds six swords, an axe and a shield. He is shown trampling a corpse which symbolises human ignorance. During the earlier days, criminals used to be brought here to swear their innocence as it was believed that anyone who lies in his presence would bleed to death. Conveniently, the police station today is also situated nearby.

Not all the heritage of Kathmandu is about temples and palaces. Some are even about humans as well. Little girls, four to seven years old, to be exact. Worshipping a pre-pubescent girl as a source of supreme power has been prevalent all over Nepal, especially among the Newar community in the Kathmandu Valley. It was Jayaprakash Malla, the last Malla king, who first built a temple for Kumari or Durga in her virginal state. The Kumari Devi is a young girl who stays in the building called the Kumari Ghar at the southern end of the durbar square. This is like a golden cage as the young girl, chosen through an ancient, mystical process to find whether she is actually the reincarnation of the Hindu goddess, is not allowed to go out except on occasions.

For a serious traveller, Kathmandu durbar square can take up the better part of a day. As I headed out late afternoon I saw this group of fine arts students from a nearby institute honing their skills. They told me that they were observing the magnificent forms and structure and translating them to art.

The Kathmandu durbar square was the best place to do that.

## Chapter 2

### **Gateway city Kathmandu: Patan and Bhaktapur durbar squares**

The ancient city of Patan, known as the city of fine arts, is just 5km southeast from Kathmandu. It is widely believed to have been founded by Emperor Asoka in the third century BC though there are no proofs to support it. The place is also called Lalitpur which means ‘the beautiful city’. The day I came to Patan Square happily coincided with the Krishna Janmashtami celebrations, the birth anniversary of Lord Krishna. I was privy to the peoples’ enthusiasm about the local festivities and beliefs – which are celebrated with the same pomp and splendour the way it was centuries ago. The devotees – all attired in traditional finery – had assembled in the Krishna Mandir, the ancient temple in Patan Square. They also visit other temples which deify Lord Krishna and offer prayers, food, flowers and sweets. They chant hymns all the while, invoking the god’s blessing for a fruitful year ahead.

Patan is the oldest among all the cities in the Kathmandu Valley. It was a well-developed and progressive-minded town right from the earliest days. The city was designed in the shape of the Buddhist Dharma Chakra or the Wheel of Righteousness and it is believed that the great Emperor Asoka came visiting Patan with his daughter Charumati in 250BC and built Buddhist stupas here. There are approximately 1,200 Buddhist monuments spread around the city. The most famous Buddhist landmark here is the Golden Temple, a short walk from the durbar square.

The Patan durbar square today is one of the World Heritage Sites listed by

UNESCO. It is a city of arts and artists and craftsmen with undisputable skills. The majority of the population follow Buddhism, but you also find exquisite Hindu temples in addition to the bronze gateways, marvellous statues, guardian deities and beautiful carvings in metal, wood and stone. The shops lining the palace square are a delight for anyone interested in curios. Handicraft shops with a wide variety of statues and idols leave a lot of options as far as souvenirs go.

The Royal Palace, guarded by Narsingh – the man-lion – on the outside, is a spectacular sight and a singular example of the Newari belief and craft. Inside the courtyard of the palace is a small temple where the locals pray to this day. The gilded statue of King Yoganarendra Malla, the most powerful of the Mallas, prays on top of a pillar shaded by the hood of a cobra. A bird is seated on the cobra and legend says that the king will be remembered and will remain immortal as long the bird does not fly away. The bird definitely didn't look like it was going anywhere.

The Krishna Mandir, on the northern side of the palace courtyard, is one of the most exquisite temples in the whole of Nepal. It was built in 1637 by King Siddhi Narsingh Malla after he had a dream of Lord Krishna and his consort Radha. A statue of Garuda on a pillar faces this embodiment of elegance. The temple is an



*Krishna Janmashtami celebrations in Patan durbar square*

example of Shikhara style architecture made entirely of stone and has scenes from the epics Ramayana and the Mahabharata.

