STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN

CIRCUMAMBULATION OF MT. KAILASH IN TIBET

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A born tramp in love with wild places, Akhil Bakshi has been vagabonding around the world since his early years, finding telling beauty everywhere. He has led four major international motoring expeditions that have furthered the cause of peace and development. Vice President of the Indian Mountaineering Foundation, Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, International Fellow of Explorer's Club, he is on the board of several adventure and sports organization's in India. He has founded two non-government organizations that work with rural youth and with small farmers and landless labour.

Akhil Bakshi has produced seventy television documentaries. Besides several e-books, his published books include: *The Road to Freedom; Silk Road on Wheels; Between Heaven and Hell; Back to Gondwanaland; I'll Follow the Sun and Askar Akaev- A Political Journey*

Photo: Author in Diraphuk with the northwest face of Mt. Kailash in background.

STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN

In early 1964, months away from my ninth birthday, while lying in bed recovering from typhoid, I read the Indian prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru's *Autobiography*. In his book, the beloved leader had mentioned that the greatest regret in his life was not having been able to visit Lake Mansarovar in Tibet. A few weeks later, on 27th May 1964, Nehru passed away. I took it upon myself to undertake the mother of all pilgrimages, the Kailash-Mansarovar *yatra*, and fulfil my hero's unrealised wish. Ever since, this holy mountain and lake, the cosmic centre of the universe, the navel of the earth, had been on my radar. Forty-six years later, the call came from Shiva and Parvati, the resident deities of this forbidding and desolate wasteland, and in autumn of 2010 I was in Kathmandu joining a group of 15 other pilgrims. Just before I left for the journey, I was told by an acquaintance that when Motilal, Jawaharlal's father, was not having a child, he was taken by a Congressman from Bihar to Mansarovar where he was introduced to an ill-tempered sadhu who received them in a hostile manner but gave Motilal the required boon. After Jawaharlal's birth, Motilal was advised to visit Mansarovar again to express gratitude to the sadhu. He did make the journey - but the sadhu had passed away.

While the rest of the pilgrims, during the two days we were in the contaminated Nepalese capital, went sight-seeing, attended briefings and bonded, I lent my ears to the country's politicians caught in a parliamentary deadlock over election of a new prime minister. Maoists, after ten years of effective insurgency that had brought the rich and powerful to their knees, had participated in the 2008 elections winning 40% of the seats in parliament – twice as many as their nearest rival. They led a short-lived coalition government that got cosy with China, unnerving India. When the coalition collapsed, an anti-Maoist block took power but was been unable to impose its authority. The people on the street I spoke to seemed happy that the government was paralysed: there was less corruption and interference in their lives. Meanwhile, the Chinese dragon had spread its tentacles in Nepal by sponsoring infrastructure projects, establishing Chinese language schools throughout the country, funding the Nepalese-led Gorkhaland movement in the Indian border state of West Bengal, donating liberally to local radio stations spreading anti-India propaganda – and bribing members of

parliament to elect a Maoist prime minister. Playing India against China, the political parties hoped to rake it in. A senior minister observed that while China had opened their coffers to the anti-India Maoists to contest the elections, India had only offered crumbs to the pro-India parties. Unless India stuffed the pockets of its supporters, its influence would wane. I suspect he told just the opposite to the Chinese.

"Do the people here not fear China? They are known to move in slowly, dominate and take control. They could do a Tibet here. Destroy temples as they did the gompas," I said to the minister. "Millions of Nepalese work in India. Hinduism binds us together. Pashupatinath, one of the most significant temples of Shiva, is here. There are many more. Surely, the Nepalese will not accept the Chinese."

"Situation has changed," said the minister, reflectively. "We were the only Hindu country in the world. In 2006, our parliament abolished Hinduism as the official religion and declared Nepal a secular state. During King Gyanendra's rule, mosques and madrasas sprouted along India's borders with Nepal. This was a conspiracy between the king, China and their ally Pakistan to destabilise India. These mosques and madrasas were nothing but stocking points for arms, fake currency and drugs meant for Indian underground movements. You are going to Kailash. Please pray to Shiva that both are countries will remain fast friends. If you can, bring some holy water from Mansarovar and I will arrange special prayers at the Pashupatinath temple and you can pour the water over the sacred *linga*." While I retired to my hotel room for the night, the minister joined his colleagues and the ambassadors of India and China to watch an eye-warming fashion show being held at the same hotel.

Before sunrise, amidst a rousing chorus of "Har har Mahadev!" – Victory to the Supreme Lord Shiva – our ancient, scarred and tarnished bus, stuffed inside and above with baggage, two weeks rations, gas cylinders, 16 pilgrims, a cook, three Sherpas, a Sherpa sardar and two coordinators of the tour operator, chugged out of the hotel gate in a drizzle, blowing clouds of diesel fumes. The monsoons were late this year and even by mid-September they were showing no sign of withdrawal. Since two weeks I had been keeping a tab on the satellite map of the region and the images of thick overcast sky kept me tense and doubtful of accomplishing the journey. If we could get across the Lalung La Pass in Tibet, we would be in Trans-Himalaya

and safe in the rain-shadow area. It poured heavily the night before our departure and by morning the strong winds were blowing the clouds out of our way.

The Rain Gods have always favoured me. However, the road through the valley of the Bhote River had been given a sound hammering by the seasonal rains and was in a dreadful condition. Massive landslides and huge boulders had hurtled down the mountainsides and blocked our path. Whenever a slushy landslide had to be crossed, I jumped off the bus on the pretext of taking a picture and walked across it, having more faith in my trembling legs than the balding tyres of the bus that rocked, groaned, skid and slid across the mire. At one place, on my side of the window, the outside edge of the road had been washed away and one of the two rear tyres of the bus was suspended in the air, thousands of feet above the roaring rapids. Before I could say my last prayer, we were on safe ground. I never fail to admire the courage of the fate-tempting, foolhardy bus and truck drivers of the Himalaya.

With wrecked nerves we got to the border town of Kodari, a long array of trucks choking its entrance. Sixteen years ago, during the Central Asia Expedition, when I had crossed into Kodari from Tibet, it was only a small post with a handful of houses. Growing trade with China had turned it into a bustling, filthy town. While we lunched and exchanged our Indian rupees for Chinese yuans, frail and wrinkled women porters unloaded our baggage from the bus and together we walked across the Friendship Bridge, over the wild and torrential Matsang Tsangpo River, into Tibet. A young, sullen Chinese soldier, motionless as a statue, stood at attention, gun in hand. I felt like tickling him but his bayonet was too sharp.

While we waited outside the busy Immigration Hall another group of 32 pilgrims from Chidambaram District of Tamil Nadu in southern India, and on way to Kailash, joined us. Porters carrying sacks with protruding sheep hooves brushed past us. Jyoti, a chubby vegetarian, wanted to faint but her pot-bellied, panting husband talked her out of it and denied us the amusement. Mash, a Texas-educated, notoriously worldly Sindhi spinster, in her mid-30s, working in Bangalore as a psychological counsellor, a clairvoyant, a regression analyst and a spiritual tour leader, affected by the swarming legions of poor, scrawny porters in patched shoes and tattered rags, asked me what I thought of “all this poverty”.

“Fate,” I said, rubbing my chin.

“What do you mean?” she asked, stirred.

“Once Parvati posed the same question to Shiva. She asked him how he could call himself the Supreme God when there was so much deprivation, disease, hunger all around. Shiva replied that he could do nothing about it as the poor were fated to be poor.” The story continued like this:

“Hogwash!” said Parvati.

“Let me prove it to you,” said Shiva.

A beggar was walking down a trail. Shiva cut a watermelon, stuffed it with gold coins, sealed it again and placed it on the beggar’s path. The poor man excitedly picked up the fruit, took it to a grocer and exchanged it for 14 pieces of *roti*, bread.

“Did you see that?” Shiva asked Parvati. “Had he cut the watermelon to eat it, he would have found the gold coins and become rich. But it was not his fate.”

“Bull!” said Parvati. “How did he know there were gold coins in the fruit? Fourteen pieces of bread are more vital to a poor man than a fruit.”

“Let me prove it to you again,” retorts Shiva.

This time he took a melon, cut it in half, stuffed it again with gold coins, and placed the exposed melon with the booty on the beggar’s path. As the tramp approached the melon, suddenly a thought dawned on him that he wanted to experience how a blind man felt while walking. He closed his eyes – and walked past the treasure that could have ended his miseries.

“Now do you believe me?” Shiva asked Parvati. “Here is a man with perfectly good eyesight, gold coins lying bare steps away from him – yet he shuts his eyes, acts like a blind man and saunters past a fortune! He is fated to remain poor.”

Before Mash could react to my philosophical monologue, the Tibetan agent herded us into before the Chinese immigration officials, young boys and girls in army uniforms, undoubtedly under punishment posting. However, they were surprisingly welcoming – and they even smiled at us - quite unlike the scowling officials I had encountered on my two previous visits to Tibet.

Zangmu, the Chinese border town had also grown in spread and

population and was full of architecturally graceless buildings. In blinding rain our convoy of five Land Cruisers drove to Nyalam, 35km from the border, through the gorge of the Matsang Tsangpo. Waterfalls pounded us from above and the frightening roar of the angry river, hidden under the clouds, kept us on the edge. Nepalese traders called Nyalam the "Gate to Hell" because the track from the town to the border was extremely treacherous and terrifying. Sixteen years ago I had driven on this route on a wild, thunderous night. Rain had poured down in amazing volumes. Ear-splitting lightning crackled as diligently as the deafening thunder. Loose rocks, pushed by the furious winds, assaulted my roof and bonnet. I had reached the relative safety of Zangmu with shivering bones – but delighted at having come out of the storm in one piece. The Chinese have now built, over the earlier dirt track, a spanking new road, tarred and secured. From the warm comfort of our vehicles, we enjoyed the magnificent scenery with hundreds of waterfalls pouring out from the wooded mountains and tossed away into space by violent gusts of wind.

