A LITERATURE REVIEW OF THE MENTION OF THE SACRED MOUNTAIN “KAILASH MANSAROVAR” IN THE ANCIENT INDIAN CLASSICS AND MYTHOLOGY

ABSTRACT

For millennia Hindus have revered the sanctity of Mt. Kailash and Mansarovar as a heaven on earth. Kailash is regarded as one of the most sacred place on this planet for the geopietic vision of varied communities in Asia. Each year millions of Hindu devotees travel to these high and risky mountain ranges in order to fulfill their karma of sacred pilgrimage which, they believe, will lead them to attain Moksha. The popular belief prevalent is that journey to this mountain will get them rid of all sins and pave the way to the earthly paradise. The Mount Kailash have influenced the Indian mind since Vedic times, when it was considered to be the home of the gods and the source of soma, the drink of immortality. The myths and legends surrounding the region are not very well documented in the Indian mythology. We can find mention of the holy mountain appearing in the great epic of Mahabharata and the Ramayana too. There are several mention of this sacred mountain in several other religious texts and mythical legends such as Skanda Purana and Brahmanda Purana. Even religious literature of Jainism and Buddhism refers to this mountain as a holy site in their faith. Therefore, a comprehensive survey of these literatures and folklore related with Kailash Mansarovar will benefit us to know the cultural and religious importance of this holy mountain among Hindus and non-Hindus of the region and the whole world. Legends of a mythical land were spread throughout the centuries and became of interest to philosophers, adventurers, theologists and even modern day psychologist. This paper is a preliminary attempt to do a brief survey of myths and legend surrounding the holy mountain Kailash, Lake Mansarovar and the related sacred river Ganges, three forming a triadic sacred complex.

Keywords: Ganges, Hindu, Kailash-Mansarovar, Shiva, Tibet.

INTRODUCTION

India is a sacred country of various religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism, out of which the majority of population (around 80%) is Hindu by birth. Since ancient times, Hindu people regarded mountains and rivers as very sacred and even till today worship them as manifestations of Gods and Goddesses. The mighty Himalayan ranges have been home to the many Hindu legends and also the abode of their gods. Hindus revere the entire Himalayas as an embodiment of the divine, but the presence of the sacred mountain and lake are the ultimate seal of sanctity upon the range. In the geographical as well as social and cultural terms, the Himalayas had always been the crown of the Indian peninsula and remained the cultural focus for its teeming millions. It is in the Himalayas, as the Skanda Purana records, where Lord Shiva lives, and there the mighty river Ganges fell from the foot of Lord Vishnu like “the slender thread of a lotus flower”. The Ramayana says: “There is no mountain like Himalchal [Himalaya], for in it are Kailash
and Mansarovar. As the dew is dried up by the morning sun, so are the sins of mankind by the sight of Himalchal. Mt Kailash is most sacred to Buddhists, Jains, Hindus and Tibetans. Mt. Kailash is regarded as the earthly manifestation of the Hindus’ mythic Mount Meru, or Sumeru, the spiritual center of the universe, the axis mundi in Buddhist and Jain as well as Hindu cosmology. The mount Meru appeared with improvisations in Jain cosmograms, in Japanese temples, in Japanese mythology and Tibetan paintings. It became the ‘shikhar’ of Hindu temples as well as Buddhist Stupas with hemispherical circles rising high.

The Himalayas (snow-abode), also known as Himavat, Himachala, Himadri and Giri-Raja, are the highest mountains in the world, though the youngest. There are picturesque descriptions of the Himalayas in Sanskrit literature. The great Indian poet Kalidas has described this mountain very beautifully in his epic of Kumara-sambhavam. For Hindu residents of the Himalayas, geography is critical to numerous beliefs and ritual practices. Many mountains and rivers have sacred significance, and temples dedicated to local deities are an essential part of each village’s geography. From the perspective of pan-Hindu traditions and beliefs, the region is a place of pilgrimage, not only for today’s people, but also for deities and characters from the great epics. Rishis, sages, and spiritual aspirants had been visiting and sojourning in this hallowed region from time immemorial. Even today, many hundreds of thousands of Hindus travel each year to pilgrimage sites in the Himalayas (tirtha). The pilgrimage site that is most frequently referred to in religious texts and epics is Kailash-Mansarovar. Kailash is the home of Lord Siva, and, for many, it is understood to be the earthly manifestation of Mount Meru – the great mountain mentioned in the Mahabharata. It is also understood to be a physical representation of Siva’s linga. At its base is the holy lake of Mansarovar.

Worship of Shiva may be the oldest surviving religious cult in the world. Each year, millions of Hindus devotees travel to these high and risky mountain ranges in order to fulfill their karma of sacred pilgrimage which will lead them to attain Moksha. The traffic of pilgrims and merchants to and fro Kailash-Mansarovar area was indeed a busy traffic in the Maurya period and Ašokan missionaries like Kasyapa and Madhyāmāgata might have scaled the Himalayas to acquire on-the-ground knowledge of the Himavat. One complete parikrama or circumambulation of Mt. Kailash is said to have the power to erase the accumulated sins of a lifetime, while 108 of these parikramas will ensure nivara or liberation from the cycle of life and death. Legends of a mythic land were spread throughout the centuries and became of interest to philosophers, adventurers, theologists and even modern day psychologist.