Thanks to the superb craftsmanship of the artisans, intricate woodcarvings, quite deep in detail, are to be seen everywhere. A lot of rebuilding took place from the 16th to the 18th centuries under the Mallas and it has undergone much renovation in recent years. The Bishwanath Mandir is a double roofed pagoda guarded by stone elephants and decorated with fabulous carvings. Though the fierce monsoons of 1990 destroyed the entire building, it was reconstructed to almost the same design and dimensions.

A short walk from the durbar square, in a temple which goes back 800 years, a little boy holds fort as the high priest. The Bahals are Newar Buddhist monasteries, usually spread over two floors, and a short walk away from the durbar square is the most famous of them, the Kwa Bahal. This is also known as the Golden Temple. The entrance to this ancient place of worship is guarded by two lions and legend has it that it was built by a queen in the 12th century. Inside this building are metal works which show exquisite craftsmanship. A hotspot for Buddhists from all over the world, the rich friezes inside depict Buddha in his different avatars. Inside the temple are large prayer wheels as well as larger-than-life statues of Buddha. The protected shrine holds the elaborately decorated Buddha looking at believers through bright, unblinking eyes. The main priest of this temple, the little boy with the shaved-smooth pate, is five years away from his teens. When I saw him, he was poking playfully at the shell of a tortoise, eyes twinkling whenever it stuck its head out. The high chair of the priest had deprived the little one of those infectious screechy giggles we are so used to when little ones are having fun.

A melee of colour, a profusion of culture and an exuberant heritage, the Patan durbar square is where architecture is at its evocative best. Where gods and kings mingle with the mortals. This is where history comes alive. In its truest spirit.

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Were there nothing else in Nepal save the Bhaktapur durbar square, it would still be aptly worth making a journey half way round the globe to see.

E.A. Powell in 'The Last Home of Mystery'

Bhaktapur, between the 14th and the 16th centuries, was the capital of Nepal. Though today it has lost the privilege to Kathmandu, it still retains its culture and traditions, some say, even better than Kathmandu or Patan. One reason is that it is 15kms away from the madding crowd, the choking traffic and the general mayhem

of the capital city. During the ancient days, the city was an important business centre as it was located in the bustling trade route to Tibet. The inhabitants were prosperous and self-reliant. They were blessed with a fertile soil and the farmers could make enough produce to feed the entire town. The craftsmen were a respected lot and they were entrusted with the task of making the temples really fit for the gods. And by the looks of it, they did extraordinary justice to their responsibilities.

'Bhaktapur' meaning 'city of devotees' proudly bears the title of the 'cultural capital of Nepal' and lives up to it. Listed as a World Heritage by UNESCO for its exquisite temples, exotic wood carvings and other rococo works in stone and metal, Bhaktapur is in a class of its own. Compared to the other durbar squares, the Bhaktapur durbar square is quite spacious. Ironically, this is because of an earthquake that happened in 1934 which destroyed many of the temples and monuments that stood here once.

This is a living heritage in every sense. There is even a school inside the premise, the entrance to which is the famous lion gate. Right next to the lions that stand as a



*The Bhaktapur durbar square is a living heritage*

possible deterrent from bunking classes, is the statue of Ugrachandi, one of the masterpieces in stone. Ugrachandi is the fearful manifestation of the consort of Lord Shiva. Bhairab, the fierce avatar of Lord Shiva, associated with annihilation, is revered all over Nepal by both Hindus as well as Buddhists. Bhairab is invoked to destroy and annihilate enemies. The images of Bhairab which you find in the durbar square hence are quite ferocious and intimidating.

The Dattatreya Square named after the triad deities, Brahma the creator, Vishnu the preserver and Maheshwara the emancipator are a delight for those interested in wood carvings. The Square also features some of the finest examples of metal craftsmanship you would ever see. The 55 Windows Palace, built in the 18th century, is made of brick and has an upper floor entirely of wooden windows – a total 55 of them. Hence, the name. However, counting them would not be unlike counting stars; I tried several times over. The earthquake of 1934 partially destroyed the palace. Fortunately some of the more exotic carvings were mercifully spared from the fury. The Taleju Bhawani was the preferred deity for the kings here as well. Getting inside the Taleju temple complex is not usually encouraged but you can persuade the armed guards to look the other way – you can either be real nice or real generous. Once inside the complex, you get a foretaste of some imperial preferences. The Mallas, it seems, were as fond of luxuries as they were of their gods. Their swimming pool had an open terrace for sunbathing. The golden spout pumped in the water and the entire outlay was like a sprawled snake. Even inside the pool, the kings had set up miniature temples. Well, it definitely looked like they had long-lasting bathing sessions.

