

Tibet: Hundred Years After Younghusband

Travels in Tibet

Harish Kapadia

Travel becomes most meaningful in retrospect after we have had a chance to paint it up a little in our minds. With time all scenes of travel become part of remembered landscape effected by the chemistry of time and distance.

(G. Winthrop Young)

At the western end of the road below the Potala Palace in Lhasa stands a huge chorten with a gate in the centre and wide roads on either side. On 3rd August 1904 the British army had marched through this gate, symbolising the fall of Lhasa. Younghusband had reached and 'unveiled Lhasa' a week later. We stood opposite this historic chorten, exactly 100 years to the date after the event.

The Younghusband expedition 1903/04 was organised to thwart the Russian interest in Tibet, so it was thought. Lord Curzon, the then Viceroy of India felt that the Russians were supplying weapons to Tibet. He persuaded the British Government to authorise a major military expedition to reach Lhasa, which had been closed to visitors for a long time. Thus the Younghusband mission was born. Soldiers gathered in Darjeeling; Sikhs, Dogra and other Indian sepoys under British officers including L. A. Waddell and F. M. Bailey, and marched across Nathu la at height of winter in December 1903. Supply lines were built up and they penetrated deep inside the Chumbi valley with usual British military efficiency. Finally Lhasa was reached but like the present day Iraq, no WMD (Weapons of Mass Destruction) or Russians were found. After signing a one sided treaty which established a permanent British presence in Tibet, Younghusband returned.¹

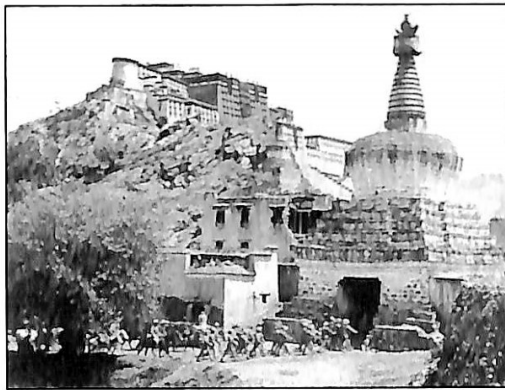
Lhasa and Surroundings

Much water has flown in the Tsangpo since, as the old adage goes. Tibet has undergone change, political upheavals, ethnic rivalries, development of its infrastructures and now is a part of the international

¹ *A Mountain in Tibet*, by Charles Allen.



5. The historic chorten in front of the Potala Palace, Lhasa, through which Sir Younghusband entered the city a hundred years ago. (Savita Apte).



6. Chorten as seen in 1904. (L.A. Waddell)

tourism circuit. Many border roads have been built and entry points opened. A modern international airport and a super fast railway line with modern carriages to Lhasa will be ready in time for the Olympics to be organised in Beijing in 2008. After the symbolic opening of Tibet by Younghusband the world has changed for the Tibetans.

A modern jet, operated by the Chinese airlines connects Lhasa with Kathmandu. They serve some of the worst food but the view compensates for everything. The panorama starts with Gaurishankar, Everest and Makalu, a grand view beyond imagination. As the aircraft takes a sharp northerly turn, focus shifts to the right as the Kangchenjunga massif and peaks of Janu and Jongsong come into view. Soon 'the Plateau' of north Sikkim is seen and then we fly over Tibet. It was time to fasten seat belts for landing at the Gonggar airport, which was under renovation and expansion. Younghusband had taken more than 9 months to reach here with guns drawn on *ekkas*² and long supply lines. We were here in 2

² Guns were mounted on an open bullock-cart pulled by Yaks. This was the first time that any wheels were introduced in Tibet.

hours and the only formalities required were passport and visa. We drove the 96 kms to Lhasa on a four lane highway crossing the Tsangpo at the Gonggar bridge, imagining the crossing by the early teams on inflated yak skins - romantic but dangerous.

This was my third visit to the Tibetan plateau, each time following a different route.³ I have witnessed many changes in Tibet under the Chinese rule. Over decades the only thing that has not changed is the Chinese ruler's hatred of the Dalai Lama, whose photographs and literature are banned and anyone found with it is deported. However faith survives and most Tibetans wear a locket with Dalai Lama's photo. Prayer houses in remote villages have his photo; well hidden from view but very much in the hearts of people, and that's what the Guru wanted in the first place!

Lhasa and its surroundings, a major showpiece of Tibet, has changed beyond recognition. In the old pictures a big shantytown is seen opposite the Potala. This area has been cleared by 'cajoling' occupants to move to the outskirts. The square has been beautified and is now a major tourist attraction called Potala Square. It wears a festive look with several Chinese statues and a four-lane highway passing at the foot of the Potala. Lhasa and surroundings have excellent roads and well planned townships. Fancy streetlights, taxis, museums, huge billboard signs, posh hotels and bright coloured restaurants gives it a feel of Hong Kong. Progress yes, but then ideologically no one has any say, least of all the Tibetans, as to whether they want this progress or what it means to them. Schools teach Tibetan as a language, locals can travel to mainland China and many are employed in the tourism industry. No political dissent is tolerated and no one is ready to voice any views, specially as many Han Chinese have settled in Tibet and are in position of power.

The Potala was painted in white, symbolising religious power, and the centre was painted maroon stating political authority. Nowadays as there are so many visitors here, only 5000 are allowed in everyday and that too for a very short period. Many of the visitors are Chinese who are here to see the cultural heritage of 'their' country. For preservation of the monument, photography is prohibited and continuous maintenance work is carried on. Lhasa is beyond recognition since Younghusband's time of course, but it had grown even since last I visited four years ago.

3 1999; trekking from Simikot to Purang, Manasarovar area.

2000; Lhasa to Raga, northern route to Shiquen, Manasarovar, Everest base.

2004; Lhasa, Shigatse, Gyantse, Kailash, Tirthapuri, Guge and Tsaprang.