**Figure 1: Mount Kailash**
GEOGRAPHICAL DESCRIPTIONS

Mount Kailash (Kang Rinpoche in the Tibetan language) is situated in the south-western part of Tibet bordering the Kumaon hills and Nepal. It is two hundred and forty miles from Almora in U.P. and 800 miles from Lhasa. Mount Kailash is a rock pyramid 22,028 feet high. It embodies the age old concept of the ‘navel of the earth’, the ‘world pillar’, the ‘first of the mountains’, the ‘still point in the turning world’, ‘rooted in the seventh hell, piercing through to the highest heaven’. They are a part of the Himalayas and are situated in northwest Tibet (or Gangdesh). To the north of Mansarovar stands the sacred peak of Kailash, mentioned in Sanskrit literature as the paradise of Shiva. Kalidasa mentions, the waters of Mansarovar are like pearls; to drink them erases the sins of a hundred lifetimes. Innumerable shooting stars descend into the waters as one sits and watches the celestial show at dusk.

Before the dawn of history Mansarovar had become the sacred lake, and it has remained for four millennia (Pranavananda, 1934, 1949). Its inaccessibility has enhanced its sanctity, and has enshrouded it in mystery. Earlier composers of tales believed that it rises 84,000 leagues high at the centre of the universe, encircled by the concentric rings of the seven continents and seven oceans. Later Sanskrit epics too describe Kailash as the one descending from the upper reaches of Himalayas and recognized this seat at the holiest of the mountains. It has been accepted that the most beautiful and captivating of all the lakes in the world is Mansarovar. Formerly, in ancient India, it was known as Brahmasar. It is a fresh water lake perched at 15,000 ft. above sea level. Consequently, the religious importance of Mount Kailash and its immediate hinterland of Lake Mansarovar is multifaceted. Since the ancient times the Lake Mansarovar, the lake born from the mind of Brahma, is among the most ancient and holy of Hindu pilgrimage sites. Hindus believe that by traveling to this holy mountain and taking bath in this lake, their all sins will be washed away and they can get Mukti (liberation) from this life. They believe that the Lake Mansarovar is an embodiment of purity, and one who drinks water from the lake will go to the abode of Lord Shiva after death. The person gains merit and believed to be cleansed of all his sins committed over even a hundred lifetimes.

The glory of Kailash and Mansarovar, where nature unleashes its fury and dons its beauty, are sung at length by the shastras (Hindu classics) of Sanatan (eternal, referring to ancient Hindu religion) Dharma. Since Vedic times thousands of years ago, it has been revered as a holy pilgrim place and is believed to be the source of four subterranean rivers, namely, Shatdru (Sutlej), Sindhu, Brahmaputra and Saryu (Karnali). Together the Holy Mountain and the four rivers that spring from it, form a vast geographical mandala that has a very profound effect over the cultural universe of the Himalayan people. The Holy Mansarovera or Mana-sarovar, the Tso Mapham or Tso Mavang of the Tibetans, is the holiest, the most fascinating, the most inspiring, the most famous of all the lakes in the world and the most ancient that civilization knows. “Mansarovar” was the first lake known to geography. It is the creation of the manas (mind) of Brahma, the first of the Trinity of Hindu mythology; and according to some the Maharaja Mandhata in the Krita-yuga (Golden Age) discovered the Mansarovar. The legend goes: Mandhata had done penance on the shores of Mansarovar at the foot of the magnificent mountains named after him. At the shores of this holy lake, there were seven rows of trees. According to the legend, there was a big mansion down below on its bottom. It is said to be the abode of the king of Nags – the serpent gods – and in the middle of the arc like surface of the lake once upon there stood a huge tree. Its fruits fell into the lake with the sound ‘Jam’; thus, the surrounding region came to be known as “Jambu-ling” or “Jambu-dvipa” in the Hindu Puranas. It is said that the Nags – serpents – ate some of the fruits that fell into the lake and some sank to the bottom of the lake and metamorphosed as gold nuggets. Although mythological and historical stories behind the mount Kailash vary from religion to religion, its religious significance is undisputed. The greatest of all Indian poets, Kalidas, pours his heart in penning the grandeur of Kailash and Mansarovar in his work called Meghdoot. In Meghdoot, Kalidas writes, “Kailashaye tridha sa vanita darpanayate.” (Purva Megha 59) – Mt Kailash is the mirror for celestial ladies. He further describes Mt Kailash as being one of the four krida shail or sports hills built for Shiva, the other three being Kankadi, Mandar and Gandhamadan. The southern face of Mt Kailash displays the marking of the celestial steps - a long vertical deft punctuated by a horizontal line of rocks strata. The design resembles a swastika indicating the rays of the sun in Hinduism. According to Charles Allen, one description in the Vishnu Purana of the mountain states that its four faces are made of crystal, ruby, gold, and lapis lazuli.

According to Sergei Balalaev: “The Kailash Complex is a huge natural mandala each part of which is characterized by its specific qualities. The top of Kailash allows a person to be united with the Center of the Earth. The South Face, associated with the element of Water, is the link between the manifested and secret worlds, as well as between the terrestrial and celestial worlds. To the full extent it is possible to experience during the passage of the inner kora (Nandi Kora). The West Face of Kailash, associated with the element of Air, makes it possible to realize Absolute Love. The
North Face of Kailash, associated with the element of Ether, helps realize Knowledge. The East Face of Kailash associated with the element of Fire, is a kind of a Gate inside Kailash. The way inside is open only to those who are able to interact with all the elements manifested in the Faces of Kailash and realize corresponding qualities, and who are able to pass the purification by fire energies of the Valley of Life and Death.”

There is another explanation that the mountain is four faceted with four colours: white like a Brahmin, the priest, on its eastern surface; yellow like a Vaisya, the merchant, on the south; red like a Kshatriya, the warrior, on the north; black on its western side like a Shudra, the menial. This version of Mount Meru embraces the concept of Hindu social organization that divides the people in four classes. In other words, Hindu life system derives its existence from the legendary four sides of Mount Meru. Yet, one school of thought attributes it to the Sumerian civilization (2,500-3,000 B.C.). In the Mesopotamian city, a stepped pyramid, the ziqurat, supposed to be linking the forces of heaven and earth represented the cosmic mountain. One of the myths goes to maintain that at the core of the Jambu, the landmass surrounding Lake Mansarovar, stood the glorious mountain of Meru.