We were to spend three nights at the cold and wind-blasted township of Nyalam (12,300 feet) for acclimatisation. On the very first evening I advised my fellow members to drink plenty liquids. In deference to my advice some of the members took liberal doses of water mixed with whisky and spent the rest of the night in an inebriated state, over-expressing their admiration for Shiva. "*Bum bum Bhole*," they would shout for 'cheers' – paying homage to Bholenath, the pot-smoking Shiva, the god with childlike simplicity. A simple man, Bholenath's only ostentation was a taste for marijuana and being faithful to Parvati, his wife. He frowned on all worldly pleasures – other than ganja and marital sex – and commanded respect of the world for his austerities.

"Will someone please explain to me the reason why a pot-smoking character like Shiva inspires such extraordinary devotion? If we worship him to celebrate wackiness or to create a work environment that spawns fun and happiness, then, I say, cheers to that!" said the productivity-obsessed, US-educated Mash.

Shivpurana, the sweeping saga of Shiva's tumultuous life, is a mind-boggling narrative spun out of control. It is meant to educate. I read it once and found it a wholesomely entertaining fantasy straight from the realm of the improbable. Those with a more open mind than mine and given to

mythomania consider the book a holy gospel. Indeed, it has all the powers - and faults – of the Bible. No one reads it these days but it was a huge draw when choice was limited. However, there wasn't enough reasoning in it to answer Mash. Defeated, we retired for the night, four to a room. I slept fitfully – due to the unending snoring competition between my roommates.

To exercise our lungs, seven of us left the next morning to climb a mountain overlooking our humble inn. We scrambled up slowly and breathlessly in short, measured steps, stopping every minute to regain our energies. It was hard work but all of us reached the top, a climb of perhaps 800ft, in just under an hour. To fittingly celebrate this distinguished event, Nageshwar, a business executive from Bangalore, did a head stand. From the peak I could see Nyalam being invaded by the urban and commercial creep. While Mr. Singh, a retired government official from Dehradun, and Nageshwar's two uncles, both rural doctors, descended, the rest of us tramped across a long ridge and made a steep descent from the other side of the mountain.

Back at the inn, we sat out in the sun boasting to others about our feat. Before our inflated achievements could be digested by the listeners, we saw, below the middle of the mountainside we had patiently plodded up, a young Tibetan girl in a red top and denim jeans running at top speed, galloping, bounding over rocks, flying up the steep slope like a lightning cable car. She stopped once to pull down her jeans and quickly water a shrub, and then continued her ceaseless sprint. In an instant, she was at the top. In wondering silence, the four of us retired to our rooms to reflect and introspect.

At night, a procession of unwashed, blistered, weary, gallant pilgrims limped in holding their crushed backs. They had completed the circumambulation of Mt. Kailash and were at the end of their journey. In spite of the hardships, the dismal boarding and lodging, the complete lack of clean toilet facilities – and being fleeced at every step by their unscrupulous travel agent - they could not keep their emotions within their breasts. In tired voices they told us of the heaven they had visited, the god they had seen, and of stars that came down to kiss the waters of Mansarovar Lake, rebounding into space.

The rain-washed road to Tibet border

Looking for lice - the favourite Asian pastime

Porters waiting for loads in Kodari, Nepal-Tibet border

Akhil Bakshi above Nyalam

Cutting short our stay by a day in Nyalam, our convoy, with the addition of a support truck carrying the cook and rations, left for Saga, a military garrison on the Tsangpo River, 336km away.

Just 5-6km away from Nyalam was Milaphuk, the power cave in which the 5th-century sorcerer-sage Milarepa, the only person to have attained Buddhahood in one lifetime, had meditated for 14 years. Due to my great faith in Milarepa (my adventures with the great sage are narrated in my book *Silk Road on Wheels*), I had been requesting the organisers ever since I had booked the tour to take me to Mila's power cave on the very first day. At Nyalam I was told that due to the permit restrictions I could not move on to Milaphuk. Later in the day, I received a proposal that for an exorbitant amount of yuans a taxi driver would take me there, bribing the Chinese security en route. I declined – but extracted a promise that on the way to Saga we would stop at the cave to seek Mila's blessings for our onward journey. The promise was not kept. Our convoy drove past Milaphuk. About 2-3km later, one of the Land Cruisers developed a snag and it took half-an-hour to fix it. The Tibetan guide, who had organised all the permits and logistics within Tibet, walked over to me like a man punched in his nose and said that we would stop at Mila's cave on our return. However, Mila was not done with us yet.

We had stopped near the village of Zongtacun from where a secret route, till it was discovered by the Chinese some years ago, allowed Tibetans to escape to India. Now the Chinese had spoilt the party by building a road to the top of the pass and setting up check posts. We drove by Tibetan settlements with houses of unchanging sameness of design stretched against a flawless blue sky, their rural isolation spoiled by the road roaring past their front doors. Passing vacant land with bald hills, their contours lined with splintered and fractured black rocks that resembled mammoth prehistoric reptiles, we began our ascent to the Lalung La Pass (16,672ft).

The road snaked its way across heaving waves of brown hills and mountains, each bend taking it closer to the gigantic snow peaks. As soon as the convoy stopped at the top of the pass, the pilgrims jumped out at triple speed, wobbled and strutted behind curtains of prayer flags to empty their bursting bladders before absorbing the grand scenery. Facing Nepal, we looked at the stupendous Rolwaling Himal and its principal peaks of Gaurishankar (23,406ft) and to its right, its sister peak, Melungtse (23,560ft).

Further south, to our left, were the mountains of the Khumbu Himal – of which Cho Oyu (26,906ft) was visible but Mt Everest and Lhotse, that were further away, could not be seen with the naked eye. To our right were the Jugal Himal, an extension of the Langtang Himal. This entire region was a suture zone, where the Indian and Eurasian tectonic plates had collided, thrusting up the sky-scraping mountains. It was awesome, mind-boggling scenery and we could have dallied here the rest of the day if there was a windproof restaurant and a bar.

Enroute Lalung La

Enroute Lalung La

View of Rolwaling Himal from Lalung La

View of Rolwaling Himal from Lalung La

View of Rolwaling Himal from Lalung La

Rolling down the pass I commented that several mountains in the Himalaya were associated with Shiva and his family. Gaurishankar is another name of Shiva. Nanda Devi (25,643ft), the second highest mountain in India, is named after Parvati, Shiva's wife. Mt. Kamet (25,446ft) is also known as Ganesh peak – after the elephant-headed son of Shiva and Parvati.

"The name 'Parvati' itself comes from the word 'Parvat', meaning mountain," said Nageshwar, my jeep-mate - whose name is also a name of Shiva, the Lord of the Snakes. "She was the daughter of Himavat, the Lord of the Himalaya."

"Why only in the Himalaya?" questioned Shankar, the other jeep-mate, a manufacturer of radiators from the southern Indian city of Hyderabad – whose name is also another popular name of Shiva. "There are so many mountains in the south that are associated with Shiva. Arunachala Parvat in Tirruvanamalai is supposed to be the physical embodiment of Shiva. It was here that the question of who was the greater god – Brahma, Vishnu or Shiva – was settled. Chamundi Hills, near Mysore, Nageshwar here will know, are named after Parvati who, in her Chamundi incarnation, slayed the demon king Mahisa there."

"The Agastyamalai Parvat, bordering Tamil Nadu and Kerala, is where the sage Agastya, as ordered by Shiva, meditated to balance the world when gods, rishis and the people migrated en masse to Mt. Kailash to attend the wedding of Shiva and Parvati, disturbing the earth's balance," continued Shankar.

Shankar was a storehouse of Puranic knowledge. "The Palni Hills in Tamil Nadu is where Lord Murugu, or Kartikeya, took residence. You must have heard the story associated with these hills," he said, in his aching Hindi. According to the ancient Puranic legend, Narad, a trouble-making sage, offered a rare mango to Shiva and Parvati who were at the time residing at Mt. Kailash. The loving parents wanted their sons, Kartikeya and Ganesh, to eat it – but were unable to decide which one of them to give it to. (I have never been able to comprehend why they could not share it between the two). Anyway, Shiva told his kids that the first one to go around the universe would get the fruit. Kartikeya got off the mark, mounted his vehicle, the peacock, and flew away at the speed of light. The elephant-headed Ganesh, always calm and sedate, revolved the matter in his head, and walked around his parents three times saying that for him they represented the universe. The

parents, their egos boosted, were delighted and gave the fruit to Ganesh. On his return from the lengthy flight, the outwitted Kartikeya felt cheated and was furious. Renouncing his family and all his possessions, Kartikeya sought solace in the solitude of the Palni Hills. Shiva and Parvati followed him there and requested him to return to Kailash but the son refused, making Palni Hills his base and endearing himself to the people in southern India.

So narrating stories to each other, we got off G318 National Road, near the village of Xiamude, where it loops towards Tingri and beyond to Shigatse and Lhasa, and drove off-track on dusty roads and through shallow streams arising from the glacial melts of the Jugal Himalaya Range on our left. Shishapangma (26,289ft), the principal peak of this spectacular range, the fourteenth highest mountain in the world, the lowest of the 8000m peaks, was hidden behind clouds. Shishapangma, in Sanskrit, is known as Gosainthan – the abode of god. The lower mountains of the range were clearly visible and presented dramatic views.

As we approached the blue expanse of the Lake Pelku Tso (15,164ft) on our right, I saw, through the viewfinder of my camera, etched perfectly in snow on a mountainside a colossal symbol of 'OM' – the sacred Hindu syllable that represents the incomprehensible Brahman, "the impersonal Absolute of Hinduism – omnipotent, omnipresent, and the source of all manifest existence". From his birth to death a Hindu lives with this symbol. As soon as a child is born and cleansed the sacred symbol is written on its tongue with honey. Before beginning the day, or any work, or embarking on a journey, a Hindu will utter 'OM'. When writing a letter or an exam paper, he will first scribble the symbol at the top of the page. Men and women tattoo it on their forearms. The temples and shrines are full of this symbol. The T-shirt I am wearing now, as I write, is packed with OM symbols. Overawed, I lowered my camera without clicking and, pointing the surreal occurrence to my fellow passengers, asked driver Kesari to stop. We all walked out of the vehicle in a trance – and even the most ardent unbeliever amongst us, that included me, could not help being spiritually moved and swayed by the sight. The vehicles of the Chidambaram group came roaring towards us. I flagged them down, directing their attention towards the occurrence. Gombu, a Sherpa who was driving on this route for the 40th time swore he had never seen this phenomenon before. Neither had any of the Tibetan drivers who had been plying on this route for years. Elated that the gods had revealed this

auspicious omen just for us, we got back into our vehicles. Strangely, one of the five Land Cruisers would not start. All the drivers poked their heads under the bonnet but could not figure out what the matter was. “Milarepa...” I whispered.

