

POLITICAL DETERMINATIONS OF THE INDIAN PILGRIMAGES TO MOUNT KAILAS AND MANASAROVAR LAKE

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Abstract

This article¹ describes the phenomenon of the contemporary Indian national pilgrimage to Mount Kailas and Manasarovar Lake in Tibet called *Kailash-Manasarovar Yatra* (KMY), in the context of complicated international relations (between India and China), and border relationships (Himalayan frontier between India, China and Nepal). The pilgrimage is organised annually by the Indian government for ca. 650 Shiva worshippers who have Indian citizenship. Chosen from among thousands of applicants, the pilgrims (*yatri*) set out on the extremely difficult, over-month route through the Himalayas to Tibet. To them, the pilgrimage to Tibet constitutes a challenge, a dream and a chance to win social and religious prestige. The present article is based on ethnological fieldworks combined with the analysis of the political situation in the region. The historical and political background of pilgrimages to Mount Kailas makes them a fascinating subject of research not only for ethnographers and experts in religious studies, but also for political scientists. It constitutes an example of how great power politics of two countries (dependent on historical decisions of colonial empires) may directly influence the lives of ordinary people and local communities both in Indian mainland and in the Himalayan borderland.

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Artykuł prezentuje współczesną, indyjską pielgrzymkę narodową do Góry Kailas i Jeziora Manasarowar w Tybecie, zwaną *Kailash-Manasarovar Yatra* (KMY), w kontekście złożonych uwarunkowań politycznych relacji międzypaństwowych (Indie – Chiny) oraz przygranicznych (himalajska granica między Indiami, Chinami i Nepalem). Pielgrzymka organizowana jest co roku przez rząd indyjski dla około 650 wyznawców śiwaizmu, będących obywatelami Indii. Wybrani spośród tysięcy zgłoszeń pielgrzymi (*yatri*) wyruszają na ekstremalnie trudną, ponad-miesięczną trasę przez Himalaje do Tybetu. Jest to dla nich wyzwanie, spełnienie marzeń i równocześnie wielki prestiż społeczno-religijny. Artykuł przygotowany jest na podstawie etnologicznych badań terenowych w powiązaniu z analizą sytuacji politycznej w regionie. Historyczne i polityczne tło pielgrzymek do Góry Kailas sprawia, że są one interesującym przedmiotem badawczym nie tylko dla etnografów i religioznawców, ale także dla politologów. Jest to przykład, kiedy wielka polityka dwóch mocarstw, zależnych od historycznych decyzji państw kolonialnych, bezpośrednio dotyka zwykłych ludzi i lokalne społeczności, zarówno w Indiach, jak i na pograniczu himalajskim.

Key words: Yatra, Kailas, Manasarovar, Indian pilgrimages, Indian-Chinese border relations, Tibet, Sivaism.

¹ Much of the present text constitutes an abbreviated version of a larger article published in Polish (see: Urbańska-Szymoszyn 2012, pp. 43–78).

Mount Kailas² and Manasarovar Lake are located in the western part of Tibet, in the Ngari Province of the Tibetan Autonomous Region, China. Mount Kailas is a pan-religious and pan-ethnic sacred site, which had continued to be worshipped since the pre-Buddhist period. Despite its remote and secluded location, it has been the destination of regular pilgrimages undertaken not only by Tibetans (followers of Buddhism and Bön), but also Indians (mostly Shaivites), who perceive the journey to Mount Kailas as a great national *yatra*,³ a pilgrimage and the most important event in their lives.