KAILASH IN HINDU MYTHOLOGY

Kailash Mansarovar is the land of mists and myths. But these myths and legends surrounding the region are not very well documented in the Indian mythology except in Shiv Purana. Mythological tales in the Purana mention that the Himalayas are the abode of Shiva.” It is a land where Lord Shiva lives with his consort Parvati. The popular Hindu perception associates the Himalayas with Lord Shiva, the Destroyer and Transformer of the Hindu Triad. The other two of the Triad, Brahma, the Creator, and Vishnu, the Preserver, also reside there. According to ancient Hindu religious texts, the abode of creator Brahma is called Brahmaloka, the abode of Lord Vishnu is called “Vaikunth” the abode of Lord Shiva is called Kailash. Of the three, one can only go bodily and return in this life from Kailash having experienced divinity.”

As per Hindu mythology, Kailash is the divine centre at the heart of all creation, and from its worship comes a vision of the divinity of all things. The basic cosmography described in these epics took some shape in the eighteen texts collectively known as Puranas. Puranas describe the earth as made up of seven continents and seven oceans. The central landmass has six mountain ranges surrounding the Meru at the core, and one of these mountains is the Himalayas. The human ideal of Mount Meru rising from the descent of the seventh hell and rising to perforate through the loftiest of the heavens – the great mountain at the centre of the universe itself – comes to rest at Kailash. The Skanda Purana therefore acknowledges, “There are no mountains like the Himalayas, for in them are Kailash and Mansarovar”. Mount Meru is given a spectacular description in the Hindu Vishnu Purana of 200 BC. In another sense, it captures for a fleeting moment the Absolute for which all symbols are only substitues, translations of eternity and infinity into the realm of time and space. Of human construction or not, Mt. Kailash is one of the most mysterious, secret and at the same time one of the most holy and sacred mountains of Asia, if not of the world, the circumambulation (parikrama/kora) of which has for many centuries or possibly many millennia remained a vital pilgrimage, symbolizing the life’s stages of death, purification and rebirth. As long as there have been ancient religions in Asia, there has been a reverence for Mount Kailash. The cosmologies and origin myths of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism each speak of as the axis mundi - the center and birthplace of the entire world.

The Mount Kailash occupies one of the highest places in the hierarchy of millions of Gods. The Aryan cosmology had established Mount Meru not only as the navel of the Earth but the centre of the universe as well. On its summit is located the Swarga – the heaven – presided over by the king of the Hindu Gods, Indra, who is also the God of rains that bring prosperity to the vast food bowl of the Gangetic plains. Nevertheless, the dominantly emerging themes are related to Lord Shiva, who married the daughter of the king of a Himalayan state, the Daksha Prajapati. It is supremely sacred mountain, cosmology connected with Mount Meru, the great mythological mountain that forms the axis of this world system. In Hindu mythology, Mount Meru is a fabulous mountain, for on it is situated Swarga - that is, heaven - the place with the cities of gods, and the habitations of celestial spirits. The sun, moon, and stars are supposedly turning around the mountain, and above the king of mountains is heaven. (Chamaria, 1996, 24)

In Hindu sacred books, literary classics and mythology, we find numerous instances, where this sacred mountain has been referred to as the abode of Lord Shiva. The Shrimad Bhagvad Gita describes Mt. Kailash as a divine form of God, “Meruhu shikharinamaham” meaning, “I am Kailash (Meru) among all mountains.” The Kailash Mansarovar region finds mentions in both epics, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. The Valmiki Ramayana, in the Kishkindha Kand and Bal Kand, and the Bhishma Parva, Van Parva, Dron Parva and Anushashan Parva of the epic Mahabharata describe, through stories, the glory and beauty of Kailash-Mansarovar. In the great epic Ramayana, the sage Valmiki tells Lord Ram, that the Manasa Lake was mentally created by Brahma in Kailasha mountain. This is Kubera’s living place also.
After his brother Ravana takes control of Lanka and Pushpaka Vimana, Kubera with the blessings from Parameshwara establishes Alkapuri in Kailash and becomes Yakharaja. Another story goes like this. Once sage Dattatreya travelled from Vindhyachal Mountains in the south to the Himalayas and then arrived at Mansarovar. After a holy dip in its waters and seeing the royal swans (rajahans) he asked Shiva and Parvati residing in a cave in Mt. Kailash, “Which is the holiest of holy places in the world?” Shiva replied, “The holiest of holy places is the Himalaya in which lies Kailash and Mansarovar.”

The Puranas describe the death of Bhasmaur, a demon, at this place. Many nearby landmarks are also related to infamous and famous people of Indian culture. Ravana, the King of Lanka, performed austerities at Ravanhrud or Raksha Tal. Ravana ruled Lanka. He came to Mount Kailash in the Himalayas to worship Shiva. Kailash Mountain was the abode of Shiva. Ravana prayed Shiva to appear before him. Shiva did not. Ravana got frustrated and wanted to show his strength. He lifted the Kailash Mountain with all his twenty hands. The entire place shook as if struck by an earthquake. Shiva’s wife Parvati got scared. The gods in heaven thought the world might come to an end if the mountain was dislodged thus. They prayed to Shiva to do something. Shiva, who usually fulfills any and every wish of those who worship him decided to teach Ravana a lesson. Shiva pressed the mountain with one of his big toes. Now Ravana got the chance to show his strength. He lifted the Kailash Mountain with all his twenty hands. The entire place shook as if struck by an earthquake. Ravana lost his strength and was defeated.