In centre of the Potala square flutters the Chinese flag near the site of a pillar that was erected in 821 A.D. signifying the Sino-Tibetan treaty. This treaty gave China the first foothold in Tibet, roots of their claim date thus far back. It was again at this place under the 1959 'Lhasa uprising' hundreds of Tibetans had gathered to protest. They were dispersed and the Dalai Lama fled to India. Rest, as they say, is history.⁴



7. Buddha and Mao Tse-tung statues sold together in streets of Lhasa. (Harish Kapadia)

The spiritual centre of Lhasa is the Jokhang temple with the Barkhor circuit around it. At anytime of the year you will find devout pilgrims from far away villages, performing *chham*, the Tibetan way of bowing to the deity. It wore a colourful look and in small stalls in the mall, statues

of Mao were being sold with that of Buddha! Near the temple and in Potala square, boards were pasted with Chinese circulars and statues of liberated peasantry were erected in Beijing style. Tibetans read them with curiosity. They seem to be living without much fear and not much poverty was evident -less than you would see in India. The three monasteries around Lhasa are as ancient as holy. Sera is the nearest one with Ganden and Drepung a little away. Each of these represented a way of life with hundreds of lamas being trained here. When we visited, they seemed to be flourishing, well maintained and with several lamas performing rituals. Norbulinka, the summer palace of the Dalai Lama was another attraction. With its Japanese style garden and long walls it was peaceful haven for his holiness when he stayed here. A large radio, presented by the Prime Minister of India in 1952 is displayed and one wonders how it must have been ferried across passes by humans and mules.

Younghusband Mission

Soon it was time for us to start on our journey across the Tibetan plateau. In 2004 the road to Gyantse was being repaired and widened into a four-lane highway. Soon a wide road from Gyantse to Yatung

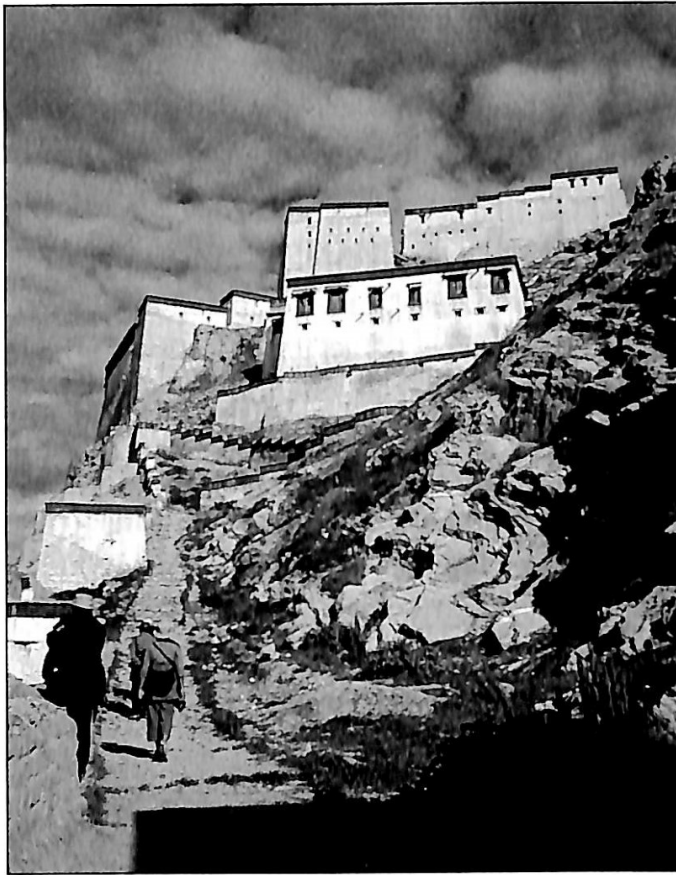
⁴ *Tibet A Political History*, by Tsepon W.D. Shakabpa.

would be joining the road from Nathu la in Sikkim and to Kolkata. As per the agreement reached between India and China large container traffic from the warm water port of Kolkata would drive across this road to supply Lhasa, giving fillip to trade and bring supplies to Lhasa directly rather than driving across the entire Chinese mainland.

We passed the beautiful Yamdrok Tso (lake), Karo la and the foot of Nojin Kang peak. From your car you are within a touching distance of its icefall. Nakartse was as dirty as it can be. In fact throughout our travels in Tibet, we always wished for better hygiene, one thing that has been missing in development of tourism beyond Lhasa. As a rule toilets were dirty, rooms and streets left much to be desired. Gyantse township was being improved with wider roads and celebrations to mark the 100th anniversary of Younghusband's expedition year were under way, called 'The Younghusband invasion and the defeat of British'. The Gyantse fort, in centre of town, witnessed fights between Younghusband's troop led by General McDonald and Tibetan forces. Today as one climbs up to the Gyantse fort, at the entrance there is 'The British Hate Museum'. It contains stories of how brave Tibetans defeated the British. Of course history records that Tibetans were soundly beaten, but not without a fight. From the early part of the last century deceptions by Chinese and twisting of history has remained their hallmark.

As the Younghusband expedition entered Tibet the first major battle was at Chumik Shenko where the Tibetan general from Lhasa had gathered a large army with primitive weapons. As both the armies met, there were friendly exchanges and the Tibetans admired machine guns and modern weaponry that the British had brought. Someone from the Tibetan side fired one of these and threw stones. This led to Indian soldiers opening fire and killing over 3000 Tibetans, a truly gory example of any battle.

Going through several gorges soon the Younghusband expedition reached Gyantse. Tibetans fled from the fort, which was quietly taken by the British. Presuming that the battle for Gyantse was over, a large contingent of soldiers marched towards Lhasa across Karo la. The Tibetans, realising their opportunity returned in strength and reconquered Gyantse and the British found it difficult to dislodge them. Finally fresh reinforcements from famed Gorkha regiment were called for. As the main column returned, on 30th June 1904, Gorkhas mounted a major assault to recapture the Gyantse fort. After establishing defences they fired



8. Climbing Gyantse fort. (Dr Genevieve Anand)

mortars and artillery to make a gaping hole in the walls and its defences.

