

Kailas & Manasarovar

**After 22 Years
In Shiva's Domain**

**RAHUL KULDIP BEDI
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Preface

THIS travelogue was completed some two years after the return of the authors from Kailas Parbat and Lake Manasarovar as part of the first batch of pilgrims to the region in 22 years.

We travelled a total of 1,300 kilometres of which 280 were on foot, reaching heights above 18,000 feet, starting from New Delhi on September 9, 1981 returning 23 days later on October 2. In all we spent eight nights in Tibet. Regretfully too few.

Our hosts, the Chinese were gracious and hospitable, granting concessions where they had no need to. Ever polite, they made our stay in Taklakot as comfortable and economical as possible, besides spoiling us with gourmet Chinese cooking.

We walked and rode through barren glacial valleys in an almost mystical land, its mystery heightened by being shuttered to the outside world for decades. We traversed countryside as beautiful as it is harsh, ageing people long before their time, with nature's wonders tucked almost casually into a remote corner, fit indeed for habitation by gods.

Both of us are convinced that no one who has been to this area of Western Tibet can forget the almost choking, breathless feeling on topping the 16,200 feet high Gurla La (pass), over 60 kilometres north of the Indian border and gazing upon the piercing blue Manasarovar, darker Raksas Tal to its left and Mount Kailas in the distance. The suddenness of the "assault" in the midst of rock strewn plateau is uplifting. A rare moment of awe and splendour.

Our sincere hope is that with the increase in pilgrim traffic to Kailas-Manasarovar, (over 200 pilgrims went last year), a larger number can visit both the Lake and Mount, still so much a part of our Hindu make-up. We also wish that the old trade routes between Tibet and India open soon, economically boosting the flagging remote border regions on either side.

The authors wish to express their special gratitude to the officers and men of the Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP), the Special Police Force (SPF) and the warm hearted villagers en route, all of whom made our journey comfortable. Our regrets that we could only bring back limited quantities of Manasarovar water for them.

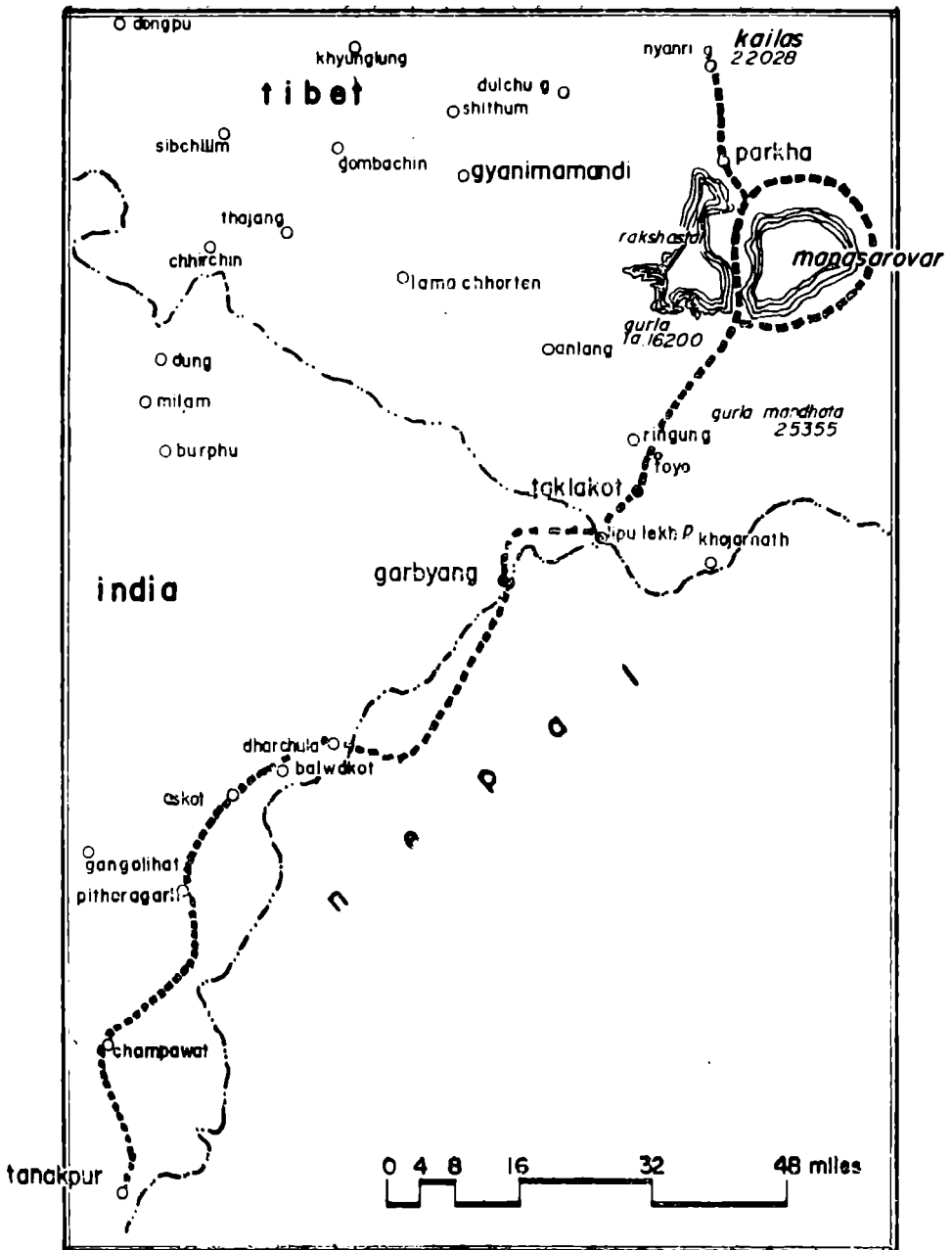
We would also like to take this opportunity to especially thank Anjali Daphtary, whose painstaking efforts at the typewriter, bearing stoically with our almost incessant editing made this manuscript possible. We also thank Pradip Sachdev our architect friend for his effort on the maps.

RAHUL KULDIP BEDI
DR SUBRAMANIAM SWAMY

May 1984
New Delhi

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THE ROUTE TO MT KAILASH & MANSAROVAR

Introduction

MOUNT Kailas, a perfectly shaped giant *lingam*, defiantly thrusting 22,028 feet into the sky, the abode of Lord Shiva, the third in the trinity of Hindu gods, and Parvati, his consort, and the nearby, Lake Manasarovar, their bathing spot, with its sea-like lapping of waves, lie secreted in a remote and barren corner of Western Tibet—the holiest and highest of Hindu pilgrim spots.

An integral component of the Hindu psyche, Kailas and Manasarovar have over a millennium drawn, by sheer magnetism of beauty and ecclesiastical sanction, millions of Hindus across hundreds of miles of unfriendly terrain, through below zero degree temperatures and rarified atmospheres to perform the traditional *parikramas* (circumambulation) of the lake and the majestic mountain. Faith, sustained by centuries of conditioning and enthralled by the dream-like quality of the Mount and the Lake, were enough incentive to carry the weak and strong alike to their midst.

Kalidasa's Mount Maru (Kailas) from his epic "Kumara-sambhavam" which milched Mother Earth of shining gems and herbs of wondrous virtue to enhance its eternal beauty, imbues beholders, the agnostic and faithful alike, with a sense of awe and majesty moving them from the involuntary obeisance, however fleeting, of the scoffer, to the frenzied salutation of the

devout. Even those renowned for their agnosticism have professed a desire for such a pilgrimage. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, in a foreword to Swami Pranavananda's book *Kailas-Manasarovar*, one of the most exhaustive tomes on the region and its environs, in 1949 wrote: "I am filled with regret that I shall never reach Kailas and Manasarovar".

The authors of the book are not in particular religiously-inclined but neither are they atheists. Their motivation in visiting the pilgrim spots arose out of multiple objectives, amongst them curiosity fueled by myths and traditional beliefs. But the sheer unadulterated beauty and unsurpassed tranquility of the place has left an indelible mark on their minds. Spiritual upliftment they leave to more receptive beings.

Faith was once again put to the test in September, 1981, when three batches of twenty pilgrims each were permitted by the Chinese to tread the centuries-old Kailas-Manasarovar pilgrim route between Hindustan and Tibet, closed following Sino-Indian territorial wranglings twenty-two years ago. The pilgrims were allowed to trek over 300 arduous kilometres across the 17,890 feet high Lipu Lekh Pass in the Kumaon Hills into Tibet and perform *parikramas* of both holy places. Novices most of them, exhausted facing interminable slopes and unending hillsides, the impending climb more daunting than the last, each pilgrim struggled through with hidden reserves of determination and what one may loosely term faith for want of a better explanation, and, perhaps, leave oneself vulnerable to censure!

The *parikrama* or circuit of Kailas and Manasarovar is the traditional pilgrimage of Hindus and Tibetans alike. It is popularly believed by Hindus that one *parikrama* of the mountain (around 50 kilometres) washes away the sins of one lifetime, ten the sins of a *kalpa* and 108 *parikramas* ensure *nirvana* in this life. According to Swami Pranavananda, 87, who has performed thirty-six *parikramas* of Kailas and thirty-three of Lake Manasarovar, Tibetans do three or thirteen rounds of

Kailas and the Lake (over 100 kilometres) while the more pious do the *sashtang danda pradakshina* (prostration circuit) of Manasarovar in around twenty-eight days and of Kailas in fifteen. The average time span of a *parikrama* is two days for the Kailas circuit and three days for Lake Manasarovar.

The awesome snow capped mountain alternately resembles a perfectly-shaped *linga* and a hooded Cobra poised for the strike, the *Naman*—three parallel stripes of naked rock atop the peak-adding life-like scales to the lethal fan-shaped hood of the king snake. Tetrahedronal in shape, with falling snowflakes, clouds partially hiding the unconquered Kailas, the peak creates the mesmerising effect of *abhisheka* (coronation of milk) on a *linga* (phallus). The jet black rock dazzlingly whitewashed by fresh snow is taken by devotees to be Shiva's face, the naked portions his eyes shut tight in meditation, and the adjoining mounds his consort, Parvati, two sons—Kartikeya and Ganesh, and Nandi, his faithful bull, symbolising sexual prowess in the lexicon of Hindu mythology.

Lord Krishna, according to legend, visited Kailas and the Pandavas left for Lord Shiva's domain when the time came for them to depart from the world. Only Yudhistar, the pure, was able to withstand the rigours of the journey, the rest dropping by the wayside, paying for their sins. Accompanied by his faithful dog who refused to stay behind, Yudhistar made it to the bosom of the mount only to be denied entry to heaven for his paradoxical statement with regard to the 18-day epic battle with his kinsmen, the Kauravas. His footsteps and the prints of the dog made in the pristine snow, the devout claim can still be seen headed for the phallus-like peak.

Earlier, Ravana, the demon king of Lanka had travelled to the region and sat aeon in meditation by the shores of Raksas Tal (also known as Ravana Hranga) adjoining the mighty Manasarovar and obtained a *vardan* (gift) of prowess equalling Shiva's own. Popular legend has it that one day Ravana, in an agitated mood, lifted the mighty Kailas and shook it, so scaring

Parvati sulking in a remote corner of the mountain after a quarrel with her lover, that she scrambled back to her paramour's arms, joyously uniting the squabbling couple.

Equally revered by the Tibetans who call it Ringpoche, Kailas in their scriptures is the centre of the universe where Lord Buddha with five hundred Bodhisattvas is said to be residing. They believe it is protected by four footprints of the Buddha so that the peak may not be transported into the sky by the numerous deities in the region and four chains prevent inhabitants of the lower regions from taking the holy peak to the darker regions below.

The presiding Tibetan deity on Kailas is Demchok who bears a close resemblance to Shiva. Dressed in a tiger-skin with garlands of human skulls around his neck, Demchok carries a trident in one hand and the *damru* (small drum) in the other. His consort, Dorje-Phangmo, who is portrayed in Tibetan paintings and sculptures as united with her lover in fierce sexual embrace, is the Hindu counterpart of the volatile Parvati. Nine hundred and ninety rows of deities with five hundred in each row are believed to form a ring around the precious mountain with Hanuman (Joo) the monkey-god seated at the foot of the peak as chief protector.

The green, sea-like Manasarovar, thirty kilometres from Kailas, created from the *manas* (mind) of Lord Brahma, the first of the trinity of Hindu gods, is no less a breath-taking marvel.

At a height of 14,950 feet, the freshwater lake over 100 kilometres in circumference is surrounded by snowcapped mountain peaks of which the Gurla Mandatta (25,350 feet) is the highest. The vast water mass resounding gently with the sound of rippling waves, described in the ancient scriptures as the lake without heat and trouble, is portrayed in Pali and Buddhist writings as the only true paradise on earth. Its waters are credited with healing powers for all ailments, be they of the

mind or body, equally sought after by gods and mortal beings. Even Chinese officials posted in the area swear to Manasarovar-waters having immense healing powers for chronic diseases.

The brown drabness of the surrounding areas, bereft of any trees or verdure, abetted by the majesty of the water mass at such a great height sharpens the contrast all the more, enhancing the majesty of the lake. Surrounded by low-lying hills, with a hint of scrub, the occasional hare and ruins of eight monasteries, once vibrant centres of the Kargyndpa sect of Buddhism, Manasarovar is believed to be the custodian of the Hindu mind, from whence flows all wisdom for the sustenance of mankind.

Three kilometres west of Manasarovar is Raksas Tal where the demon Ravana is believed to have done penance to propitiate Lord Shiva. Much smaller in circumference, Raksas Tal is a bright blue which dazzles on first beholding it. According to ancient accounts, Raksas Tal was originally part of Manasarovar but land movements separated the two water masses. The azure waters of Raksas Tal were identified in Tibetan scriptures, amply corroborated by Hindu writings, with demons and its waters considered impure. However, two gold-fish, so the legend goes, engaged in a fight pursued each other into Raksas Tal purifying the "evil" waters. Darker in hue and mythologically murkier in character, Raksas Tal is, despite ominous attributes, a wondrous sight on descending the Gurla La Pass on the way to Kailas, an attractive rapier to the ecclesiastical foil of Lake Manasarovar.

Manasarovar is said to have been created by Brahma who, it is believed, floats in it in the form of a royal swan (*hans*). Emperor Mandhata in *Krit-Yuga* (golden age), Ravana and others in the *Tretya-Yuga* (silver age) did penance in this region to propitiate Lord Shiva. Both Lord Shiva and Brahma, gods of destruction and creation respectively, sat in meditation on the shores of Manasarovar. The Ramayana makes reference to the

Manas, with a host of *rishis* and *munis* having meditated and attained *nirvana* by its shores.

According to references in the Mahabharata, around 5,000 years ago at the beginning of the *Kali-Yuga* (iron age), Arjuna, the famed Pandava archer, visited and conquered this region. The vassal kings as a consequence are believed to have sent black and white yak tails, gems and other precious gifts to Yudhishthira on the occasion of the horse sacrifice (*Rajasuya Yagya*). Emperor Ashoka's generals are believed to have annexed this region of western Tibet to the Indian empire while the famous Chinese traveller, Hsün Tsang (635 A.D.) said that Kumaon kings ruled over this region in the 6th century. The following century saw a host of Chinese travellers and scholars venturing across the Tibetan hills, across Kailas and Manasarovar to study Buddhism in the famous Nalanda University and visit places of the Buddha in India.

Mystics and holy men ventured into this area, meditated in its uplifting and awesome tranquility and either returned to their homes or left their earthly forms, achieving what they had set out to. Tibetan holy men, dervishes, well-known Hindu saints and learned men belonging to various religions and disciplines visited the home of Shiva and Parvati seeking solace and wisdom from Manasarovar, the storehouse of man's wisdom.

It is believed that the Mughal potentate Akbar sent a party to discover the source of the Ganges in the mid-16th century. The party went round the *Manas*, preparing a map for their King showing the Sutlej and the Brahmaputra arising out of Manasarovar and the Saraju respectively.

Around 1625, Father Antonio de Andrade, a Portuguese Jesuit priest, went to Chhabrang in the area, and is believed to have laid the foundation of a church the following year. Ninety years later the first white men, the Catholic fathers Desideri and Freyre, visited Manasarovar and Kailas via Lhasa which they reached from Leh.

In 1812, William Moorcraft, a veterinary surgeon, and Captain Hearsay entered western Tibet and camped near Chiu gumpa, the first Englishmen reportedly to have come to this region. A stream of adventurers, pilgrims and holy men continued to traverse difficult terrain and explore the fascinating Kailas-Manasarovar area, chart it and attempt to trace the origin of the Ganges, the Sutlej and the Brahmaputra.

Of all the Europeans who visited here perhaps the greatest was the Swedish explorer, Dr. Sven Hedin. Travelling for two long years from 1907, he began his journey from Srinagar in Kashmir passed through Ladakh and spent over two months around Manasarovar, sailing on it, sounding it and mapping the region. He wrote illuminating tomes on the trans-Himalaya regions and some of his scientific explorations and deductions of the region remain unchallenged even today.

In 1959, following border incidents between China and India, the pilgrim route to Kailas and Manasarovar was closed. Swamy, born an Iyer Brahmin, had been weaned on stories of the far-off pilgrim spots told with relish by elders who were merely embellishing tales heard from others to titillate the imagination of a toddler. Therefore, when he paid his first visit to Beijing, decades later in 1978, it can e naturally to him to raise with the top Chinese leaders the question of reopening the pilgrim route(s).

After meeting with the Chinese Deputy Prime Minister, Ji Peng-fi, Swamy asked him about the possibilities of throwing open the centuries-old pilgrim route. Surprisingly, the Chinese had never heard of the place and, later in the day, made him write down the name of Kailas and Manasarovar, promising to have it checked out.

During Swamy's second visit to China in 1980, the Chinese leaders were prepared with an answer. Yes, they said, the pilgrim route could be opened, but the roads and temples ruined by the "Gang of Four" would first have to be repaired. How

long would that take? they were asked by a jubilant Swamy. To this they gave a vague answer suggesting thereby that conditions were not ripe for opening the route. In April 1981, Swamy once again raised the question but one of the China's top leaders, Deng Xiao-Ping informed him that Foreign Minister Huang Hua would be visiting India shortly when the issue of the pilgrim route could be taken up. Later, at a banquet held in his honour the Chinese leader told him the route would soon be opened and hoped that he would be part of the first Indian expedition to the region.

Huang Hua's visit in July, 1981, decided that sixty pilgrims selected by the External Affairs Ministry would trek over 300 kilometres to Kailas and Manasarovar in three equal batches. The first batch would leave on September 9, 1981, the remaining two departing within eight days of each other. It was imperative that all pilgrims return by end October as heavy snowfall would make the 17,800 feet high Lipu Lekh Pass into Tibet impassable and the already cold temperatures in Tibet highly unbearable. Moreover, a majority of the pilgrims, novices in trekking, particularly so in rarified atmospheres, would make matters fatal if the weather turned too cold.

The programme chalked out by the Ministry was of a month's duration, entailing a nine-day walk from Tawaghat, over 650 kilometres north of Delhi in the heart of the Kumaon hills, rising to a height of 17,800 feet at the Lipu Lekh Pass from where we would cross into Tibet. From Lipu Lekh we were to travel 20 kilometres on horseback to the military township of Taklakot or Phulan Chung. After a night's halt, we would continue by jeep or truck to Manasarovar, 80 kilometres to the north and Kailas another 30 kilometres further. The entire trip was costed at Rs.5,000 of which half was paid to the Kumaon Vikas Mandal, a tourist wing of the Uttar Pradesh Government, responsible for board and lodging arrangements on the Indian side.

The remaining amount (\$ 250) was for expenditure in Tibet which included two nights of hotel accommodation in Taklakot,

transport to Kailas and back, food stocks for the five-day *parikrama*(s) and hiring of horses from the border pass to Taklakot and back.

Judging from the rush to be included on the first batch of pilgrims and the widespread interest that was attached to reports of this trip, illustrates how deeply embedded Kailas and Manasarovar are in the Hindu mind. The haute monde of the metropolis, who one would not even remotely associate with either the rigours of getting to the region, having the religious bent of mind or even the mildest curiosity, had a wistful look on their faces when told, on return, about the trip, and asked incisive questions as to the spiritual vibrations we may have felt in the shadow of the pilgrim spots.

Both authors were part of the first batch of eighteen pilgrims to the Kailas region in twenty-two years. Swamy, 43, by virtue of his substantial contribution in persuading the Chinese officials to re-open the pilgrim route and Bedi, 32, of *The Indian Express*, through a lucky roll of the dice.

Every journalist's passionate desire to be *numero uno* led to a dilemma in the Ministry of External Affairs, as to who to include (each batch was to have one representative from a magazine or newspaper) and whom to leave out without offending over-sensitive media men whose feelings seem to rise to the fore at will, but particularly so at being left out of any major event.

The dilemma was resolved without giving offence by following the simple yardstick applied to the rest of the pilgrims—drawing lots. Six days before departure, Suman Dubey, Editor of *India Today*, Sondeep Shankar, photographer, *Sunday*, K. Raj, Special Correspondent, *United News of India* and Bedi of *The Indian Express*, New Delhi, were summoned to the room of Mr. S. S. Gill, the loquacious Deputy Secretary, China desk and the overall in-charge of the pilgrimage. Names and numbers were written on six pieces of paper (two hopefuls

who had applied were not present). Amidst nail-biting tension, the ever-courteous Mr. Gill threw the chits of paper onto the table. *The Indian Express* turned up first with *Sunday* and *Samachar Bharati* bagging second and third batches respectively.