At the south eastern corner of the royal palace is the Siddhi Lakshmi Temple. This is known as the 'Lohan Dega' or the stone temple. The steps leading up to the temple is flanked by the male and female species of animals and two nobles at the bottom, each of them are shown dragging a naked child and a dog. Just five minutes from the durbar square is the Taumadhi Square where the legendary Nyatapola temple towers elegantly. 'Nyata' is Nepali means 'five stepped'. The Nyatapola, rising to a regal 30 metres, is Nepal's tallest temple. Balanced on five receding square plinths, there are five balconies over which are five roofs each supported by magnificently carved wooden columns. At the bottom of the steep stairway that leads up to the temple are two wrestlers from the Malla times who were famed for their skill and strength. Further upwards are lions and griffins and statues of goddesses Singhini and Baghini.

The temple was built by King Bhupatindra Malla for his favourite deity the Siddhi Lakshmi. There are 108 wooden beams that support the roof from below, each



*Friendly potter wheels of Bhaktapur*

depicting the goddess in her different forms. However, one strange fact is that despite the size and the allure of the temple, no one has really seen the goddess. The temple offers great views of the durbar square as well as the surrounding areas. The brick red of the square offers a fabulous contrast against the verdant green of the mountain of the valley. Set at right angles to the Nyatapola is the Bhairavnath Mandir. The three-tiered roof which stands against a clear afternoon sun shows off a massive grandeur. The temple, dedicated to the city's patron god Bhairav is believed to have extraordinary powers which make it a favourite among the locals.

Southwest from the Nyatapola square is the famous pottery market. If you do enjoy the high that you get by moulding a mound of clay into beautiful objects, or just enjoy seeing the finished goodies, then this is a place you cannot afford to miss. Here, the amiable and ever helpful craftsmen take novices through the basic motions.

Alleys where culture oozes out from every corner. Heritage buildings standing tall, bearing testimonial to an era that earned it the label of the 'culture capital'. Exotic works by immensely gifted and talented craftsmen. A charming people. If you have to make a trip half way around the globe to see Bhaktapur, I second Mr Powell that you make it.

## Chapter 3

### Temple town Kathmandu

#### Pashupatinath

When it is an act of faith that made the whole country, it is no surprise that there are more religious monuments than houses. At least there used to be. Kathmandu, the capital and the largest city in the country, is believed to have been founded around 300 AD. However, real development in Kathmandu and surrounding Patan and Bhaktapur began only from the 14th century onwards when the Mallas came to power. Despite the ravages of modern progress – milling crowds, unscrupulous development, traffic and pollution – Kathmandu occupies the pride of place as the thumping heart of the country.

Between the durbar squares of Kathmandu, Patan and Bhaktapur, there are no fewer than 150 major temples of varying intricacy and magnificence. All the durbar squares are designated UNESCO World Heritage Sights. The buildings and monuments are a tribute to the magnificent skill and artistry of the Newar craftsmen and maintain more or less certain elements of uniformity throughout. Almost every second building in the valley used to be a temple, stupa or some other place of worship. The Valley has the finest congregation of temples, sculptures and other monuments in the world which continue to hold visitors and natives alike in awe. This has earned Kathmandu the epithet, 'temple town'.