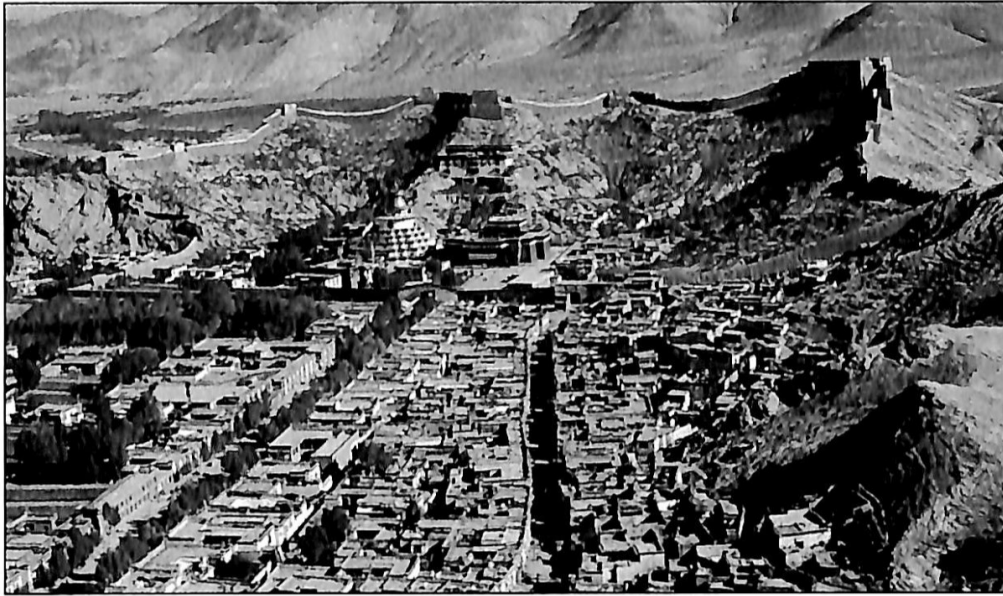
The final storming of the fort began at 3.30 am, on 6th July 1904. Lt. J D Grant and Havildar Karbir Pun led the assault. They climbed a cliff as Tibetans threw stones and mud. They got nearer to the wall along a route on which stones could not reach but many climbers slipped. Finally these two reached the top at 6 p.m. followed by others. As Gorkhas

made a charge with khukris Tibetans ran to the top and jumped off the cliff to their deaths. Over 500 Tibetans died in the assault. For their bravery 8 Gorkha Regiment received a special citation. Lt. J D Grant was awarded the Victoria Cross and Havildar Karbir Pun was awarded a First Class Order of Merit. Gorkhas marched ahead across Karo la, Yamdrok Tso and without any resistance entering Lhasa through the chorten.

Gyantse and Shigatse

The other important aspect of Gyantse is the Kumbum stupa. This unique structure rising seven storeys is an architectural wonder having been built in the 9th century. At every floor there are small temples with exquisite paintings which have lasted centuries. Its top offers views of the Gyantse fort and the wall, which was climbed by Lt. Grant.

Between Gyantse and Shigatse, the second most important town in Tibet, there is a wide road, covering distance quickly. Shigatse was a mini Lhasa with modern facilities and its centerpiece was the Tashilumpho monastery, the headquarters of Panchan lama. Sven Hedin,



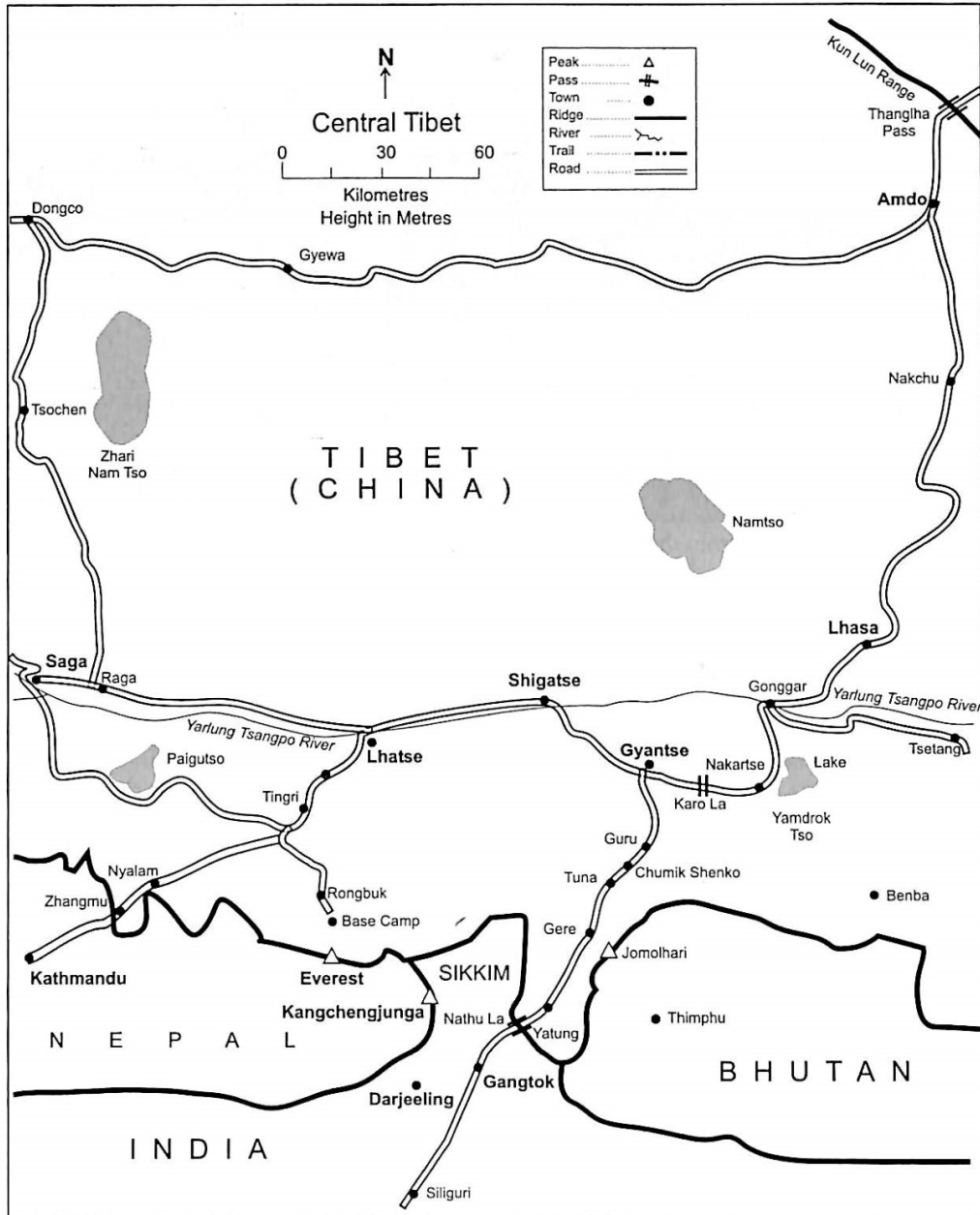
9. The Kumbum Chorten viewed from the Gyantse fort. (Harish Kapadia)