There is a reference to Kailash and Mansarovar in the great epic Mahabharata, according to which Arjuna visited and conquered this region, in consequence of which the vassal Kings of this region sent black and white yak-tails, bet seeds, gold, brilliant gems, and other things as presents to the Emperor Yudhisthira on the occasion of Rajasuya-Yaga or Horse-Sacrifice. After that, Rishi Vyasa and Bhima visited Kailash once and Sri Krishna and Arjuna on another occasion. At the end of the Mahabharata, the Pandava brothers all renounce the world and wander into the Himalayas. Eventually the eldest brother, Yudhisthira, bathes in the Gangā and enters heaven (Sax, 2002, 19). There is a reference to Kailash and Mansarovar in the great epic Ramayana, Rishi Dattatreya did the pilgrimage to Kailash and Mansarovar. Ravana, Bhasmaur and others in Treta-yuga did penance to propitiate Lord Shiva. In the Ramcharitmanas, Tulsidas says ‘Param ranya girivar Kailashu sada jahan Shiva Uma nivasu’ (1-105). It is on this most beautiful and prominent mountain Kailash that Shiva and Parvati reside. Even as late as sixteen century the nirguna poet Kabir mentions Kailash in his poems.

According to some historians, Emperor Ashoka (269 B.C.) deputed the Katyuri Raja Nandi Deva of Kumaraon who invaded Western Tibet through the Unita-dhura pass and annexed it to the Indian Empire. On his return journey, he visited Kailash and Mansarovar. Some biographers of Adi Shankaracharya write that he had dropped down his body near Kailash. Shankaracharya in his Chandrashekara Astaka glorifies the abode of Ishwara - the holy Mt. Kailash. With the antiquity of Tantra traced back to the Indus civilization and with Mount Kailash as the focal point in Tantra, regular
contacts and exchanges between the Siddhas on both sides of the Himalayas in pre-Buddhist and even pre-Vedic times are no longer ruled out. Some scholars surmise that even Indian Tantra was developed from the pre-Buddhist religion of Tibet called Bon.31

**KAILASH IN BUDDHIST AND JAIN MYTHOLOGY**

In some Pali and Sanskrit Buddhist works, Mansarovar is described as Anotatta or Anavatapta—Lake without heat and trouble. In its center is a tree which bears fruits that are ‘omnipotent’ in healing all human ailments, physical as well as mental, and as much sought after by gods and men alike. This Anavatapta is described as the only true paradise on earth. It is also said that mighty lotus flowers, as big as the Amitabha Buddha, bloom in the Holy lake, and the Buddha and the Bodhisattvas often sit on these flowers. Heavenly Raja-hansas (Swans) will be singing their celestial melodies as they swim in the lake. On the surrounding mountains of the lake are found the Shata-mulikas or hundred herbs.

The story of Lord Shiva and his incarnations does not end here. Kailash bristles with more deities sitting in 990 rows with 500 in each. Each of them is a facsimile of Demchok. Besides Demchok and his eternal partner Dorje-Phangmo, others also populate the Kailash. There is an intermingling of the myths: Lord Buddha and his 500 Bodhisattvas are said to have their dwelling on the Kailash peak. At the foot of the sacred peak is seated Hanumanji, the Hindu monkey-god. This is said to be the abode of lesser-known deities around Kailash and Mansarovar. The legend goes: these deities could be seen by the pious one only and the lesser mortals report hearing sounds of bells, cymbals and other musical instruments coming right from the top of Kailash. The myths descend down from Mount Kailash to the shores of Lake Mansarovar.

According to the ancient Tibetan text of Kangi Karchhak, the presiding deity of Kailash is Demchok (Dharmapala or Pavo). Demchok, like Lord Shiva, wraps himself in a tiger skin and wears an intimidating garland of human skulls. According to the Tibetan scriptures, he holds a damaru - a small drum – in one hand and a khatam – trident – in the other. The Shakti, or spouse, of Demchok is Dorje-Phangmo or Vajra Varahi. She is shown in ancient Tibetan paintings and idols clinging to Demchok in convoluted embrace. This physical union of the super beings is translated into geographical symbolism. On the western side of Kailash peak, a smaller snow peak known as Tijun is situated. Tijun is said to be the abode of Dorje-Phangmo. The “Kangri Karchhak” --the Tibetan Kailash Purana-- says that the four great rivers called Langchen Khambab, or the Elephant-mouthed river (Sutlej), on the west, Tamchok Khambab, or the Horse-ears-mouthed river (Brahmaputra), on the east, and Mapchu Khambab, or the Peacock-mouthed river (Karnali), on the south, have their sources in Tso Mapham, the lake unconquerable (Mansarovar).

In Jain literature, Kailash is called Ashtapada. Adinatha Vrishabhadeva, the first Tirthankar of Jainism, was said to have attained Nirvana at Kailash. In the Mahabharata, Mansarovar is also known as Bindusara and in Jain works as Padma Hrada. According to the Uttar Purana, the first Tirthankar in Jain dharma, Rishabhdev, performed austerities and gave up his mortal existence at Mt. Kailash.

**STORY OF KAILASH AS DEPICTED IN HINDU TEMPLES**

As the history progresses, movements of people and ideas also found the concept of Mount Meru filtering and improving itself through various layers of civilizations and passages of time as well. While in the West, the medieval Europe had the vision of the multi-tiered realm of heaven and hell, in the East, Hindu mythology, for instance, spoke of various kinds of heaven and hell. In other words, the concept of Mount Meru spread across the globe and Asia, in particular. It inspired art, architecture, literature, religion, mythology and even naturopathy and psychology. Following are some of the famous paintings found across India and in South Asia which depicts the story of Shiva in Kailash. For example, the ancient Koneswaram temple of Trincomalee is heralded as “Dakshina Kailasham” (Kailash of the South) it lies on exactly the same longitude as Mount Kailash.32

![Figure 2: Temple in Trincomalee in Sri Lanka](Photo taken by Dschen Reinecke)
Figure 3: Drama (Dance) Gestures. Dancing Siva. Early 8th c.