The remaining 16 pilgrims were an assorted lot, a majority of whom had never walked more than a kilometre at a stretch on flat ground, leave alone in hilly tracts in rarified atmosphere. For many, the concept of baggage and equipment was equally hazy, many of them carrying expensive suitcases and holdalls packed with fancy city clothes, the unanimous concession being tennis shoes or the ubiquitous "Hunter" boots.

The doughty first batch of pilgrims included V. 'Chief' Satyanarainan, 40, a paunchy sales executive from Hyderabad, an inveterate smoker, who on the third day of walking in his Napoleon greatcoat complete with shoulder epaulettes and Japanese-style foam leather peaked cap, earned his lofty sobriquet, becoming from then onwards the mascot for the entire group. His 'title' also caused considerable confusion to the hyper polite and rank conscious Chinese in Taklakot a few days later, when an innocent request to 'Chief' to hurry and have his dollars changed into Yuan had the nearby interpreter looking a little worried and asking for his passport. This was taken to whom they referred to as 'Chief', a Tibetan Khampa in-charge of the pilgrim reception centre and returned a little later. Needless to add, our 'Chief' spent a few anxious moments waiting for his passport's return expressing nervous displeasure at the person who had conferred on him the awesome rank which existed in reality in the Chinese officialdom.

Tenacious Miss Navinlata Joshi, 43, a public relations officer with the State Road Transport Corporation in Delhi, who determinedly refused a horse despite availability but had to be 'ordered' on by the chain-smoking liaison officer, Mr. Deb Mukherjee, 43, from the External Affairs Ministry, whilst crossing the formidable Lipu Lekh Pass,

Mr. Harish Chander Rawat, 35, the ever-smiling Congress (I) M.P., the first ever Parliamentary representative to visit his Constituency which stretched right up to the Tibetan border, and who was accorded a tumultuous though progress hampering welcome in the colourful hamlets en route. Mr. Rawat, whilst performing the Manasarovar *parikrama* developed serious high altitude sickness suspected to be cerebral oedema and spent two agonising nights on the *parikrama* of the freezing lake, ministered to by the wiry M.S. Jamwal, 38, a Delhi school teacher.

Mr. Dhirender Sharma, 53, the argumentative professor from the suspended Centre for Studies in Science Policy in Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi, constantly needled the two members of Parliament about their political leanings and succeeded admirably in making them lose their cool. Pratul Pathak, 37, a Delhi University lecturer in English, a veteran mountaineer who led the Kailas contingent of pilgrims and whose fabulous array of equipment went a long way in sustaining a number of under-equipped expedition members.

Arvind 'Stud' Sud, 28, a merchant marine officer whose manly frame and trendy clothes earned him his middle name and lean Purshottam Vaishnav, 39, a Rajasthan Government photographer whose emaciated physical appearance belied his stamina also formed part of the group.

Sudershan 'Chitranand' Lal, 53, christened so because of his penchant for photographing any and everything regardless, a Reserve Bank of India employee from Delhi, Shiv Kumar, 37, a lanky plantation owner from Kerala and Mahesh Sharma, 26, a Jaipur University student completed the complement of pilgrims who successfully performed the *parikramas* of both Kailas and Manasarovar in two separate batches.

Swamy and Mr. Singhal, 56, a retired Assistant Commissioner of Income Tax from Meerut visited the pilgrim spots by jeep and crossed the border into India on September 20, 1981,

six days before the rest of the party. Three others, Mr. Jain of Meerut, Drs. Ramesh Khandelwal, a rotund Tantric priest and Kaushal, both residents of Delhi dropped out before crossing into Tibet, unable to face the rigours of the journey. The former two called it a day after the first day's trek, while the hefty Dr. Kaushal braved mountain sides for three days before tearfully admitting defeat.

Before the Climb

MIDST the paraphernalia of Doordarshan, press photographers and reporters, after the seemingly unending rounds of posing with politicians for photographs and the wasteful offering of prasad, 18 pilgrims were flagged off early morning September 9, 1981, by the then Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, Mr. V.P. Singh, from Chanderlok building on Janpath in Delhi. A big banner declaring who we were adorned the front of the uncomfortable bus heralding our approach till the road-head at Tawaghat, 642 miles north of Delhi.

The lunch halt was at the historic gurdwara, Ritha Sahib, in Sikarganj in the fertile Terai belt of Uttar Pradesh. According to legend, Guru Nanak, the first Sikh guru, accompanied by Mardana, his disciple, visited Lohaghat in the Kumaon Hills over 120 kilometres north of the gurdwara. Feeling hungry, Nanak asked Mardana to pluck some *ritha*, a bitter inedible berry-like fruit used primarily for washing hair and as a form of detergent. Mardana protested, arguing that the fruit would be too bitter to eat but Nanak insisted that it would be sweet, only if Mardana took the pains to climb a tree and pluck some. Miraculously, the fruit was found to be sweet and the amazed disciple in astonishment collected hordes of the freak fruit scattering the seed as he walked. These germinated seeds, now massive trees over four centuries old, continue to produce the

sweet *riti* of the Guru's miracle which is distributed as *prasad* at the *gurdwara*.

The night halt was at Champawat after passing through delightfully afforested country of the Terai and Kumaon, immortalised in the books of the famous British shikari, Jim Corbett. For tea we stopped at the Tanakpur dak bungalow where the chowkidar gave us a blow by blow account of a deathly battle between an elephant and a tigress and her two cubs by the banks of the Sarada river, (which forms the border between Nepal and India) a few hundred yards from the rest house verandah.

The elephant was vanquished, he sadly concluded his bloodthirsty tale to a rapt audience of pilgrims, who looked nervously over their shoulders at the mist-shrouded river, for shadows were lengthening and the watchman an effective raconteur. No doubt greatly embellishing his gore-filled tale the young man, probably not even born when the battle waged "uncontrolled for half a day with bits of fur and flesh littering the riverside and tainting the river a deep red", swore to the authenticity of his tale reliving the lethal "jang".

Champawat, the overnight halt, at a height of 5,000 feet, named after a hill deity is the forgotten township of the erstwhile fiefdom of Almora, more renowned for the man-eater to whom it gave its name (one of Jim Corbett's impressive kills) than for the historic monuments dating back over 2,000 years. The main Shiv temple, once spread over an entire hillside, is today scattered ruins in the charge of Ganga Giri, the mahant, whose family migrated from the Deccan to this former seat of hill culture over 900 years ago. The dome-shaped roof with its pantheon of gods and goddesses carved intricately in-relief look down upon the devout who ring the antiquated gigantic bell suspended to attract the almighty at the sanctum entrance.

Tired Champawat residents waging a pathetic battle against life, wistfully fall back upon the glories of a bygone-era when religion was life in the hilly region. The Brahmins of Champawat

today owning teashops recall their ancestors who enjoyed special status with the Gurkha kings of the area whose suzerainty stretched from Almora to Tanakpur and on to Naini Tal. They recall the revelation to one Sri Ram Datt Swami that a temple was buried in Champawat. Excavation by the King nine centuries ago unearthed a meticulously built temple, according to lore, by followers of Ram thousands of years ago. A jagir of nine villages was granted to the temple but discontinued with the abolition of the Zamindari Act after Independence. Decline followed and till a few years ago the Champawat temples were easy prey for antique buffs and unscrupulous art dealers. But anything of value has been spirited away and all that remains for the 15,000 residents of this once imperial capital of a branch of intrepid Gurkhas of Nepal are defaced sculptures of gods in various poses of prayer and long-diffused greatness.

A little distance from Champawat is the fascinating Gunna Mata ka Mandir on the main road overlooking a precipitous gorge. It is so overhung with bells, that its roof and walls appear not to be made of stone and concrete but of variously-hued and curiously-shaped bells. Built on its present spot 35 years ago it was originally located several hundred feet lower than the spot on which it exists today.

The contractor, so the legend goes, entrusted with building the road suffered heavy casualties in his labour force, all of whom fell to their death into the gorge near where the temple was located. One night, after a crippling number of deaths, the contractor dreamt that success would be his only if he shifted the temple to its present site located on the road he was laying. The temple was hastily shifted and work suspended on the road till the deity was comfortably housed. Miraculously, the accidents stopped, the road was completed without further mishap and the temple became part of mountain superstition, the devout tying bells to invoke the blessings of hill gods to ensure safe passage.

The second day's halt at Pithoragarh, the quaint district

headquarters, was where the pace for the pilgrimage was set on meeting Swami Pranavananda, 88, of whom mention has been made earlier. Settled in Pithoragarh since the Chinese takeover of Tibet, the holy man from Andhra, has walked over one lakh miles in the mountains of western Tibet and escorted over 5,000 pilgrims over a span of 25 years to the Kailas-Manasarovar region. Appointed a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society and awarded the Padma Shri in 1960 for his explorations in Tibet, Swami Pranavananda whose knowledge of the region is unsurpassed, was studiously ignored by the ill-informed External Affairs Ministry, though they often referred to the holy man's detailed tome, "Explorations in Tibet"—complete with minutely graphic maps. Even the Chinese were surprised when they saw a few of the Swami's detailed maps and asked for them as they claimed they had no maps of that region.

The hoary-haired Swami who remembered the terrain perfectly, told us what to look for on the journey and how best to negotiate the difficult terrain we would encounter on our *parikrama* of Mount Kailas. Ten miles from Taklakot, Swami Pranavananda reminisced, a far away look in his opaque eyes, existed the Kocharnath monastery. An inner sanctum housed three silver figures thought by many to symbolize Ram, Laxman and Sita. However, the Swami discounted this popular myth, saying that all the three are male deities and, in all probability, not Hindu *murtis* at all. He spoke of his flight from the Chinese after their occupation of Tibet and claimed they would never let him into the region for they feared his incisive knowledge of the area. He waxed eloquent to the group of wide-eyed pilgrims about his discovery of hot water springs in Manasarovar and about one part of the lake which did not freeze even at the height of winter and where there were Brahminy ducks, bar headed geese and sea gulls who had not migrated to the warmer climes of India. He spoke wistfully of sounding Manasarovar and conclusively proving its depth to be around 300 feet. He hoped for one last journey to the area he had devoted his best years to, but despaired of the Chinese granting permission.

Accompanying him was 63-year old Naga Baba, a faithful disciple of the octagenarian Swami who 25 years ago had carried his aged mother on his shoulders from Pithoragarh and gone around Kailas and Manasarovar as a last wish for an aged parent. Existing mainly on *sattu*, he ferried his parent over steep hill and dale, satisfying her desire to glimpse the Hindu monuments of assured salvation.

The night's halt was at Dharchula (meaning hill-oven), believed to have been named after the Panadavas set up a gigantic oven in the hillside to cook food en route to Kailas. Dharchula is a crossing point into neighbouring Nepal. There is free access to both sides over the river bridge and, according to the local inhabitants, regular volleyball matches are organised between the Nepalese army and the locally billeted Indo-Tibetan Border Police. This free passageway also accounts for the trickle of Chinese and Tibetan goods into the area for the two decades that borders between India and China were closed, while Nepalese entry into Tibet continued unabated.

Spending the night in a hurriedly erected camp of leaky tents (discovered during a downpour late at night) we left the following morning for the roadhead at Tawaghat 19 kilometres away. On September 11, we lined up at the confluence of the Dhauli and Kali rivers to receive the blessings of a pandit and the prasad thoughtfully packed in plastic. Armed with traditional staves, the first batch of pilgrims began their journey to the 17,800 feet high Lipu Lekh Pass, 103 kilometres and a seven-day walk away.

The Climb

FROM Tawaghat, the meandering ascent to the Lipu Pass is a see-saw track which loses and gains several thousand feet every few kilometres before rising dramatically to the rarefied atmosphere of Tibet. After the first night's halt at the 26-roomed Narain Swami Ashram (8,000 feet), with its immaculately laid flowerbeds and fruit trees, succeeding camps were at Jipti (8,500 feet), Malpa (7,000 feet), Budhi (9,100 feet), Garbyang (10,000 feet), the shinking village, Kalapani (12,000 feet), the last Indian border post, and Sbyamchun (13,000 feet), the stark, unfriendly take off point for the gruelling march to the pass. The undulating haul is daunting to the most grizzled of mountaineers and we at best, barring a handful, were inveterate novices in mountain craft.

Throughout, on the Indian side, we walked along the Vyas valley, named after the sage, Vyasa, who, according to legend, wrote his epic the "Mahabhartā" in a cave high above Kalapani. Dotted all over the hillsides, in seemingly inaccessible spots, are temples dedicated to this saint revered by the hill folk.

The Pandava brothers passed through this valley on their way to Kailas and once, thirsty, Arjuna, the marksman, shot an arrow into the ground from where sprang forth water. History and legend were our constant companions.

The steep inclines which began a few hundred metres after Tawaghat saw a spurt of activity as pilgrims bounded up them, the libations of the priest still ringing in their ears. An enthusiasm arising from solemnity of purpose and historic significance of being the first, had a majority of pilgrims jubilantly covering the first half kilometre in record time, scoffing at the experienced few setting a slow, though steady, gait up the gradient. Their joy at having covered ground so fast wiped out all apprehensions they had felt earlier and it was with light hearts that they set their over-zealous pace to cover the remaining eighteen-and-a-half kilometres to Narain Swami Ashram.

At the first kilometre mark canteens were greedily emptied, woollens discarded and shirt buttons opened to cool sweat rolling down unfit, corpulent limbs and cigarettes lit to take a "breather". What followed over the next 18 kilometres was a nightmare for eight of the pilgrims, two of whom had to be brought to the ashram in dandies long after it was dark. These two, Mr. Jain of Meerut and Dr. Ramesh Khandelwal, the Tantric priest of Delhi, opted to remain behind the following morning unable to face the rigours of the climb. The rest, after innumerable halts and the inevitable coaxings by the experienced, that succour was around the next bend in seemingly unending hillsides, staggered up the last verdant slope to the joyous sight of the ashram. The rest of the evening was spent in silence, massaging healing ointments into stiff muscles. Reality had dawned.

Besides intimidating heights the route was beset with more animate hurdles. From the road-head till the crossing into Tibet on September 18, the pilgrim's progress in the Kumaon Hills was akin to the Mughal Mansabdar's tour of his *subah* or the British agent's visit to his fief. This was due, in part, to us being the first group on the Kailas-Manasarovar route but more to the presence of Mr. Harish Rawat, Member of Parliament. The train following the M.P. included local political heavyweights who swelled the crowd for that was what it became, at

practically every village and halmet we passed, inflating the already unmanageable numbers. The accompanying officers from the Indo-Tibetan Border Police (I.T.B.P.), the Special Police Force (S.P.F.) and the local constabulary, official escorts to the pilgrim party till the border, were hopelessly outnumbered.

Though the area is a restricted one, being within the inner line, entry being subject to a special permit issued by the District Collector, innumerable people from the area boasting clout with *yatra sewadars*, trekked onto the pilgrim bandwagon proving unshakeable till our return two weeks later. A freelance cameraman who joined the group, claiming patronage of the Uttar Pradesh Government Publicity Department, paid for his brashness by having his film confiscated and was unceremoniously turfed out of the area by the district authorities on charges of photographing prohibited areas.

Tired after precipitous climbs, stiff limbs had to face elaborate welcomes. The entire hill region seemed to be lying in wait for us. Groups of martial looking hillmen dressed in elaborate turbans and knee length *angarkhas* (double-breasted tunics made of light fabric), armed with lethal curved swords and sturdy shields danced the *cholia nritya* alongside stunningly beautiful women in delicately embroidered headresses weighed down by antique silver jewellery.

Tibetan influence was apparent in the *Chubti* (meaning top) headress of the women and the bhaku shoes worn by them. Their head gear, quite similar to that worn by nuns, differed in being colourfully embroidered.

Swaying to the monotonous beat of the hill *daame* (drum) and *chaa chaa* (cymbals), the men waved their weapons in mock battle, while the ruddy-cheeked women swayed sonorously heralding the approach of the warriors. The women so impressed pilgrims that many films were exposed on overjoyed beauties and fervent promises made to relay the finished product immedi-

ately on return. It can be said, without fear of contradiction, that none of us vindicated our solemn promises made to self-conscious women who posed so solemnly as if their entire lives depended on the click of the "fottu machine". Enthusiastic pilgrims would have been a little surprised to learn that the subject of their celluloid fantasies lived under traditionally emancipated conditions compared to their lesser fortunate urban counterparts. The hillmen approached prospective brides who had the option to accept or refuse a suit.

From Tawaghat till crossing the snow bound pass we were incessantly feted and danced into village enclosures. Welcome parties complete with traditional dress accosted pilgrims, in some cases a kilometre outside villages offering cups of highly sweetened tea laced with black pepper guaranteed to banish tiredness. Succulent cucumbers, the size of small watermelons, and sweet-sour crab apples, cultivated in the hilly regions and used in making excellently flavoured local liquor were arranged temptingly on highly-polished brass salvers.

Initially welcome and quaint to behold, two days of receptions every few kilometres brought tension to the pilgrims and the frequent stops put paid to barely gained momentum, imperative whilst walking in the mountains. Moreover, the refreshments, difficult to refuse at risk of giving offence, further slowed down weary and inexperienced pilgrims. For a majority of us, the sound of the drum took on an ominous note and had many trying to slink through the less frequented alleyways of tiny hamlets. But we were fooling no one. For, just as we were congratulating ourselves on having made good our "escape", smiling villagers with bright yellow marigold garlands patiently waited and forced on our already distended bellies more nourishment.

In fact, on the return journey, two villages, one along the road and the other a kilometre below, near Narain Swami Ashram, each with a welcome party, literally crossed swords, both wanting Mr. Rawat to visit their respective village and

alleviate their problems. However, Rawat and Swamy out of patience born of innumerable such welcomes and years of honing on the political grindstone, offered pallatives and accepted memorandums demanding roads and concessions to the hitherto neglected regions.

These regions till Garbyang, around 65 kilometres north of Tawaghat, are inhabited by the Rang tribe. The over 35,000 Rang are a mixture of Bhotias (a name coined by the British for all people living in the trans-Himalayan regions) and local Kumaonis. They claim a distinct identity of their own, though plead paucity of historical documentation and indigenous literature to pin down distinct cultural characteristics. The only known study on the Rang tribe was carried out by a British scholar, one Atkinson, who surveyed the area and identified their clan in the "Himalayan Gazetteer" in 1897.

According to the Hyanki family, prominent Rangs, many of whom have made good, becoming officers in the I.T.B.P., the S.P.F. and the army while others have set up lucrative businesses in neighbouring towns, the clan traces its ancestry to the warlike Rajputs of Chittorgarh. Having dispersed from their homes in turbulent times of the imperialistic Mughal potentates, over 400 years ago, they fled to the hilly regions and settled down, marrying into local Kumaoni families and adopting their hill life-style. This fusion, abetted by geographical isolation, has, over the centuries, guarded the inmates from foreign influence, and kept distinct their *modus vivendi*.

The Rang villages we passed through were prosperous, agriculture and carpet weaving being their economic mainstay. Their stone havelis, some over 200 years old, with intricately carved doorways and large patios and their relatively opulent life-style indicated greater economic stability compared to the villages beyond Budhi.

All the people en route nostalgically recalled days of trade with Tibet when wool and rock salt were bartered for grain.

This trade reduced from a flourishing pipeline of laden mule trains to a mere trickle by the late 1950's, before grinding to a halt in 1960, after closure of borders, brought a modicum of prosperity to the area. Besides, the pilgrims provided an opportunity to earn small sums of money, a rare commodity in barter dominated economies by way of porterage and hiring out of mules. Many villagers we met had either themselves been to Taklakot Mandi on the way to and from Kailas and Manasarovar or remembered yak and goat wool and rock salt passing through their hamlets bound for the plains and onward shipment to larger centres.

Villagers unanimously petitioned the Members of Parliament for a relaxation of trade embargos between the border villages of Tibet and India and the speedy laying of a road to facilitate traffic to the area. In Budhi, local heavyweights voiced a feeling of restlessness, claiming rather dramatically to be forsaken by God and sirkar alike. They alleged a mounting discontentment, simmering for decades, due to Governmental apathy towards the remote regions of Kumaon. Making tongue in cheek references to the agitating Assamese, they said that till the border people created an issue and agitated, the authorities would pay no heed to developmental projects.

The other problem we faced had to do with the organising body, the Kumaon Vikas Mandal Nigam whose arrangements for food and camping equipment were, to say the least, inadequate. Pleading a lack of time in organisational shortcomings, the eight-year old travel wing of Uttar Pradesh Tourism, handled the pilgrim party unprofessionally. Charging the astronomical sum of Rs.2,500 from each pilgrim, and reportedly sanctioned Rs.4 lakhs by the Ministry of External Affairs to buy equipment, the Nigam provided substandard gear, admitting to a "distress" purchase of tents most of which leaked.

Moreover, the food, an integral part of the trekkers' armour, concentrated mainly on *sujji* and *chole* on the plea that they were nutritious. Occasional forays into beans failed to vindicate

the large amounts charged. Only the camp at Budhi, manned by Mr. Anil Tiwari of the Vikas Mandal were the pilgrims aware of any professionalism and imagination in diet and efficiency in overseeing the myriads of little things that require the organiser's attention.

Walking along the Kali river which forms the border with Nepal, the contiguity of which we never left till Lipu Lekh, (from Narain Swami Ashram onwards till leaving Kalapani on the seventh day we could see the Nepalese track on the opposite side of the Kali river, a dangerously narrow path, few feet above the swirling waters trampled out by herds of sheep and goats. After Dharchula, the second and last bridge crossing over into Nepal is at Garbyang) we passed through Thani, Pangu and Sosa arriving at Narain Swami Ashram, clocking 19 kilometres on the first day's tally card.