We made the most of the breakdown, gaping at the OM with our eyes and mouths wide open, appreciating the blessing and photographing it from all the modes available on our digital cameras. After a forty-minute delay we rolled into a dusty, mud-walled compound in the village of Dzonka for lunch. Swarms of kids came running towards us, their eyes fastened on our pockets. Their expectations diminished immediately when they realised we were all scrimping Indian pilgrims travelling, as always, on a shoestring budget, for whom a handout of a few yuans would result in a colossal financial disaster. A lorry bringing in colourful Tibetan furniture and mattresses was being unloaded to furnish restaurants and inns that were sprouting up. The new road under construction was expected to increase the flow of pilgrims and tourists. Ladies in traditional robes, blue-and-orange headbands and turquoise and amber earrings and necklaces, flitted about spinning wool, knitting, and asking for cash with a rub of their thumb and two fingers. A flock of sheep loafed around, with bowed heads, moving slowly towards the deep blue waters of Pelku Tso. Ravens basked in the autumn sunshine, waiting to feast on our leftovers. Bands of yaks munched on rocks.

Xiamude Village

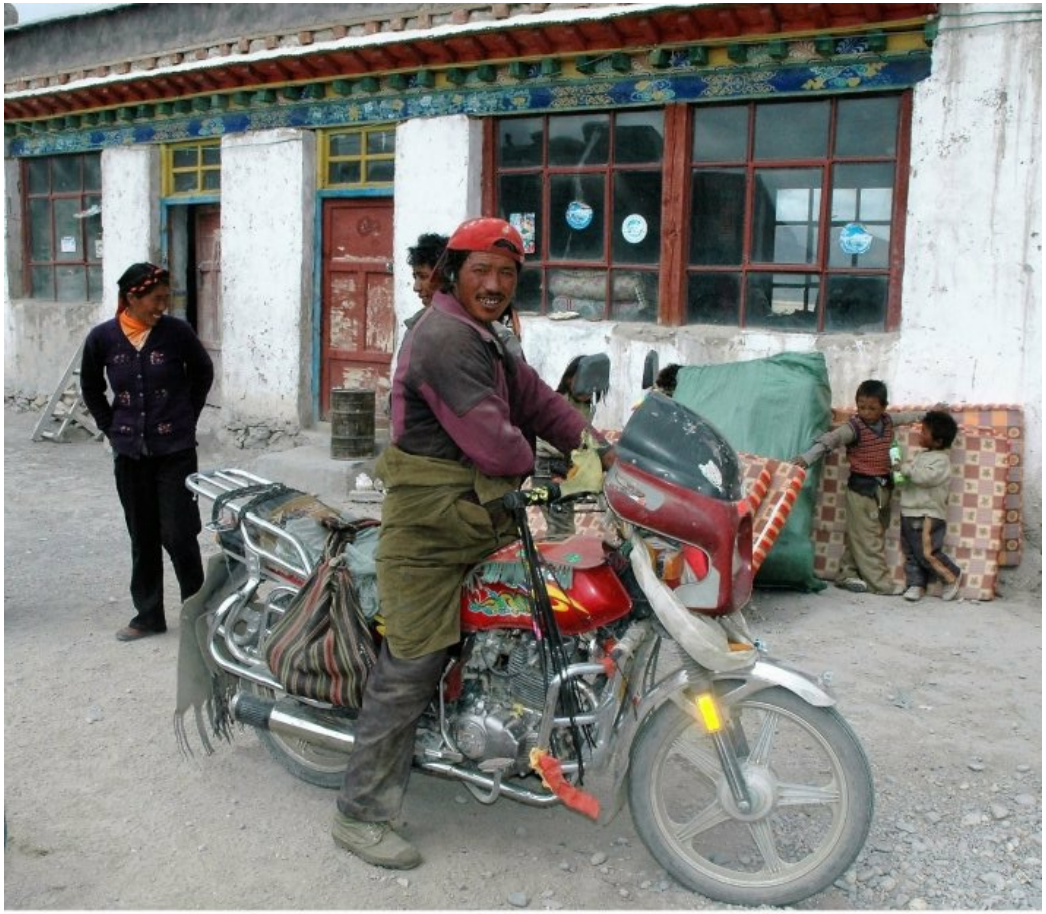
View of Jugal Himal and Shishapangma (8027m), its principal peak.

Jugal Himal

OM symbol etched on a mountain of Jugal Himal

Dzonka Village

Dzonka Village



Dzonka Village

Our journey continued through the broad valleys and barren mountains of the Kyirong region – the road construction work and the slushy tracks slowing our progress. Passing the salt lake Drolung Tso, the Land Cruisers climbed the easy gradient to the top of the first pass and went rolling down the meadow on the other side, each vehicle making its own track. We stopped where the road flattened out to allow our convoy to reassemble. Deepak took advantage of the halt to throw up, the nauseating smell of his vomit making him puke even more. Grossly over-weight, he had been suffering from altitude sickness since Nyalam. Soon after, we ascended another pass and drove down at a steep gradient. Once again, the rolling, gentle hillsides tempted the drivers to experiment creating their own course. Due to my frequent requests to stop for photography, our vehicle was usually the last in the convoy. Kesari, our lanky driver, attempting a shortcut of a shortcut, drove into a sharp rock, flattening the tyre. Milarepa was still around. The jack didn't work until Nagesh and Shankar, applying their South Indian ingenuity, fixed it. The spare tyre itself was flat – but luckily Kesri had a second stepney.

Crossing a narrow bridge over Yarlung Tsangpo (Siang in Arunachal Pradesh, Brahmaputra in Assam and Jamuna in Bangladesh), we entered Saga. All the citizens and soldiers were out on the road sweeping it with broomsticks. It was obvious that some big cheese PLA officer with a heavy boot was coming on an inspection visit. Checking into our hotel, Puneet and I strolled the streets of Saga. Invigorating aroma of freshly baked bread drifted from a bakery. Pharmacies sold oxygen. Elegantly ttired Tibetan ladies shuffled past us yacking on their cellphones. A young Chinese couple shredded prawns outside their restaurant. An infant yawned aloud in the lap of his sleeping grandmother. A wrinkled male fossil twirled his copper prayer wheel leaning listlessly against a mud wall. Jaiswal, a 74-year-old textile manufacturer from Indore, had his blood pressure checked – a high 174/134. To soothe our nerves Puneet and I traced a house where fresh *chang* had been brewed.

Saga excited our team because each hotel room had an attached toilet with running water. Obsessed, like all Indians, with "bowel movement", the pilgrims were thrilled at the prospect of having a morning bed tea followed by a good crap. If that didn't happen, they were edgy, irritable, and unable to concentrate or enjoy a moment till their intestines are cleared. As we were to leave early for Prayang at four in the morning, roommates discussed

strategies and planned schedules for using the toilets and the rationed supply of running water. At breakfast, relieved and delighted faces proudly announced their “total evacuation”.

We drove in darkness till the rising sun and receding shadows lighted golden the barren hills. At Saga we had joined track G219 coming from the east, shooting off highway G318 from Shigatse. At the top of the Singa Pass (15,065ft) we waited for the road to be cleared as bulldozers flattened the mounds of tar deposited on the track by a fleet of dumpers. To our left, hidden in the clouds, were the mountains of the Annapurna range in the Manang and Mustang region of Nepal. Every now and then we got off the gravel track where road construction was in full swing and drove through graveyards of rocks and stones, the clouds of dust distancing the vehicles. Old fortresses, battered by nature and the Chinese, lay forlorn by the riverside and ancient stone bridges festooned with prayer flags were being replaced by concrete ones displaying communist slogans.

The play of shadow and light prompted eerie wonderings. I gazed at the mountainsides in search of imprints left behind by celestial beings. A barren hill took the shape of Ganesh, the elephant-headed son of Shiva and Parvati, standing on his hind legs and looking back into my eyes. I looked to the skies where the fluffy white clouds assumed forms of unbelievable, bizarre and colossal magical creatures found only in fairy tales and sacred texts: fire-spitting dragons, a four-legged centaur with human body, a foetus floating in a womb, an exuberantly blossomed tree, and a phoenix holding a snake in its talon. At a break by the riverside I shared this observation with Mash. “Dude, I’m seeing them too! I tell ya these sacred Puranas were written by some pot-smoking author lying on his arse on a carpet of grass watching the clouds take forms of ogres, super humans, giants and strange animals. Look at that cloud. Could be a tiger riding a peacock. How else can an elephant like Ganesh ride a mouse? You got to be stoned out of your mind to make up something like that, dude.”

After Lhakstang we followed the Tachchok Tsangpo upstream and going over the Sogela pass (15,593ft) descended into a broad valley and drove into the dog-infested village of Prayang. The barrenness of the surrounding dark, shady hills and sand dunes contrasted brilliantly with the dreamlike cheerfulness of snow-covered peaks of the Shey Phoksundo National Park in neighbouring Nepal. A galloping drover gave chase to his

three ponies. A shaggy black dog followed a lady bent under the weight of a sack. A smiling, toothless man shuffled along a sandy track spinning his prayer wheel. An old lady, an enduring village artefact, sat on the earth, watching over the yak dung cakes drying in the sun. As soon as we drove into the unkempt compound of the "Famer and Normad Hotel", we dumped our bags in the mud-walled rooms, each crammed with five beds, and trouped out to check the toilet facilities – an exposed open pit latrine - the sights and smells of which had us gagging. We stampeded out holding our noses and spread across the countryside to identify suitable spots under the open sky. "Don't even try that," cautioned one of the drivers. "The dogs will make a meal out of you if you stir out at night." We resigned ourselves to our fate.