the Swedish explorer had drawn excellent black and white sketches of the monastery and comparing them a century later one can see that nothing has changed much, the streets and buildings are the same. One hopes that faith is same for there are disputes about who is the 'real' Panchan lama. While we were in Shigatse, Panchan lama drove through the streets in a cavalcade strictly guarded by the Chinese soldiers. People quietly bowed to him and some celebrations were held. As Indians, we had more respect from the locals ('as you come from the country where the Dalai Lama lives') and we interacted with lamas, locals and guides. They were comfortable talking to us but their eyes were always alert for eves droppers, even within their group.⁵ Grains are collected as tax from rural areas and at vantage points there were clusters of road builder's huts. Many Tibetans felt that what China took from Tibet (gold, precious metal, gems, food) was far greater than what was given back to them (roads, houses, infrastructure).

From Shigatse starts the second part of Tibet. The road is rough and as you drive across the Tibetan plateau population is sparse and towns become smaller. Lhatse is at the junction where a bridge across the Tsangpo leads south to Kathmandu, while the road west goes along the river. There is a pass to be crossed where we met Mr. Po, a Chinese

⁵ During my third visit to Tibet no Chinese liaison officer accompanied us as was required five years ago. There was more openness and Tibetan guides were running the show.

Central Tibet



cyclist who was going across from Peking to Central Asia, 'to see my country'. He was staying with Tibetans and had no qualms about travelling alone amidst them. On the road frequently we saw double-decker buses carrying Chinese tourists visiting Lhasa and proceeding to the extreme west of Tibet. These tourists looked interested in the country but it was difficult to judge whether they were sponsored by their Government or were travelling on their own.

The Northern Road

Little before Saga, a major military station, a bifurcation leads north going across very inhospitable terrain. It was this route that I had followed during my second trip to Tibet. Immediately after the bifurcation is one of the wonders of this plateau 'the Geysers'. Huge springs of hot water burst out into the sky and splash over a vast area. Many small bubbles of sulphur water also pour out. There is a small rest house and geological study station maintained by the Chinese government. The road ahead becomes rougher and rougher and no human settlement is seen. We passed Zari Namtso lake, and almost on its shore stands a small township of the Tsochen (Coquen). Further north we were on the Shiquen-Amdo 'highway' and turned west passing Gertse and Gakyi to reach Shiquen which borders Ladakh. This was a barren stretch to drive through but amidst cold winds we would suddenly find a large flock of sheep grazing on the stony plateau. We always wondered, 'grazing' what? When we stopped, curious shepherds would gather around and look at us without making any trouble. All nomads have standardised quarters on the outskirts of towns. Much of the population consists of Han Chinese who have been given incentives to come and settle here. Many herds of Tibetan antelope ran along the road, unafraid of our cars. We heard the stories of Chinese soldiers using guns to hunt wildlife while travelling on this route.

Most of the time after driving 200 kms, with no human beings in sight, suddenly a modern township would spring up from nowhere, for example Tsochen. It had a bank (China Bank exchanging dollars), hotels, modern amenities, water supply, school (Chinese teachers), telephones (China telecom, mobile phones, internet), postal facilities (China Post which operates daily services) and good restaurants (mainly Chinese) and of course, the Chinese army garrison quarters. One wonders what these people eat, work and why they are settled at these smaller towns.

Shiquen (old Ali) was the largest town in Western Tibet - with nightclubs and a disco! A special Tourist guesthouse is built here and permits are checked at a local Tibetan office lined with posters of Indian film actors and Indian film music playing! It was a huge military headquarter with a small airstrip and it was from here that Chinese troops attacked India in 1962. The Aksai Chin road starts from here linking it to Central Asia; Khotan, Yarkand and Kashgar. The war was fought by the Chinese to protect this illegal road running through Indian territories. Today regular bus services operate on this route for locals and tourists.

Rutok (Rudok) was on the banks of the Pangong lake, which is 2/3rd in China and 1/3rd in Ladakh. Having visited this lake in Ladakh, I compared with amazement the features and water of this lake. Like territories, even water was caught between the two political giants.