(Location: Temple of Kailashanatha, Kanchipuram, Tamil Nadu, India. Photo Credit: Vanni / Art Resource, NY33)

Many of the Kailashanath temple's sculptures and relics depict episodes relating to Lord Shiva and Parvati, including Ravana's tale. The picture in Figure 4 is a classic depiction of Shiva's story located in the cave temples of Elephanta Island near Mumbai in India.

Figure 4: Cave carving, Elephanta Island

Figure 4 shows Ravana being crushed by Shiva under the Kailash Mountain. The gods from heaven are watching the entire spectacle, basically enjoying the destruction of Ravana's pride in being powerful enough to lift the Kailash Mountain. A grateful Ravana sang a song in praise of Shiva. Carvings have been damaged, locals say, by Portuguese raiders in the 17th century.34
THE MYTHICAL ORIGIN OF GANGES IN KAILASH

Hindus across the world believe that the Ganges is the most pious river on the earth. One very popular story told in India is that of the sacred river, the Ganges descended to earth with the help of Lord Shiva. The river Gangā derives its sanctity largely because it is believed to emerge from Shiva's hair. Shiva and many other deities reside in the mountains. Even in other parts of India, “the quality of sanctity of the Ganga and of the Himalaya seems to have been transferred in part to other rivers and other mountains respectively” (Bhardwaj, 1973, 86). The Matsya Purana describes the descent of ‘Divya Ganga’ near Bindusara Sarovar (lake) nestling between the Kailash, Mainak, Hiranyakshringa mountains, and taking three different paths as Tripathaga -the tripath ganni Ganga.

The Hindu scriptures have their own legends about these rivers. Once upon a time, King Bhagiratha did severe penance to request Ganga to descend to earth and redeem his ancestors who had been reduced to ashes and denied entry to heaven due to curse by Sage Kapila. As Ganga responds to this call and begins her descent, Gods fearing that her irresistible nature could deluge the world and appeal to Lord Shiva to intervene, Shiva contains her force and arrests her in his matted hair. He then loosens the knot gently and releases her tributaries in four different directions. These are the four mighty rivers that travel great distances and make vast portions of South and South East Asia fertile. Both Hindu and Buddhist scriptures claim which incidentally have been confirmed by various geographers and explorers, that these rivers encircle the Kailash-Mansarovar region seven times before flowing in various directions.

Tibetan theory about the Ganges originating in the catchment of Kailash Mansarovar is not merely based on the Sanskrit Abhidharmakosha or earlier Pali records. Even as late as the second half of the eighteenth century, Tibetan pilgrims and merchants are known to have seen the 'animal bead' out of which streamed forth the Ganga; Cho-je Pa-trul and Lama Tsanpo record from hearsay as in ancient tradition as well as from knowledge of pilgrims and other on-the-spot observers. While orthodox; Hindus, in both north and south India, would locate this lost source of the Ganges to a subterranean glacier connecting with Gangotri glacier, more modern minds would straightway reject the story of the Tibetan origins of “the Ganges as a myth”. (Nirmal C. Sinha, 1977)

Steven Darian has produced a beautiful book on the origin of the river Ganges in which he describes the legends related with the origin in Kailash. He writes: “As such it seems less a place than a state of mind, populated with the dreams and aspirations of a thousand pilgrims who shall never make the journey except in their hearts.” He further writes that there are four legendary rivers that flow from within a radius of 50 km in four different directions. To the south is the sapphire face from where flows the Kamali, from the ruby face on the west flows the Sutlej, from the gold face on the north flows the Indus and eastwards from the crystal face flows the Brahmaputra also referred to as Yarlag Sangpo.

SUMMARY

As mentioned above, with regard to the sanctity of the Kailash Mansarovar, Hindu, Buddhist, Jain and Bonpo: each holds different beliefs, each sees different gods, but the underlying reality is the same. At this site of natural power, the temporal and the eternal unite; the divine takes physical form. To the faithful, Kailash is the supreme mountain and a journey to it is made in the spiritual as well as the earthly realm. Kailash and Mansarovar are so deeply rooted in the Hindu soul that even the self-professed unbelievers not only from India but from across the world are taking the arduous journey to experience the divine in person. In coming years with the development of a better infrastructure, the holy mountain may emerge as the most famous tourist place on this planet earth.

ENDNOTES

1. In the Indian mythology, rivers and mountains have been always regarded as source of life and sustenance. In the Rig Veda the mountains are the home of water: of rivers, of rain, of soma—all forms of the life-conferring liquid (amrita). At that time the mountains were portrayed as holding back the water-laden clouds which lay hidden among them. Gradually the theme recedes and the mountains—notably Himavat (Himalaya)—are characterized as the home of rivers. Along with other rivers, Ganga, Saraswati (now invisible), Sindhu (Indus), and Yamuna are described as flowing from slopes of Himavat. Sindhu, Satluj, Karnali and Brahmaputra have their sources in one region embracing Mount Kailash and Mansarovar lake. The relationship between Ganga and Himalaya is mentioned throughout the Indian epics and Puranas. Ganga is specifically connected with Mount Kailash and also with Mount Meru. The holy river Ganga has been especially regarded as mother of the Hindu civilization. The Ganges is born several hundred miles south of Kailash Mountain in the Gangotri glacier (the exact place of the origin is called Gomukh as it is cow mouth shaped).
2. According to Puranic (and pan-Indian) cosmology, the conical, golden mountain at the centre of Jambudvipa, the innermost island of the earth, is a flat disc. Meru is therefore the axis mundi, or 'navel' (nabhi), a mountain of extraordinary proportions (said by some sources to be 84,000 yojanas (756,000 miles) high), extending into both heaven and hell. It is said to be the abode of various gods and their heavens.