The drivers parked themselves in the warm and spacious kitchen that had a wood-fired oven in the middle and broad, carpeted benches that served as beds on three sides of the wall. A constant supply of beer fuelled their energies as they played an endless game of cards. Knowing from experience that drivers always had access to the best food, I sniffed around the kitchen, opening pots brewing on the fire. I was bored with the daily fare of watery *dal*, oily vegetables and rice we were being subjected to by our cook and wanted a change of taste. The yak stew simmering in the pot would have served just the purpose. The merciful drivers, with whom I had been sharing my candies and chewing gum, realised my plight and, in their joyfully high spirits, offered me the stew that I gladly downed with a thermos of salty butter tea.

In one corner of the kitchen was an altar with some prayer lamps and pictures of pensive Buddhist abbots. I asked Tashi, our Tibetan tour organiser, a short, stocky man with a broad, cheeky face, why there was no picture of the Dalai Lama.

"It is best not to rub the Chinese on the wrong side. Not good for business," he whispered.

"That desire of independence is not there any longer?" I asked.

"People have realised they cannot fight the Chinese. As long as they don't interfere with our religion and extend to us the benefits of development, people will play along," he confided, in a dropping voice.

This was my third visit to Tibet in 16 years. Compared to my first visit in 1994, economic development and consequent dilution of political aspirations was clearly visible. Tibet is no longer in an existential state. No

longer are its citizens gripped by a deep uncertainty about what will happen next. Knowing now that independence is a far-fetched illusion, they have made peace with the Chinese dragon, slowly sunk into its embrace and begun to enjoy the traditional benefits bestowed by colonial powers – new world-class infrastructure, roads and trains that bring in tourist money and transport the produce of the herders to faraway markets, schools for the bright-eyed kids and medical centres for the sick, and a mobile network and an electricity grid that reach the remotest corners. As productivity and incomes rise, herders are now rich enough to move out of their black yak-hair tents into built houses. They have gotten off their slow-plodding yaks and ponies and ride swiftly and smilingly on motorcycles to roast some Beijing Duck, pull open a can of chang, or buy shares in one of the state-owned Chinese companies listed on the stock exchange. As the Tibetans drive boldly on the road to prosperity and economic freedom, the movement for political independence has fallen into a ditch.

As I got up to retire to my cold room, a monk from the Prayang monastery walked in. Portly, bald and impeccably dressed in a maroon robe, the picturebook monk scratched his bums in an entirely unsuitable way for a man of his standing.

Major sement of the road was still under construction

Rolling down the hills of Kyirong region

Saga town on Tsangpo River

Sleepyheads in Saga

Spinning prayers. Saga.

Rough track enroute Prayang

Enroute Prayang with mountains of Shey Phusundo National Park of Nepal in the background

Roof of the World. Driving from Prayang to Mansarovar.

Easyrider. Enroute Mansarovar.

Deepak's condition was worsening. He had all the signs of high altitude sickness - headache, breathlessness and loss of appetite. Dr Vijay Kumar had checked him the night before and detected a patch in his lungs. By the morning the patch had increased in size. Water was accumulating in his lungs. The doctor injected him with Lasix and bundled him into his Land Cruiser.

Leaving Prayang we entered a broad, grassy green valley, a wonderland

of lakes. As we climbed higher and higher into the blue sky the long range of snow peaks on our left emerged from behind the rounded hills and we stopped to have ourselves photographed with the spectacular mountains. The road, where complete, was absolutely swanky and allowed us to cruise comfortably at 80-90kmph. When the entire stretch of the road is tarred and ready, it should be possible to tear along from Nyalam to Darchen in a day or a day-and-a-half – for the acclimatised – instead of the three driving days that it takes now. The Chinese are also developing an airfield in Ali, north of Darchen, the base camp for the circumambulation of Kailash. Expected to be operational sometime in 2012, it will be possible to fly in from Lhasa, drive four hours to Yamdwar, the starting point of the trek, and reach Dirakpur the same day. The new road and the airport will knock the romance out of the pilgrimage.

Where construction work was in progress, we had to get off the road and drive alongside it on topsy-turvy land. At one point, just before the Maryum La pass, the highest motorable point of the journey, where the road had been blocked, we ran into soft, slushy soil. The front right tyre of the support truck of the Chidambaram group had sunk into the earth, its bumper resting on the ground. Two Land Cruisers coming from the opposite direction were also stuck in the sludge. Though the Land Cruisers got towed out, the truck would not budge – even when two powerful vehicles tried to pull it out. A bulldozer was called in from the construction site and it yanked the truck out in no time.

For the rest of the afternoon we swung towards Mansarovar Lake, admiring the pastoral scenery and wide valleys populous with grazing sheep, yaks, deer and wild asses. The road, which we had solely to ourselves for most of the time, ran along the length of the brilliant Nyogse Lake, also

called Hanuman Lake. Just before Mansarovar, we stopped for lunch at a meadow. Shankar could not resist the beautiful stream flowing into the holy lake. He walked to the brook with a bottle of water and, lowering his pants, proceeded to fertilise its banks in full view of the pilgrims. My appetite deserted me.

Spectacular view of the Himalayas between Prayang and Mansarovar

We met Mansarovar near Seralung monastery. A cairn with piles of consecrated mani stones, strings of frantically fluttering prayer flags, and eye-catching cattle horns announced the entrance to the lake. Driving clockwise around the cairn, the drivers stopped to allow the pilgrims to take in the mystic vibrations of the site. Far across the northern side of the lake, thick clouds caressed Mt. Kailash, hiding its view. Pradeep, the Shreshta Holidays rep, went down on his knees and prayed facing the holiest mountain. Deepak, in spite of his infirmity, fell on his face and prostrating full length lost himself in a frenzy of chanting. I kept an anxious watch over him – in case he needed to be raised. Gurla Mandata (25,243ft), the mountain named after the king who discovered Kailash, sitting on the southern edge of the lake, exposed itself from head to toe. Circumambulating the lake clockwise, according to the Hindu and Buddhist custom, we crossed several streams that feed the 320 sq km lake, stopping at a sandy shore to allow the pilgrims to bathe in the blessed waters. Mansarovar was first created in the mind of Lord Brahma. A dip in the lake releases you from the sins of a hundred births and

catapults you straight to the paradise of Lord Brahma. The men stripped to their underpants and stepped gingerly into the freezing waters. The ladies followed in their petticoats and gowns that floated prettily round them like a ballerina's skirt. I sensed the temperature of the water with my finger tips and by the shivers of the shuddering bathers and suddenly realised that I had led a virtuous life, not committed any sins - hence there was no compulsion on me to take a tortuous dip.

Continuing our 30km dramatic drive around the 88km circumference of the lake, we approached Gurla Mandata. A massive aqueduct with arches and pillars seemed to be running from its core to the base. On closer examination it turned out to be a series of landslides. As we touched the feet of the mountain, the cloud cover lifted over Kailash, exposing its south face and the celestial stairway to heaven. Bypassing Yerngo and Trugo gompas, sitting on the lakeshore, we ascended a steep hill and from the top, under the shadow Gurla Mandata's Naimona'nyi glacier, got fabulous views of Mansarovar and, to the east, its twin lake, the gorgeous Rakshastal, the Demon Lake. We got out to stretch our cramped limbs and draw draughts of fresh air. There was no wind, no sound and the stillness in the vacant land was absolute. One of the pilgrims found a stone with an imprint of the OM symbol. This sent the other pilgrims scurrying to look for more such stones. Unbelievably, almost everyone who looked, found stones naturally engraved with the sacred symbol.

Of the two lakes, the deep blue Rakshastal, hemmed between soothing brown hills and two islands, Dose and Dola, relaxing on its calm waters, is the prettier one. Yet, it is hopelessly shunned, rejected and cursed due to its association with Ravana. No one touches its waters. The Tibetans spit in it.

The legend, narrated to us by Shankar, goes like this: Ravana, the godly demon king of Lanka, was asked by his dying mother to get her the supreme lingam, Mt. Kailash itself, for worshipping. The obedient son rushed to Kailash and struggled to lift the mountain, his efforts causing earthquakes and landslides and streams to overflow their banks – and disturbing the amorous couple, Shiva and Parvati, who were showering their affections on each other in their mountain cave. Shiva pressed the mountain with his big toe, trapping Ravana underneath. When Ravana's endeavours to extricate himself failed, his band of supporters advised him to seek Shiva's forgiveness and do penance. Eating humble pie, the arrogant king did as he was told. For

a thousand years he invoked the name of Shiva. The Lord, pleased with Ravana's devotion, freed him and allowed him to take Mt. Kailash to Lanka – on the condition that he would not put it down on earth anywhere on the way. The sacred mountain shifting to Lanka worried the other gods. Varuna, the god of water, entered Ravana's stomach and made his bladders work overtime. To empty his bursting bladders Ravana had to put the mountain down – unless he found someone else to hold it for him. Ganesh, the son of Shiva and Parvati, and a part of the celestial conspiracy, appeared in the form of a Brahmin and was requested by Ravana to hold the lingam mountain while he relieved himself. Varuna, having taken over Ravana's bladders, ensured that there was a continuous, never-ending flow of pee. Meanwhile, the Brahmin, tired of holding the lingam by Ravana's delayed return, placed it on the ground – and there it has remained since. The lake formed by Ravana's pee is the shunned Rakshastal. And the present location of Mt. Kailash is somewhat away from its original position. There are more sizeable and fanciful versions of this story but Shankar's, I found, is the most modified one.

Descending to Rakshastal Lake, we briefly drove along its waters, heading east towards Chiu village on Mansarovar, where we would be halting for the night. Suddenly, a procession of 50-60 wild asses appeared before us, meandering through the countryside, leisurely crossing the road. The sight and sound of the vehicles stirred them up, and tossing their heels in the air they galloped into the wilderness, raising clouds of dust. They were all fine, handsome fellas with chestnut sides and white underbellies and tufts of brown hair that grew from between their prickly ears to the mane and extended as a chocolate-coloured stripe to the end of the tail. It was a fascinating spectacle.