Tibetans refer to the mountain as ‘Kang Rinpoche’ and ‘the seat of Demchog’.⁴ For them the place also exemplifies their national and religious identity (see: Urbańska-Szymoszyń 2011, pp. 17–46). A pilgrimage to Mount Kailas is among the three paramount sacred religious journeys in Tibet (Chan 1994, pp. 208, 273). Its popularity among the Tibetans is related to the universal context of Mount Kailas as the centre of Shangri-la, the *axis mundi* and the central chakra, known to Europeans since early 20th century or perhaps even earlier. The 1980s and 1990s were a period of a rapid dissemination of a ‘fashion’ for Tibet and Buddhism in Europe and the US, and also for international charity movements dedicated to the so-called Tibetan Case. Mount Kailas became an inherent element of Tibetan identity. The fact that it is located in Chinese-occupied Tibet, near the Indian and Nepalese borders, has made the mountain into an icon of the political game. Thus, the pilgrimage to this sacred site usually entails coming into contact with politics. This encounter may be observed on the level of organisation and logistics (in the case of the Indian national pilgrimage), of international dialogue (in the case of Tibetans living abroad who wish to protect the area) and of border agreements binding for the small borderland movement of the population of the Himalayas. The fact that the Kailas-Manasarovar Region is also a route used by Tibetan smugglers and refugees intensifies the Chinese restrictions and limitations in this remote area.

² The form ‘Kailas’ shall be employed throughout the entire article. The accepted transliteration dictates that I should use the term ‘Kailāsa’, yet in my practice as an ethnologist I have chosen to employ a form which is more popular (‘Kailas’). English- and German-language publications sometimes adopt the form ‘Kailash’. The mountain is also called by other names: Tibetan Buddhist ‘Kang Rinpoche’ (English transliteration, sometimes written as ‘Gang’ or ‘Khang Rinpoche’), Tibetan Bon – ‘Tise’, and Chinese ‘Gānggrénbōqí fēng’ (pinyin transcription). The latter name is a Mandarin Chinese transliteration of the Tibetan name – the differences in spelling and pronunciation result most probably from the lack of differentiation between some voiced and voiceless consonants in Mandarin Chinese. The mountain is located in the Transhimalaya range in the western part of Tibet. In Chinese this part of the Transhimalaya is called Gāngdīsī Shān (pinyin transcription) – the name is derived from Mount Kailas and constitutes a combination of Chinese and Tibetan, including both the Bon and the Buddhist tradition. The Indian name ‘Kailas’ is used in the present article, since I focus on describing Hindu traditions and employ the most popular transliteration.

³ Proper names in Sanskrit and Hindi, such as names of deities or place names are given in the English transcription.

⁴ Demchog (Chakrasamvara) – (Sanskrit: Samvara) a Tibetan tantric deity associated with meditation, represented as a fearsome emanation of Buddha.

The complicated social and political situation casts a shadow on all ethnological research related to this holy place. The Indian tradition of organising pilgrimages to Mount Kailas is but one of the many examples. For political reasons, the pilgrim movement was restricted in the latter half of the 20th century. Although the population of Shiva worshippers (Shaivites) in India amounts to several hundred million, the Chinese government only permits the border to be crossed by around 600–700 Indian pilgrims a year. The travelers – who participate in the national pilgrimage known as the *Kailash-Manasarovar Yatra* (abbreviated as: KMY) – go through the Lipulekh Pass. The procedure of selecting pilgrims is long and costly. Indians have the right to cross the Chinese border at a single point, in organised groups and only at a certain time of the year. The route leads from Delhi to the Indian state of Uttarakhand; the pilgrims go by bus or train to Almora (370 km), then transfer to a bus heading for Dharchula (in the Pithoragarh district) and further on travel by foot along the Indian-Nepal border as far as Taklakot⁵ in Tibet (PRC). In Taklakot they get into trucks which transport them to Darchen, a village at the southern slope of Mount Kailas. Pilgrim groups set off from June to August, at a period of intensive monsoon rains and an increased probability of dangerous landslides. They come to the place after the end of the pilgrim season for Tibetans, who travel to the mountain *en masse* in the first half of June, for the holiday of Saga Dawa.⁶ Unfortunately, the Chinese authorities do not permit Indians to cross the border in places other than the one designated for the official *yatra*. Only since a few years ago (around 2005) tourists and pilgrims from India are allowed to enter Tibet through Nepal, similarly to tourists from other countries. Before that law was passed, a Chinese visa and the special permit needed for visiting Tibet was unobtainable for most of them.