4. Following the political and border disturbances across the Chinese-Indian boundary, pilgrimage to the legendary abode of Lord Shiva was stopped from 1954 to 1978. Thereafter, a limited number of Indian pilgrims have been allowed to visit the place, under the supervision of the Chinese and Indian governments either by a lengthy and hazardous trek over the Himalayan terrain, by land from Kathmandu or from Lhasa where flights from Kathmandu are available to Lhasa and thereafter travel over the great Tibetan plateau by car. The journey takes four nights stops, finally arriving at Darchen at elevation of 4,600 m (15,100 ft), smalloutpost that temple to swastika, at certain times of year. An Indian parliamentary committee has suggested that the government should actively explore the possibility of making the alternate route to Kailash Mansarovar through Demchok in Ladakh a reality. The panel said that the alternate route was safer, dependable and shorter than the one in use since 1981 through the Lipulek pass, which requires cooperation with the Chinese government even though only a limited number of tourists are permitted every year. (Times News Network, New Delhi, 21 Aug 2008).

5. Buddhists and Jains refer to the circumambulation as kora, Hindus as parikrama. A single circumambulation equals one turn of the Wheel of Life and will wipe away the sins of one's life, twelve circumambulations will purify one's karma for all past and future lives, and enlightenment is attained after 108. Even one kora presents an extremely difficult task since the mountain is difficult of access and dangerous. The parikrama or circumambulation of Mt. Kailash is performed in a clockwise direction. Followers of Bon, the pre-Buddhist religion of Tibet, perform it anti-clockwise. The Kailash parikrama can be done by doing the outer parikrama or what the Buddhists call kora and the inner parikrama or nangkor. It involves traversing 53 km and takes three days to complete. The kora is done clockwise from Darchen via the south face of Mt. Kailash and then to the west and north face. Beyond this are the Drolma Pass and Gauri Kund, and then back to Darchen.

6. The manifestations of Mount Meru are numerous and varied and found in the inner journey of the human soul and body. The psychologist Carl Jung found it as the self’s journey to sublime completeness. The tantric, the Yoga, emphasized the channelization of psychic energies through the spinal cord, which is also called 'meru danda'. The medieval tools of tantric cults described the Meru in geometric terms as ‘mandalas’ and the Shiva Samhita spoke of the Meru as the spiritual centre, the kingdom of the mind. Indian tradition prescribes sleeping posture along the north-south axis: either head or legs facing the north where Meru stands. The north-south axis of the earth confirms with the human meru danda, the spinal cord, and the human being sleeps in perfect harmony with the celestial and earthly magnetic forces. The great tradition of Mount Meru has intermingled with mini traditions.

7. With its four facades facing north, east, south, and west, Mount Kailash looks like an enormous diamond. Seventy-five percent as high as Mount Everest, the mountain is one of the tallest peaks in the Himalas as. Nearby is the source of the Indus, Sutlej, and Brahmaputra Rivers. The source of the Ganges is not far away. On its southern face, a vertical gash crosses horizontal layers, creating the image of a swastika. The word comes from svastika, Sanskrit for well-being and good fortune. Buddhists regard the mountain as a mandala — the sacred circle from which the sacred rivers flow like the spokes of the eternal wheel.” See Wilson, Colin (1996). The Atlas of Holy Places & Sacred Sites, Penguin Books Ltd., p. 119.


9. Swami Pranavananda was one of the pioneers who between 1928 and 1949 made 25 circuits of the mountain and 23 of the lake and gave a detailed account of the physiography of this region. Until now, the most comprehensive book is that of Swami Pranvananda's Kailas-Mansarovara (Delhi, 1949, 1983) which is not only the complete pilgrimage.
guide book but also gives the narrative of its importance for Hindus and other believers. Among primary sources on Kailash, The Sacred Mountain by John Snelling (London, 1998) surveys Kailash’s role in Asian religions and the accounts of pilgrims and travelers who have journeyed to it. Kailash-Mansarovar: Ascent to the Divine by Rommel and Sadhana Varma (Switzerland, 1985) places Kailash and the entire Himalaya, in their Hindu context as embodiments of divinity. Eika Kawaguchi’s Three Years in Tibet (Madras, 1909) includes a description of the Japanese monk’s journey to Kailash. The three chapters on Kailash in The Way of the White Clouds by Lama Anagarika Govinda (London, 1966) remain the classic description of a religious pilgrimage to the mountain. For a general overview of Tibet, Giuseppe Tucci’s Tibet (London, 1967) and Tibet by Thupten Jigme Norbu and Colin Turnbull (London, 1969) are comprehensive, interesting surveys of traditional culture. Tibetan Civilization by R.A. Stein (London, 1972) covers Tibet’s political and religious history in more detail. Robert Ekvall’s Religious Observances in Tibet (Chicago, 1964) examines Tibetan Buddhism from an anthropological perspective. The Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa, a poetic summation of Buddhist precepts, appears in several English editions; Garma C.C. Chang’s translation (New York, 1972) is among the best. The adventures of Western explorers in the Kailash region are summarized in Charles Allen’s A Mountain in Tibet (London, 1982), which describes the search for the sources of the four great rivers. Although An Account of Tibet: The Travels of Ippo Lito Desideri of Tistola, S.J. (London, 1932) was not published until over two hundred years after the Jesuit’s journey; it remains a fascinating, perceptive description. Volumes II and III of Sven Hedin’s three-volume masterwork Transhimalaya: Discoveries and Adventures in Tibet (London, 1909—1913) contain a wealth of historical material on the mountain range as well as an account of Hedin’s adventures in the Kailash region.