Our mud-huts were located below the Chiu gompa that was perched high on a cliff. I went for a walk to the lakeshore skirting the burrows of marmots and piles of deer excreta but could not get close to the water as the land around it was marshy. Another Shrestha Holidays group had come in from the nearby Taklakote border. They were on a 10-day helicopter tour that had been delayed by three days as the flight could not land at Hilsa due to inclement weather. My wife sent text messages to me about Indian pilgrims on the Ministry of External Affairs tour being stranded on the Indian side due to heavy rains and massive landslides. Later they were evacuated by helicopters and taken back to Delhi. Deepak's condition was deteriorating

and Doc Vijaykumar suggested he should not go any further and should try and take a helicopter ride back to Nepal. However, Deepak was fit enough to complain to Mr. Pradhan, the president of Shrestha Holidays, who was accompanying the helicopter group, about the eggs being cooked for Puneet and me in the common kitchen. I had bought some eggs in Nyalam to supplement the breakfast of corn flakes and milk that I shunned due to lactose intolerance. We had been eating the eggs discreetly – in the privacy of our room, away from the eyes of the pilgrims. Eggs were offensive to the vegetarians. The cook returned the eggs to me and I gladly shared them with the drivers who did not eat from the common kitchen and had their own pleasant arrangements.

"Some cheek Deepak has!" huffed the articulate Mash. "He will come here all the way to worship Shiva - a pot-smoking tribal bumpkin; a man who attired himself in nothing but a deer skin, sat on tiger skin, had snakes wrapped around his neck and broke all environmental laws; a man who wore a garland of human skulls and hung around cremation grounds; a man who, had he been living today, would be thrown into the slammer for drug abuse – that's alright with him. Yet, he has a problem with eggs. Jerk!"

The wind had picked up and it was bitterly cold. Mash was shivering and had a slight fever. She had never been on a trek before. Used to affluence and high living, she was under the impression that she would be staying in three or a four-star accommodation during this tour. Crammed four to a room in a cold mud-hut with no toilets and surviving on a simple diet, she was grossly uncomfortable and frustrated. All her bubbling cheerfulness had evaporated. Lying in bed, buried under a mountain of quilts, she chided, in her nasal American accent, Shiva and Parvati for not finding a more agreeable place than Kailash-Mansarovar. "What's so holy about this place, dude? People peeing and shitting all over. It ain't even endowed with the superhuman beauty and eternal charm that everybody says it has. Why would he come and live here in these most impenetrable, lifeless mountains where nothing grows - not even cannabis? And there wasn't a pub to get tanked up. Was it a punishment posting – like the one meted out these days to the Chinese soldiers? Or was he deported here for a drug offence? Why could they have not made Lake Tahoe or Pangong Tse or New Zealand or Las Vegas their home – instead of some shithole mountain cave in this desolate place? Obviously, Shiva had not seen the world... he is just an Indian god."

Struggling not to laugh, I spoke up in Shiva's defence. "That is not correct. He has left his symbols all over the world. The three peaks of Torres del Paine, in Chilean Patagonia, are said to be his *trishul*, trident. I have seen a mountain range in northern Ethiopia that is full of phallic hills..."

"I have been around the world too," interrupted Mash. "And never have I seen anywhere else but in India people worshipping a man's phallus. Why on earth would anybody do that? It's crazy, dude!"

Provoked, Shankar emerged from under his quilt, sat up in his bed, his head covered by a monkey cap. The mention of Shiva woke up his drowsy company and got his tongue going. With the perpetual smile on his dark face, he proceeded to tell us, in his tortuous Hyderabadi Hindi, why Shiva's phallus is worshipped. Once Vishnu and Brahma were arguing who amongst them was the greater god, the real creator and destroyer of the universe. The endless argument had turned into a quarrel when they saw, rising out of the ocean, a towering phallus crowned with flames. Casting aside their squabble, the astonished divinities decided to investigate the apparition by determining its height and depth. Taking the form of a boar, Vishnu plunged into the ocean and plummeted deeper and deeper trying to reach the base of the phallus - but it just continued to grow bigger and bigger. Brahma assumed the form of a swan and flew higher and higher trying to reach the tip of the phallus but could not get to it as the phallus just wouldn't stop growing. Exhausted and rebuffed, they both gave up their attempt and returned to earth. Tottering, they gaped in astonishment at the colossal vision that refused to shrink or slump. Suddenly, the sides of the phallus burst open and revealed Shiva. His supremacy challenged, Shiva got explosive and told the two gentlemen that he was the true god, the creator, the preserver and the destroyer. Brahma was his right side and Vishnu his left – and together they both existed in Shiva, the supreme god. Having set the matter to rest, he announced that he would be worshipped in his phallic form and not in any other.

"Some phallus!" mocked Mash. "They were all defective anyway! Did you know that this bunch of gods suffered from PME?"

"What's PME?" asked Puneet, innocently.

"Pre-mature ejaculation, dude. Don't you know that?" replied Mash, illuminating our minds.

"How do you know that?" questioned Puneet, giggling.

“I have also read these scriptures, dude. It’s all in there. I ain’t making it up. Swear to god,” said Mash, firmly and unabashed. “Once Shiva got so excited just by watching birds mate that he blew his load. And Brahma! He was as lecherous as you can get. Imagine – while performing the marriage rites of Shiva and Parvati he was looking so lustfully at the bride that his ‘seed fell on the ground’ – as they say in the scriptures.”

“Maybe it was ESV – excess spiritual vibration,” suggested Puneet.

“Alright. Now my revised theory is that Shiva sought the seclusion of the Himalaya because his wife was so beautiful that he didn’t want any other man to look amorously at her,” declared Mash, the spiritual traitor.

Mash has a flair for provocation.

On a cold, crispy morning, with the wind at rest, I walked to the lake to photograph the sun rise from behind the mountains that hemmed its shores. Paliwal was already there waiting for the first rays to light up the serene sheet of water. Excitedly he told me how he had come out around half-past-two at night to empty his bladders, and while he was relieving himself he scanned the heavens looking for a cosmic occurrence – and indeed he saw the fabled stars shooting down to touch the holy waters of Mansarovar and rebound back to their positions. As he was holding his own lingam rather than a camera, he could not take a photograph of the celestial event. The sun peeped out from behind the mountains and washed the entire landscape in a golden hue. The dry grassland, the bald hills, the rocky cliffs, the mud huts, the Chiu gompa – all turned yellow in the soft light, casting a spell on us.

Puneet, Nageshwar and I trudged up to the venerable gompa, stopping on the way at the cairn to capture some amazing views. Ominous clouds were rising up around Kailash. Ganga Chu, a water channel that connects Mansarovar and Rakshastal when the former overflows, was clearly visible and curving in a loop around Chiu village. The cairn itself was a work of art with colourful prayer flags shredded by the winds flapping wildly, beckoning gods and devils to pay heed to our prayers. Acres of mani stones lay around, each stone fussed upon by sculptors and painters with baffling Buddhist mantras and symbols. Piles of cattle heads, skinned to the bones, added to the

creative energy. I placed my arm around a particularly charming skeleton with a toothy smile and planted a joyous kiss of remembrance on its cheek.

Chiu gompa was empty of monks and people, and had a silence and solitude about it that was warmed and enlivened by the vibrant colours of its doors and windows. I sought the resident monk from his quarter and he ceased his prayers to open the lock of the monastery for a price of ten yuans each. I stepped in gingerly, making sure there were no hazardous monks around. Going into a gompa full of bleating monks is like going into a battlefield. They sit on tattered rugs, dusty with age, their noses digging into the holy scriptures, chanting sacred mantras. These men of god, committed to the philosophy of non-violence, bear no arms. Music is their weapon. The whining bleats of their chants strikes dread into their listeners and attract devils, ghosts and other hellish characters. The drone is like whistling bullets and shrapnel hitting against the body. However, this place was safe – as the Chinese had offered a scholarship of 400 yuans a month to every monk who vacates his gompa and goes home. The response to this scheme had been immediate.

On the way down we came across an Indian sadhu, attired in nothing but a loin cloth and the rest of his body smeared with ash – in total disregard for the intense cold. He was Naga sadhu, a firebrand soldier of Shiva's army that still lives on to this day. Clad in nothing but raw skin they roam freely the mountains and plains of India inflicting hellfire and damnation on anyone who comes in their way. We quickly distanced ourselves from him. He had covered his lingam with a loin cloth out of respect for Tibetan sentiments and Chinese laws. Otherwise, this accessory is not a part of his usual attire.

Looking at the ash-smeared sadhu made me feel like having a bath. There was a hot spring down by the village. I quickly shaved, using the window of a Land Cruiser as a mirror, and trekked the short distance to the spring. An enclosed hall with four private bathrooms inside had piping hot water gushing through pipes into a spacious vat. A large poster showed a pretty Tibetan lady relaxing in the vat, enjoying a pleasurable bath. While paying my 40 yuans for the wash I jokingly asked the Tibetan attendant if the lady in the poster was a part of the service. Waving his hand, he said no – but pointing his finger at the three attractive village ladies washing clothes in the spring water trickling outside, he indicated, chuckling blithely, that I could take one - or all of them - to my tub. We all had a merry laugh. The bath was

heavenly – soothing and refreshing. As it was not a sulphur spring I did not end up smelling like a rotten egg.