Before the year 1959, pilgrims could enter Tibet by easier routes leading through Himachal Pradesh and Ladakh. These passes are now closed. It must be remembered that India still demands the return of the borderland region of Aksai Chin (including its southern part with Demchok village) by the People's Republic of China. Formally speaking, this land is a part of the Ladakh region of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir. In October 1962 the Chinese army simultaneously entered Aksai Chin in the west and Arunachal Pradesh in the east. This was the beginning of a Sino-Indian

⁵ The name 'Talakot' (from the Tibetan: 'takla-khar') is used by Hindus and the Nepalese. In Tibet the village is known as Purang (Ngari Prefecture, Tibetan Autonomous Region, PRC). It lies at the altitude of 4755 metres in the valley of the Karnali River. For centuries it has been known as a trading post on the pilgrim route.

⁶ Saga Dawa (Tibetan) – (Sanskrit: Vaiśākha), one of the most important Buddhist holidays, commonly referred to as Buddha's birthday. The holiday celebrates the three most significant events in the life of Buddha Sakyamuni: his birth, enlightenment and death (or, more precisely, his achieving parinirvana). Everywhere in the world it is celebrated in spring, though the precise date varies depending on local traditions and differences in the calendar; in the area of Mount Kailas in Tibet – due to geographical and weather conditions – the holiday is usually observed in early June.

war; the hostilities ended in December 1962 when India lost Aksai Chin to the PRC. A formal (if conditional) peace treaty was signed only in 1996 (see: Skulska, Skulski, eds. 2010). Before that date the village of Demchok in the Indus River valley, halfway between Leh (the capital of Ladakh) and the Kailas-Manasarovar region,⁷ used to be a stopping place for trading caravans travelling deeper into Tibet and China, as well as for pilgrims journeying to the sacred mountain. It is currently divided into two parts by the Line of Actual Control (LAC), which constitutes the 'temporary' border but *de facto* determines the extent of Chinese conquests. Despite attempted talks between the prime ministers of India and China pertaining to the possibility of reopening the border pass in Demchok in order to stimulate commerce in the region and to make it easier for citizens of India and PRC to travel (e.g. to Mount Kailas), the pass still remains closed (see: Puri 2005). In 2005 the Indian government proposed an initiative of making a road connection between the Jammu and Kashmir province and both Pakistan and China. Although Kashmir is a politically unstable area, the authorities of India and Pakistan managed to cooperate in opening a road from Srinagar to Muzaffarabad (see: Naseem 2005). The local elites were of the opinion that if a similar enterprise was completed in Demchok, the entire region would quickly develop with regard to economy and infrastructure, leading to a reopening of the historical international merchant route between the East and the West and the area's connection to an important trail running from north to south through Aksai Chin in Xinjiang Province to Tibet. Unfortunately, the Chinese authorities make the opening of the Demchok route conditional to India's officially renouncing all claims to Aksai Chin, a requirement the citizens of India are not willing to meet. Despite the fact that the Sino-Indian war of 1962 ended formally in 1996 with the signing of a peace treaty that pronounced the LAC line to be the border between the two countries, the current *status quo* is not accepted by local Indian authorities, political parties and representatives of the central government. They make loud demands for the return of the Aksai Chin region, especially before elections. The two-sided committee set up for the precise delineation of the border has not yet finished their task (see: Das 2009). China mitigated its standpoint in 2006. After long negotiations between India and China, the frontier crossing on the Nathu La pass in the Indian state of Sikkim⁸ was reopened. However, no such thing has yet happened on the western side of the Himalaya. No international agreement was concluded to make the lives of the local community, merchants and pilgrims easier. The latter group must still follow the road through Uttarakhand.