10. Swami Pranavanandaji, who had made pilgrimage to and stayed at Mansarovar thirty-two times writes, “From the spiritual point of view, she has an en rapporting vibration of the supreme order that can soothe and lull even the most wandering mind into sublime serenity and can transport it into involuntary ecstasies.” Swami Pranavanandaji (1949). Kailas-Mansarovar, 1st ed. Calcutta: S.P. League, Ltd., p.7.

11. Ibid., p. 12.
12. According to Charles Allen, it has square sides of gold and jewels: its eastern face of crystal, the southern of sapphire, the western of ruby and the northern of gold; its peak is wrapped in aromatic flowers and herbs. There are four footprints of the Buddha on the four sides: these footprints stopped the local deities to take the peak to the sky, the seventh heaven, and four chains prevented the denizens of the lower regions from taking it down to the seventh hell.
13. The Puranas are, next to the epic Mahabharata, the most important source of our information on places of pilgrimage in India. The Puranas as a body of Hindu literature not only possess great sanctity but also contain vast amounts of material for the study of cultural history, geography, ethnography, and many other aspects of ancient India. They provide us great insight into all aspects and phases of Hinduism.
14. “Parvati is mythological represented as the daughter of King Himalaya (lit., “abode of the snows”) whose home is
a certain peak on the Tibetan border. Astonished travelers, passing below that inaccessible peak, view afar a vast snow formation resembling a palace, with icy domes and turrets. Parvati, Kali, Durga, Uma, and other goddesses are aspects of Jaganmatri, the Divine Mother of the World,” variously names to signalize particular functions. God or Shiva in His para or transcendental aspect is inactive in creation. His shakti (energy, activating force) is relegated to His “consorts,” the productive “female” powers that make possible the infinite unfoldments in the cosmos. - See more at: Paramahansa Yogananda(1974). Autobiography of a Yogi, Self-Realization Fellowship, pp. 194-95.

15. Hindus believe in the Trinity of supreme gods- Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh also known as Shiva.

16. Dr. Sethumadhava, Mount Kailash, Where the Heaven meets the Earth.

17. The Axis Mundi, the centre of the universe, the navel of the world, the world pillar, Kang Tisé or Kang Rinpoche (the “Precious Jewel of Snow” in Tibetan), Meru (or Sumeru), Swastika Mountain, Mt. Astapada, Mt. Kangrinboge (the Chinese name) - all these names, real or legendary, belong to one of the holiest and most mysterious mountains in the world - Mount Kailash.

18. आवेदनमथे या कक्षामें देवमणि गगनाणि: विष्णुपूर्वे विष्णुपूर्वे विष्णुपूर्वे विष्णुपूर्वे विष्णुपूर्वे विष्णुपूर्वे विष्णुपूर्वे विष्णुपूर्वे विष्णुपूर्वे विष्णुपूर्वे विष्णुपूर्वे विष्णुपूर्वे विष्णुपूर्वे विष्णुपूर्वे विष्णुपूर्वे विष्णुपूर्वे विष्णुपूर्वे विष्णुपूर्वे विष्णुपूर्वे विष्णुपूर्वे विष्णुपूर्वे विष्णुपूर्वे विष्णुपूर्वे विष्णुपूर्वे विष्णुपूर्वे

19. One of the ideas the Russians have put forward is that Mt. Kailash could be a vast, human-built pyramid, the centre of an entire complex of smaller pyramids, a hundred in total. This complex, moreover, might be the centre of a world-wide system connecting other monuments or sites where paranormal phenomena have been observed. The idea of the pyramid in this region is not new. It goes back to the timeless Sanskrit epic of the Ramayana. Since then, numerous travelers, especially in the beginning of the 20th century, have expressed the view that Mt. Kailash is too perfect to be a totally natural phenomenon, or at any rate give the appearance of human intervention. For example: In shape it (Mount Kailash) resembles a vast cathedral… the sides of the mountain are perpendicular and fall sheer for hundreds of feet, the strata horizontal, the layers of stone varying slightly in colour, and the dividing lines showing up clear and distinct… which give to the entire mountain the appearance of having been built by giant hands, of huge blocks of reddish stone. (G.C. Rawling (1905). The Great Plateau, London). However, it is only fair to add that the Russian claims to have discovered in Mt. Kailash area as the highest ever human-built pyramids were denied three years later by Chinese scientists in the official Chinese Press. Evelina Rioukina, Axis Mundi, Questions… Enigma… Mysteries… UNECE Stable URL: http://www.unspecial.org/UNS640/t47.html, last accessed on 20 March, 2014.


21. For example, Sage Valmiki writes: कैलासपर्वतेऽर्थ नमस्य निर्घर्मिति यज्ञं नरशादृशं ते पवित्र नामसं सर्वं। 1/248-9। तत्समाधानं भगवानं भगवानं भगवानं। निलविन्दाः निलविन्दाः निलविन्दाः सहानु:। 7/114। तत् मन्यात्रि रूपं नरशादृशमता नरी। कैलास: सुरसशक्षाः पक्षकं सत्वादिका। 7/118/2। कृष्णेश्वरलंकाचे तथा अर्न्ध्यज्ञ वृक्षशिवं। 7/11/4। तत् रेता: सम्पन्नह्य: समयांशिकत्वाः। 7/11/44। (भगवानम् / उक्तकाण्डम् / सर्वं: 11)

22. The pan-Indian god of wealth, and, as one of the dīkṣālas, the guardian of the North. In the Purāṇas and Epics, he is said to be the leader of the yakshas and rākshasas, and the half-brother of Rāvana. He is normally included in the Shaiva pantheon.