Lake Mansarovar with Mount Kailash in the background

Kailash and Mansarovar

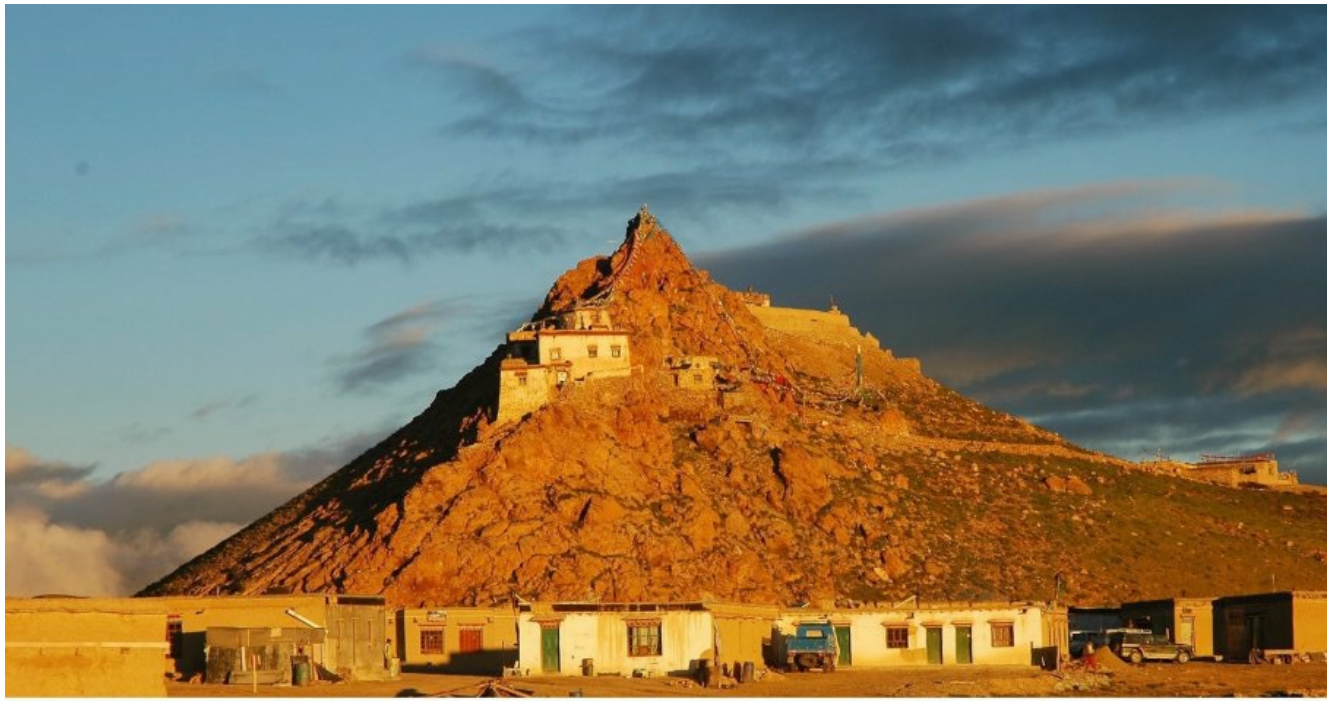
Lake Rakshastal

Kailash and Stairway to Heaven as seen from between Rakashtal and Mansarovar

Wild Ass Crossing between Rakashtal and Mansarovar

Wild Asses on the run

Sunrise at Mansarovar



Chiu gompa and village

Chiu village from Chiu gompa

Soon after lunch we left for Darchen, 30km away. Driving between the two lakes, we stopped at Barka to have our papers checked, and followed the last truck (license number M 66221) in a long convoy of Dong Feng army trucks driving empty towards Ali. The disillusioning panorama of Darchen defies Tibetan picture-postcard romanticism – decrepit town with acres of strewn litter and plastic bags; and sludgy streams that are playgrounds of filthy mongrels. The entire village never seemed to have felt the shove of a broom. We were housed in a barrack that posed as a hotel. Intolerable smells from the pit latrine outside came in through the broken glass windows. We had been warned not to use the toilets without gagging ourselves with a litre of phenyl. As a result, the hotel's walls were urine-streaked and we could not take four steps without stepping on human excreta dumped by guests during the night. The town is a purgatory that needs to be torched and developed anew – though flowers and vegetables would grow profusely on its well-fertilised soil. We looked forward to our departure early next morning.

To escape the sights and smells of Darchen eight of us paid an astronomical amount hiring two Land Cruisers to take us on a petrifying rollercoaster drive to Ashtapad, the place where Bhagwan Rishabhdev, the first of the 24 Jain *tirthankara*, attained nirvana. Just from the outskirts of Darchen we made a steep forty-five-degree ascent on a narrow track, our hearts filling our dry mouths. Placing my camera between my feet, my right hand held on tightly to the strap while the left clawed into the seat. Had a vehicle approached from the opposite direction I shudder to think what would have happened. The sharp descent was accomplished with our backsides raised high above our seats. The treacherous track levelled out alongside a broad river bed but a water channel had cut through the path and Kesri, our driver, had to balance the tyres on the raised ends, the vehicle always tilting precariously, wrecking my nerves. On the pretext of guiding Kesri, I bailed out. The rest followed. After a few agonizing metres Kesri himself gave up and abandoned the vehicle. We walked ahead on the track that now disappeared into rocks and stones. Further ahead, the river took over. Puneet, Shankar and I attempted to cross the broad rapid, jumping over rocks, steadying ourselves after every leap – till we were hopelessly stuck in the middle. The Land Cruiser, driving behind us, caught up with Kesri, and its driver, we were later told by Mash, who had stayed behind, gave him a mouthful and directed him on how to negotiate the rifted track. Kesri,

probably annoyed at us ditching him, crossed the river, leaving us stranded in the roaring rapids. We waved at him and requested him with folded hands to reverse and drive back into the river so we could reach the vehicle. With Mash's intervention, he backed up and we hopped, skipped and jumped into Kesri's unwelcoming arms.

After about 500m we were bundled out for a short trek to the viewpoint at 17,000ft. Deepak, still down and out, stayed behind in his vehicle. Paliwal, fighting for breath, slumped on a rock after a few steps. The rest of us continued the gradual climb towards the south face of Kailash. When we got to the top of the hill we were at a touching distance from the holiest mountain. It was an awesome, mind-boggling experience where the elements and nature collaborated to make us believe in the existence of Shiva.

Just in front of Kailash was a massive, squat, tent-like mountainous rock that represented the Nandi bull, Shiva's vehicle and keeper of his gate. It had an unnatural formation as if it had been crafted by a human hand and eroded over the millennia. The stairway to heaven, right in the centre of the south face of Kailash, a series of 14 visible steps chiselled into the rock face, all the way to the top of the peak, also did not seem to be the hand of nature. Though we did not see Shiva and Parvati dallying on the mountain top, we did see, to our left, just above a rock band, compressed in deep snow, the two brows of Shiva and his third eye between them. A shadow cast by a drifting cloud appeared as Shiva's matted hair being blown in the wind. Combined, the two dream-like images formed the perfect upper half of Shiva's face as represented in paintings and sculptures.

Shankar, as simple and easy-going as his namesake Shiva, lit a few pieces of camphor between some rocks and passed the fire around as we recited the *gayatri mantra*, invoking the omnipresent, all-pervading god, the basis of life, the creator and energiser of all universe, the giver of happiness, whom we embrace so he may direct our mental powers in the right direction. Puneet broke a slab of chocolate in the name of Shiva and distributed the *prasad* to all of us on his behalf. Suddenly, out of the blue, a huge bird with a massive wingspan flew low over us. "Garud!" said Puneet, referring to Lord Vishnu's celestial vehicle. "It has come to bless us," said he. "Lammergeyer," said I, setting the record straight. "It just swooped down for the chocolate."

When we got down to the vehicles, we faced an agitated Paliwal.

Suffering from high blood pressure, he had fainted while resting on a rock. He complained that no one kept an eye on him and with great difficulty he had, after regaining consciousness, walked back to the cars.

Back in Darchen we were told that the yak herders had gone on a strike and we would not be able to leave tomorrow for the trek around Kailash. Just the thought of staying another day in the hell-hole of Darchen nauseated me. Puneet lobbied that those of us who were going to walk anyway and had no need for yaks should press ahead. The Shrestha reps countered that the rations and the gas cylinders had to be carried by yaks and no food would be available to those who went on their own. Food be damned, we said. There was no guarantee that the strike would end the day after. If that situation arose, the organisers would just raise their hands in the air and we would return without completing the pilgrimage. After having come so far we could turn back. A meeting was called. Puneet, a most mild-mannered man, found his tongue and gave a hard-hitting speech on the disadvantages of staying another day in Darchen ("you'll be wiping your arse with stones") and the advantages of moving on. The incapacitated Deepak, finding his breath, steamrolled into the room and in an aggressive tone warned that some of us who were physically fit were misleading others. "While you die up in the airless heights, these people will be singing and dancing over your fading bodies. What they are saying is immature and childish. You can never make it walking, without food and the support of the Sherpas. We are here as a group. We have to stick together. Remain together. It does not matter if we are unable to complete the *parikrama*. If we live we can come back another day." Unable to decide between the two points of views, the organisers said they would talk to Mr. Pradhan and his decision would be final. After an hour or so they regrouped us and announced the decision: we would remain in Darchen another day and, as assured by the Chinese authorities, the strike would be over sometime tomorrow and we could move ahead the day after. I agreed to the decision – on the condition that those who did not want to spend an extra night in Darchen could go back to Mansarovar and rejoin the group the following day. No one objected to this arrangement though it meant shelling out extra yuans on the ride to Mansarovar and back, and on boarding and lodging at the lake. Puneet, Mash and I were ready to do anything to escape smelly Darchen. Moreover, it suited me as I had been earnestly dreaming of spending a full moon night on Mansarovar Lake – and circumstances had now made that possible. Had the herders not gone on

strike I would have missed seeing the lake in full moon. Everything falls into place if you wish hard enough.

As the three of us left Darchen the next morning for Mansarovar, the riot police were out marching on the streets in full battle gear. We reckoned the show of strength was to intimidate the striking herders. A reposeful afternoon was spent at the lake – chatting by the fireplace; drinking soup with dehydrated vegetables; lazing in the wooden vat with running spring water massaging my head, and talking to the keeper of the spring while sipping a thermos full of butter tea (the revenue earned from the natural spring went to the Chiu gompa). Some Russian, Chinese and Taiwanese tourists had also come in to witness the full moon and, as dusk set in, they set up their tripods on the lakeshore. Dark clouds sailed low over the lake and it took a while for the moon to break free of them and reveal itself high over the lake, its mellow reflection cutting through the water. We absorbed the view as long as we could before the chilly winds forced us to retreat to our room. I set the alarm for two-thirty at night to look for the stars that came down to touch the holy water of the lake but when it rang I lacked the will and courage to leave the warmth of my sleeping bag and stand out in icy weather.