⁷ The distance between Demchok and both Leh and Kailas is around 200 km.

⁸ Information reported by the Polish Press Agency, quoting Xinhua Agency: "Chinese-Indian border crossing open after more than 40 years", WP.PL. June 19, 2006; <http://turystyka.wp.pl/kat,3,title,chinsko-indyjskie-przejscie-graniczne-otwarte-po-ponad-40-latach,wid,8356229,artykul.html>; accessed 8 March 2013.

Due to the restrictions imposed by the Chinese, every year the Indian Ministry of Foreign Affairs issues TV and press announcements that the process of enlisting for the pilgrimage to Mount Kailas has begun. In 1998, only 350 pilgrims were chosen (by means of drawing lots) from several hundred thousand applicants. In the following years this number was steadily rising (e.g. in 2006 the group amounted to 600 people). Candidates are divided into groups of thirty to sixty. Each group has its own supervising officer appointed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Subsequently, the candidates must go through a series of tests and medical examinations and complete intensive training that prepares them for enduring prolonged physical strain at high altitudes. The pilgrimage requires massive expenses, including the fees for obtaining a Chinese visa and special permits for visiting the closed areas of the Autonomous Region. Due to these obstacles, the traditional Indian pilgrimage to the sacred place of Shiva has become very exclusive, available only to the wealthiest strata of Indian society. Although the region's topography and extreme climate has never allowed the journey to the sacred mountain to be undertaken by the masses, yet the possibility of crossing the border freely at several Himalayan passes and the lack of state restrictions meant that Shiva worshippers could undertake the pilgrimage in much greater numbers than they do today.

It must be added that the year 1998 marked a turning point in the custom of *Kailas-Manasarowar Yatra*. The tragedy that occurred during the pilgrimage made Indians reflect on the traditional pilgrim routes through the Himalayas and on the sacred sites located there. The elite classes of India started to connect their interest in religious culture with environmental concerns (see: Jagmohan 1998, p. 7).

The tragic accident happened at night in the village of Malpa (Pithoragarh district in the Indian state of Uttarakhand). The entire group of pilgrims (around sixty persons) and all inhabitants of the village (a total of 300 people) were killed in a landslide. Heavy rainfall had caused the waters of the local streams to rise and the outer layers of soil on the slopes to become soaked with water. The increased weight pushed the mass of earth down, resulting in a landslip that swept the entire village away. The place has since been taken up by new buildings, while the death of the pilgrims and the locals was commemorated by a large statue of Shiva sitting on Mount Kailas. The *Yatra* of 1998 was discontinued; no further group set off to Mount Kailas that tragic year.

The government of India attempted to negotiate the opening of other routes for Indian pilgrims – the trail through the Shipki pass to the Spiti crossing or through Demchok in Ladakh. They waited for the Ladakh pass to be made accessible, yet no other road was opened. The *yatri*⁹ who did not complete their journey in 1998 had priority in enlisting for the pilgrimage in 1999.

The landslide of 1998 shocked the Indian society. All television stations broadcasted related information every day. News of the tragedy reached the media around

⁹ *Yatri* – pilgrim / pilgrims.

the world, Poland being no exception. The accident sparked a discussion about the safety of travelers in the Himalayas. The press and the television devoted much attention to discussing how the tragedy could have been prevented by the state authorities – focusing on the recultivation of forests cut down as a result of a ruthless exploitation of natural resources practiced first by colonial and later by Indian authorities. As an ethnologist, I was equally interested in the statements made by Indian religious journalists in the press and in front of the camera. They discussed the significance of this incident in the spiritual context of religion. Many of their statements boiled down to the question: “What was Shiva trying to tell us?” This, in turn, triggered a debate on the necessity of protecting the environment of the Himalaya Mountains. International media started to inquire about the state of the Himalayas, especially the trash left by mountaineers, tourists and local inhabitants. The discussion also covered issues of protecting the natural environment and cultural heritage of the area around Mount Kailas and Manasarovar Lake. The Malpa tragedy became an impulse for a global debate on preserving the natural beauty of the Himalayas and Tibet – an analogical discussion about preserving the cultural assets of the region was only a step away. However, the dispute upset the balance of the political *status quo* (see: Urbańska 2003, pp. 149–165; Urbańska-Szymoszyn 2011, pp. 17–46). China’s standpoint on environmental protection and the preservation of cultural heritage does not agree with the position of the Tibetan administration in Dharamsala or with the worldwide public opinion, mostly expressed by members of non-government organisations, artists and politicians specialising in human rights.