Founded in 1946 by Narain Swami, a mendicant from the Deccan when he came on a pilgrimage to Kailas and stayed on, the ashram is revered particularly by people from Gujarat and Maharashtra. Overlooked by the formidable Api ranges in neighbouring Nepal, the Waterloo of many an experienced climber, an icy grave for others, the ashram is spread over the col of a hillside and surrounded by apple orchards and multi-hued flowers in carefully tended beds. A variety of rare plants from Tibet, priceless specimens nurtured for over two decades are supervised by Narsima, a holy man of Mysore and a well informed botanist.

The 26-bedroomed ashram nestles beneath the temple or inner sanctum which houses the Shiva idol and resembles a miniature castle transplanted from Gothic Europe with slanting roofs and mysteriously gabled bay windows. Enveloped in fog during the icy cold nights, one almost waits for a clammy hand to accost one at any moment to complete the scenario. The incumbent priest, Prem Chaitanya, a former artillery officer of the Indian army and Swami Narsima, an understudy of the ashram founder live in this section of the building.

The residential premises under the able administration of Mrs. Garbyang, 64, a retired college principal of the area is a two-storey building of mud and wood with simple, clean and comfortable rooms.

Meanwhile, the daily medical check up (despite each pilgrim's indemnity bond signed with the External Affairs Ministry, absolving the latter of any responsibility in case of mishap) found Mr. Jain and Dr. Ramesh Khandelwal in a state of exhaustion. The former, a portly businessman from Meerut and a diabetic who was brought to the ashram in various stages—by stretcher, charpoy and finally in a dandi (hill palanquin) decided voluntarily to cut his losses and opt out of the journey.

Dr. Ramesh Khandelwal, the cherubic Tantric with dark tinted glasses and a self-admitted ability to look right through the thoughts and deeds of others, was the second casualty. The rotund priest who runs a successful institute of Tantric studies in a posh south Delhi colony had old links with China. His grandfather had been a sepoy attached to the quartermaster section of the Indian contingent which took part in the Boxer rebellion in Beijing in 1900. He had died during the campaign of natural causes and his unfettered soul, his enlightened grandson maintained, was freely roaming the Chinese mainland.

Filial ties with China were not all. Dr. Khandelwal was being summoned to Tibet by a 2,500-year-old spirit he regularly communicated with. Hampered by his enormous girth, the cheerful Tantric conversed freely with sages and "visited" the pilgrim spots by going into a trance in the dark interiors of the Ashram. As advance proof of his travels he was freely distributing a colourful calling card with the legend "Siddashram, Tibet" engraved in one corner.

Airily he claimed to have been to Tibet on a regular basis through trances. This visit in the flesh was merely a corroborating one. Having been declared unfit by the I.T.B.P. doctors the Tantric huddled under his quilt to consult his several

thousand-year-old spirit, by special spiritual appointment, on the future course of action. The spirit, taking pity on his condition, however, allowed him to drop out. But that was not the end of Dr. Khandelwal. He stayed on in the Ashram for a week after the rest of the party departed and each day of his stay was action packed for the sedate Ashram inmates. Every morning, Dr. Khandelwal "sensed" the approach of a helicopter, coming specially to ferry his bulk across the Lipu Pass. According to observers of these capers, he regularly laid out white sheet markers for the mythical helicopters to land. So possessed was he with the whirlybirds' arrival that he even cut down a pine tree, stripped its bark and made a gigantic 'H' to facilitate a landing. However, maintaining his humour and knowledge of the universe, he left the Ashram at a leisurely pace, content at having visited the holy spots during his numerous cross-legged trances.

Through the verdant Vyas valley, we walked 23 kilometres to Jipti, the last army outpost manned by the 9th Garhwal Regiment. Misinformed by the External Affairs Ministry with regard to distance, trail weary pilgrims trudged endlessly, arriving at the picturesque Binda Koti rest house long after dark. The last two kilometres were negotiated rather dramatically with the help of flares lighted by the army.

This long haul was across one of the most formidable ascents—four kilometres at almost a sixty degree gradient up Jungle Chatti to Rungling Top at 10,000 feet. Hopping gingerly from rock to rock, we toiled up the slopes, coaxed onwards by the sturdy I.T.B.P. men and officers and local hill women who seemed to saunter up. This was followed by an equally long descent to Simkhola village, which had most of the pilgrims, particularly Swamy and Rawat screaming for horses available for Rs.50 a day.

It was half way up the three kilometre Jungle Chatti climb that we acquired a "Chief" in the form of V. Satyanarayana of Hyderabad. With a fanatical attachment to his navy blue trench

coat (which, in a weak moment, he admitted he had borrowed from an uncle in Delhi) and peaked cap, the Chief became the mascot of the party. Even the coolies thought him to be some august personage and soon everyone was referring to him as Chief Sahib. Despite inching his way to the Binda Koti rest house practically on all fours, he retained his sense of humour. Having completed the gruelling ordeal he remarked from the rest house floor, “. . .and that is the end of Prasana’s over for the day”.

Grossly unfit, a chain-smoker and walking on splayed feet, the Chief was often coaxed along with outlandish enticements pandering to his wildest fantasies, awaiting him at the rest houses. It was only on the last day on the return journey that we discovered the cause of the Chief’s snail pace—his heel was poised about three inches above the bottom of his shoe. Too lazy to open all the laces of his hunter boots and retie them everyday, he had walked around 250 kilometres on his toes, his heels rarely, if at all, touching terra firma!

A steep descent over several thousand “stairs” which proved a nightmare on the return journey the next day, and a halt at Malpa (7,200 feet) nine kilometres from Jipti, saw us at Budhi (8,500 feet), on September 14. Here Dr. Kaushal of Delhi, who was carried practically all the nine kilometres from Malpa by I.T.B.P. jawans in a fireman’s hold, was declared unfit by the doctors and the party reduced to 15 members all of whom made the border crossing.

The Budhi rest house set in a depression with a terraced look out platform was by popular consent the only well-managed halt manned by Mr. Anil Tiwari of the Kumaon Mandal Vikas Nigam. The countryside viewed from the look out was a riot of colour with the last burst of flowers before the snows set in and the apple trees laden with the sweet-sour succulent fruit.

Budhi onwards, many pilgrims including Swamy who was complaining of a game knee, hired horses, not relinquishing them till the Lipu Pass four days later. An almost perpendicular

ascent from Budhi brought us atop the Chyalig Pass (10,600 feet) where a Gharwal Rifle contingent had made elaborate *bando-bust* for tea, while the locals put up a colourful pageant of dance and folk music at an ancient Vyas temple, one of many such which lie scattered all through the valley. There was a moment of excitement when a helicopter landed on the plateau which serves as a helipad to ferry a S.P.F. jawan suffering from high altitude sickness to hospital.

A flat walk along a path which snakes through forests saw us at the sinking village of Garbyang (10,300 feet). Once a prosperous village of over 250 families and an important stop over for the Indo-Tibetan trade caravans, Garbyang today resembles a ghost village with barely 60 families trying to eke out an existence.

Located in what is known as the earthquake zone, the area from the Chailya Plateau till Gunji several kilometres north of Garbyang, according to geologists was a vast lake thousands of years ago, which often burst its banks, flooding the relatively flat area around. Land movements over the centuries resulted in drying up of the lake and the villages in this area were built on the resultant loose soil. The brittle sub-soil sinks rapidly and aided by earthquakes, Garbyang has, over the years, become a victim of its location. The lynx and snow leopard, once found in large numbers, are today a moth eaten memory of a few pelts that adorn some dwellings.

The present inhabitants, a mixture of Nepalese, Bhotias and local Kumaonis farm in bordering Nepal paying revenue to the local panchayat whilst others breed livestock. But come winter and there is a mass exodus to the warmer climes of Dharchula with chances of finding one's house, on return, either listing dangerously or a crumpled heap of mud and straw.

Opposite Garbyang, on the Nepalese side (to which access is over a bridge by the side of a quaint temple built in Vyasa's memory whose pyramidal architecture shows distinct Nepalese

influence), is a cave near the village of Chagru which has an interesting history. Charles Sherring, a former Indian Civil Service officer who travelled considerably in this area in the early 1900s, and wrote a travelogue "Western Tibet and the Indian Borderland" has mentioned this cave, about 200 precipitous feet above the village. In ancient times it was deeper but as one of its sides carved in, it became shorter.

"We found it", writes Sherring, "full of dead bodies of men, women and children, their hair and flesh in some instances wonderfully preserved owing to the extraordinary dryness of the interior". He goes on to say that local residents claimed the cave to be the abode of aborigines many thousands of years ago. It was also used as a retreat in the last century by Indians during the wars with the Gurkhas. Regarded as a demonic place, it is still believed to be evil, and a place to be avoided.

Garbyang is also the first out-post of the intrepid Indo-Tibetan Border Police, a specially created force to man India's northern borders. Operating under difficult conditions of long service at heights above 12,000 feet, men and officers both tend to suffer from the dreaded monges, a deadly disease where red blood corpuscles in the body are reduced due to extended periods at great heights in rarified atmospheres. Long tenures in remote border regions where temperatures drop to as little as 20 degrees celsius below freezing from November to March and volleyball and transistor radios the sole entertainment, the I.T.B.P. men we met indicated a feeling of resentment at the step-brotherly treatment they were getting. Pleading a lack of personnel for the long tenures in high altitudes, the Government even denied them army commissary facilities available to other para-military forces.

An afternoon of invigorating volleyball followed by an enormous campfire and a titilating collection a film and hill songs sung lustily by the I.T.B.P. jawans, raised many a flagging spirit. Even the Chief, reticent for the past two days (as he had been forced by the rigours of the walk to give up smoking)

unbidden, sang a popular Telegu number to lusty cheers, forming an imposing presence by the fireside in his coat and cap.

September 16, and sixteen kilometres through lush hills and some of the prettiest countryside we traversed during the entire trip, saw us above the treeline at Kalapani (12,000 feet), the last Indian check post. The source of the Kali river which is marked by a small, artistically laid out temple, with deities of both Shiva and Kali, this exclusively military camp is the last habitation before the border, 13 kilometres away. A long line of sausage-like bunkers capable of accommodating over 20 S.P.F. men in hammocks slung in two tiers dot the camp. The neatly laid out border post is a little island of efficiency in the freezing mountains where strong winds kick up around two in the afternoon, blowing uncontrolled till late into the night.

A meeting to discuss apprehensions across the border was held in the dining hall tent but ended inconclusively with Swamy holding class and teaching basic Chinese for water, food and the inevitable nee how (hello). Here our passports were amongst the first 15 to be stamped in over two decades. The next day, walking in light rain which later turned to snow a little higher we moved into the rarefied atmosphere of Shynchung, the take off point for the border crossing. Overlooked by the snow capped Lipu ranges. Shynchung is a barren, almost frightening spot. During the 1962 border incidents, a posse of Chinese horsemen reportedly rode up to Shynchung but returned without advancing further. This intrusion 20 years ago, is believed to be the cause for discontinuation of work on the road from Kalapani to the border, in the fear that it might prove a tactical asset if captured. Breathing became more difficult the last two kilometres to the tent camp set up by the I.T.B.P. and a small snow storm in the evening fuelled fears already building up about the crossing.

Snow was an unexpected hurdle, at least for the first batch, as it was too early in the season. Snow over-shoes were miles behind in Kalapani and the under clothed and inadequately shod

pilgrims apprehensively faced the almost 5,000 feet climb in a span of just around four kilometres. Headaches, loss of breath at the slightest exertion and a sleepless night later, we made our assault on the 17,800 feet high pass early in the morning of September 18.

Swamy, who was certain of an elaborate reception by at least a Deputy Minister from Beijing due to the historical significance of the pilgrimage, and, as a consequence, hoping to make an entry into Tibet before the rest of the party, was the first astride his horse at 5.30 a.m. Around 9.00 o'clock when the rest of the party arrived atop the pass, gasping for breath and blowing furiously into icy hands, they found a frozen Swamy who had been waiting in the lee of a snow covered hillside with only I.T.B.P. guides for company. A very subdued Swamy made his way into Tibet to recover his *sang-froid* only on arrival in Taklakot 10 hours later.

Zig-zagging our breathless way up the hill, over snow which lay a few inches deep, we were encouraged by the athletic I.T.B.P. men who patrolled the areas regularly. Miss Navinlata Joshi who had doggedly refused to ride a horse all the way, was floundering up and constantly being advised by the guides to compromise and ride up the torturous slope. Mr. Deb Mukerjee, who himself was having a tough time, in his capacity as Liaison Officer, in what was his only decisive step during the entire journey, eventually ordered her to take a horse.

The crossing was scheduled to be made around 10 a.m. but, playing it safe, we had all arrived at the border crossing an hour earlier. The crossing has to be made before one o'clock in the afternoon as deadly freezing winds start blowing around that time, their velocity and razor keen cold edge making it impossible for any one to stand. Even though the Sun had mercifully risen by this time (what Deb Mukerjee dramatically described as "champagne weather" in his despatch to his Ministry) there was little feeling in hands and feet. However, the I.T.B.P., resourceful and

hospitable as always, rose to the occasion at this numb moment providing us with mango milkshake made from a tinned mix and melted snow. Not the most ideal drink, given the circumstances, but welcome nevertheless, the incongruity of it all taking ones mind off the cold.

Excitement welled when thousands of feet below us we saw a party of five men and horses snaking their way like ants up the snow covered slopes. As they neared, we could see one of them, who later turned out to be Passang their leader, bearing a huge Chinese flag. Hectic photographs were taken at the pass where snow lay six inches deep, and before long we were confronted by the welcome party of five impassive Tibetan guides who spoke only a smattering of Nepalese interspersed with a few words of Hindi.

Dressed in knee length greatcoats lined with yak fleece and Mao caps, our guides in a jumble of languages and frantic handwaving informed us that our luggage would be transported on horseback and we were to await their arrival at a spot three kilometres downhill. A knee breaking, treacherous descent over loose rocks made slippery by melting snow saw us in a U-shaped barren valley and our welcoming party's horse camp in Tibet.

Tibet

A lone toothless Tibetan dressed in piles of clothing and brewing green tea barely acknowledged our presence. Tired after our rigours we sat and watched the Tibetan devour his lunch (Tibet follows Beijing time and is two hours and a half ahead of Indian time), which consisted of dried yak meat, salty green tea and a smelly cheese made of yak milk. Replete, he smilingly offered us a piece of meat cut off a hunk dug out of a well used saddle bag, which all of us politely declined.

Three hours later, Pasang, the horsemen's leader, a weather beaten man with watery eyes washed out by long hours in the hot Sun and the gait of a horseman (who we later learnt was a farmer), arrived with our luggage and in a mixture of Nepalese and Tibetan and frantic waving of hands told us that we would ride to Taklakot or Pulan Chung, a Chinese military township, 20 kilometres to the north.

Perched delicately atop wooden saddles, the 15 pilgrims travelled through stark though beautiful countryside along a non-existent track before reaching Taklakot. Surrounded by high mountain ranges, the highest being the unclimbed Gurla Mandhatta (23,350 feet), a route devoid of trees and greenery, the limitless drab brownness created a feeling of total isolation and loneliness.

The icy crispness of the air and the bright Sun-shine which had most of us fishing for dark glasses tends to telescope distance making things appear closer than they really are. Barren hills once criss-crossed by glacial valleys grimly loomed above us as we bumped along on our saddles. The path at places was so precipitous and the short though sturdy ponies so close to the brink, that many anxious moments were spent before suitable vibrations were established between hapless rider and agile pony.

A distance of six kilometres, in the course of which many slipped from their perches, brought us to Pala, at one time a resting place for pilgrims with two fully-staffed *serais*. All that remains of Pala today are four walls where once populated buildings stood, a pile of stones, mute sentinels to hordes of travellers and pilgrims, many of them on their last journey to meet their god.

We passed through Magrum village high above the Karnali or Map Chhu river across from which lies Taklakot, where the poverty and squalor is similar to that found in our less prosperous villages. Tibetans familiar with Hindustan before the trade route closed eagerly greeted us clasping their hands to our saddles and touching our knees, happiness writ large on their wrinkled faces, aged long before their time. Young faces below peaked Mao caps dressed in the drab olive of Chinese militia, stared impassively as our caravan passed by. Clusters of children, like infants anywhere, swarmed from hutments shared with one-horned fierce-looking yaks, yelling excitedly. Hindustan had once again journeyed to Tibet.

Rectangular fields adjoining the village were cultivated collectively, growing barley, maize and chick peas. Irrigation and harvesting techniques were archaic even though evidence of mechanised farming lay strewn around.

Crossing a deep gorge across the Karnali, we rode past the ruins of the Indian *mandi*, walls of which still remain in various

stages of decay, and on past the teeming Nepalese *mandi* which has flourished unabated, despite closure of trade with its erstwhile competitor. Large numbers of Nepalese, many of them knitting and making wool from sheep and goat fleece, mobbed us till the square mud fortress flying the Chinese red flag where we dismounted and passed into a garret-like room and onto the visa, immigration and customs authorities of the Autonomous Region of Tibet.

Tables and benches lined the tiny dark room which accommodated, besides the 15 strong Indian contingent, around 10 Chinese officials. Here we met Mr. Lee, 43, the burly chain-smoking interpreter from Beijing who was to be a constant companion for our three nights stay in Taklakot. Lee, who despite certain unreasonable demands and embarrassing questions thrown at him by insensitive pilgrims remained calm and cheerful throughout. He never turned down any request, stolidly answering that he would "check" or "refer back" and neither did he contradict, parrying difficult questions with the sang froid of a seasoned diplomat.

A short bespectacled youth in a high-collared tunic with a red, oblong-shaped insignia on his sleeve, asked us our particulars in perfect, though sing-song Hindi. After transcribing each person's antecedents—profession, date of birth, father's name, etc.—both in Chinese and English, he passed us on to the suave customs officer.

A customs declaration form in which we detailed all precious belongings including watches, jewellery, camera lenses (all these entries were checked on departure), was followed by a diligent baggage search. Bedi's bags took unusually long as he was carrying a Penguin paperback, "Tibet" by Thubten Norbu and Colin Turnbull. The normally efficient customs officer seemed taken aback at this discovery and, after minutely examining the inner flap of the book which had Tibetan characters, passed it on to fellow officials. Like a number of Chinese from Beijing posted in the area, he was unfamiliar with the characters

and alternately thumbing through the book, mulling over its innocuous cover and consulting his equally nonplussed colleagues for over 20 minutes, he returned it, much confused by the unexpected.

Holders of diplomatic passports, Deb Mukerjee, Swamy and Rawat, were not accorded diplomatic immunity. Ignoring their mild protestations of waiving such checks, the Chinese were firm though hyper-polite and the bags of the three were gone through like the rest. However, on the return journey, the Chinese respected their diplomatic status and waved them through, unchecked. Finally, after around three hours, we were issued pilgrim visas to Manasarovar and Kailas on payment of one yuan (approximately Rs.5.50) which directed the holder that "no lending out, missing or destroying" the card was permitted. In batches of four we were allowed to leave for the specially built Pilgrim Reception Centre in the relatively newer section which houses the officials of Purang county of Ari district, Taklakot being its headquarters.

The charming, bespectacled Mrs. Hsueh Hui, our second interpreter from the Foreign Affairs Ministry greeted us here, and, though younger than Mr. Lee seemed to wield more clout than the smiling Chinaman. Polished and fluent in English, Mrs. Hui introduced us to their "chief", a Tibetan, who was responsible for the pilgrim contingents in Taklakot and for organising their onward journey. Unassuming and good humoured, the grizzled Tibetan who spoke only through interpreters made our eight-day stay in Tibet comfortable and economical, granting numerous concessions not stated in the ground rules intimated to the External Affairs Ministry by the Chinese Government.

He reduced the hotel tariff from 40 yuan to 30 yuan and the return fare by truck from Taklakot to Kailas and Manasarovar by half. Goods in the Foreign Trade Company, the only shop in Taklakot, were also sold to us at indigenous rates as opposed to rates charged from outsiders, till then only the Nepalese and the local population. The eight-day sojourn in Tibet costed by

the External Affairs Ministry at around \$250 (410 yuan) eventually cost us around half that amount, courtesy the Tibetan Chiefs magnanimity. Each pilgrim ended up paying 70 yuan for board and lodging for three nights, 55 yuan for transport and 41 yuan for guides who accompanied us around Kailas and the Lake, besides the horses to and from Lipu Pass. No subsequent team was accorded these concessions.

The Reception Centre has independent units similar to modern day hutments, consisting of a big room and a small ante-room with five beds in each unit. Functionally furnished, the rooms are upholstered in bright Chinese prints and gaily decorated enamel basin-like bowls with flights of birds painted on them are placed under each bed along with an empty beer or wine bottle to carry to the pit lavatories located at one end of the compound.

These lavatories, where refuse continued to pile high, were the scene of an amusing encounter between Deb Mukerjee and the hyper polite Mr. Lee. The former repairing to the pits found the further of two stalls occupied by Mr. Lee. Spying the Indian diplomat, Mr. Lee, ever courteous, rose, bowed and sat down again. Deb Mukerjee, after suitably reciprocating, occupied the neighbouring stall, separated by a mere three foot high partition and rather confusedly, began conversing with the Chinaman.

Each room was liberally supplied with delicious Monkey Roll toffees, exquisitely-flavoured tea specially brought from the Chinese interior and tall thermos carafes of boiling water. Bone china tea cups were provided for the lightly aromatic tea which the Chinese drink without milk or sugar but indulgently (rather patronisingly, as is the case when a connoisseur palate makes concession to less honed taste buds), provided us with sugar as a special indulgence. They drew the line, however, at milk. Electricity is provided by a generator, though Mr. Lee informed us that a hydel project was located nearby and would soon take care of Taklakot's power requirements.