23. Vishnu Purana (4/5/26; 85/4/55; 10/10/2; 55)

24. In the Rāmāyana, and other versions of the Rāma story, the anti-heroic, ten-headed, twenty-armed, lord of the rākshasas, who abducts Sītā and carries her off to his kingdom of Lankā. In the end, he is killed by Rāma. Various stories are told of his origins and character. He is said to have been a brahmin, who acquired his power through great austerities (tapas), and was granted invulnerability (but not from a god in human form). He ousted his half-brother, Kubera, from the throne of Lankā. Renowned for his lust, he does not, however, violate Sītā. Although the epitome of adharma, for that very reason (i.e. because he opposes Brahmanical dharma) Rāvana has become a heroic figure for some, particularly in South India, and among outcasts.
25. No records tell when the first Hindu pilgrims crossed the Himalayas to bathe ritually in Mansarovar's waters and circumambulate its shores. The origin of the lake's sanctity is buried deep in the unconscious mind where it first struck a resonant chord. References to the divine lake stud the pages of the Hindu classics as well as early Buddhist literature. It is the most excellent 'lake of the mind' and the only true 'paradise on earth', 'I behold Manas, and there in the form of a swan dwells Shiva', says the Ramayana. 'This lake was formed from the mind of Brahma; there dwell also Mahadeva and all the gods.' Mansarovar is depicted as a divine paradise; royal swans, the emblem of Brahma, float on its transparent waters beside Bodhi satvas and Buddhas enthroned on giant lotus blossoms. The Mahanirvan Tantra describes Kailash in similar terms: The enchanting summit of the Lord of Mountains... clad with many a tree and many a creeper, melodious with the song of many a bird, scented with the fragrance of all the season's flowers, most beautiful, fanned by soft, cool and perfumed breezes, shadowed by the still shade of stately trees.

26. Kailasa is not only venerated for its religious significance, but also for its physical beauty. It is called the 'Mountain of the Sun' by the Hindus, and is considered to be the abode of Shiva.

27. Sufficient literary evidence is there to suggest fair knowledge of Himalayan regions in North India in the period of Buddhism. Arjuna had reached Uttrakuru, beyond the Kun Lun Mountains, by way of Lake Manas which was the country of the Hatakas. The offerings of gold at Yudhisthira's court included the variety recovered from the Pipilika in Western Tibet. The Gold-digging Ants of Herodotus and the Pipilikas of Mahabharata were no doubt the same obscure fauna.

28. Long before Buddhism took root in Tibet in the 7th century, Kailash was venerated by the adherents of the Bon religion. The indigenous religion of the region who maintained that the mystic region around Mt. Kailash and the Nine-Story Swastika Mountain was the seat of all power. When viewed from the south face, a swastika can indeed be seen. According to Bon accounts, while the circumambulation is made (anticlockwise, whereas followers of the other religion walk in the clockwise direction) 18 powerful and enlightened teachers will appear in this eon. The land is traditionally described as dominated by Mount Yungdrung Gu-tseg (edifice of nine swastikas), which many identify as Mount Kailash.

29. Koneswaram temple of Trincomalee, Thirukonamalai Konesar Temple - The Temple of the Thousand Pillars and Dakshina-Then Kailasam is a classical-medieval Hindu temple complex in Trincomalee, a Hindu religious pilgrimage centre in Eastern Province, Sri Lanka. Built significantly during the reign of the early Cholas and the Five Dravida Kings of the Early Pandyan Kingdom atop Konesar Malai, a small hill overlooking Trincomalee District, Gokarna bay and the Indian Ocean, its Pallava, Chola, Pandayan and Jaffna design reflect a Tamil Saivite influence. The monument contains its main shrine to Shiva in the form Kona-Eiswara, shortened to Konesar and is a major place for Hindu pilgrimage. Connected at the mouth of the Mahavilli Ganga River to the footprints of Shiva at Sivan Oli Padam Malai at the river's source, the temple symbolically crowns the flow of the Ganges River from Shiva's head of Mount Kailash to his feet. Source: Wikipedia.

30. Shiva and Parvati (his consort), along with worshipers, are depicted in relief on the lintel of the doorway facing the arriving visitor. The door guardians and the river goddesses (Ganga and Yamuna) flanking the doors marked the religion of Shiva's worship, as did the ganas (Shiva's army) on the side wall, and the Yakshas— who had displaced the rivers from their customary flanking position to the top of the door. The Yakshas were vestiges of the ancient veneration of the tree and water spirits.

31. As discussed above, Ravana was a devotee of Lord Shiva. Ramayana does not document Ravana shaking the mountain. Ravana's mother had fallen ill. As they were great Lord Shiva devotees, he had attempted to carry the temple on his back to bring it closer to his mother. Shiva, being stunned by his boldness, had blessed him with immortality as Ravana had passed Lord Shiva's test of devotion.

32. According to Hindu belief, drinking water from the Ganga (Ganges) River with one's last breath will carry the soul to heaven. Hindus travel from around the world to immerse in the river's purifying waters, for forgiveness of their sins and to help attain salvation.
36. It is relevant to point out that unlike Sindhu, Satadru and Brahmaputra, the term Ganga is not of pure or true Indic origin. The word is not known in Vedic period and modern scholars have justifiably traced it to Tibeto-Burman dictionary. In Tibetan language the river is celebrated as Ganga, and it is derived from terms Gangri (Snow mountain) and Bumo (Daughter). That perhaps settles the issue in favour of Ganga's Tibetan origins. Sinha, Nirmal Chandra (1977). India and Tibet: Geographical Considerations, Gangtok, Sikkim: Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, pp. 11-13.


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