Kumaon Manda Vikas Nigam, the tourist agency responsible for organising the *yatra*, was even willing to transport pilgrims to Manasarovar Lake by air. The Indian authorities allegedly suggested this solution a few years previously, yet the proposal did not meet with the approval of the foreign minister (Dhondiyal 1998, p. 7). Apart from the flights, the Nigam agency also planned to reopen the old route through the Malpa pass. These projects were never implemented due to the lack of consent from the Chinese authorities.

At the opening ceremony of the 12th Tourist Fair in Kolkata, Omak Apang, who was then the Minister of Tourism for India, made a statement that due to the landslides along the road in the Pithoragarh district the government had instituted a committee for analysing alternative routes for pilgrims heading for the Kailas-Manasarovar region in China (*Manasarovar route...* 1998, p. 4). An alternative, safer trail leading through the Rothang La pass was proposed. The minister did not add that the dates and the route of the Indian pilgrimage were dependent not on the decisions of the inter-government committee, but on international agreements between India and China.

In the 21st century there has been a visible improvement in the relations between the two countries. Many more Indians are allowed to participate in the national *yatra*

to Mount Kailas and Manasarovar Lake. In 2007¹⁰ the pilgrimage comprised around 650 believers, excluding the ‘staff’ – porters, cooks, doctors, leaders, officers and other personnel that follows the *yatra*. As the relations between China and India warmed up, in 2007 the staff and participants of the *yatra* were repeating a rumor that the authorities of both countries were planning to reopen the route through Ladakh. Once again, the gossip proved to be untrue. The motif of hope for making the pass available for pilgrim traffic has been present at least since 1998, yet it might be supposed that the actual opening of the border crossing will not take place in the nearest future.

The annual pilgrimage to Mount Kailas and Manasarovar Lake is still organised by a national tourist agency called the Kumaon Mandal Vikas Nigam Ltd., with branches around the entire country. The preliminary stage in Delhi is coordinated by the capital city office, while the regional branch of the organisation – Tourism & Development Corporation for Kumaon Hills – takes over once the pilgrims have reached the state of Uttarakhand.

The employees of this organisation are state officials who follow their instructions to the letter. For this reason, it has never been possible for foreigners to obtain a permit for crossing the Chinese-Indian border at Lipuleh pass. The *Kailash Yatra* is a national pilgrimage, organised officially by the state authorities for the citizens of India. Even people of Indian origin who do not hold Indian passports are not allowed to participate. People who follow the pilgrims but are not officially registered as *yatri* may only go as far as the edge of the Chhialekh Valley beyond Budhi, reaching the so-called Line of Control, the border of the special closed zone controlled by soldiers of the ITBP (Indo-Tibetan Border Police). This boundary cannot be crossed.

The ITBP is an Indian force stationed along the entire stretch of the Himalayan border with China and Nepal. The name of the organisation reflects its personnel structure: the soldiers are recruited from among Indians and Tibetans (citizens of India and those who were granted refugee status or tolerated residence permits and enrolled for military service). From the tactical and psychological point of view, posting Tibetans as border guards was a very good choice. Interviews I conducted with the Tibetan soldiers serving this unit in 1998 indicate that they were emotionally committed to defending the border and would not hesitate to fight the Chinese if a conflict ensued.