Taklakot Mandi, as it is referred to by old Tibet hands on the Indian side is situated on the Karnali River which flows from Tibet into Nepal, over 1,600 kilometres and a seven day's jeep drive away from Lhasa. Overlooked by the Guria Mandhata, Taklakot is set in a depression with sheer cliffs on three sides descending for 500 feet, while on the fourth is a glacial ridge running at a uniform level for several miles to the west. With a mixed population of around 10,000 Chinese, Tibetans and the seasonal Nepalese, Taklakot is the furthestmost outpost of Chinese officialdom in western Tibet, where attention to development seems to be a relatively recent phenomenon.

There are three distinct parts of Taklakot with obvious demarcations. Across the river are clusters of ancient Tibetan hamlets engaged in collective farming, which we passed through on our ride. Irrigation facilities on the high table land above the river are meagre and of a very basic nature. The Tibetans that we saw, though young in age were wrinkled long before their years, toothless and stooped, the harsh conditions of the terrain alongwith the rarefied atmosphere hastening the aging process. One wreck of a human being we saw outside the departmental store in Taklakot, a yawning gap where teeth should have been, a washed out vacant look in his eyes, was placed by all at around 80 years. He was 35.

Across the river on the other side, facing the villages, is the Nepalese *mandi*. Spread over an area of around 3,000 square yards, the *mandi* is a permanent feature of Taklakot from mid-May when the melting snows make the passes between Nepal and Tibet accessible until mid-October when they start snowing up again. The trade like in ancient times is confined to grain in exchange for Tibetan wool and rock salt. The *mandi* was abustle with activity with mounds of wool under tented shelters, while resigned mountain goats, fine specimens, many of whom are the height and size of Great Danes, though more rugged and sure of foot, awaited shearing. Many Nepalese shops sold Indian goods—cloth, dark glasses, consumer and various household items,

Initially the Nepalese, who number around 300 families traded only with the Chinese not coming into fiscal or barter contact with the Tibetans. But since 1979, trade regulations have been somewhat relaxed and today they deal with both Chinese and Tibetans alike. Two quintals of inferior quality rice fetch one quintal of raw sheep or goat wool while three quintals of rice, in 1981 were exchanged for one quintal of salt.

The Nepalese who cross over into Tibet over the Bara Lipu Pass (a few kilometres along the ridge on which lies the Chotta Lipu Pass we negotiated) are kept under strict surveillance. They are not allowed to travel beyond Taklakot, being issued with seasonal visas, their trade regulated by a customs officer specially posted in Taklakot. However, for the pious Nepalese the pilgrimage to Manasarovar has continued undisturbed, though they are not allowed to perform the *parikrama* of the Lake or travel to Kailas. Crossing into Taklakot from a place called Tinker, for the devout, the pilgrimage is a seven hour round trip by truck to Manasarovar in the course of which they merely have time to bathe and perform their rituals after which they are hustled back.

Most of the Nepalese families, regular traders in the region, reside in the ruins of the summer palace across the bridge spanning the Karnali and separating the newer section of the township from the *mandi*. Once the headquarters of the Jongpen, the Viceroy's Agent in Taklakot, the palace built into an 800 feet high hillside is today a series of frightening caves and half-destroyed boundary walls. Crude lean-to shelters dot impressive walls which once stood as symbols of Lama power and wealth. The trader who depended upon royal patronage a mere 40 years ago is now camping on the decayed walls of erstwhile imperial glory—a poetic justice of sorts.

Overlooking the entire township and immediately above the ruins of the summer palace are the impressive remains of the Simbling Gompa, once the largest and richest in the area. Decaying roofless walls once the centre of learning, wealth and

power, watch dumbly over Taklakot. Destroyed, reportedly, by the Gang of Four (responsible for dynamiting all the monasteries in this region, according to our interpreters), the Simbling Gompa had over 170 monks in cavernous recesses and was a veritable treasure house of scriptures, scrolls and paintings. Many precious Buddhist scriptures found their way from India, as Buddhism waned in the country of its origin. Successive maraudings over centuries by adventurers and the resurgence of Hinduism, temporarily eclipsed, drove the peace-loving Buddhist people into the remote mountain regions where they stored their precious manuscripts and the few treasures they managed to salvage. The libraries of the Gompa, according to travelogues, were stacked to its vaulted roofs with precious tomes of learning and philosophy and more than 400 banner paintings were kept in the gigantic main hallway. Four silk Buddha and Maitreya banners each measuring 60 feet by 30 feet were part of the monastery's treasures.

According to Sherring, the Taklakot monastery was generally known by the Hindu word Shivling (note the similarity to Simbling) even among the Tibetans, because the numerous Hindus who went on pilgrimage to the area had given it this name, so much so, that the word was applied to any large monastery. Even though phallic worship is unknown in the region, the Shivling, he goes on to say, was extremely wealthy, having inherited large sums of money and land from pious donors.

“The monastery is far richer than the Jongpen”, Sherring says, “and special officers are appointed for due administration of this wealth, the principal of whom is the Dazang, in whose hands is all executive power and who is generally chosen from among the local lamas. Subordinate to him is the Nirchang, whose term of office is three years and who is the ‘Minister of Agriculture’, all matters concerning revenue and tenants passing through his office. All monks wear claret-coloured robes and the distinction between the ‘yellow caps’ and the ‘red caps’ lies

in the head-dress and in the girdle, which are yellow and red respectively, though the monks go bareheaded.”

Hitherto neglected by the Chinese, presumably because of its remoteness and daunting countryside, the Haans appear to have moved to Taklakot with a view to development about five years ago. Most of the personnel are on compulsory state service stints for two years, like both our interpreters and some of the customs officials, who have left their families behind, the Taklakot school, catering only to a handful of Tibetan children. Modern conveniences are few and life for even the hardy Chinese tough. Motor vehicles are a recent introduction as evidenced by the numerous goat and yak herd stampedes that we saw whenever a motor vehicle went past them.

Taklakot also houses a military cantonment which is perched high on a hill commanding a view of the valley and one we were expressly forbidden to photograph. Reportedly one square mile in area, this military outpost in western Tibet billets soldiers atop the hill where even straying animals are unwelcome. Squat mud bunkers with gun emplacements along the perimeter of the hill loom menacingly over the valley.

The food served to us was gourmet Schezuan with enormous quantities of black mushrooms, capsicum and shrimp fried into paper-thin *papad*-like pieces which had even the vegetarians fooled for a while, till regrettably enlightened. Excellent Chinese beer was available for 2.5 yuan (about Rs.14) as was red wine at 2 yuan a bottle. The rare rice wine, Mao Tai, in its unusual white porcelain bottles cost 13 yuan. On our first evening we were served delicious tea, followed by a sumptuous meal of rare delicacy. The magnanimity of the “Chief” (Tibetan, this time) had us sampling succulent apples and syrupy water melon specially imported thousands of kilometres from the Chinese mainland. Breakfast was a simple meal of hard biscuit-like rolls stuffed with raisin and peanuts washed down with aromatic, highly sweetened coffee, or freshly baked

rice bread, a lot of which we took for the *parikramas*, which, high up in the mountains, dipped in steaming hot soup, tasted delicious.

Queries regarding the *parikrama* itinerary over a delicious dinner elicited a vague "I will check with my chief" response from Mr. Lee. The polite, though confused, Chinese officials made it appear as if there had been some communication gap and they were not wholly aware of what was to be done with us other than offer hospitality in Taklakot. A new generation of officials, unfamiliar with the *parikrama* concept, had to be explained our demands in detail. They responded by saying that they would check back and, in the meantime, we should spend the following day, September 19, in Taklakot, shopping and having a look around till they could finalise arrangements.

The bonus rest day was welcome to most pilgrims after having been continuously on the move for eight days. Shingal, who by riding a horse constantly had successfully hidden high altitude symptoms in the nightly medical checks-ups now developed high fever and diarrhoea. Hence it was decided jointly by Mukerjee and Swamy that he would accompany the latter who was visiting Manasarovar and Kailas by jeep the following day, having no intention of performing the *p. rikramas* as Parliament, then in session, summoned him to Delhi. Swamy who was returning to Kalapani the day after was persuaded to take the Meerut income-tax commissioner with him, as he would be a burden to the rest of the party. Swamy was then being airlifted by helicopter to Bareilly the same day.

The extra day in Taklakot was spent shopping in the sparse though interestingly equipped department store for tinned food, table tennis racquets, excellent letter writing paper, wool lined great coats (70 yuan and useful only in snow regions), ear muff caps (7 yuan) and handkerchiefs. The adjoining hardware store and general merchandise stocked smokers, continually running low, with strong Chinese cigarettes (practically all Chinese whom we met, officials and others,

were heavy smokers) and food buffs with an esoteric form of egg baked in a mud crust which had to be spilt open before being eaten. The bookshop hard by, Mr. Lee said was "sold out" and awaiting replenishment.

From the crowds that thronged the door of the general store, and the requests by a few Nepalese to buy them cigarettes or the odd bottle of liquor indicated that the shop was not democratic in its choice of clientele. Tibetan herdsmen who came down from the hills were also barred entry, a prerogative of only party officials. When this was pointed out to Mr. Lee and the customs officer of the day before, our queries were fobbed off in the customary Chinese manner, both officials first pretending not to understand, and on being pressed, excusing themselves on the plea that someone needed their help in interpreting. This duality in treatment and discrimination particularly in the case of the native Tibetans seemed to be a matter of firm policy.

The hordes of Tibetans who continually swarmed around us on our meanderings around Taklakot seemed to belong to a different era altogether. Chinese attempts to modernise them in keeping with their political credo by demolishing gompas, symbols of a feudal past, appear to have proved futile in the case of the locals we came across. In the countryside surrounding Manasarovar we saw innumerable Tibetan shrines, invariably a few prayer stones collected together to form a mound mostly on or around the reportedly dynamited sites of old monasteries, which have acquired for them an ecclesiastical mantle in the absence of the original. Revolving their prayer wheels, even teenage Tibetans roamed mountain slopes, paying obeisance at the tiny remnants of a faith whose larger symbols have all been banished or destroyed.

Little has changed. The nomadic Tibetans appear to be living two centuries behind time in an age when Buddhism and its propagators, the Lamas, were supreme and their herds all that counted. Today, hundreds of years of conditioning which find expression in their crude shrines and the ubiquitous herds are

all that is of any importance. The outside world to them is as remote as god to the atheist or music to the deaf ear. Mere decades of Chinese suzerainty, which eschews all religion cannot wipe out centuries of living under the hierarchical Lama system of government where all authority stemmed from God's appointee on earth.

On our return to the pilgrim centre we were informed that the Hindi film "Caravan", the craze of Beijing cinema halls, would be screened for us in the dining hall. We were also informed of our departure the following morning to Kailas and Manasarovar where tents had been pitched and mounted guides awaited our arrival.

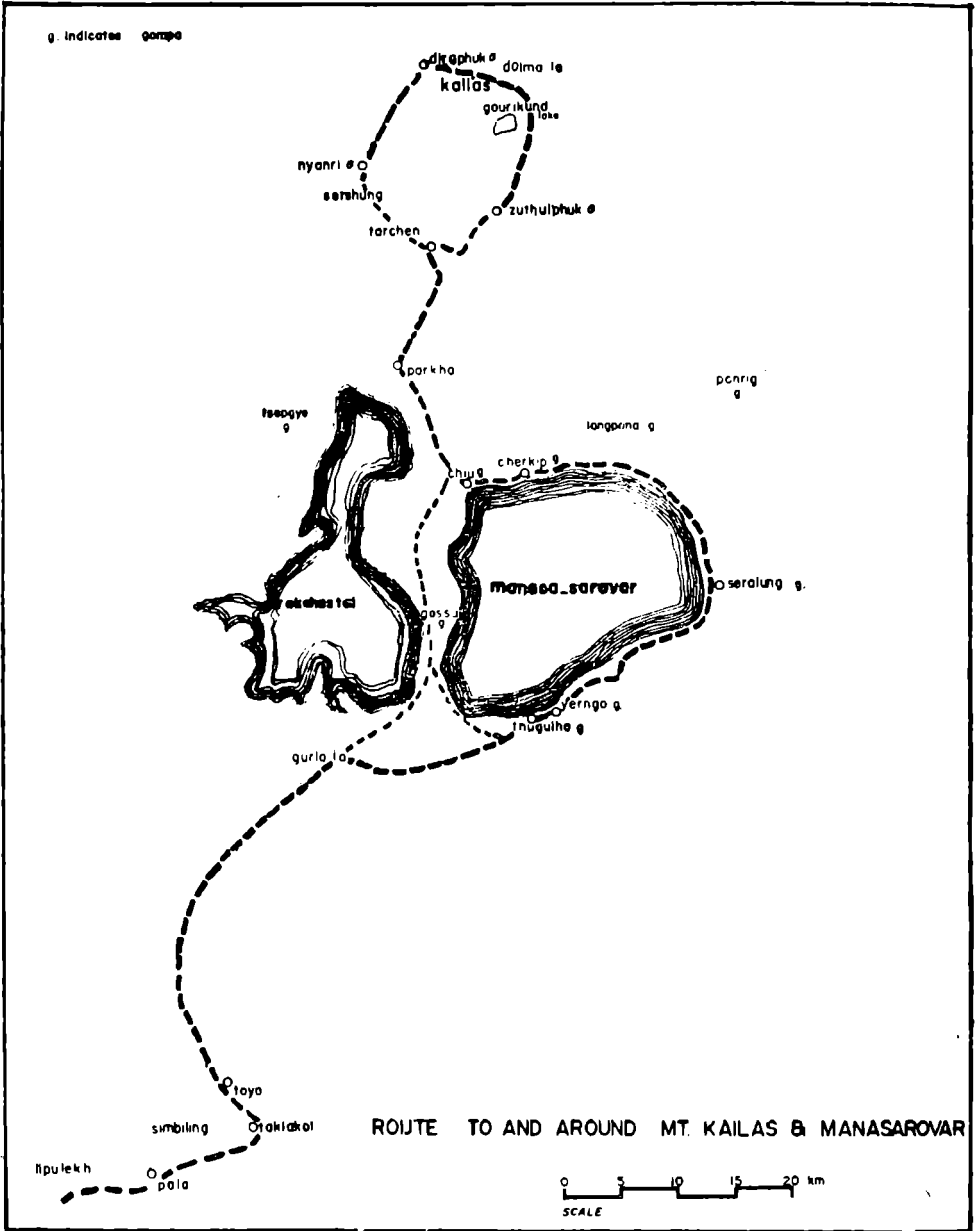
Meanwhile, Swamy and Shingal had returned from their *darshan* of both Kailas and Manasarovar, tired after the 230 kilometre drive, the latter distinctly ill and had to be put to bed after medication. The two of them left early morning September 20, with Shingal almost breathing his last on the steep climb up the snow bound slopes of Lipu Pass, like pilgrims of yore assured rebirth, if martyred running the gauntlet of the Kailas pilgrimage.

Shingal, already weak from diarrhoea, his advanced years sitting heavily on him, fainted half way up the incline developing pulmonary oedema. The waiting I.T.B.P. officers urged Shingal, by now prone and unconscious, to somehow clamber up, but sensing danger, the hardy Dr. Tripathi ran down the slope and lugged the dying man up the slope. Once on top of Lipu, the efficient medico dosed him heavily with dehydrating tablets and rushed him several thousand feet below to Shynchun. A much reduced Shingal met us at Dharchula on our arrival there 10 days later, profusely thanking the munificence of Shiva in sparing him. He regularly sends us both cards announcing *kirtans* and *satsangs* at his residence in Meerut in the name of Kailas Mahapati and Shiva, its resident deity.

Kailas and Manasarovar

IN between emotionally charged scenes from the Chinese dubbed Hindi film, "Caravan" on the evening of September 19, the two *parikrama* teams were decided upon out of the remaining 13 pilgrims. Deb Mukerjee nominated Pratul Pathak, an experienced mountaineer, leader of the eight-member team for the 50 kilometre Kailas *parikrama*, but not before Chief Satyanarayanan practically brought the roof of the Pilgrim Centre down on our heads when we broadly hinted that he should opt for the flatter Manasarovar circuit rather than the shorter though arduous one around Kailas.

Chief was gently told that the Kailas circumambulation was gruelling, one having to walk in rarefied atmospheres of over 15,000 feet, ascending at one point the 18,500 feet high Dolma La Pass. No sooner was the suggestion made that he went into tantrums inveigling the wrath of Indian and Tibetan gods to descend upon our heads for wanting to thwart his life's main ambition of performing a Kailas *parikrama*. He tearfully offered to give Mukerjee an indemnity bond absolving all of responsibility for his death. When told that he would have to carry his own rucksack, which would weigh a minimum of around 12 kilograms, he forcefully announced that should he fall by the wayside we could merely step over him and continue walking. (How prophetic Chief's fears proved. Though, fortunately for him, we had no wish to leave him behind on



the last day of the *parikrama*, when he almost collapsed on the way and had to be propped between Pathak and Bedi for the last two kilometres. But more of that later.) He had no desire to be helped. But go he would. Determination and tears got Chief his way and along with Mukerjee, Vaishnav, Mahesh Sharma, Dr. Dhirender Sharma, Arvind Sud and Bedi, he formed the Kailas contingent. The five-strong Manasarovar *parikrama* team led by the wiry Delhi school master, Jamwal, included Miss Joshi, Rawat, Sudershan Lal and Shiv Kumar.

The Chinese, who the day before had been vague about the *bandobust* at the pilgrim spots, confirmed that evening that tents, guides and horses awaited us at the Mount and the Lake. The guides, they said, would set up camp ahead, alleviating our fears that we would either have to spend the nights out in the open or in the numerous gompas that surrounded the pilgrim route according to Swami Pranavananda and other travelogues. As it turned out, the gompas were piles of rubble with barely enough evidence to identify their location.

However, the promised wool-lined tents of the Chinese turned out to be paper thin summer shelters made in India over 20 years ago. A wide cut running the entire top of the tent to enable a fire to burn inside the prairie shelter, offered token protection against below freezing temperatures. Moreover, the Chinese provided no medical cover, the fact that we fortunately needed it not, barely detracting from the seriousness of the lapse. Ill-equipped to combat the cold and in poor physical shape, the pilgrims could easily have fallen prey to any number of fatal diseases which claim many an experienced climber. With no habitation worth the name near either Kailas or Manasarovar and Taklakot 110 kilometres away, any immediate hospitalisation case could have proved devastating. Deb Mukerjee, the indecisive liaison officer, refused to request the Chinese for medical cover for even the succeeding parties as it was against his pride, and not stated in the conveniently and oft quoted "ground rules". Always the stiff-necked diplomat, he

was prepared to risk mishaps rather than compromise false dignity on humanitarian grounds.

Bumping across the flatland of the Tibetan plateau in the uncovered back of a sturdy Chinese truck, huddled close together midst rucksacks and fuel drums, we made our way on September 20 to Kailas. Our driver, a Tibetan dressed in leather breeches and a Mao cap set at a rakish angle, a cigarette forever pasted on his lower lip, would have put any race driver to shame. Showing scant respect either for his human cargo or his machine he practically flew over a non-existent track, across rivulets, banking nonchantly past boulders.

The drive from Taklakot is across flat table land criss-crossed by glacial valleys dominated by the Gurla Mandhata, and later, the Kailas ranges. Similar in terrain to the Leh-Ladakh regions, the countryside is a brown drabness, relieved only by mountain ridges. Five kilometres from Taklakot, we passed through Toyo village where there is the *samadhi* of the great Indian, General Zoravar Singh, called Singhba-ka-Chhorten (stupa or monument).

Zoravar Singh, who was Commander-in-Chief of the Jammu Maharaja, Gulab Singh, was a warrior as renowned for his bravery and generalship on the battle field as he was for his conquests. Having annexed Ladakh to the Jammu Raj, Zoravar Singh marched thousands of miles to the Kailas region, conquering as he advanced before he bivouaced in Tirathpuri (around 50 kilometres west of Kailas) in 1841.

With only 1,500 men, the redoubtable general fought an uneven battle against 10,000 Tibetan soldiers, routing them completely before advancing to Taklakot where he set up his headquarters and a loose framework of administration. He then left Taklakot with his wife to see her safely to Ladakh, leaving the area under the command of his lieutenant, Bastiram. Taking only a handful of soldiers with him, as he intended to return shortly to annex the remaining part of Tibet before the onset of winter, Zoravar set out in the spring of 1841.

On his return, a few weeks later, he was attacked by a large force of Tibetan Khampa warriors, at Toyo, and though taken completely by surprise fought bitterly and artfully till the end, giving rise to the belief that he possessed superhuman and mystical powers, and was a *tantric*.

According to Tibetan belief, a man with such ethereal powers cannot be killed with ordinary weapons and it is widely believed that Zoravar Singh was killed by a specially fashioned gold bullet fired on him from the window of the local *patwari's* house. The General fell from his horse wounded in the knee, whereupon he was hacked limb from limb with a golden sword.

According to another version, Zoravar left his wife on the shores of Manasarovar in a house specially constructed for her. When Zoravar was murdered, at Toyo, it is said that blood instead of milk poured from her breasts and this ominous omen drove her out of her protective shelter, where she was spotted by Tibetans and killed on the spot. A less gory version, however, lays the crime of Zoravar Singh's murder on a discontented servant who, badly treated, took the unarmed General by surprise and stabbed him.