On return, one of the Tibetan guides cajoled us to climb a small hill, called 'Lovers Hill'. It offered a magnificent view of the great Himalayan range dividing this part of China and Himachal Pradesh of India. Leo Pargial (Rio Purgial) rising above the Satluj gorge, Shipki la, Gya and all the peaks were clearly visible.⁶ But amazingly we also saw a large cantonment of the Chinese army with a huge star of People's Liberation Army painted on the hill and an airstrip behind it. It seemed that the Chinese did not mind tourists overlooking their military establishments, which I would have found difficult to believe anywhere else. We were photographing the mountain peaks with a telephoto lens, when suddenly a group of Chinese soldiers were seen approaching us. 'It looks like now we will return via Beijing', I murmured. But the soldiers were also tourists like us, they came, looked at us, looked through our lenses at the peaks and murmuring verly good, verly good ran down smiling! From Shinquen we drove to Demchok, which is about couple of kilometres from the Indian border and the Indus, for a brief visit. Across the political line stood the Indian Demchok. A small monastery was all that it had to offer. What really surprised us was that our Indian passports did not deter the Chinese to allow us travel to any border areas as long as we had paid our fees and our visas were stamped with these places marked on it. In fact throughout my three visits no officials, army or administration ever raised any objections to my Indian passport or ever looked up with a suspicious glance.

Now we were to enter the third part of Tibet, where the holy places of Kailash, Manasarovar, Tirthapuri and Tholing math are situated. Some of these areas has strong associations with India as many Hindu pilgrims throng here nowadays.

Trek from Nepal to Western Tibet

During my first visit to Tibet, I had trekked across the border from Nepal, a most favoured route for trekkers. We flew from Kathmandu to Nepalgunj and Simikot. Trekking along the Karnali we slowly gained ground to reach the border across Nara la (pass). On some stones we saw

⁶ An Indian-Chinese joint expedition is to attempt Gya from their respective sides in 2005. Two other such 'confidence building climbs' have taken place in near past.



5. Kailash peak above Rakas Tal, Tibet. (Shirish Apte)



6. The Tsaprang ravine. (Shirish Apte)

slogans Maowadi Zindabad (Hail Mao Communists). Little did we realize that this was the starting of trouble, which has engulfed Western Nepal today and stopped any approach through this route. Soon we approached the border where a stone marked 'The Entry point into Tibet'. It was ironically erected in early 1962 when China had solved its border problems with Nepal but later in the same year attacked India for the same problem. We passed our first huge monastery of Khojarnath. This monastery being situated next to the border was saved from destruction during the infamous Cultural Revolution, when the hardened band of Red Guards destroyed much of the cultural heritage of Tibet. The Lamas ran away across the border with almost everything and returned after the fury was over. It has huge Hindu influence and many parts have paintings of Hindu Gods and Goddesses.

Purang the district headquarters for this part of Tibet was near. We completed entry formalities and found special quarters for Indian tourists and pilgrims along with many hotels. The streets have a variety of goods being sold (Indian currency was accepted!) and barbeque meat seemed the preferred delicacy. Walking the streets, we suddenly came across a group of fancily dressed ladies. Obviously, they were not locals, but the 'comfort girls'. They had travelled long distance from mainland China to practice the 'oldest profession of the world' here for the benefit of the large garrison of the Chinese soldiers, a regular feature near all army stations in Tibet. At the outskirts of Purang, on a hill stood the ruins of the Purang (Taklakot) fort. This was the fort that had housed several prisoners who were tortured. Sydney Wignall, a Britisher in his book *Spy on the Roof of the World* mentions his interment in this fort and the sufferings he had to endure.

The road from Purang passes Toyo village, which houses a memorial to the great Dogra General, Zorawar Singh who died here in battle. The Dogras starting from Kishtwar had conquered Ladakh and marched eastwards into Tibet. The Chinese and Tibetans withdrew and allowed them deep inside. When the winter approached, the Dogra army was trapped in these inhospitable surroundings and was attacked by the defenders.⁷ On December 12, 1841, gallant Zorawar Singh fell to a bullet

⁷ This happened a five decades ago when the German army attacked Russia in World War II in a similar fashion. See the book on Zorawar Singh, *Footprints in the Snow* by Brig. G. D. Bakshi. The Jammu and Kashmir Light Infantry of the Indian army originates from Dogras of Zorawar's army.

in the war - his army was massacred with the usual Mongoloid ruthlessness. Taklakot (Purang) was abandoned. The flag of Lahore Durbar, however, continued to flutter in Leh. The Tibetans believed Zorawar to be a powerful person and in their primitive superstition began chopping his body and collecting different parts for strength. Some body parts were buried at Toyo where a monument was erected and the place of worship is locally known as 'Singhba chorten'.