The most competent person dealing with borderland pilgrim traffic in Darchula is the employee of the SDM (Senior District Magistrate) who acts as the supervisor of

¹⁰ In 2007 three ethnologists went to India to conduct research related to a grant supervised by me and financed by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education (No. N 109 021 32/1232; 2007–2011, based on my project entitled “Regional national and religious movements in the globalising Asia: contemporary pilgrimages to Mount Kailas in the borderlands between India, China and Nepal”). The ethnologists were Anita Czerner, MA, Paweł Jessa, PhD, and Joanna Jessa, PhD. (Joanna Jessa’s participation in field research was possible owing to the financial support of the University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Warsaw). I am very grateful to the field researchers for their dedicated and diligent work.

pilgrim groups between Darchula and the border at the Lipulekh pass. He is the person that issues permits for entering the border zone. In the course of his professional career no foreigner has ever crossed the Indian-Chinese border at that place (i.e. the pass). The area is more than a borderland – it also houses a military base. What is more, the agreements between India and China specify that Lipulekh pass is not an open border crossing, but a route only available to the participants of the national KMY pilgrimage. The pilgrims and the staff carry special government permits. If any person without a permit was caught in the border zone, the manager of the TRC hotel would be held responsible and lose the lucrative job, therefore the flow of people through the area is strictly controlled. It must be assumed that individual tourists are not able to bribe the manager to allow them to enter the zone, yet one may also suppose that the local elite does profit from borderland trade and possibly smuggling goods. The degree of control executed over the military zone is best indicated by the fact that every day local posts send telegrams to the central office, reporting on the pilgrims' progress. A special unit in the ministry is thus able to track the position of any pilgrim group along the route.

The groups are accompanied by two ITBP soldiers entrusted with the task of caring for the pilgrims' safety. The soldiers are equipped with mountaineering equipment (ropes, carabiners, ect.). Their help is truly needed, especially if one considers the difficulties en route: ravines, slippery stones, rapid mountain streams and the fact that for a long stretch the river Kali flows along the path. The army is also responsible for keeping the trail in good repair and, given the severe climate and local topography, it is indeed very well maintained. People and animals may travel along it relatively unimpaired. The pilgrims go along a typical stone-paved road which is in good condition despite the fact that frequent repairs are needed in the monsoon season. The soldiers accompany the pilgrimage on the stretch from Lamari through Mangti and Gala to Budhi. They travel uphill with the *yatri* and return. In Budhi they are relieved by another pair of soldiers who escort the group to the border.

Each group includes six cooks-cum-porters and a policeman (sometimes a pair of them) who only goes as far as the border. Moreover, the pilgrim group always contains an employee of the information services (intelligence), who crosses the border with the rest.

The pilgrims visit Tibetan temples along the way. Some are clearly surprised by the fact that there are no Hinduist temples in the vicinity of the mountain and the lake, and the only sacral buildings are that of the Buddhists. The pilgrims discover that one of the holiest mountains of Hinduism does not belong to the world of India, but of Tibet. This fact is not self-explanatory to the average Indian. It may be corroborated by the existence of legends that attempt to explain why Kailas – the centre of the world – is not located in India, but in Tibet. The justifications vary from the mountain's magical flight to Tibet's former appurtenance to India. Nonetheless, the possibility of visiting one of the most sacred Hinduist sites is more important than the issue of its territorial affiliation.

Another subject that ought to be mentioned are the new pilgrim routes to Mount Kailas available for tourists and Indian worshippers. In the 1990s a new type of travelling – the so-called religious tourism – became popular in the West and in the rich parts of the Far East. It involves making excursions to sacred sites organised during particular religious holidays. In the case of Mount Kailas, the trips are made for Buddhist holidays and allow the visitors to complete a *khora* around the lake and the mountain. Trekking trips from Nepal to Mount Kailas have also gained popularity. The first sizeable group of foreign pilgrims was led to the mountain in 1987 by a world-famous Tibetan scholar and Buddhist lama – Namkhai Norbu, who traveled to Tibet with several dozen of his students from Europe and the United States. He managed to obtain all necessary permits from the Chinese authorities, enter Tibet and visit Mount Kailas and other famous places known from the history of the region. This event marked the beginning of tourism in the Tibetan Autonomous Region of the PRC.