So great was the legend of Zoravar Singh that he was as revered in death as he was feared in life. One testicle of his and a piece of flesh were preserved in the Simbling Gompa in Taklakot. They were, according to Swami Pranavananda in "Explorations in Tibet", kept under lock with the Danzang (manager priest) of the monastery and taken out once in four years—in the second month of the Tibetan calendar (March-April), on the occasion of some special Tantric rite called Chakhar (iron fort). One hand of the General, shy two fingers, the Swami declares, was preserved in the Sakya monastery to the west of the Simbling Gompa and open to public. However, Sherring's version says that the Tibetans rushed upon the fallen General and pulled out his hair which was like eagle's feathers all over his body. His flesh was cut up into small portions and every family in the district took a piece,

suspending it from the tops of their houses, the idea being that the mere presence of the flesh of a man so great must necessarily confer a brave heart for the possessor. "Rumour," Sherring goes on to state, "also says that the pieces sweated fat for many days, a sign which the most sceptical regarded as connected with the dead chiefs bravery".

Whatever the truth surrounding his death, Zoravar Singh, writes, Swami Pranavananda in 1950, is spoken of highly by the Tibetans in the Purang Taklakot valley, who refer to him as "Singi Gelbo" (raja of lions) and "Singi Raja". To perpetuate his memory the Tibetans erected a special monument at Toyo, where he fell, wherein were ensconced the rest of his remains. The memorial was painted in red ochre and every year Tibetans paid homage to the fallen warrior's tomb by burning incense. Zoravar Singh's death centenary was celebrated on October 30, 1942, the Swami says, where he exhibited the General's swords, shields and side arms collected from Nepalese and Bhotia villagers in the Purang valley.

After Zoravar Singh was murdered and his cohorts decimated by advancing Tibetan troops, the survivors marched towards Pala to flee over the Lipu Pass. The dreaded winter had set in by now and the biting winds forced the retreating soldiers to burn the stocks of their rifles to keep themselves from freezing to death. A majority of the men fell victim to the cold but Captain Bastiram along with a handful of bedraggled soldiers reached India with his woeful tale of a rudderless army, a slain warrior General and an ignominious retreat over snow. The soldiers sold off their arms to the Bhotias which till the 1950's were still preserved with a few families in the area, relics of a victorious past.

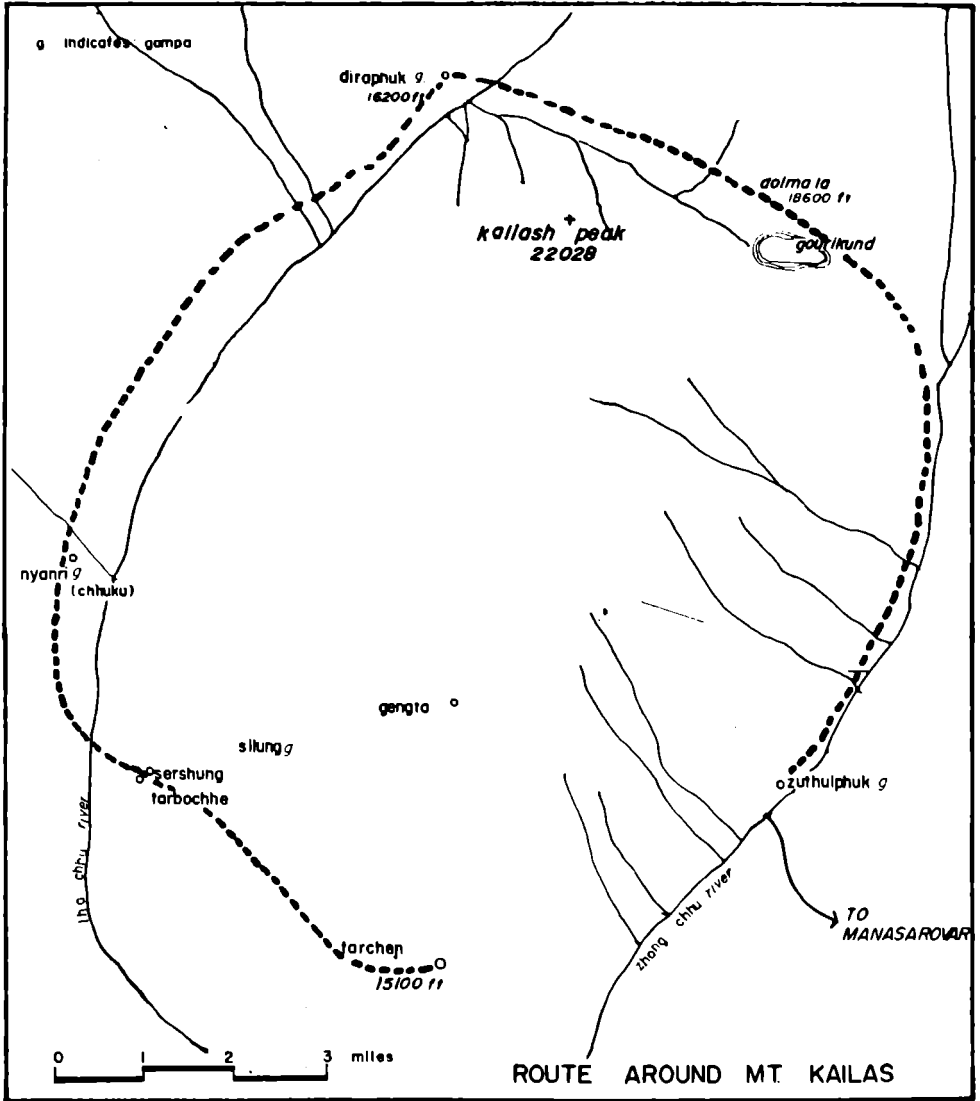
The following year, 1842, the advancing armies of Tibet marched along the Indus, recaptured their own provinces and laid seige to Leh, the capital of Ladakh, one of the provinces of the Jammu Raja. A see-saw battle ensued which led to besieging of the Tibetan General somewhere near Leh. Both

sides realising the futility of battle in which no side could execute and sustain conquest, effected a treaty by which Ladakh was to remain within Gulab Singh's kingdom and territories east of it would belong to Tibet.

Forty kilometres after setting out we ascended the Gurla La, the 16,200 feet high pass in the Gurla Mandhatta ranges. Mandhatta, a legendary Maharaja was said to have sat in penance on this mountain by the shores of Lake Manasarovar. Gurla Mandhatta or Memo Nam-Nyimri (to give its Tibetan name) is a group of snow clad peaks, the tallest being 25,350 feet and the other three 22,850, 22,650 and 22,200 feet respectively.

Descending from the pass the piercing blue waters of Manasarovar and the darker-hued ones of Raksas Tal, opposite and to our left at 14,650 feet, had even our driver rein in. The spectacular vista of sparkling lakes is greatly accentuated by the drabness of the surrounding countryside. Encircled by snow-capped mountains (Kailas is not one of them but, on a clear day, can be seen around 40 kilometres to the north), the vast water masses resound gently with the sound of rippling waves. Washing up against the flat shoreline, the waves were clearly audible to us over the noisy ticking over of the truck's engine. According to the Chinese who claim to have surveyed Manasarovar, the sides of the lake are lower than its middle corroborating the theory that the Lake is fed by underground springs and also, to an extent, accounts for the sea-like waves. An ordinary boat, Mr. Lee said, trying to make a crossing over the centre of the lake is thrust back. At times when there are high waves near the shoreline the middle is calm and clear like a mirror, reflecting the silvery dome of Kailas if seen from the southern side, or Mandhatta's giant head if seen from the north-east.

Three kilometres west of Manasarovar is the Raksas Tal also known as Ravana Sarovar. In Tibetan it is called Rangak Tso, or the lake in which five mountains are believed to be drowned.



Much smaller in circumference than Manasarovar, Raksas Tal is darker, an aspect in keeping with the role accorded to it in mythology. According to travelogues, every bend in the lake reveals a fresh scene. Early in the morning, the lake is so rough and raging with roaring waves that the entire surface is white with foam. A few bends later, the emerald green water is so perfectly still that even the tiniest pebble and the myriads of fish can clearly be seen along its bed.

Even for the Chinese, the Lake is evil, for the official from the Bureau of Public Safety who accompanied Swamy on his fleeting visit to the lake claimed that its waters gave people a stomach ache. This same man, however, paid obeisance to the Lake waters, the application of which, he admitted, had cured him of a chronic skin disease. Doctors, he said, had admitted defeat in an extremely uncomfortable kind of eczema on his neck. Resigned to live with the irritation, he had been posted to Taklakot where an old Tibetan had told him to apply water from Lake Manasarovar on to the infected area. The Lake, the old man swore, had magical healing powers bestowed upon it by Gods and Goddesses. The Communist security man scoffed at the suggestion but desperate, was willing to try any cure, however bizarre and contrary to his political credo. The water worked, softening no doubt, his contempt and disbelief towards politically condemned "gods".

Driving round the western periphery of Manasarovar we headed for Tarchen, the base camp for the Kailas *parikrama* at the southern base of Mount Kailas, 30 kilometres to the north en route to the Sinkiang province of China.

Looming in its rocky formidable majesty, the 22,028 feet high haven of Lord Shiva and Parvati eulogised in both Hindu and Tibetan scriptures and mythology, resembles a *ling* from the southern base. Never ever climbed, the tetrahedral Kailas is sheer rock base upwards. From the west, (following the *parikrama* route), it resembles a gigantic menacing cobra, poised to pounce. Naked portions on the rock surface lend an ominous slant, adding vicious eyes to the lethal hood. From the eastern

side Kailas is visible only for a stretch of around half a kilometre, from where once again it resembles a *ling*.

Tarchen, at a height of 15,000 feet, faces the amphitheatre-like Barkha plain, a vast flat expanse overlooking the emerald green waters of Raksas Tal, where a single-engined aeroplane could easily make a landing. A broken stone building by the side of a small rivulet from the mountain and a weather beaten, ramshackle hard board shed, once shelter for pilgrims, are the only signs of human habitation. The three-tiered crumbling stone house with dark alleyways, dungeons and roofless eaves was covered every inch with goat and sheep droppings its smell haunting us long after we had left the hills.

Once the property of Buddhists from Bhutan, this building was the chapel headquarters of a monk titled Labrang who looked after the possessions and interests of all Bhutanese nationals in Tibet. A small 60 to 80 tent *mandi* was held here every summer to barter traditional goods. Cracked wall paintings adorn three walls of what must have once been the inner sanctotum of the chapel.

Today the chapel is inhabited by a half demented, flea-ridden, bald Tibetan woman and her equally squalid, toothless septugenarian husband. Both were smelling so foul that it was difficult to be near them for long. They came to our camp repeatedly chanting "Dalai Lama" and "Dharamshala" followed by a sing-song litany in Tibetan. Through sign language, laboriously enacted, we gathered that they surmised since we had come from Hindustan, we must have brought word from the Dalai Lama, failing which his photograph or, at the very least, an offering from the holy man. They were pacified when we gave them sweets as *prasad* which we conveyed to the half-insane couple had been specially sent for them from India. In return, they invited us to their little "temple" inside the ruined chapel. A dingy and smelly room, it was ill lit by a single oil wick with an overpowering stench of yak manure. The offering they proffered was raw meat, which we accepted, fearing unpredictable reaction, disposing it off once out of sight.

The following morning began the *parikrama*. Carrying a pack each, weighing around 15 kilograms, which included provisions, clothing and sleeping bags we headed westwards on the first lap of our 50 kilometre march, and, according to scriptures, absolution from a lifetime of sins. Known to have been done in one day, the *parikrama* normally takes two days. We were accompanied by three mounted guides, taciturn men who knew no language we spoke, and armed to the teeth with semi-automatic weapons and dangerous-looking *Khampa* swords.

At the end of the *parikrama*, a few in our group struck a deal with two of the *Khampas* for their carved knives which they bought for around 50 yuan (approximately Rs.300). The horsemen who carried the light weight tents had to be constantly watched for they tended to ride forward unchecked, with scant regard to us lesser mortals on foot. One person, invariably the experienced Pathak, had to be deputed to stop them in time to strike camp, waiting for the less fortunate to join them.

Shortly after leaving camp, we came across a large family of 15 Tibetans who, we later learnt, were also performing the *parikrama*. The oldest in the group, an octagenarian couple, clung to each other for support as they gingerly inched ahead, taking one step at a time, thoughtfully scanning the ground in front. Their faces were creased with criss-crossing lines which seemed to have been etched to scale. Their shiny skins were the colour of old parchment, achieved no doubt through years of applying yak butter for protection against the searing sun. Their bodies bent double, withered by time and use, the old man on each foot, would often fall, but wearing a different shoe chanting mantras struggle up and link his arm with his wife's and shuffle forward again.

We learnt the following day that the husband of one of the younger women in the group had died a few days ago and the entire family including ruddy-cheeked children, with expressions of great sagacity in their small beady eyes, who would unfortunately, age long before their appointed time, were performing the *parikrama* for the appeasement of his soul.

Traversing six kilometres of practically flat land we came across the remains of Shershung where once stood a big flagstaff called *tarbouche* (or *darbouche* as it is locally pronounced). A big fair was held here on full moon day, when the towering flagstaff was dug out, old prayer flags replaced and Buddhist rites performed by monks from neighbouring monasteries under the supervision of the Viceroy of the area.

Today, Shershung is a mere collection of inscribed prayer stones piled atop burial mounds (which are probably of recent origin, having sprung up after the monument was destroyed, but patronised as it still retains its ecclesiastical appeal in the eyes of the people) adorned with yak horns tied mostly with red coloured thread. Our fellow Tibetan *parikrami*'s stopped at Shershung for a long time chanting prayers and performed a complicated ritual which entailed circling the mound innumerable times.

All along the *parikrama* route we came across similar mounds decorated with yak horns tied with colourful thread and a few symbolic prayer stones salvaged from heaps lying around. These mounds seem to have a significance for the local Tibetans, substituting for their decimated monasteries.

A little further, on the west base of Kailas are the remains of the Chhuku or Nyanri monastery. According to travelogues, this gompa had an image of a Bhutanese Lama, Ngava-Nangyal, the founder, which was taken by some Indians to be the painting of the first Sikh Guru, Nanak, because of its white beard and a turban-like conical cap. In the outer rooms of this vast monastery which provided shelter to hundreds of travellers, besides having a large order of its own, were housed the arms of General Zoravar Singh. Two huge elephant tusks a rarity in this mountainous region, were part of its treasured hoard.

Walking alongside the Lha Chhu river for 24 kilometres, we struck camp at Dira Phuk (16,400 feet), the southern end of

the mountain base and just below the 18,600 feet high Dolma La pass. Though the ascent was little over 1,500 feet, the rarefied atmosphere, the piercing sun and the constant biting winds were a tiring combination. Breathlessness prompted rest, and the ensuing feeling of physical ennui tended to lull one into sleep. But sleep at that height can be lethal for it can lead to hypothermia, loss of body heat and eventual death by freezing.

'Chief' Satyanarayana was the worst hit. Mascots have advantages and Chief was relieved of his rucksack early in the walk, retaining merely his plastic water bottle, camera and two pairs of trousers, worn in lieu of warm underwear. The first few kilometres were without event, but then rest periods became protracted than those on the move and years of indulgence began taking their toll. For the last five kilometres to the camp Chief was walking in a trance, his lips chapped, eyes glazed, unable even to reach for the water bottle slung around his neck.

Finally, when thirst could be borne no more and the stream a herculean 100 yards away, he divested himself in turn of eight things (coat, three sweaters, one pair of trousers, two scarves and a camera) before he could get to water in the canteen. Staggering up a small incline, spurred on by sheer faith and realisation of his ambition, from where the welcoming sight of tents and the cheerful bulk of Pathak cooking soup over a sophisticated mini gas stove were visible, Chief in a deathly serious emotion-choked voice told Bedi (his crutch for the day), a story to illustrate just how he felt.

A shipwrecked sailor, 'Chief' related, was washed ashore somewhere on an unknown island and rescued by savage-looking, though friendly natives. The natives treated the seafaring man well, providing him with food and shelter. Safe, after a week, the sailor tentatively asked the Chief for a smoke, which he was promptly granted. The following week, he asked for, and was provided alcohol. Noticing a complete absence of women, the sailor, forlorn for many months, hesitantly asked the Chieftain whether he could possibly be provided a woman? Women, the tribal regretfully said, were not available but there

was a barrel with a hole at one end which might serve the sailor's needs. Desperate, he agreed. Later, thrilled with his experiences, he ran delightedly to the Chief requesting that he be allowed to "visit" the barrel every day. His patron, a huge barrel chested man, smiling indulgently, granted him his wish. But with one small rider. Thursdays the sailor could not use the barrel, for that was the day he would sit inside the barrel!

And "barrelled" was added to our vocabulary, indicating total and complete exhaustion.

Dira-Phuk, at one time the second monastery on the pilgrimage route was dedicated to Geva-Gozangba who is credited with discovering the Kailas *parikrama* route. A heap of stones, barely discernible sections of a boundary wall vaguely zig-zagging their way down a hillside are all that remain of the gompa. According to Swami Pranavananda, the best view of Mount Kailas was from the top of this monastery. Kailas, from here, the Swami writes, is like a "huge silver dome placed on a giant pedestal with two guards on either side, Vajrapani and Avalokiteshvara. Facing Kailas the names of the peaks from east to west are: Chhagnadorje (Vajrapani), Kang Rinpoche (Kailas), Chenresig (Avalokiteshvara), Jamyang (Manjughosha), Chhogel-Norsang and Shavrai". The grandeur and sublimity of the view from the windows of the monastery, Swami Pranavananda says, particularly on a full moon night, is "simply indescribable".

Our camp by the side of a small rivulet, which froze with the onset of darkness, was overlooked by the southern face of the giant *lingam*-like mountain. Presenting a concave face, Kailas, broodingly towered above us in its unravaged magnificence, moonbeams bouncing off its snow clad sides, lighting up the surrounding area with an almost blinding fluorescent light. The sheer climb to the almost 19,000 feet high Dolma La Pass which was to prove, the following day, the most difficult tract of the entire trip, loomed tauntingly above us in its rockiness.

Shortly after sunset, around 8.00 p.m. the Chinese time,

the mercury dropped drastically to around 10 degrees below celsius, much to the frozen chagrin of the under equipped pilgrims. No other night on the pilgrimage highlighted the inadequacy of our equipment. Huddled together in our sleeping bags around Pathak's Japanese mini gas stove, we gratefully sipped hot goulash, which cooled within seconds away from the fire. However the diminutive Vaishnav, the most vociferous in his praise of "Kailas Mahapati", vindicated his allegiance to the Holy Mount by stripping to his loincloth and performing puja by its base.

With the water in our canteens frozen and the adjoining rivulet iced over, we staggered out the following morning to begin the steep four-kilometre ascent up the pass. Ten steps were the maximum most of us could take without getting out of breath and flopping down to rest on freezing rocks. Walking at the rate of one kilometre in an-hour-and-a-half, most of us thought that we would end up victims, after 22 years, of pilgrim-starved Gods. Every step was an effort weighed down by our packs, made heavier by the prayer stones we had greedily picked up (which the Chinese customs in Taklakot politely, but firmly, confiscated on the ground that they were national treasures). The climb was sheer torture, payment perhaps for a lifetime of sins. Pathak, the first to arrive atop the pass with Chief, whom he had relentlessly pushed ahead, feared for his group and at one stage had to descend several hundred feet to relieve one exhausted pilgrim of his rucksack.

Six hours after setting out saw us at a massive boulder, Dolma, visible from the slopes below and which lends its name to the pass (La in Tibetan mean pass), witnessing a ritual performed by the accompanying Tibetan pilgrims around it. Having set out about the same time as we did, the Tibetan family of the day before had steadily clambered up the slopes with apparent effortlessness. Even the octagenarian couple smilingly greeted our arrival, relieved that their quest was over and the soul of their departed family member assured re-birth, higher up, hopefully, on the Nirvana scale.