Enroute Ashtapad

Kailash and its Stairway to Heaven as seen from Ashtapad. The compresed snow on the left appears as Shiva's brows and a cloud's shadow as Shiva's wind-blown hair. The rock on the right represents Nandi bull, Shiva's mount.

Full moon over Lake Mansarovar

Route of the circumambuation on Google Earth map. Yellow line is from Yam Dwar to Diraphuk. Green line from Diraphuk to Zutulphuk.

On an overcast morning our convoy rolled out of Darchen and drove 8km on a rough track to Tarboche, the site where the full moon day of the fourth Tibetan lunar month, the day Buddha attained enlightenment, is celebrated with great gusto. A towering flagpole, with yards of prayer flags extending from it, marks the site of the festival. Every year the standing flagpole is brought down and a new pole erected. Close to it is the Yamdwar, the gateway to the Lord of Death, flanked by two cairns with the usual pile of mani stones and cattle heads. Following the ritual, we walked through the small shrine. From

SCALPED SHEEP HEADS INSIDE YAMDWAR

its ceiling hung freshly cut heads and legs of sheep. It was a gory, nauseating sight. I rang the temple bell loudly and before the reverberating sound could wake up the dead, I took my picture and fled. We drove another kilometre or so, stopping on a dry river bed, where our loads would be transferred on to the yaks and the pilgrims who did not want to walk could hop on to their ponies. In our group of sixteen, five of us trekked while the rest opted for ponies. Deepak, pushing his luck, was also there. His wife, reckoning that faith and divine intervention would save him, insisted that he embark upon the trek. The beleaguered husband had pleaded with Singh, their roommate, to show reason to his thoughtless wife and to leave him behind at Darchen or Mansarovar – but she had the last word. By now, all the members were brimming with barely concealed contempt for the couple.

Puneet and I left early, followed by the rest of our party and the Chidambaram group behind them. The comfortable track followed a meandering river upstream. Starting the 12km trek at about 16,000ft we would gain only 500ft till Diraphuk, where we would be halting for the night. Though the west face of Kailash was hidden behind the clouds, there were some unbelievable rock formations resembling *shivalingas* on both sides of the trail. A brownish resin oozing out of some of the rocks was probably mineral wax that is used in libido-enhancing supplements. A Tibetan couple leading a white pony passed by, stopping at every auspicious point on the trail to kneel, bow and pray to Kailash. Midway, we broke for tea at a tented canteen. A Russian group had preceded us. Viktor, a young economist, said that China and India were the economic giants of the future and he was journeying through the interiors of these lands so he could thoroughly

understand the minds of these people. He was a man in a hurry. He had walked the 6km in less than half the time it had taken us and now planned to jog the rest of the way. Breezing through the land at such a fast, dangerous pace he would just be watching his feet and missing the opportunity to see, study and reflect upon the religious zeal of the easterners. It started to snow. A shaggy black dog, lounging outside, turned white. He would silently follow us, without befriending, to Diraphuk and beyond for the next three days – till the end of our trek.

Shortly after we left, the snowfall turned into a full-scale blizzard, entirely whitening the black and brown landscape, and carpeting the trail. Puneet and I followed the footprints of a Tibetan pilgrim, who had overtaken us, all the way to Diraphuk.

Diraphuk consisted of four or five mud-and-stone shelters. Puneet and I, first to reach from our group, dumped our packs on the cots and stretched our frozen limbs. There were six cots to a room and I chose the cot next to the window that offered a grand view of the north-west face of Kailash. The chequered window had a broken glass pane through which chilly winds came whistling in – but the view was worth the discomfort. By and by, other members of our party stumbled in and straightaway cocooned themselves in their sleeping bags – too tired even to drink the hot tea that had taken the Nepali cook an eternity to prepare. Seeing the arrangements, Mash recoiled in terror.

Puneet, Shankar and Paliwal in Diraphuk shelter

The magnetic appeal of Mt. Kailash held my gaze for a long-drawn-out time – and then pulled me towards it. Leaving my cot, I walked out and clambered over rocks to get closer to its face. With the camera strapped to my hand, I was urged by some force all the way up to the tiny *chorten* bedecked with prayer flags from where I could see the entire face of the mountain rising, as if, from the bowel of the earth. Starry-eyed, I tried to absorb the scene. Real or imaginary, I saw, etched on the black-and-snow-white wall of the mountain, the face of Hanuman, the Monkey God, rising before me in surprising distinctness. Pencilled in fire were the three bands of *Rudra-tilak or Tripundra*, with a vertical band in the middle - the markings pasted on Shiva's forehead. I stood alone for a long time, absorbing the beauty and serenity of the surroundings. Though it wasn't cheery, it was definitely what psychologists call a "peek experience". As I turned back to leave, I saw Shankar trudging towards me. I waited for him so we could photograph each other with the mountain. Towards the west, the sun was setting in a zippy storm, in a vast mantle of swollen inky-black clouds, edged with orange, that were shifting, changing and disbanding. As angry explosions of thunder followed lightning, the surrounding congregation of mountains assumed bizarre, distorted forms, illuminating for an instant and then vanishing from sight.

After a frugal meal of rice and lentils, we slumped on our cots. Jagmohan Paliwal looked like a corpse – but slept soundly – as did Shankar.

Between the incessant snoring of Paliwal and Shankar, Puneet and Mash, unable to sleep, chatted ceaselessly – while I dozed in fits and starts.

By four in the morning the camp began to stir. The rattling of the pots and pans in the kitchen signalled that it was time to get out of our sleeping bags and quilts and prepare for the hard slog ahead. From Diraphuk, at 16,000ft, we would be climbing to Dolma La Pass (18,600ft) – and ending the day at Zutulphuk (15,675ft) – 22km away. Taking advantage of the darkness, the ladies went to squat amongst the rocks. Yaks were brought in to carry the baggage, gas cylinders, kitchen equipment and rations – and mules to carry those who did not want to walk. With no disposition to encounter further risks, six members of our party, including the ailing Deepak, and two representatives of the Shresta Travels suffering from altitude sickness, opted to return to Darchen. Only Puneet, Nageshwar, Shankar and I would go on foot- while the remaining five would ride on mules. Mash said she had never risen before 9 a.m. – and wasn't going to do so now. While she squabbled with the organisers, and porters made arrangements for the journey, Puneet and I quietly slipped out of the camp and hit the trail that led eastwards.

The wind was at rest but it was crispy cold. We descended into the narrow glacial valley, crossed the frothing Lhachu River and again climbed up to higher ground on the other side. All around us were barriers of lofty black mountains sprinkled with snow. The trail went through wild and broken country littered with boulders and rocks and contained no vegetation of any kind. Though the gradient was not steep, it all was silent, strenuous exertion. The only sounds I could hear were those of the turbulent river, the cracking of ice under my feet and my breathless panting.

Just as the light began to appear, after about an hour or two of walking, we reached Shiva-sthal (17,700 ft). Old garments lay scattered all over the ground. This was the place where Hindus perform *pind-daan* by leaving used clothes of a deceased relative – a rite for bringing salvation to the person's soul, praying for his happiness in whatever form he was reborn, and seeking his blessings. I left a beautiful Scandinavian-design sweater knitted by my mother for my father – who had passed away 33 years earlier - in 1977. I had also taken clothes given by an acquaintance whose young wife had succumbed to cancer a few months ago. It had been her desire to make a pilgrimage to Kailash-Mansarovar. Puneet left clothes of his mother, my first-cousin, who had also died of cancer ten years ago. At *Shiva-sthal* one is

supposed to lie down between huge boulders and enact death – shutting the eyes and facing the judgement of Yama. I passed the ritual.

Plodding slowly, I overtook the Chidambaram group and stopped often to regain my breath or take pictures of the golden glow of the rising sun caressing the mountain tops. The day brightened and the few clouds in the deep blue sky were too high to get entangled in the peaks. Before long the yak train passed me, their bulging loads shoving pilgrims off the narrow trail, making some bite the dust. Clumsy in appearance and extremely large, the shaggy yaks are ill-tempered and bad-mannered and don't yield an inch to human traffic. All through the final leg of the sharp ascent to the top of Dolma Pass I kept an anxious eye on them, moving out of their way whenever I heard the ring of the bells tied to their necks. My strength was rapidly exhausted and I was completely fatigued when I reached the top. Puneet and Nageshwar were already there, waiting for me. The pass was thickly festooned with masses of colourful Tibetan prayer flags. We rested for a while, poured mango juice into our dehydrated bodies, and had our pictures taken – adding warmth and dignity to the cold and mournful landscape.

Dolma Pass separates the northern from the eastern valley and is named after the goddess (Tara in Hindu tradition) worshipped both by Buddhists and Hindus. She is the one who enables the pilgrim to 'cross over' – from death to deathlessness, from illusion to wisdom, bondage to salvation. The Tibetans, royally wrapped from head to toe in their heavy robes, took a thrilling pleasure in pulling locks of their own hair, plastering it to yak butter and rubbing it on a massive rock that stands on the saddle of the pass. Others stacked rocks to build *latas*, or small cairns, adding to the mess of prayer flags, or offered their fallen teeth and sheep bones to the all-merciful goddess.

On the other side of the pass, about 100 feet down, set in a crater-like depression amidst rock-falls, were the twin ponds known as *Gauri-kund*. Shiv's wife Parvati, or Gauri as she is also known as, bathed in their turquoise-blue waters in the grand seclusion of the Himalaya. When Shiva went away on his adventures, Parvati stayed home to cook, restore furniture in their run-down mountain cave, and have leisurely baths. Once while bathing, Parvati fashioned an image of a small boy from the lather and soap suds on her body and breathed life into it. Thus, Ganesh was born. She placed the boy to guard the entrance to the ponds with strict instruction not to let

anyone in while she was bathing. It just so happened that at that moment Shiva returned in a terrible mood after his many squabbles with rival gods. In spite of all the meditation that he did, Shiva had an anger-management problem. His temperature scaled up and down at a lightning speed. As he tried to intrude upon Parvati's privacy, he was challenged by Ganesh. Vexed at this affront, he cut off Ganesh's head in a flash of temper. Parvati was furious and inconsolable at the death of her son. Meanwhile, Shiva's devoted troops of demons and imps landed in support of their lord. Enraged, Parvati declared an all-out war on them. Frightened by the intensity of her aggression, the celestial troops requested the holy sages to intervene and mediate. All attempts to forge a consensus between the fractious parties fell flat. Finally, Parvati agreed to make peace on the condition that the life and head of her son Ganesh would be restored. When she could create human life out of soap scurf, I don't see why she could not resuscitate Ganesh herself. Anyway, Shiva ordered his troops to go north and bring back the head of the first animal they encountered. This happened to be an elephant. Shiva placed the elephant head on Ganesh's decapitated body and revived him. This story is one of the great planks of Hindu mythology. Ganesh is worshiped as *Vigneshwara*, the lord of obstacles. Hindus invoke his blessings when leaving home or undertaking any new initiative.