In mid-1990s the Chinese authorities allowed trekkers from the West to cross the border between Nepal and China in the vicinity of Mount Kailas. In 1998 and 1999 individual travelers were able to acquire the appropriate permits and travel to mount Kailas without the help of tourist agencies. This principle, however, did not apply to citizens of India. Since 2000 individual traffic is not allowed. Foreigners may only travel to the TAR in organised and registered groups. Recently the mountain and the lake is being visited by an increasing number of groups from Europe, the US, Japan and China. Since around 2005 citizens of India also have the right to enter Tibetan Autonomous Region from Nepal. This contributed to a fast development of tourist excursions for those Shiva worshippers who could not participate in the long and strenuous national KMY pilgrimage, much of which has to be done on foot. Many Indians enlist on trips to visit Mount Kailas and Manasarovar Lake organised by Nepalese tourist agencies. It may even be assumed that these two places are the only reason most Indians consider going to Tibet. Other sights in this beautiful country are of little interest to them and are only visited in passing.

Tourists and pilgrims from India and the West usually choose one of the two most popular options for reaching Mount Kailas, i.e. go there either with an organised tour directly from Kathmandu or indirectly from Nepal through the capital of Tibet (Lhasa). All larger cities in the Tibetan Autonomous Region constitute so-called open zones, which means that any foreigner holding a valid Chinese visa may stay there for an indefinite period of time. However, a person willing to travel to more remote regions of the country must acquire a permit. A single document of this type costs 50 yuan, but often more than one is needed to reach a single destination (one may for example require a permit from the military authorities, the civilian authorities, the internal service, etc.). Each organised group of tourists (at least five people) visiting Tibet must be accompanied by an assigned guide, who controls the route, chooses the places for stopovers and determines the duration of every visit.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, new possibilities for reaching Mount Kailas have become available. One can fly to the mountain by helicopter from Nepalganj (a city near the Nepalese-Indian border). Such trips are still very expensive and thus only available to the financial elites. Travelling to Mount Kailas is associated with wealth and status, therefore it still has mythical significance. Despite the substantial costs of helicopter flights, some of Indians choose this form of transport to reach Mount Kailas and Manasarovar Lake.

It might be added that experienced trekkers may also choose to participate in three weeks' long expeditions through the Humla region located in western Nepal near the Indian border. The border crossing in Humla (between Nepal and China) was opened to foreigners in 1993. Even today it may only be used by organised groups of trekkers. Since a few years ago citizens of India are also allowed to cross. Groups fly from Nepalganj to Simikot (the capital of Humla), where they begin an arduous six-day trek to the border at a mountain pass near Gurla Mandhata – parallel to the route of the Indian KMY. After going down from the Sipsip pass, tourists are taken by jeep to Taklakot and further to Darchen. Tourist agencies organising such escapades offer two options of return: a trek back to Simikot or a jeep ride to Kathmandu.

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Traditional forms of cult practiced during the pilgrimage, such as making offerings, prayer, the retelling of myths and religious legends, circumambulating sacred sites, completing ablutions or paying one's respects to the elements of nature associated with a given deity or a mythical event are typical and common for all Buddhist and Hinduistic movements. Presenting these religious rituals and the custom of making pilgrimages to Mount Kailas in a social and political context reveals many more aspects of the image of this contemporary cultural phenomenon in which grand politics has a direct influence on the lives of ordinary people and local communities, both in the Indian interior and in the borderlands near the Himalayas and Tibet.

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