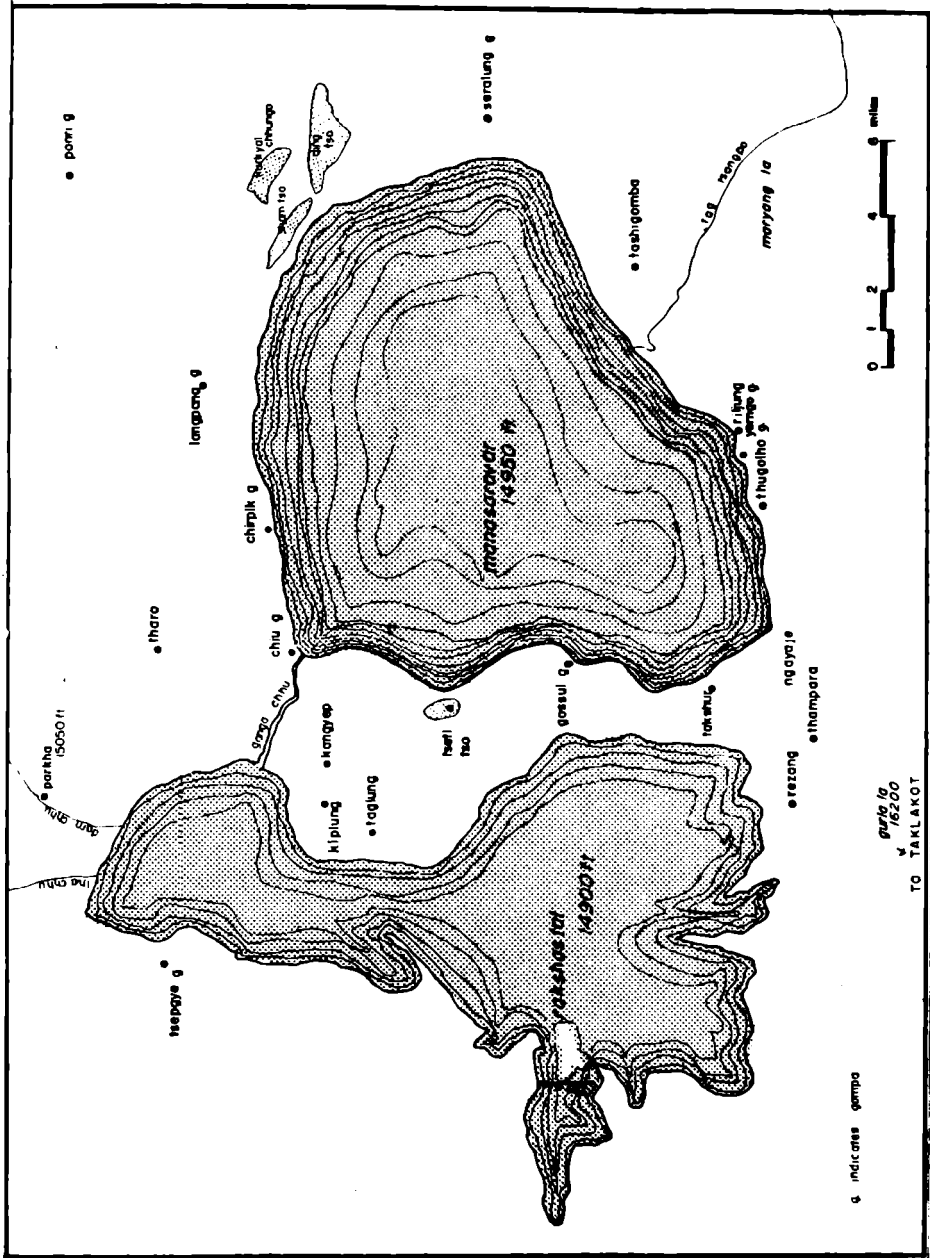
Decorated with flags, the rock is held in great reverence by Tibetans. Teeth are stuck by them into the chinks of the rock forming macabre rosaries. Pilgrims put butter on it accounting for its shiny texture and go around it several times in a kind of well practised ritual. According to legend, Devi disappeared under this block of stone in the form of 21 wolves and there are 21 forms of Devi according to Tibetan scriptures.

Our Tibetan family went around the rock innumerable times, the bereaved widow wailing uncontrollably and beating her breast. The ceremony lasted an hour after which the family settled down to a picnic lunch, brewing tea and chattering gaily, having appeased the departed soul, before continuing downwards.

A few hundred metres from the top of the pass is Gaouri Kund, the highest fresh water lake in the world. Set in a 300 feet deep bowl, the green-coloured lake was frozen. According to popular belief the perennially frozen lake augurs misfortune when it melts. Many claim that it melted 23 years ago when Tibet was occupied by the Chinese and local predictions say that the next time the lake unfreezes, a holocaust will grip the world.

Except for a brief glimpse of a shoulder of Kailas from the top of the Pass, we never saw the mountain again till our return to its northern base at Tarchen the following afternoon. From the eastern face, the peak was not visible at all, not even in snatches.

An almost perpendicular descent for around three kilometres and a five kilometre walk through marshy land brought us to our second night's halt near the remains of the Zuthul-Phuk gumpa. An interesting legend about this gumpa says that two lamas met at the spot where the monastery was later built, one journeying around Kailas from the left and the other from the right. Finding the argument futile about whose direction was the right one to follow, one of them lost his equanimity and hurled an enormous boulder at the other who nimbly caught it.



MANSAROVAR and RAKSHASTAL

To dispel doubts in disbelievers, he left his fingerprints on the rock, by the side of which a gompa came up later. Pilgrims, circuiting from left to right, would often, in vain, test their strength by trying to lift the rock. Needless to add, Zuthul-Phuk gompa has suffered the same fate as the others in the region.

The afternoon of September 23 we were back at Tarchen, having bullied Chief forward and prevented him from falling off the steep hillside, with our mascot walking like a somnambulist. This was, without doubt, Chief's worst ordeal. The last kilometre-and-a-half, "barrelled", he had to be supported by Pathak and Bedi before dropping, a dead weight at the camp. A few hours later we were waved on our way to the Manasarovar camp by the toothless wretched couple manning the hut at Tarchen, our last stop before returning to Taklakot two days later. Strangely, from the afternoon of our leaving Tarchen till the departure of the second batch of pilgrims around 10 days later, the dome of Kailas was rarely, if at all visible, because of clouds. A lonely mountain's welcome to the first pilgrims after decades. Perhaps!

An hours ride brought us to the Manasarovar camp set on its western shores. The five pilgrims performing the *parikrama* of the lake had left on September 21 and rejoined us three days later, having completed the over 100 kilometre *parikrama*. Escorted by two Tibetan guides, similarly armed as our scouts were, the pilgrims spent three nights freezing in paper-thin tents like ours.

Moving westwards from the base camp, they came across a few settlements on the northern end of the lake, photographing of which, according to the guides, was prohibited. Often having to cross waist deep nullahs flowing from Manasarovar to Raksas Tal, the pilgrims led by Jamwal walked long distances over hillocks without even seeing the waters of the lake. On the second day of their *parikrama*, they came across a family of Tibetans from the eastern part of the region, complete with yaks, also performing a *parikrama*. The handful of villages they passed were buttressed against the outside world by a wall

running their entire periphery and, at one point, they saw a military jeep outside one such walled-in village.

According to the Manasarovar pilgrims, all the eight monasteries around the lake—Gossul, Chiu, Cherpick, Ponri, Seralung, Yerngo, Thugolho and Langpona seemed to have suffered the same fate as the gompas around Kailas. Pockets of civilization hundreds of years old the gompas were rich in libraries, wealth and scriptures. Today they are roofless walls, which appear to have been blown apart, smashing what they represented—a religious hierarchy. At one gompa site, a pilgrim noted piles of prayer stones and carvings of gods dumped in a large pit and smothered by years of human and animal excreta. A few of these rescued from the manure piles as trophies by pilgrims were later disallowed by the Chinese authorities from being taken away by us.

Gossul Gompa, eight kilometres from the base camp, the place from where the *parikrama* of the lake begins and ends, abounds in carvings of Hindu and Buddhist gods. A magnificent building of mud mortar, the erstwhile gompa is spread over one kilometre of hillside by the shores of the lake, of which a few caves and a look-out bastion over the lake still remain. The main hall of worship has a fresh, though crudely put together prayer sanctuary with many stone carvings arranged one on top of the other. The monastery flagpole was flying a fresh white prayer flag the day Bedi visited it. It was easy to imagine hundreds of weary pilgrims, having to walk the 80 kilometres from Taklakot in stages, being offered succour in the cavernous hallways of Gossul Gompa. Or the lama with his prayer wheel in the fortlike perch contemplating the infinite over the serene waters of the lake, while the faithful were summoned to prayer and the robed priests pored over scriptures as old as their religion itself. The simple collection of carved images in the once vaulted inner sanctum, which evidenced an ingrained belief centuries old, difficult to repress or shatter, were blown to nothingness.

The Chiu (meaning bird) gompa houses the first ling or chhorten (monument or stupa) of the Manas region. Owing

suzerainty to the Diraphuk monastery of Kailas, itself a branch of the Dadingboche gompa, 30 kilometres north of Lhasa, the monastery today resembles a stuffed bird, calculatedly shattered to bits, with ghostly remnants of stuffing sticking out, perched disconsolately atop a hillock overlooking Manasarovar.

The Cherkip gompa, around six kilometres ahead was the smallest of gompas and under the stewardship of Tarchen, the former headquarters of Bhutanese monks at the base of Kailas. Not far from the gompa are several caves, now difficult to locate, where monks spent the freezing winter months in meditation and solitude. The Langpona monastery, eight kilometres distant had a flagstaff in its courtyard. To the south of it was a hill resembling the trunk of an elephant on which a small hut was constructed giving its name to the gompa. The gompa is ensnared by lush verdant grassland resembling the flat Barkha plain at the base of Kailas, where herders came to graze their livestock.

At Ponri, the next gompa on the *parikrama*, is the second linga of the lake. Thirteen kilometres from Langpona, Ponri is situated in a high valley at the foot of the 19,550 feet high meagrely snow clad peak of the same name. Before reaching the next gompa, Seralung, on the right edge of the valley is a line of beautiful chhortens. The eighth and last monastery on the Manasarovar *parikrama* is the Thugolho gompa. Here the Thokar *mandi* was a yearly feature. In Tibetan "thu" means bath and "go" means "head", hence Tibetans performing the circuit either took a bath here or at least washed their heads. Thugolho was probably the most important of all the lake monasteries housing 108 volumes of "Kanjur", precious idols and valuable items brought here from the Gossul gompa around 1946 for safe custody. A window on the north side of the gompa afforded, according to travelogues, a magnificent view of Mount Kailas and the blue surface of Manasarovar.

A *mandi* was held here from July to August where Bhotia merchants congregated, besides Thugolho being a large wool gathering centre.

Today it is as innocuous as the rest of the dynamited monasteries around Manasarovar. A rich gompa, housing rare treasures and precious manuscripts and an important commerce centre, is a crumbled shell, a lavatory for animals.

Lake Manasarovar is around 320 square kilometres in area and approximately 300 feet deep, resembling a miniature sweet water ocean, at the great height of over 15,000 feet, surrounded by low hills, marshy in certain parts, rocky and sandy at others. Boulders as smooth and round as pebbles and sharp slabs of stone litter its shores. It is relatively warm on the Gossul gompa side and freezing on the other. From one monastery, Manasarovar presents a magnificent view of Kailas while a few twists and turns later the playground of Shiva is completely hidden.

The utopian serenity, abetted by the sheer and undiluted beauty invokes a sort of dreadful awe in its beholding. Conditioning of the Hindu psyche, alongside the sheer magnificence of the lake and the surrounding mountains is breathtaking. The carelessness yet magnanimity of nature in drawing such bold lines in a remote corner of the earth and letting it achieve the status it has in the minds and hearts of millions deserves, at the very least, a prolonged obeisance.

Lakelets and lagoons surround the periphery of the Lake, like Yushup Tso on the south-west, Testi Tso on the west, Kurkytal Chhungo, Sham Tso and Ding Tso on the north and north-east. In Tibetan scriptures Kurkyal-Chhungo is described as the head of Manasarovar, set apart for the gods to bathe in. At times there are high waves near the shores of the lake whilst the middle is perfectly calm and still, reflecting the silvery dome of Kailas to the north and Mandhata's peak if seen from the north-west.

At sunrise and sunset the Kailas and Mandhata ranges are

aflame with the golden red rays bounding off the daunting peaks. At other times, playing hide and seek with the noon day sun, nimbus clouds form a protective halo round the lingam shaped mountain, affirming privacy to the gods.

There are three thermal springs on the Ganga Chhu about half a kilometre from Manasarovar down the Chiu hill, says Swami Pranavananda. One spring is on the right bank another on the left while the third boiling spring is on a small rock of the Ganga Chhu, all three having temperatures averaging around 140 degrees celsius. Around five kilometres from the shores of the Lake are several hot springs on the left bank of Tag Tasngpo and others at Nyomba-Chhuten varying in temperatures from lukewarm to boiling, spread over a large area out of which a regular stream of hot water flows into the Tag. Around a kilometre up Nyomba-Chhuten, on the left bank of the Tag river, are some hot springs and bubbling geysers.

Adjoining Raksas Tal, lacking little in beauty in comparison to its larger neighbour, is around 224 square kilometres in area and half as deep as Manasarovar on its northern side. While there are eight monasteries encircling Manasarovar, there was only one, Tsepgye, on its north-west shoreline. The coastline of Raksas Tal is irregular in comparison to that of Manasarovar, its waters colder and freezing earlier than those of its western neighbour.

The low hills surrounding Manasarovar descending gently to the shoreside are sparsely dotted with shrub, amongst which dart hare and ground rats. Flocks of duck conceal themselves undisturbed along the calmer edges, before the time comes for them to seek warmer waters of lakes in neighbouring India. Swami Pranavananda identifies 71 different types of birds in the Manasarovar area including the Brahminy duck, rock sparrow, pigeon, fishing eagle, heron, raven, woodpecker, house sparrow, kite gull, besides the butterfly. Apart from the varied avifauna he claims that wild yak, wild horse, snow leopard, lynx, brown and black bear, Tibetan sheep, Ghural or Tibetan gazelle, Tibetan

antelope, fox, tailless rat and the lizard also inhabited the region.

Though none of us saw the profusion of animals recorded by Swami Pranavananda in the course of his travels in western Tibet spanning over five decades, we did come across Tibetan herders on the Kailas *parikrama* and others who went past our Manasarovar camp accompanied by huge mastiffs. These massive brutes looked more than capable of taking care of any predator who dared to venture towards their herd. Moreover, the period Swami is talking about (till 1950) was one which saw a fair amount of human and animal traffic in the area, capable of sustaining wild animals and beasts of prey. With the Chinese take over of Tibet, the subsequent mass migration from the once populated region and complete stoppage of pilgrim trains following the closure of borders, has probably taken its toll of the fauna in the Kailas-Manasarovar region. Though we did not have the time or the opportunity to explore this facet in any length or detail, Swami Pranavananda's description implying a profusion of animal and bird life, was belied by our perfunctory investigation.

Fish is found in abundance in Manasarovar and Raksas Tal, while marmot (rodents of the squirrel family) remain in hibernation in their holes several feet under the snow for around four months during the winter. The fat and skin of marmots is believed to be very effective in curing rheumatism, a common ailment in cold regions.

In some villages around the lake there is a smooth velvet-like grass with a variety of variously hued flowers. In other places the grass is sharp and chaffs like razor blades. On the slopes of Kailas grows a sweet scented creeper used at one time as incense, while dotted around are prickly juniper type bushes two to three feet high, which can serve as firewood. Besides these wild shrubs no large trees grow in this region, giving the lie to the poet's imagination when he says that Parvati and Lord Shiva sat under a huge tree at the foot of Kailas or under a majestic Deodar on the shores of Manasarovar.

Swami Pranavananda says that a two to three feet high plant grows on the shores of Manasarovar near Gurla and adjoining spots, known to Indian tradesmen as Lal-butia as its leaves turn red in the month of October. Funnel-like layers of ice form at the root of this plant, which, despite the sun do not melt, though the surrounding frost evaporates. Its roots go deep down into the ground and, according to the Swami, was found effective in curing typhoid and other fevers. On the shores of Manasarovar, the Swami says he found a drug—thuma—an excellent aphrodisiac. Thuma, he says, is the root of a tiny creeper thriving at a height of around 15,000 feet, and is difficult to procure. However, a simpler way of acquiring it is to scour the holes of the wild rats who collect and store it in their hideouts for use in winter. Besides, there are plenty of water reeds in the lake just below the water surface which, at times, smell of iodine, which merit further research by qualified chemists or botanists.

Mr. Rawat M.P. who was a member of the Manasarovar contingent had a tough time, which might have proved fatal if we had not moved to lower climes when he did. A little unwell the day we made over crossing our Lipu Lekh, showing signs of high altitude sickness, Rawat fell seriously ill the first day out of Manasarovar base camp. Dogged by an unbearable headache, he also suffered from acute insomnia. The mounted Tibetan guides having refused to carry him on their horses, despite repeated pleadings, he was helped along by fellow pilgrims and nursed by the gentle Jamwal and Miss Joshi. Rawat returned to base camp on the afternoon of September 24, his face black and his lips a dangerous blue indicating symptoms of cerebral oedema. The last night at Manasarovar base camp was yet another nightmare for the Parliamentarian and one person had to keep constant vigil by his bedside. However, moving to succeeding lower altitudes the following day onwards he recovered well enough to distribute Manasarovar *jal* all through his constituency. He was, in fact, carrying two huge jerry cans which even in its indisposition he did not forget to fill and carefully supervise their safe passage.

For the Kailas pilgrims, September 24 was sin absolution day, bathing in the near freezing waters of the lake, and exploring the nearby undulating hills. Strong winds would kick up around noon and blow till the early hours of the morning necessitating steel girders on tent sides to prevent them from flying away. The sun playing hide and seek since noon the day before had to be taken into account before venturing into the icy cold waters of the lake. Risking the watery sun, before it totally disappeared, all eight of us took the plunge, emerging at least bluer, if not purer, forms of our tanned selves!

A week before Swamy on his fleeting visit to the pilgrim spots had visited the Manasarovar camp and met the aged simian-faced Tibetan who was holding fort for the "Hindu log" expected the following day. He walked up to Swamy, joy writ large on his lined face and tentatively enquired if he was Hindu. On receiving an affirmative reply, he beckoned Swamy to his "tambo", hesitatingly groping with his Hindi. He made tea and gave Swamy some *puris* made earlier, spreading them with sugar. In response to Swamy's query as to what he was doing there in the middle of the wilderness, the small figure, in all probability an old Indian trade route hard, drew himself up, declaring with a beaming countenance, "*Hindu log aa raha hai. Sabko chai denge*". (Hindus are coming. I will make tea for them all). Centuries of contact had not been wiped out. From now it was up to the younger generation of both countries to undo the follies of 1962.

From the tent Swamy sighted for the first time white flags fluttering from sticks gored into the hard earth by the side of the Lake. The flag, on closer inspection, was of delicate muslin with a fistful of wax-like substance stuck to the stick serving as a flagstaff. On being asked what the flag stood for, the ancient one replied that it was to draw away evil spirits. With an invocation for closer ties, the Tibetan returned to his tent to await the Hindu log.

By the same afternoon, the weary Manasarovar pilgrims had

returned to camp and a rather muted jubilant mood pervaded the camp, the worrying spot being Rawat. Pathak and Bedi had taken rather a long walk over the undulating hills and arrived at the fascinating ruins of the Gossul gompa. Furious clicking of cameras later, Bedi realized that he was not carrying any black and white film, essential for photographs for his newspaper. By this time it was around 3 o'clock and the camp over 10 kilometres distant. Gambling on the fact that he could be back before sunset to photograph the gompa ruins, Bedi took off at a trot for camp. On the return journey, the undaunted "Chitranand" his mentor, Vaishnav and Dr. Dharendra Sharma decided to accompany him. We arrived there just as the sun was setting over the Mandhata ranges, spreading its diffused glow over the blue-green waters of the lake.

The view from the ruined turrets of the gompa with the setting sun in the background was awesome. As shadows lengthened, the sparkle of the snow clad Kailas (the dome was not visible) gleamed like rainbow coloured gems. The twilight added a mystique to the monastery ruins and it needed little imagination to picture monks in their elaborate robes and conical hats, twirling oil wicks, revolving another day out with their prayer wheels.

By the time we had finished photographing the ruins it was pitch dark and not having a torch was little hazard as the brilliant moonlight provided glow enough to easily make our way back. The pathway was streaked like a platinum ribbon, first in the lee of the hills and later along the hard surface by the water side.

On the morning of September 25, when Mr. Lee arrived to take us back to Taklakot, Dr. Sharma having given up his favourite sport of M.P. baiting, bombarded our urbane interpreter with a host of embarrassing questions. Ever polite, the Chinaman answered as best as he could, but seeing the adamant professor persisting, he offered to "race" him in the freezing waters of the lake. Caught unawares, though having already

bathed in the freezing lake the day before. Dr. Sharma was left with little choice but to take up the gauntlet.

To the cheering of pilgrims, the two stripped down to their underclothes and jumped into the debilitatingly cold water. The cloudy sky and fierce freezing wind to boot added to the cold. Both emerged, having swum a few strokes, frozen to the bone. Mr. Lee, the ever diplomatic and hardy man that he proved himself to be, refused even to change out of his dripping wet underwear, donning his numerous layers of clothing over it.

We returned to Taklakot sometime around late afternoon the same day. After settling our bills we changed what Yuans were left into Dollars (the fluctuating exchange rate, had, since our conversion six days before gone up in favour of the Yuan). Our request to visit the people's commune was politely turned down with a "Next time, perhaps". The last night's dinner (we were served delicious, specially requested, noodles) where our two interpreters joined in, became a little boisterous as toasts of wine and beer flowed freely. The party dispersed and carried on in various rooms, much to the chagrin of our hosts. The following morning, bleary eyed pilgrims bumped their way up to Pala, seated at the back of the sturdy truck that had taken us to Kailas.

From here began a five kilometre ride on mountain ponies equipped with hard saddles. The Lipu Pass was under two feet of snow and the scramble up those last few hundred feet proved intimidating labour for some. Ropes had to be thrown down, while joyous hands of waiting I.T.B.P. and Vikas Mandal personnel pulled us up to where the second batch of frozen pilgrims awaited their foray into Tibet. This batch, we were told, included three pilgrims of which one was a journalist who had given special indemnity bonds at Kalapani, the last Indian checkpost, absolving the authorities of any blame should any misfortune befall them. Fortunately, all returned safely.

By-passing halts and braving three days of incessant rain,

the party reached the roadhead of Tawaghat on October 1 and immediately left for Champawat. Late October 2 evening, a bunch of 13 dishevelled pilgrims disembarked from the cramped confines of their bus in Delhi. Immediately began the soul destroying bargaining with taxi and scooter-rickshaw drivers to take us home. Kailas was a long way away.