Still on Dolma Pass, I sat against a rock and shut my eyes to feel the divine presence through peaceful meditation and contemplation, – but the bladder came in the way. To minimise the adverse effects of high altitude, I had been force-feeding myself all day with liquids and my kidneys were working overtime, giving me no rest to enjoy the supreme satisfaction that should have been the reward of my extreme labours.

The descent was through a sublime waste of rocks. The gradient and the slippery rocks obliged riders to get off the mules on the way down through the rough and difficult stony defile. Swarms of smiling Tibetans, some with a wild look and others stately in appearance, were pouring down the desolation in a single file, filling the rocky passageway like a gentle mountain brook. The sight of a faraway tent and level ground below the defile made me hasten my pace.

The tent was pitched on a rising ground close to the bank of meandering Lham Chu Khir. It was well stocked with tea, water, juices and snacks. The Russians, who had arrived before us, sat listlessly in the tent, lined up on the

wooden benches. Viktor, the economist in a hurry, was bleeding profusely from his nose. Another Russian was being administered oxygen from a cylinder. Drained of energy, I ordered butter tea, and sat still as a statue, trying to get some sleep. After about twenty minutes, overcome by nausea in the smoke-filled tent, I staggered out to get some fresh air and joined the grazing mules and yaks and a lively band of Tibetans stretched out on the meadow. The squaws poured hot water from thermos into wooden cylinders to pound barley into the horrific, tasteless tsampa, the staple diet of Tibetans.

As I lay on the ground, resting my throbbing head on the backpack, our Nepali porter walked across to inform me that one of the Chidambaram group members had died at the top of Dolma Pass. His corpse, seated in a basket, was strapped to a porter's back and was being taken to Darchen for post-mortem. The porter carrying the dead weight had already trotted past the tent when I was still inside. A few minutes later, the mule-riding Chidambaram pilgrims began to arrive. I cornered one of them to get further details on the death.

"The man had willed his death. It was *icchha-mrityu*," said my informant. "He was a devotee of Lord Shiva. In fact, his name was Shivaneshan. Sixty-five years old. A retired engineer from the Tamil Nadu Electricity Board. A very learned man. During our journey, he kept to himself and spent his time reading religious scriptures. At the top of the pass, he sat against a boulder – and his soul left him."

"He might have suffered a massive heart attack," said I.

"During the tedious ascent to the pass, he showed no sign of distress. He had planned his death. His brother-in-law, who is also with us on this pilgrimage, says that when Shivaneshan was leaving home, he had told his wife that he would be 'moving on' from Kailash."

Instead of being broken-hearted or showing remorse, the Chidambaram pilgrims thought Shivaneshan was extremely fortunate to have met an auspicious end. He would surely attain *moksha*, release from the cycle of death and rebirth. It is the aim of every Hindu, Buddhist and Jain to work towards *moksha*. Sadhus spend a lifetime pursuing liberation from rebirth. I fail to fathom this meaningless goal. Given a choice, I would love to be reborn to enjoy another term on earth and make life difficult for others.

We had descended to a softer region and the lenient trail traversed a succession of shallow streams that had to be crossed over rocks. Caked with dirt, arrayed in rags, a faithful Tibetan vagabond, a follower of Bon religion, was toiling through the circumambulation, the *parikrama* or *kora*, in the opposite, anti-clockwise direction. After another three hours of walking, we reached Zutulphuk where we put up in dark and dingy stone shelters that had clean bedding and were as comfortable as a grave. Exhausted, I slumped on a cot with my legs dangling on the floor. Nageshwar and Shankar slipped inside their quilts. Puneet was still on his feet, exercising his lungs, Shiva-

A faithful vagabond circumambulating on all fours

like, with smoke.

About ninety minutes later, a visibly distressed Mash stumbled in looking like a ghost. She collapsed on the bed and howled like a child that had been soundly whipped. Nageshwar, Shankar and I were too tired to bother about her. Puneet sat beside her, consoling her. After a while Mash sat up with her face in her hands, drowning herself in a flood of tears. With

prodding from Puneet, she managed to throw in some sentences, punctuating them with high-pitched sobs, about her fearful ordeal. She got badly affected by the altitude on Dolma Pass and had to be given artificial oxygen. She had not eaten for over a day and felt faint and feeble. She could not hold the liquids down and was throwing up. On the descent from the pass, she tripped and passed out. Her mule-man arranged for oxygen that revived her. The sight of Shivaneshan's corpse, perched in a basket, further crushed her spirit. While crossing a stream, after passing the tent, her mule thought proper to display its vicious pranks. It reared and lunged most furiously, throwing her into the freezing water. Luckily, the yak carrying her baggage was following her. Drenched to the skin, she stripped in the cold, behind a rock, and changed into dry clothes.

"I'm bruised – black and blue – all over," she screamed and began to howl all over again.

Suppressing my laughter, and trying to humour her, I remarked, from my horizontal position and with my eyes still shut: "Ah! These are but tears of joy and victory. Just as Serena Williams cries after winning the Wimbledon final." I can still feel the kick I received on my right shin.

Sitting upright to rub my leg, ignoring Mash's ferocity, I politely commented that, in spite of all the difficulties, it must have been an extremely illuminating experience for her. Jerking her head threateningly, Mash glared into my eyes, twitched her nostrils and erupted like a volcano spewing forth lava. "You take a walk! You think you can find enlightenment when you are struggling for breath; suffering from nausea; head throbbing like a motorcycle engine; dehydrated; looking for a bush in an open, shadeless country to bare your bottoms and relieve your running stomach? Illuminating, my ass!"

After releasing all her hot gas, Mash cooled a bit – and then collapsed on the bed.

Trail to Diraphuk

Author in a blizzard

View from Diraphuk

Kailash Northwest Face

"Angry explosions of thunder followed lightning". Diraphuk.

Trail leading to Dolma Pass from Diraphuk

Shivasthal

Author on Dolma Pass

The twin ponds of Gaurikund as seen from Dolma Pass

Descent from Dolma Pass

Mt. Gurla Mandatta looms large over a flat valley

The last view of the fabled land

In the morning it was all fair again. We were all well-rested and acclimatised and eager to hit the trail that snaked along mountainsides, high above the gorge of a turbulent river. The sun rose, bathing the bald hills with its warm rays. We passed a large conical rock that had the impression of Parvati's over-sized hand. After hearing so many tall tales during the pilgrimage, I was not besieged with doubts. A smiling Chidambaram pilgrim informed us that the late Shivaneshan's family had been contacted over the satellite phone. His body was being taken by road to Kathmandu. His wife would fly in from Chidambaram and his son from the United States. It was yet to be decided whether the cremation would take place in Kathmandu or in his hometown in southern India.

After about three hours of excited walking we saw the grand brown sweep of the Barkha Plains stretched before us like an ocean. There was Gurla Mandatta, white with snow, towering over the azure waters of Lake Rakshas Tal. With no strong winds to urge them, fluffy white clouds hung listlessly in a voluptuous blue sky. Our Land Cruisers and support trucks were waiting for us in the outskirts of Darchen. It was a joyous reunion with our drivers and members who had stayed back. We bid farewell to the shaggy black dog who had accompanied us throughout our 48km circumambulation of Mt. Kailash. On reaching the pick-up point, he quietly distanced himself from our group without asking for any rewards or favours, and slumbered on the gravel in profound indifference and tranquillity, enjoying the mellow sunshine. With raucous cries of "Har-Har Mahadev" we boarded our vehicles and, homeward bound, drove towards Lake Mansarovar, the stairway to heaven on the face of Kailash always in view.

Shiva is a roaringly popular god. While the other two gods, Vishnu and Brahma, focussed on the business of universe-building, Shiva, lacking the entrepreneurial spirit, retired to the loneliness of the mountain fastness. When he could have networked the world, he was content being a one-man, one-woman show operating from a cramped cave in the open wilderness of the Himalaya. Though not generally attention-seeking, he created his own fashion – always immaculately dressed in deer skin. I admire Shiva's strong independent streak and am enamoured by his adventures. He is human, a common mortal like us. Though he had his vices, he loved his wife – truly, madly, deeply. They were united in hurt, lies and misunderstandings. Like us, they loved intermittently and unevenly. And like us, they had in-law

problems. His father-in-law considered him an unsophisticated, pot-smoking tribal bumpkin, a scab fit to be thrown to the vultures. But Shiva couldn't care less. So reflecting on Shiva's life, I turned back to take my last look at Kailash and Mansarovar and the fabled land of shadowy legends.

I had fulfilled a childhood pledge, curried favour with Shiva, and brought my sin-meter back to zero. I was ready to start life afresh – and sin anew.

Postscript: Mash has set up a flourishing workshop in Pondicherry where she makes exquisite sculptures of Shiva and Parvati. Puneet, an airline pilot, takes pictures from air of mountains associated with Shiva. Nageshwar forays twice a year into the Himalaya, worshipping in Shiva temples. Shankar returned to Tibet to do, once again, the circumambulation of Kailash. When I visited Hyderabad, he accompanied me on the long drive to Srisailam, one of the twelve principal Jyotirlinga temples dedicated to Shiva. After having met Shiva in his abode, I am a bit standoffish with and indifferent to the swarms of other Hindu gods because after having called on the God of all the Realms I do not like to be too familiar with lesser gods whose moral fabric I am not acquainted with.

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