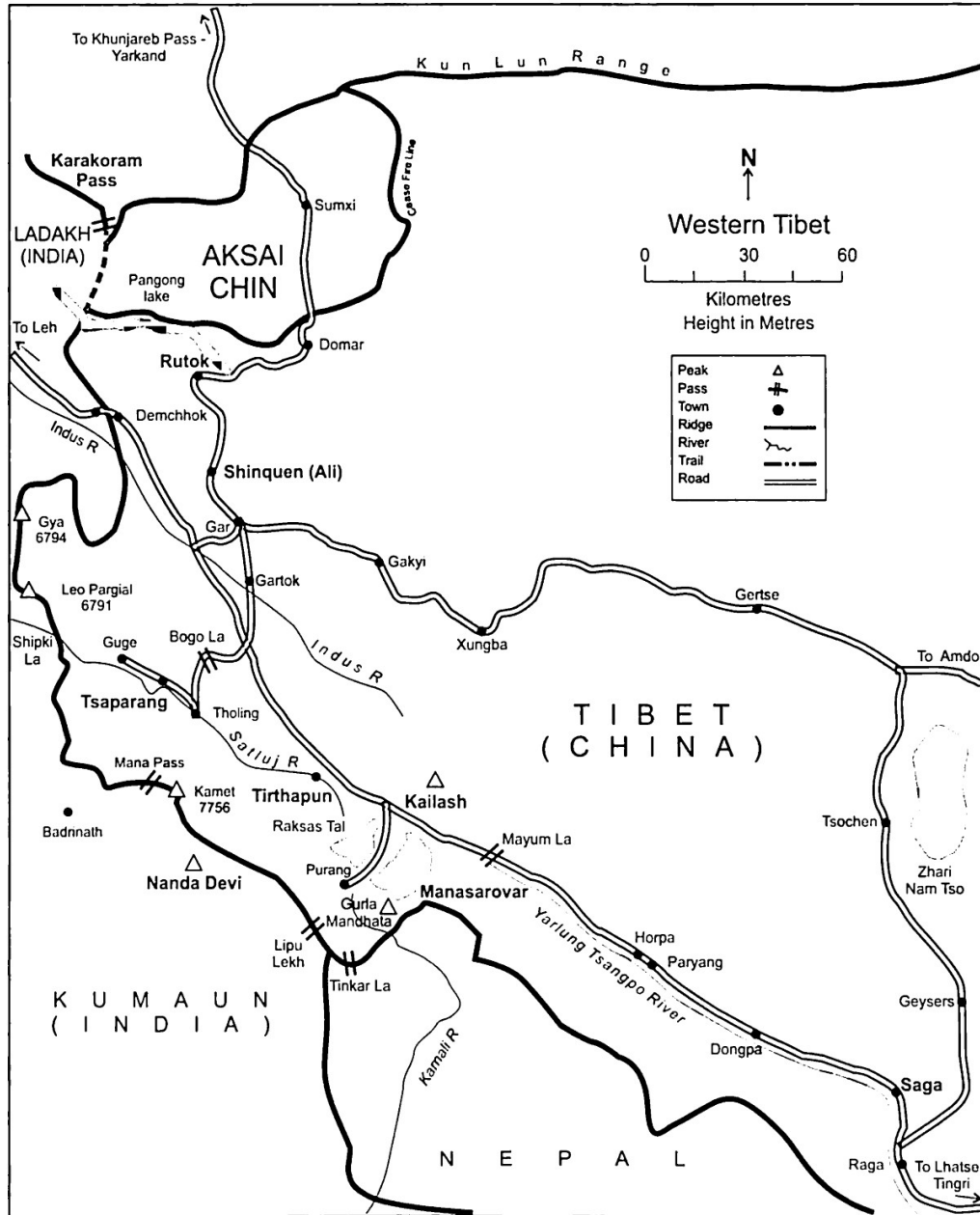
Manasarovar and Kailash area

A long winding two-lane road now takes visitors comfortably and fast to Raksas Tal and Manasarovar with the grand view of the holy Kailash. We gave a lift to a Chinese army officer in our car. After initial hesitation I was chatting with him as he spoke fluent English and seemed rather friendly. He was a philatelic stamp collector and we decided to exchange Indian and Chinese stamps, which we did later by post. At the first view of Manasarovar and Kailash I watched him curiously. As we alighted, he did a proper namaste to Kailash and Manasarovar and kneeling down on ground like any other Tibetan performed a *chham*. We Indians were brought up with hatred towards the Chinese, but such gestures and our experiences clearly portrayed that all are not cruel and non-believers like western writers would like us to believe. We met many friendly Chinese soldiers and except once at Saga, we were never stopped photographing anything that we wanted to.

A lot has been written about Manasarovar and Kailash, which has a central place in Hindu philosophy and the Indian mind. The real reason could be geographical as four major rivers, which supply water to India, originate in the vicinity of this lake. The Indus flows towards the west and after entering Ladakh, takes a huge turn to flow south into the Arabian Sea across Pakistan. The Yarlung Tsangpo (or only the Tsangpo) originates at the foot of Mayum la near Manasarovar and flows across the Tibetan plateau to the east where the passage is blocked by the great massif of Namcha Barwa and Gyala Peri. Making a stupendous gorge between these two peaks it finally turns south and enters India, to the plains of Assam where it is called the Brahmaputra. Finally it merges with the Bay of Bengal.

From the southwest of Manasarovar near Tirthapuri originates the Satluj, flowing past the old kingdom of Guge. It passes through a gorge at foot of Shipki la to enter Kinnaur and flow into the Punjab plains to merge finally with the Indus. Towards the south from the foot of

Western Tibet



Gurla Mandhata originates the Karnali river, which flowing through Nepal ultimately joins the Ganga. Thus major water sources of India, apart from the Ganges, originate north of the Himalaya and particularly from vicinity of the Manasarovar and Raksas Tal lakes. The channel between these two lakes called Ganga chu, is situated almost on the same longitude as the holy confluence of Ganga, Jamuna and the mythical Saraswati at Allahabad in India. These factors may have given a religious halo to the peak and the area. Perhaps some day a researcher

would discover that early saints and Indian *shastras* (holy books) actually knew about the geographical significance and hence declared the area holy. There are gold mines at Thok Jalung, on the channel between the two lakes.⁸

Amongst several travellers and pilgrims that have visited these areas Swami Pranavanand, an Indian traveller stands out. He stayed here for several years and explored all aspects thoroughly. His two books, *Kailash and Mansarovar* and *Explorations in Tibet* are the most authoritative references on the area.⁹ E. Kawaguchi, a Japanese monk travelled here in disguise has narrated experiences in his book *Three Years in Tibet*. The greatest view from Manasarovar area is of the Indian Himalayan peaks rising in the south and seen at about at same height due to curvature of earth. No wonder Tibet is called the 'Roof of the World'. Extending from Nanda Devi, Kamet, Abi Gamin, Mukut Parvat, the range extend towards the peaks of the Western Himalaya. This is a stupendous panorama and worth travelling to just for the view.