The Pashupatinath temple, Swayambhunath and the Boudhanath are not just three of the most important pilgrimage destinations of Nepal, but they are also among the most visited holy sites by Hindus and Buddhists from all over the world. The

Pashupatinath temple, dedicated to Lord Shiva, is a very happening pilgrimage as well as tourist destination. It is five kilometres east of central Kathmandu. The approach to the Pashupatinath temple, as with any other buzzing pilgrim destination, is lined with vendors selling flowers, holy necklaces, engravings of gods and other pooja requirements. Bargaining is on in right earnest by pilgrims who also look for items to be carried back as memorabilia. As I entered the temple premises, I bumped into Hanuman, the monkey god himself, who was walking about welcoming the devout showering benedictions. For a price, this camera-friendly Hanuman did it all – from posing for the camera to doling out divine gestures. The Pashupatinath Temple, the oldest Hindu temple in Kathmandu, is a UNESCO World Heritage Site (by now I started wondering whether ‘World Heritage Countries’ would make life easier for UNESCO). It is five kilometres east of central Kathmandu. A permanent fixture of any important pilgrimage destination is the sadhus and sadhvis. The difference was that here they were clean, well-fed and taken care of. They beckon anybody with a camera towards them and make you sit with them, yakking all the while, in a tone that belies firm supplications for money. It is when they start tugging at your trouser pockets impatiently you realise the demands sitting next to you.



*The camera-friendly Hanuman doles out blessings - for a fee*

Lord Shiva, revered as the most benevolent god in the valley is depicted here with four arms and three eyes. One of his hands holds the trident which symbolises his three-fold manifestations – that of the creator, keeper and destroyer. Many childless parents also pray to the Nandi or bull, his vehicle, believed to be a symbol of fertility. Shiva is at the same time, the creator and the destroyer. He is Mahadeva, the Great god, Bhairav, The Cruel or Pashupati, the Lord of the Beasts. A lingam or the phallus is worshipped in this temple, also called ‘The Temple of Living Beings’ symbolising Lord Shiva. Entrance to non-Hindus and camera-totting tourists are a strict no-no. “Even the king cannot enter if he is carrying a camera,” told a temple authority. No phallic shots, please.

The Pashupatinath Temple is by the banks of the Baghmati River which is lined with cremation ghats and pilgrim guesthouses or dharamsalas. Any time of the day, there will be at least one cremation in progress. This cremation ghat is called the Bhasmeshwar Ghat and is the most-used cremation site in Kathmandu Valley. Till the early 20th century, sati – the practice of married women following their husbands in death through the funeral pyre – used to be performed here. There is also a separate cremation ghat for the royal family called the Arya Ghat. Since the Baghmati River flows out into the River Ganges, the ashes are scattered into the river after the cremation is complete.

Despite the state of the water, couples still bathe in the ash-muddy muck together in the belief that they will be together again in their next life as well. Believers also take ritual purification bathes in these waters. Tough to digest, but true (not them wanting to be together again, but bathing in those waters). Having seen enough to lose sleep at least for one night, I decided to cross the bridge across the river Baghmati and head into the Pashupatinath Temple.

No sooner did I cross over the narrow bridge, did I come across another one of the iconic sights of any great temple – the severely dreadlocked sadhus, with foreheads decked up with huge chunkloads of ash. While some are definitely the real ones, many also have been discovered to be fakes trying to make a fast buck giving tourists their photo-ops. Though a place of death, the whole place was thriving with life. There was a bustling economy here. Tourist guides who enticed you with stories of Pashupatinath and necklace sellers who mended their beads in their spare time. And there was also the occasional drunk for whom India meant Salman Khan and nobody else.

Having had my fill of the smoke from the pyre and sadhus training their dreadlocked glances at me, I decided to get back to the main square where things

would be more, well, lively. Though it was a stuffy afternoon with an unfiltered sun blazing down on the tiled courtyards, there seemed to be no dearth of devotees. On the other side of Pashupatinath is the Guhyeshwari temple which is dedicated to Lord Shiva's consort, his strength or shakti, represented in the manifestation of Goddess Kali. There are thousands of gods and goddesses in Hindu mythology and many of them are represented in wrathful avatars. Maha Devi, is one such fearsome goddess who has numerous incarnations. She is the one who can never be satiated or fulfilled. Generally portrayed as Kali or Durga, she is shown giving birth, perennially. The Nepalis perform sacrifices to appease the goddess – a popular practice in the country.