Epilogue

LAST September, tragedy struck a group of 20 pilgrims, who after successfully completing their *parikramas*, were, in the face of a fierce blizzard, attempting to cross over Lipu Lekh into India. Two of them Ms Sushma Bhojan, 58, of Nagpur and Dr Yudhishtar, 52, a Delhi University professor-perished on the snow laden slopes, whilst three others, including the liaison officer from the Ministry of External Affairs had to be taken back to Taklakot, in a frozen nightmare of a journey, and airlifted a few days later. The rescue flight by helicopter, was historic, being the first flight into Chinese territory for over 25 years.

In a mild drizzle turning to snowflakes in the early hours of September 11, 1983 (exactly two years to the day when we began our pilgrimage from Delhi) when the seventh batch of pilgrims for 1983 rode out of Taklakot, headed for Lipu Lekh.

Miss Tara Vaidya, 49, a college lecturer from Hoshangabad, suffering from pneumonia and symptoms of pulmonary oedema was being carried on a stretcher in turns by two teams of four Tibetan porters each. A Tibetan doctor and guide, Dorje, accompanied them.

The rest of the pilgrims, soaked to the skin in their inadequate clothing, bumped along the ribbon-like track on wooden

saddles to Pala, which they reached around 9 o'clock. Attempts to brew a cup of tea were abandoned due to the piercing cold wind and snow. Half an hour later began the treacherous ascent over loose rock to a point around 1,000 feet below the Lipu Pass. Already, the pilgrims were hour behind schedule, as the crossing was due to be made at the very latest by 10 a.m. The eighth and final batch of 20 pilgrims for 1983, were to make their entry into Tibet as the previous batch crossed over.

Without warning, the already inclement weather turned worse. Heavy snow began to fall and wind velocity increased. Mrs Sujata Singh, from the External Affairs Ministry, Dr Yudhishtar, deputy liaison officer, Ms Sushma Bhojan and Mr RC Acharaya, 49, of Ahmedabad accompanying the stretcher bearing Miss Vaidya brought up the rear.

As the first of the pilgrims reached the spot from where the half kilometre ascent to the Lipu Pass begins, the stretcher party ran into trouble. All eight porters sensing that the weather had turned nasty, abandoned their charge, refusing to go any further. Entreaties by both the doctor and Mrs Sujata Singh and despite the high rates the porters had been paid in advance, failed to dissuade them from desertion.

Leaving the patient in the doctors care a few kilometres below the pass, Mrs Sujata Singh, Dr Yudhishtar, Mr Acharaya and Ms Bhojan advanced to join the rest of the party. Meanwhile, at the pass the weather had turned really foul, with over a foot of snow and more falling and the 15 pilgrims had already started the tricky ascent to the pass around noon, with the waiting ITBP contingent having given up any hope of a crossing, and returned to Navidand, 4000 feet below the pass on the Indian side.

All four of the stretcher party began their climb up to the pass to ensure that no mishap occurred. Half way through the by now knee-deep snow, Dr Yudhishtar was persuaded by Mrs Singh to forge on ahead with Ms Bhojan while she and the

bearded Mr Acharaya returned with Miss Vaidya to Taklakot. That was the last they saw of both Dr Yudhishtar and Ms Bhojan, for visibility was limited to a few feet.

Both the professor and his 58-year old companion lost their way in the blizzard, which in all its fury engulfed the pass, and perished some 300 feet off course from Lipu Lekh. Their bodies, recovered by the ITBP the following day were taken to Kalapani for cremation. Kailas had claimed its victims.

In the meantime, Mr Singh returned to the sick pilgrim while Mr Acharya heroically climbed to the top of the pass to see that all was well before he made his way back. In fierce winds, he sought shelter in the lee of an outcrop for over half an hour and saw the first pilgrim made the crossing into India around 1.30 p.m., three hours behind schedule. He then returned to the ailing Miss Vaidya and began their nightmarish journey to Taklakot.

In complete darkness, the weary party began their 20 kilometre haul to Taklakot around 5.30 p.m. Constant snowfall and a cloudy sky had drastically reduced visibility, and the pilgrims saturated with the travails of the day, were exhausted.

Hungry, cold and desperately tired, the disconsolate party inched their way over mountainous paths for over 12 hours before reaching Taklakot the following morning (September 12) around 6 a.m. "It was agony," Mrs Singh said on her return to Delhi, a few days later, "We never thought we would make it out of there alive".

By this time, the ITBP thinking that five pilgrims had died alerted the External Affairs Ministry, who in turn contacted the Chinese. By September 13, Ministry officials had confirmed that 15 of the pilgrims were safe, two dead and three safely ensconced in Taklakot.

Traversing communication and liaising problems, an

Indian Air Force helicopter, the first in over 25 years, was sent to airlift the three beleaguered pilgrims from Taklakot, but bad weather and uncharted air corridors led the chopper pilot to land some distance away from the scheduled landing spot, seven kilometres distant from Taklakot. Here, the locals, having seen the Indian pilgrims leave Taklakot for the helicopter pick-up point, told the pilot that his passengers had already left on foot.

Unable to communicate with the locals, the pilot presumed that the stranded pilgrims had not received their message and had, instead, opted to traverse the pass once again. The chopper returned to its base in Bareilly, only to fly in once again the following day, make contact with the three pilgrims and fly them out safely.

All three arrived in Delhi on September 21, ten days after they should have crossed over. The 15 pilgrims who made the journey to Delhi by bus were held up all along the way by land slides, arriving in the capital around September 29.

The eighth and final batch of pilgrims, had, perforce to abandon its plans for the visitation. Mount Kailas would reign, undisturbed for another year.

Because of the widespread interest in the Kailas-Manasarovar pilgrimage it has become essential to think positively in terms of organising trips more frequently. As the trips are going to multiply every year (last year there were around 200 pilgrims), a completely professional organisational procedure has to be evolved. Obviously the development of Government machinery in the way it was during our trip cannot be repeated nor can it be practical in the long run.

The Indo-Tibetan Border Police and the Special Police Force (S.P.F.) have other duties to perform and have no direct interest in assisting or organising the pilgrimage. Besides, it is

wholly improper to deploy the border forces in such civilian programmes.

The entire responsibility could therefore be put on the Kumaon Vikas Mandal Nigam (KVMN) or some similar agency experienced in undertaking expeditions continuously for around four months, beginning in June. However, in practical terms the KVMN is not equipped to handle such a pilgrimage with international ramifications. A State Government cannot possibly liaise with a foreign Government which is essential for the complete arrangement of the pilgrimage.

In our view and experience, the Central Government should set up a Kailas-Manasarovar Yatra Samiti or some such comparable agency on the lines of the Haj Committee with the Ministry of External Affairs as the post office. Arrangements for board, lodging, transport etc. should be framed out to a suitable agency, Governmental or private.

The present cost of the return trip around Rs.6,100 including \$340 (app.) to Delhi is exorbitant. Since the Chinese Government does not allow pilgrims to make their own arrangements poor pilgrims have no chance at all to make the journey. The organising agency (KVMN for instance) could receive an escalating grant every year to subsidise the cost for a few genuine but poor pilgrims.

Also, the organising agency should arrange to issue visas and foreign exchange at various points near the border. The External Affairs Ministry should negotiate with the Chinese to make some *ad hoc* arrangements for the issue of visas. At present pilgrims have to make one extra trip to Delhi to obtain a passport, visa and the necessary exchange from the Reserve Bank. This is an entirely redundant exercise involving a waste of time, money and effort.

The present track to Lipu Lekh is a bridle, at best a foot-path, a big strain on pilgrims particularly the aged. The

Government in conjunction with the border roads organisation should examine the long term validity of constructing a road, initially up to Jipti and later up to the Lipu Pass. The rudimentary facilities for a road along the river bed, at least up to Jipti, exist and should be exploited. This would not only make the pilgrimage relatively easier, but would also benefit the villages, bringing the outside world to their shielded and backward economies.

The involvement of the locals in organising the pilgrimage is essential. These people have been neglected and have a feeling of being divorced from the mainstream of national life. Moreover, these people feel a certain emotional bond to the pilgrimage and the Indo-Tibetan trade route, having either been old hands on the route or grown up with tales revolving around it.

The routes to Kailas-Manasarovar are many. We have explored merely one which has the advantage that the bulk of territory traversed is in India. However, Swami Pranavananda has researched, besides this, 10 different routes:

1. Almora-Dharma Lekh-Gyanima Mandi: 363 kilometres
2. Bageshwar-Kungri Bingri Lekh-Gyanima Mandi: 336 kilometres
3. Joshimath-Gulna Niti Lekh-Gyanima Mandi: 320 kilometres
4. Joshimath-Dayman Niti Lekh-Gyanima Mandi: 256 kilometres
5. Joshimath-Hotiniti Lekh-Gyanima Mandi: 253 kilometres
6. Badrinath-Mana Lekh-Gyanima Mandi: 381 kilometres
7. Simla-Shipki Lekh-Tirathpuri: 712 kilometres
8. Simla-Shipki Lekh-Gyanima Mandi: 757 kilometres
9. Srinagar-Lekh-Gartok-Tirathpuri: 968 kilometres
10. Kulu-Thuling-Nyanima Mandi: 789 kilometres

Of these 12 routes (including the one we followed), originat-

ing in India (two others originate from Lhasa and Kathmandu), the one we followed was relatively easier. But there is need for further research on the subject of routes and the Government should undertake the study of alternate tracks and gradually work on opening them to pilgrim traffic.

The possibility of a subsidised helicopter service from Bareilly to Garbyang or even Kalapani should be examined. There are many old people who dream of a last glimpse of Kailas and Lake Manasarovar, but are unable to withstand the rigours of the trip. For such people too, we need to make provision to systemize the journey to the holiest of holy, the gateway to *Nirvana*, *Kailas Parbat* and Manasarovar.



A reception committee at one of the many villages on the way to Lipu Lekh.



The pilgrims at Shynchun on the eve of the crossing into Tibet.



Our "welcome" committee in Tibet



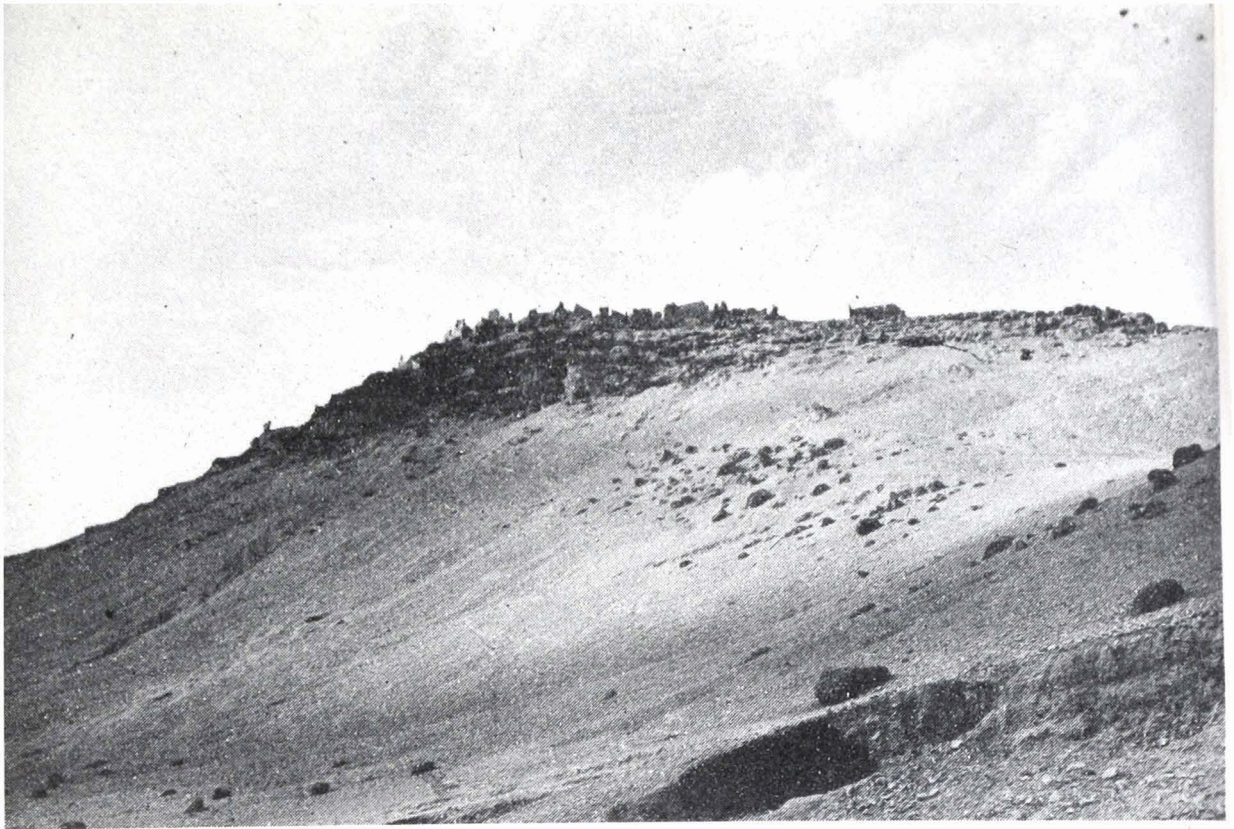
Our first experience of Tibet.



The Api ranges in Nepal as seen from Naraian Swamy Ashram on the second day of the pilgrimage.



Ruins of the Indian Mandi.



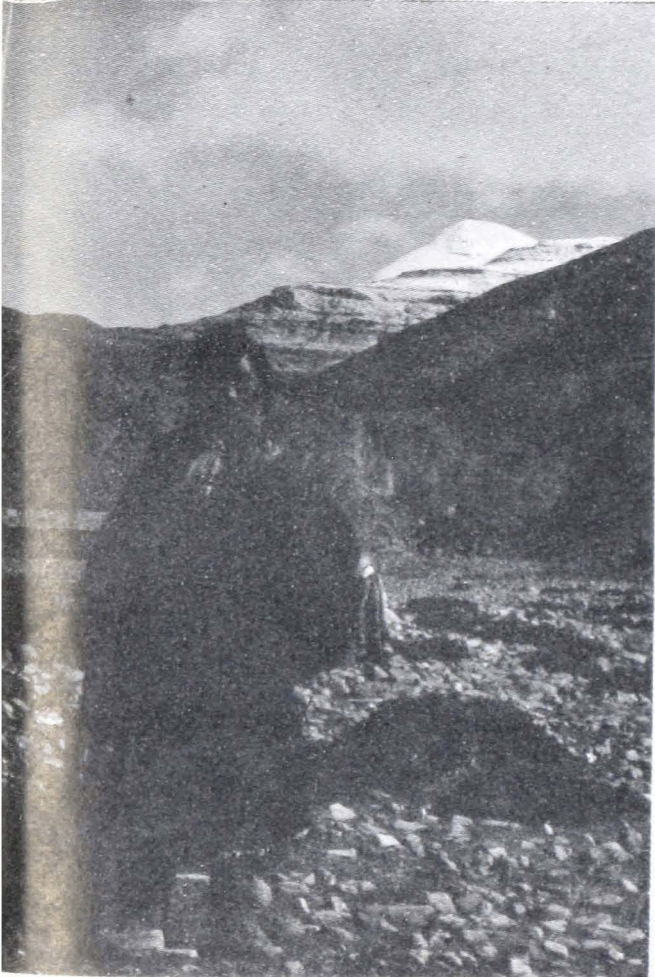
Ruins of the Simbling Gumpa overlooking the military township of Taklakot.



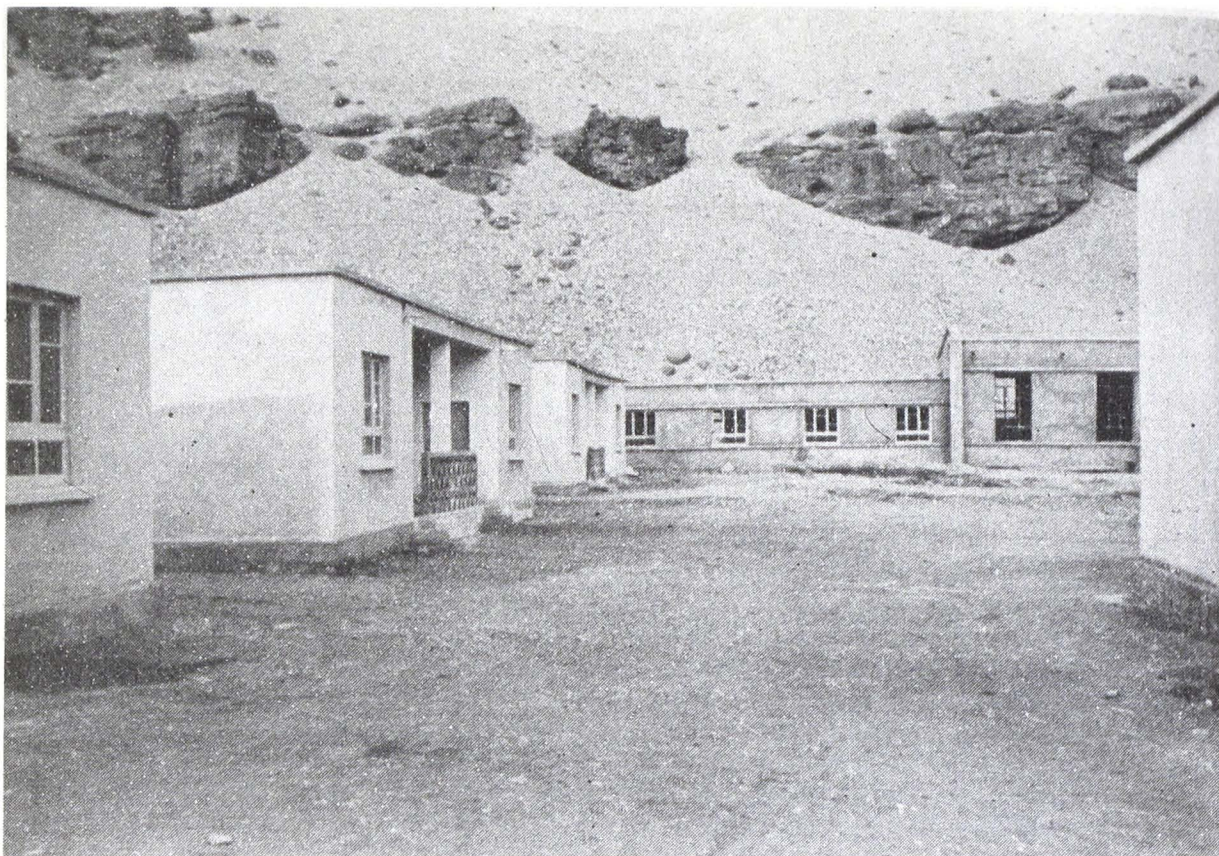
A group of Tibetans outside the only general store in Taklakot. Tibetans are apparently not allowed to use the facilities of this shop.



A tibetan mother and child.



A young Tibetan in his late 30's,
who looked not a day younger
than 80 years.



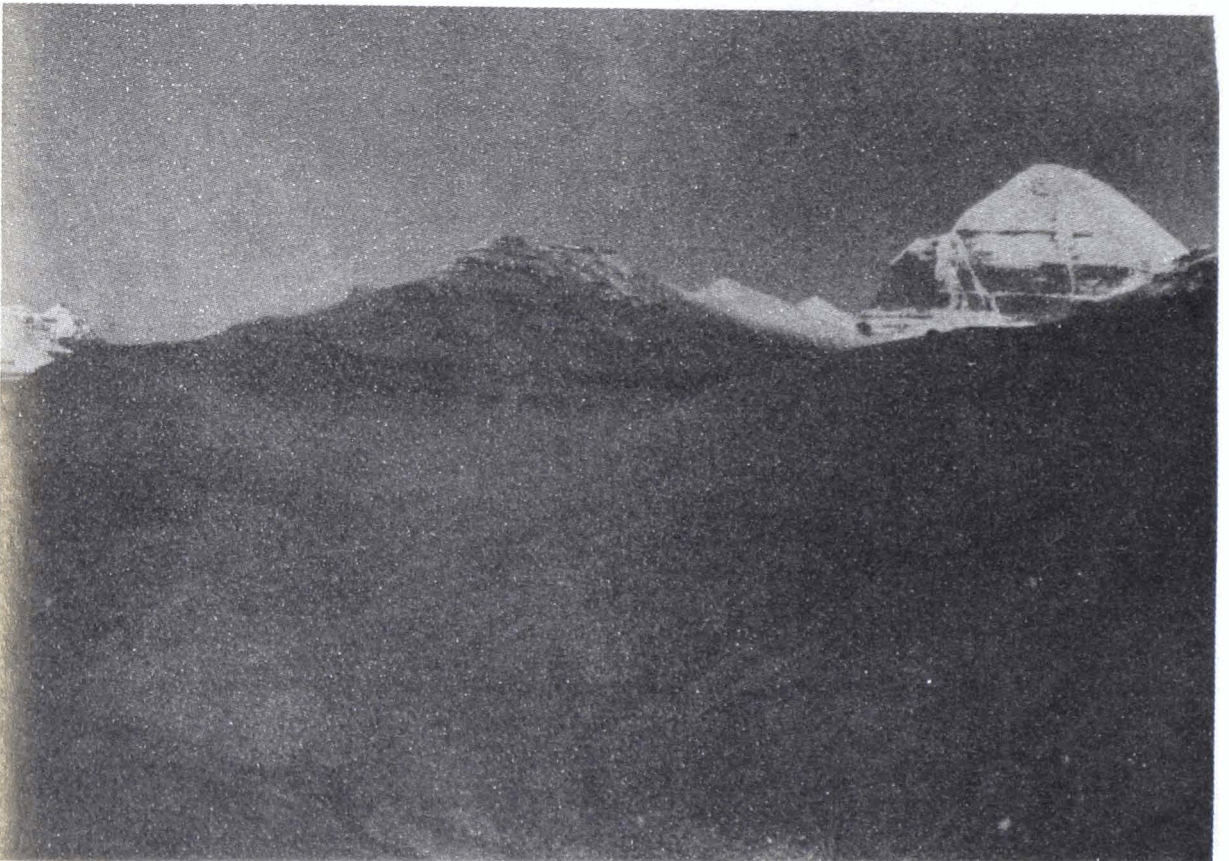
The Pilgrim Reception Centre where all Kailas-Manasarovar pilgrims are billeted



The Chinese Red Star on a Tibetan youth.