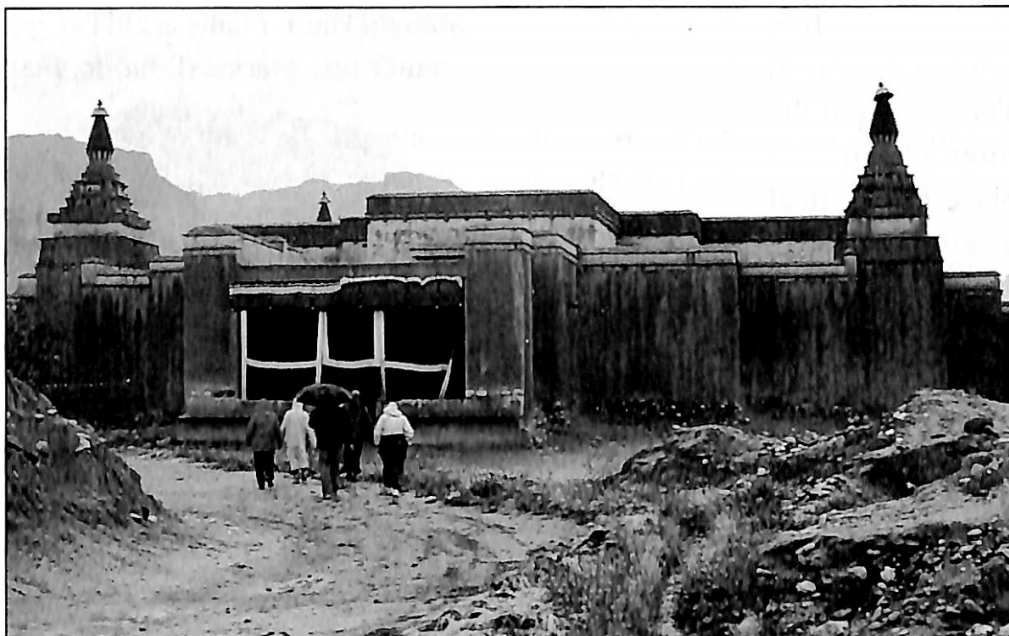
Tirthapuri, Tsaprang and Guge

We travelled southwest from Manasarovar to Tirthapuri and as tradition has it, any Tibetan pilgrim before visiting Kailash, has to pay obeisance here. This was the extent of Hindu influence into this area as Indian gurus from the south had reached here centuries ago. The Satluj originates from the plains below Tirthapuri where the watershed divides the Indus and the Satluj river systems. There are several shapes of mountains, which curiously resemble Nanda Devi. There is a hole through which you put your hand and pick up three stones. The three white stones signify your karma to be very pure leading you to heaven and three black stones send you towards hell. Luckily everybody falls in between, picking some white and some black stones!

From Tirthapuri we drove across Bogo la (pass) to enter the southernmost district of Tsaprang. No words can describe the scenery, which must be seen to be believed. Surreal colours of mountains, deep gorges, backdrop of range after range of unbelievable shapes of peaks, was captivating. The high peaks of the Himalaya and Mana pass were

⁸ The early exploration interest in Tibet was to locate these gold mines. Pandit Nain Singh passed from here in 1877.

⁹ These books were so accurate that initially the Chinese had banned them and one could not travel into Tibet with its copies.

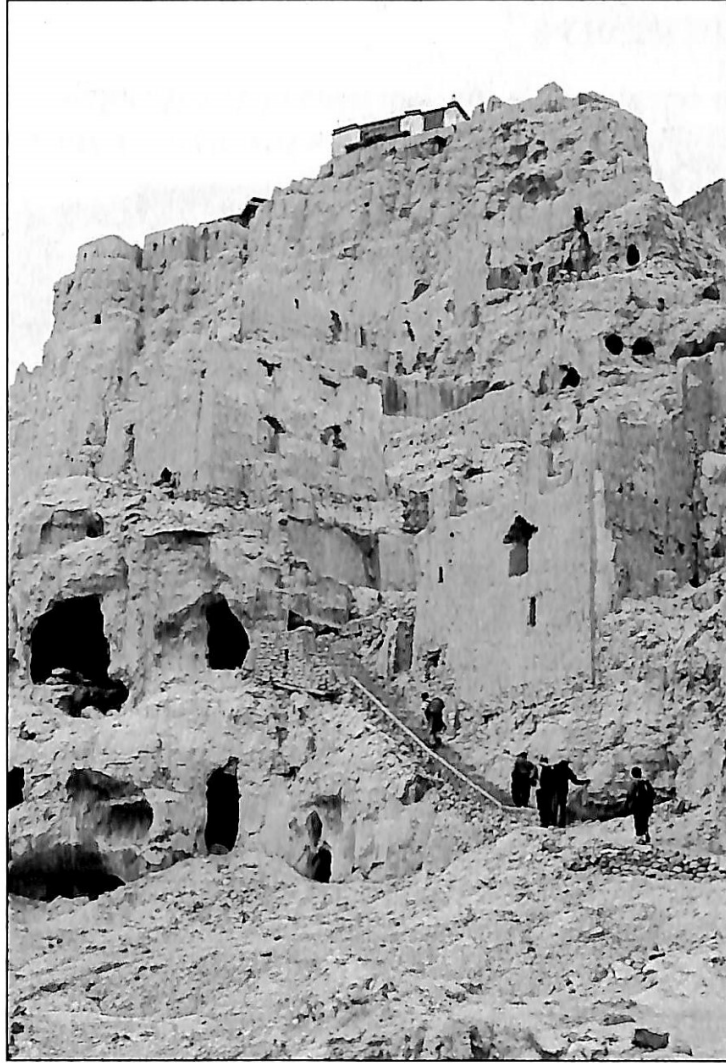


10. Tholing Math, established centuries ago by the Hindu guru Adi Shankracharya in Tsaparang, Tibet. (Harish Kapadia)

on the horizon. The Satluj flowed in the centre of the range, forming a wide gorge. No wonder, so many travellers and pilgrims were attracted to this place. We camped little before the Satluj gorge and on the next day crossed a bridge, to reach the small township of Tholing (Thuling). The Tholing math (a typical Indian expression for a Hindu *ashram*), was established by Adi Guru Shankaracharya who was the earliest person to have crossed the Himalaya across Mana pass from the Indian shrine of Badrinath. He had performed Hindu initiation rites on the King of Guge, under whose kingdom this area fell. He carried back a statue, a mix of Buddha and Vishnu, to be consecrated at the Badrinath temple. Later an earthquake destroyed it and now a new statue has been consecrated.