Built along the Nepalese pagoda style of architecture, beautifully carved wooden rafters or tunda, multiple level roofs with copper and gold covering, the Pashupatinath Temple is where history and mythology blur. The often conflicting and multiple versions of the origins of the famed temple seemed to have only added to its mystic allure. While on one side there were those seeking blessings for the journey of life. On the other side were those who had embarked on a different journey altogether. The Pashupatinath Temple embodied the contrasts Nepal was famed for, with a profound grandeur.

## Swayambhunath

The Swayambhunath marks a spot of great mythological relevance in Nepal. As I neared this gigantic stupa, there prevailed an air of a miniature village fair. People of all ages and intentions – tourists and pilgrims – were flipping low denomination coins into a twin-mouthed metal pot placed at the foot of a gilded statue of the Buddha. The Gautama stood there, watching haplessly – almost as if it was his idea. While most of the coins found its way into the water below, we were told that blessings are accrued to the flipper of each coin that clangs its way into the pot. In a list of assured returns, this should figure among top five. Numerous prayer flags fluttered above the pond as if sending out prayers for those who missed the jackpot, like us. It also prodded me towards the 2500-year old site, a little climb from the fair ground.

Nepalese legends believe that the country was formed when Manjushree, an avatar of Buddha, came to a holy lake to worship the blue lotus, which contained the eternal flame of the Primordial Buddha. To make passage for the devotees easier, he drained the lake which revealed a fertile valley which eventually became Nepal. The site of the Swayambhunath stupa marks the place where the original island



*Swayambhunath - where the Kathmandu valley was founded*

stood. The eyes of the Buddha that gazes in all directions denote that this was an important centre of Buddhist learning for several centuries.

The gigantic, white hemispherical mound of the Swayambhunath represents creation and is designed as per certain rigid parameters. The 13 gilded rings on the spire represent the 13 degrees of knowledge required for enlightenment and finally to nirvana, represented by the umbrella at the top of the stupa. The Swayambhunath also offers views of the Kathmandu Valley like you have never seen. A verdant valley, surrounded by misty mountains, the capital of a nation with a rich heritage poised for a promising tomorrow.

## Boudhanath and Buddhaneelakantha

Just like the white dome at Swayambhunath, but much bigger, is the one at Boudhanath. This is the biggest stupa in the whole of Nepal. Boudhanath is possibly the largest community of Tibetans outside Tibet – most of them are those who fled from their homeland during the Chinese Cultural Revolution of the 1960s. The big white dome has multi-hued all-seeing eyes painted around it. These are representative of the eyes of the Primordial Buddha. At the base of this huge dome

are 108 Buddhist deities and numerous prayer wheels. This 'Little Tibet' comes alive during the Losar New Year Festival between February and March. The inhabitants come out in their fineries carrying a portrait of the Dalai Lama accompanied by music and dancing. This is a memorable experience not to be missed if you are visiting during the time.

Buddhaneelakantha, nine kilometres from Kathmandu, is one of the earliest settlements during the Licchavi period. This is a little village that sits comfortably at the foot of the Shivpuri Hill – a 2732-metre summit which is a hot spot for trekkers, bird watchers and picnickers. Here, the monolithic black statue of the reclining Vishnu rests on a bed of snakes. Vishnu is part of the Hindu trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva and is most revered by many Hindus as he is the creator and the keeper of the world. He has a thousand avatars among the more popular ones are that as the frolicking god Krishna and as Narayana – as he is depicted here, floating in the primeval ocean, resting on a bed of snakes.

Some 1500 years ago, during the reign of the Licchavi kings, a massive five-metre rock was dragged and placed in this pond at the foot of the Shivpuri Hills which was sculpted by master craftsmen into a literal translation of Vishnu as Narayana. Devotees crane their necks through the gates surrounding the pond for a better view and shower petals and flowers over the sleeping Vishnu as a mark of devotion. Modern folklore says that no Nepali King ever visits the Buddhaneelakantha as it supposedly leads to a premature death.

A drastic belief perhaps, still one of those arcane, archaic ones which keeps alive the enigma that is Nepal.