Local inhabitants.



Mount Kailas from below.



Mount Kailas in the background. A mound of prayer stones in the foreground, the likes of which dot the entire region around Kailas.



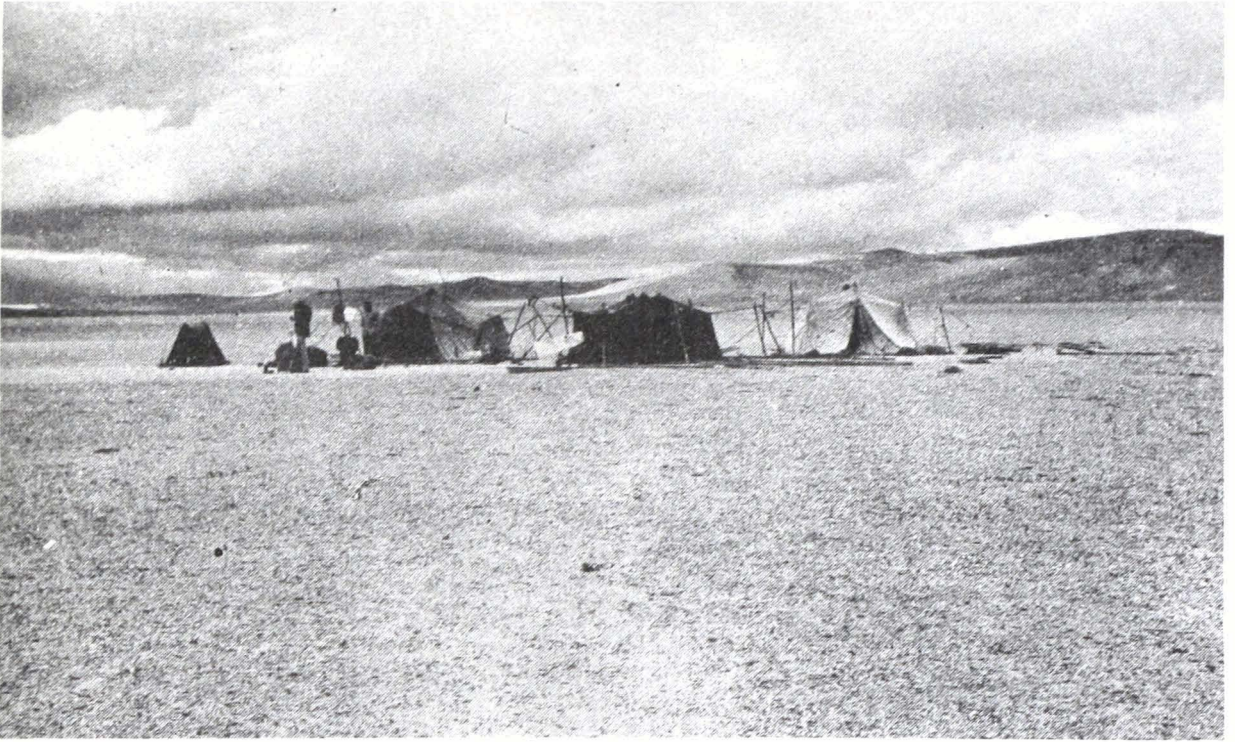
Author Subramaniam Swamy by the side of Lake Manasarovar.



A dip in the Lake



Frontal view of Lake Manasarovar.



Camp at Mansarovar.



View of Lake Manasarovar from above.



Ruins of the Gossul Gumpa from above. Notice the white prayer flag fluttering on the ruined turret.



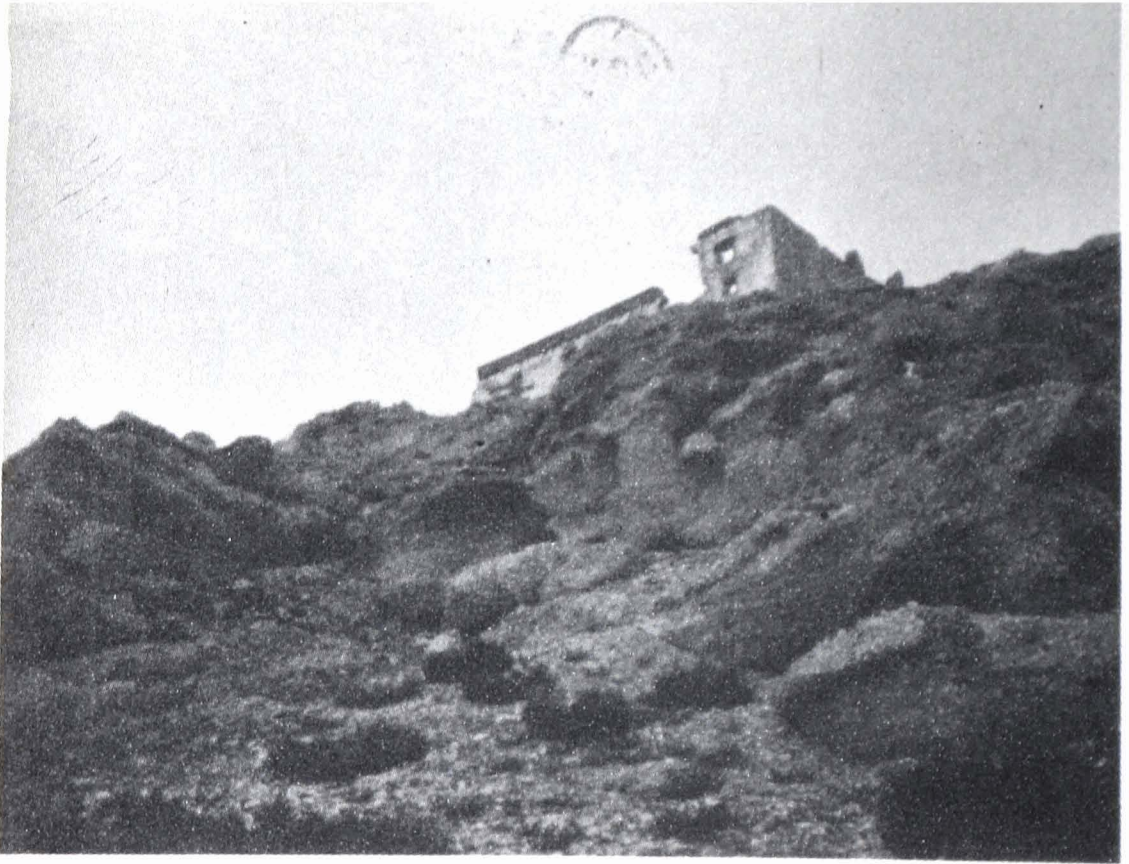
Buddhist chapel at Tarchen manned by a flea-ridden, half-demented couple.



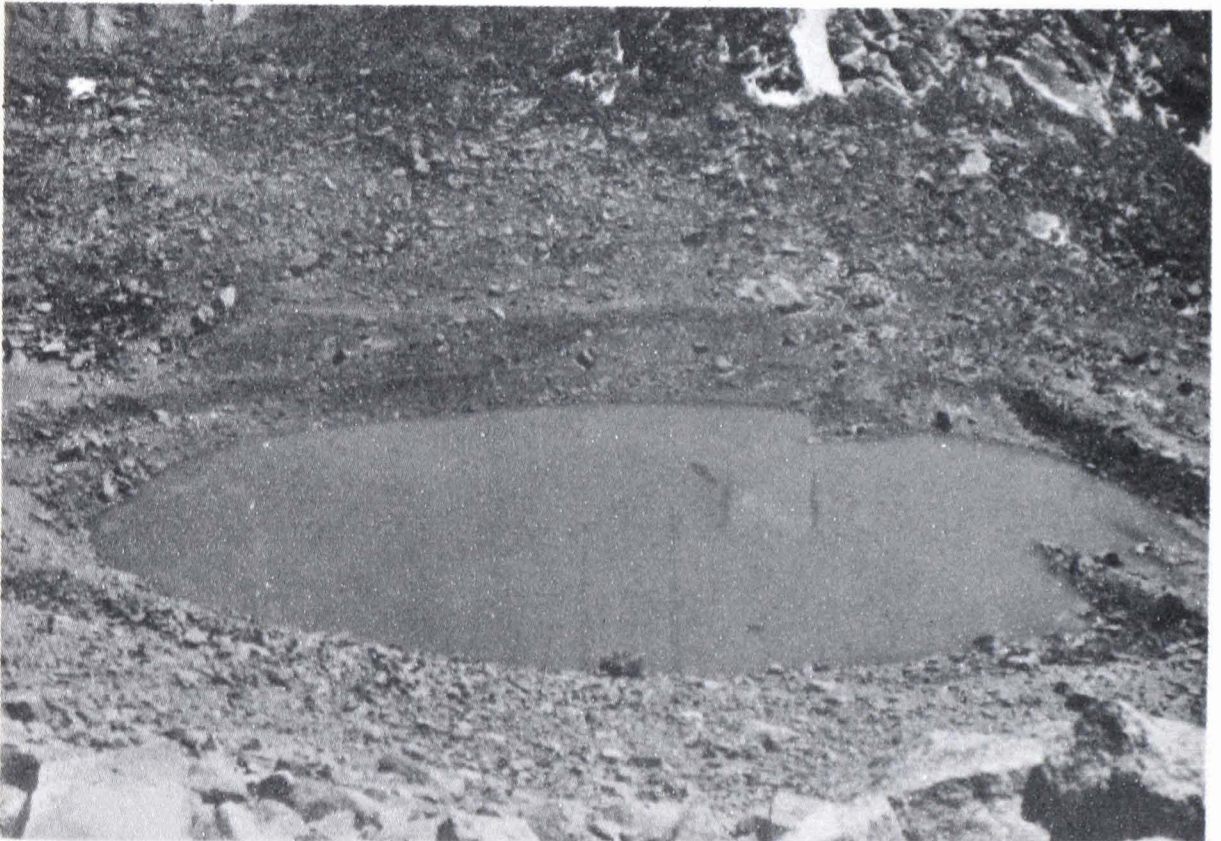
Base camp for the Kailas parikrama at Tarchen. In the immediate background is a plywood shed, once shelter for pilgrims before the borders were closed 22 years ago. The tents supplied by the Chinese were paper thin prairie ones which provided practically no shelter from the freezing cold winds.



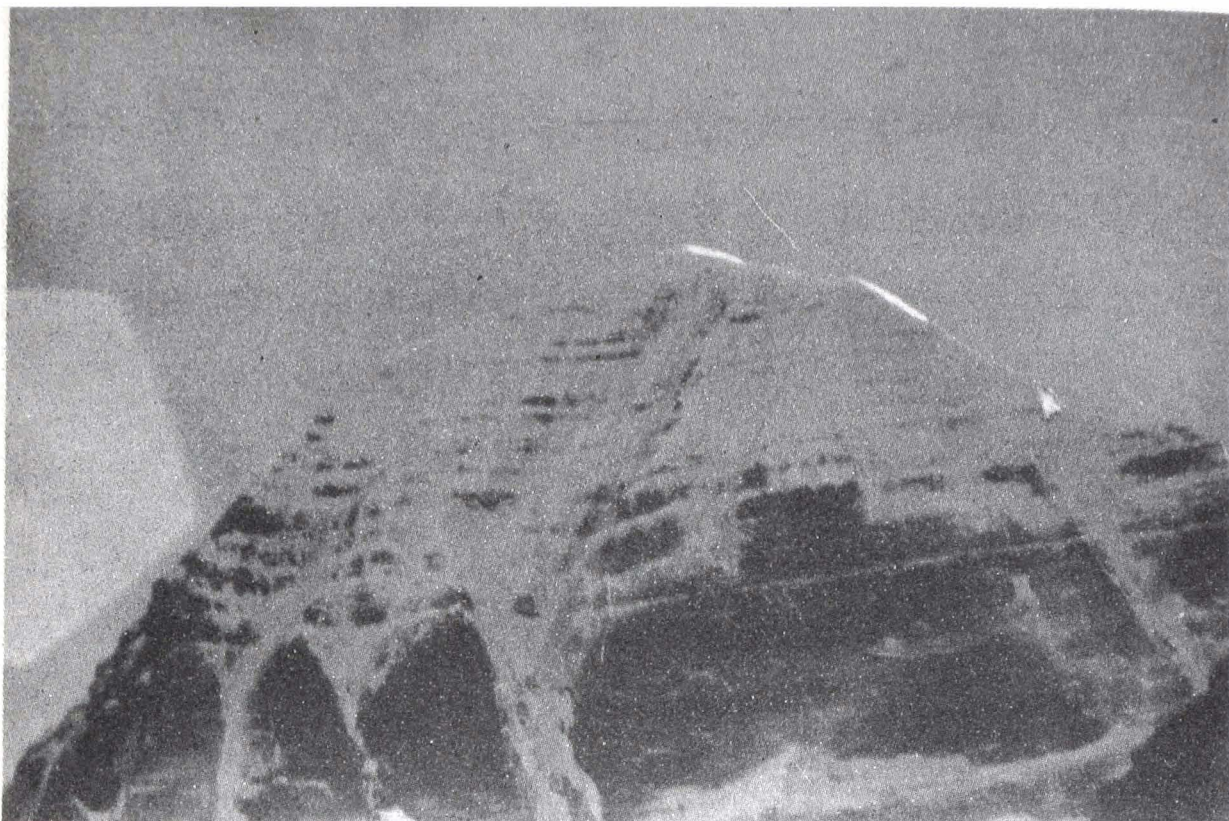
Ruins of the Gossul Gompa by the side of Lake Manasarovar.



Section view of the Gossul Gompa from below.



Gouri Kund, perhaps the highest fresh water lake in the world. The lake is perpetually frozen and according to popular belief, augurs great misfortune when it melts. It reportedly melted 23 years ago when Tibet was "occupied" by the Haans.



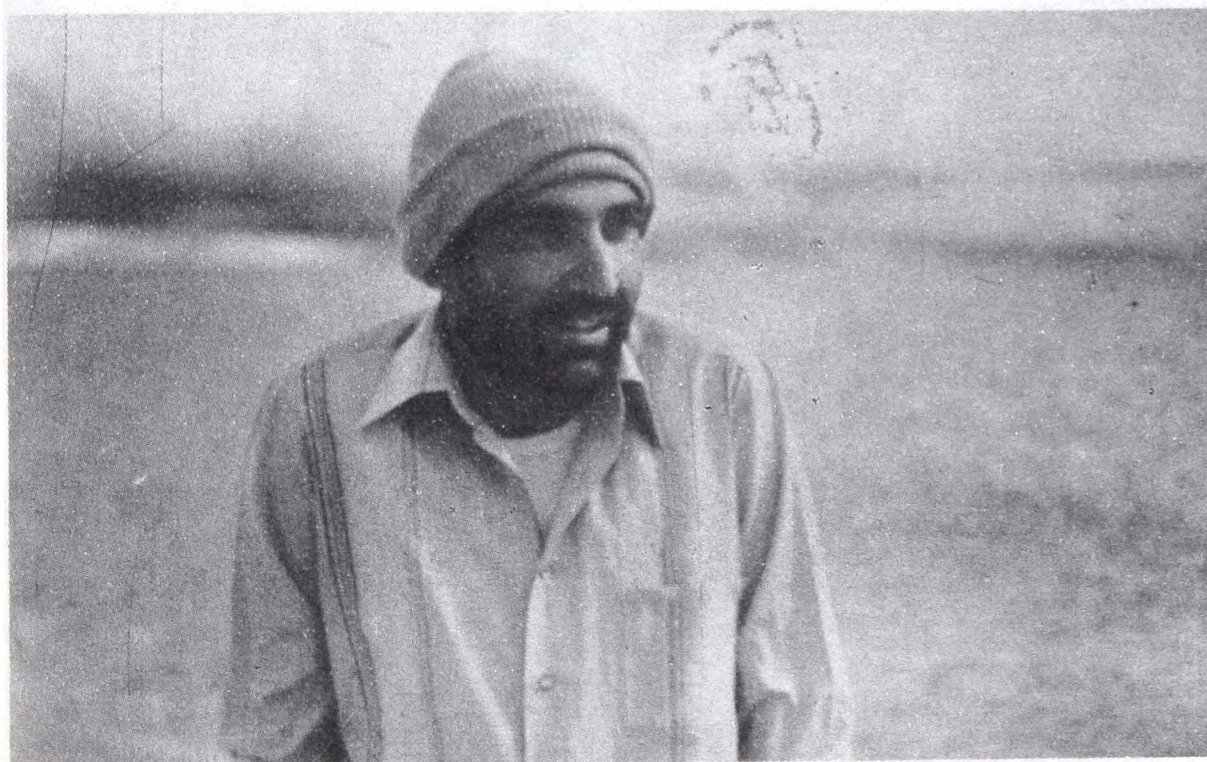
South face of Mount Kailas.



Bits of monastery walls found scattered around on both the Kailas and Manasarovar parikrama routes. This particular photograph shows a host of stone carvings collected from the ruins of the Gossul Gompa, the biggest in the region, situated by the side of the Lake. The carvings show various poses and incarnations of the Buddha.

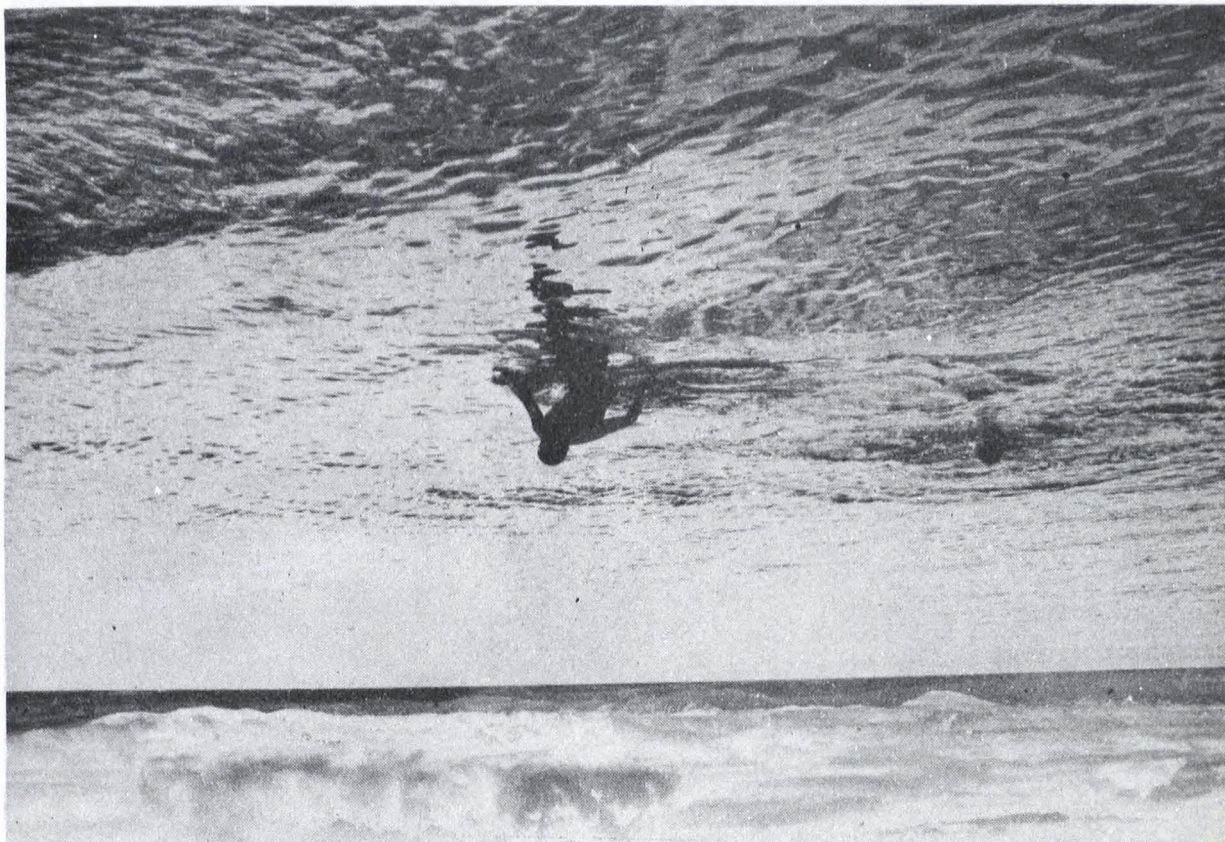


A massive holy boulder at the Dolma La pass at 19,000 feet, which is held in great reverence by Tibetans. The rock is gaily decorated with prayer flags and bits of clothing belonging to the dead the Tibetans are mourning. Rosaries of teeth are stuck into chinks in the rock. Tibetans mourning a death in their family make innumerable circuits of this rock, beating their chests and wailing uncontrollably. Having done this, they happily settle down to tea and dried yak meat. Death to the Buddhist Tibetans is a welcome release from the bondage of life.



Author Rahul Bedi after a dip in Manasarovar.

The purifying dip.



The prayer wheel still revolves despite the best efforts of the Chinese by destroying all symbols of Buddhism in Tibet.