The Tholing math, near a modern town was in ruins with a very eerie feeling. In the centre was a typical square where a Hindu would perform a *havan* (puja with fire) and the wall must have had huge statues of Hindu Gods and Goddesses. All this was ripped apart during the Cultural Revolution in 1967-1974. Today, the monument stands in ruins. As a sign of changing times, the Chinese had put up boards that these temples were destroyed during the cultural revolution, a kind of an expression of regret, and we could see Chinese archaeologists measuring and photographing the area. We were told that a major restoration drive based on old pictures is likely to be conducted.

A few kilometres from Tholing stand the ruins of Guge, a place of mystical quality. A huge fort stood here and today, though you can see only ruins, one is awestruck by its magnificence. From the Satluj valley at its foot you see a high hill in a brilliant setting, with many holes, which soon turn out to be caves, mud walls and monuments. Inside are paintings, which have luckily remained intact,



11. Ruins of Guge fort in Tsaparang. (Dr Genevieve Anand)

showing the variety of visitors to the court of the King of Guge and Indian Gods and Goddesses. Jesuit Father Andrade had crossed Mana pass after Shankaracharya had stayed here and converted the King to Christianity! After a few years, the local lama clergy took objection and rose in revolt. The King had to run away for a few years and he returned as a Buddhist to restore the kingdom.

The centerpiece of attraction at the Guge ruins is the Winter Palace. It is a huge cave through which one has to descend and its dark rooms with small windows are uniquely placed to keep the King and his entourage warm during the very cold winters of the Tibetan plateau. It offers a good view and gives you the feeling of how the King must have spent long months of winter, warm but without many of the modern day comforts.

This is what Lama Govinda, a spiritual traveller from England, had to say about Tsaprang and Guge.

It may be that the others might have felt oppressed by the loneliness and strangeness of the place, but to us it was just paradise - an enchanted world of rock formations which had crystallised into huge towers, shooting up thousands of feet into the deep blue sky, like a magic fence around an oasis, kept green by the waters of springs and mountain brooks. A great number of these nature-created towers had been transformed into dwellings- into veritable "skyscrapers" - by the people who had lived here many hundreds of years ago. They had ingeniously hollowed out these rock-towers from within, honey combing them with caves, one above the other, connected by inner staircases and passages, and lit up by small window-like openings.

(Lama Angarika Govinda, *Way of the White Clouds*, p.232)

Rongbuk and Everest Base Camp

With this the third part of Tibet was over and the only thing that remained was the visit to the Rongbuk monastery at the foot of Everest. We crossed the Tsangpo by a ferry at Saga (where a bridge is now being built) and drove to the banks of the beautiful Paigusto Tso, admiring the northern face of Shisha Pangma. A rough road, now a major shortcut, took us to the Rongbuk monastery, looked after by several nuns.¹⁰ Many Everest expeditions have camped here and today, vehicles reach the base camp, which has built-in toilets, quarters for liaison officers and in season you can imagine over 300 tents spread around. The stories of ascents of Everest from the north are many. As a vignette from the Younghusband days, small colourful *ekkas* drawn by mules would have taken tourists from the monastery to the base camp. The Everest was almost within touching distance and the play of light at different times of the day would have to be seen to be believed. Last rays of sun made the mountain golden soon to be followed by reflections of radiant moonlight. One from our group had tears in her eyes looking at this magnificence.

¹⁰ The original road drove over Pang la and offered a wide panorama of Everest peaks. It is still worth the extra drive.

Return

We drove back to Tingri for the descent from the Tibetan plateau cutting across the Himalaya at Thorong la. It was a natural route passing between wide gorges, the Milarepa Cave en route was a holy place but the townships of Naylam and Zhangbo, were as crowded and dirty as can be and filled with moneychangers and trucks. The custom formalities were completed here and soon we passed the Chinese flag to cross the 'Friendship Bridge' to Nepal. Hundreds of Nepali porters scrambled to carry luggage across the bridge for a small payment.

As we had our first coffee, the Indian influence was all around us. Several pictures of Hindu Gods, film stars and cricketers adorned the walls of every restaurant, barber's shop and shopping area. But the major statement was made by the display of Dalai Lama's picture at almost every place -- a picture that was banned by the Chinese to be taken into Tibet. Having experienced Tibet's material development by China, which perhaps Tibetans would have never achieved by themselves for a long time, triggered many discussions on what was better, the material progress as we had seen or this symbol of Dalai Lama's photograph which portrayed freedom and spiritual realism? It was a hard choice.¹¹

In a shop we saw stickers being sold - the Indian flag with a message written on, 'India - Love it or Leave it', a message by the Dalai Lama for the Tibetan population now sheltering in India. Our choice of course, was obvious. We loved India and were soon back home having experienced Tibet from Younghusband's days to modernity.

Summary

Three visits to different regions on the Tibetan plateau by different routes. Changes observed from historical Tibet to present day.

¹¹ The Dalai Lama has appealed to followers to accept Chinese rule in Tibet and has plans to dissolve the Tibetan government-in-exile at Dharamsala, India.