

# K A I L A S H   Y A T R A

A Long Walk to Mount Kailash through Humla



Strong winds and sharp sunshine bursting through cloud cover animate the prayer flags at Raling Gonpa.

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A Long Walk to Mt Kailash through Humla

KEVIN BUBRISKI | ABHIMANYU PANDEY

ICIMOD



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## ABOUT ICIMOD

The International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), is a regional knowledge development and learning centre serving the eight regional member countries of the Hindu Kush Himalaya - Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Myanmar, Nepal, and Pakistan – and based in Kathmandu, Nepal. Globalisation and climate change have an increasing influence on the stability of fragile mountain ecosystems and the livelihoods of mountain people. ICIMOD aims to assist mountain people to understand these changes, adapt to them, and make the most of new opportunities, while addressing upstream-downstream issues. We support regional transboundary programmes through partnership with regional partner institutions, facilitate the exchange of experience, and serve as a regional knowledge hub. ICIMOD strengthens networking among regional and global centres of excellence and works to develop an economically and environmentally sound mountain ecosystem to improve the living standards of mountain populations and to sustain vital ecosystem services for the billions of people living downstream –now, and for the future.

Within ICIMOD's Transboundary Landscapes Programme, Kailash Sacred Landscape Conservation and Development Initiative (KSLCDI) is a flagship transboundary collaborative initiative between China, India, and Nepal that has evolved through a participatory, iterative process among various local and national research and development institutions within these countries. The Kailash Sacred Landscape represents a diverse, multi-cultural, and fragile landscape. The programme aims to achieve long-term conservation of ecosystems, habitats, and biodiversity while encouraging sustainable development, enhancing the resilience of communities in the landscape, and safeguarding and adding value to the existing cultural linkages between local populations across boundaries. The Kailash Sacred Landscape Conservation and Development Initiative (KSLCDI) is supported by partner organizations: Department for International Development (DFID) - UK Aid, and Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung/Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH.



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## FOREWORD | David Molden

The reference to ‘culture’ in the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) marks the first time that culture has been cited as part of the international development agenda. This reference has been lauded by UNESCO as ‘an unparalleled recognition’ to qualify sustainable development from the angle of safeguarding places, rites and rituals that comprise culture. The safeguarding and promotion of culture is an end in itself, and at the same time contributes directly to many of the SDGs—the environment, inclusive economic growth and sustainable cities, among others. The indirect benefits of culture are accrued through culturally informed and effective implementations of development practices. This recognition of culture is a conceptual shift in thinking about development beyond economic growth—envisioning a desirable future that is equitable, peaceful and environmentally sustainable.

This enhanced recognition of culture in the SDGs fits squarely with the Hindu Kush Himalaya (HKH), one of the most ecologically and culturally diverse regions in the world. The HKH provides cultural ecosystem services to millions in the form of its sacred natural landscapes that hold countless traditions of veneration and pilgrimages to sacred natural sites. These sacred natural sites provide, in turn, an anchor for local communities’ everyday religious practices, spiritual succor, traditional ecological knowledge and distinct ethnic identity. In addition, these sites also embody traditional attitudes towards nature, which can be leveraged for promoting conservation and generating livelihoods for local communities.

The Kailash Sacred Landscape (KSL) is a rare transboundary landscape shared by China, India and Nepal and a focus site for ICIMOD’s transboundary work. The KSL has countless sacred natural sites with layers of religious and symbolic meaning as several religions worship the holy Mount Kailash as a cosmic centre. The sacred sites in the KSL play an important role in defining the identity, historical legacy and everyday practices of the landscape’s communities. Regular pilgrimages to this holy peak, like the one documented in this book, are a defining cultural phenomenon capturing the imagination and beliefs of the millions who visit this landscape in search of meaning and fulfillment.

In the modern context, it is especially important to document these sacred sites as well as the paths by which people access them. By virtue of the photos in this book, you will travel along a route from Humla in far western Nepal, through an assemblage of visuals that can inspire and strengthen commitment for effective conservation, restoration and monitoring of this important site.

The quickening pace of development in the KSL has necessitated a focus on long-term conservation and development cooperation between the participating nations. We hope the captivating aesthetics of this book will assist in those efforts. We also deeply wish that this book will appeal to conservation and development practitioners of regional member countries of the HKH providing new orientation and make us all work for stewardship of such pilgrimage routes for future generations.

David Molden, PhD  
Director General,  
International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development, Kathmandu

## PREFACE | E k l a b y a S h a r m a

The area around the sacred Mount Kailash (called the Kailash Sacred Landscape, or KSL) is an ecologically and culturally diverse region in the Hindu Kush Himalaya. It is also an extremely fragile landscape. The KSL region is located in the border area around Uttarakhand in India, north western Nepal and the Tibet Autonomous Region in China (TAR). The KSL is considered as an indicator region representing the condition of the Himalayan range, which, in turn, is of central importance for global climate surveillance. The ecosystem services of the KSL, in particular its biodiversity, water resources, as well as its spiritual and scenic attraction, are of utmost importance to the local population. Mount Kailash and Lake Manasarovar are important pilgrimage destinations for Hindus, Buddhists, Jains and Bonpos. Over one million people directly depend on the resources (such as firewood and medicinal plants) and ecosystem services (such as water retention and soil-nutrient enrichment) provided by KSL ecosystems. However, unsustainable forms of land use and development have resulted in the loss of biodiversity and the degradation of ecosystem services resulting in the migration of people to emerging mountain towns, thus affecting the local stewardship of the landscape. Hence, the transboundary Kailash Sacred Landscape Conservation and Development Initiative (KSLCDI) is being implemented by ICIMOD in partnership with three countries—China, India and Nepal—combining the protection of biological and cultural diversity in the KSL while ensuring that sustainable development and adaptation to climate change are addressed.

However, reversing the clock of degradation is not easy when the local people are moving out and their cultural link to the divine landscape is being threatened. Furthermore, thousands of pilgrims and tourists going to the landscape barely travel responsibly, thus challenging its carrying capacity and degrading it further. Since the advent of its implementation, KSLCDI evolved and applied the ‘Landscape Journey’ process tool which enabled implementers and key stakeholders to traverse through the pilgrimage route and, subsequently, understand the culture and its deep connection to ethereal nature as manifested in the landscape. This photo book is a timely attempt by KSLCDI to capture the natural subtleties of a selected pilgrimage route through a series of holy destinations that are historically interconnected in history and woven together in a rich web of cultural and spiritual backgrounds. Inspiring captions to each photo were prepared to encapsulate the beauty and splendour of this landscape that continues to mesmerize and will continue to drive future generations to work for its conservation and development. KSLCDI has embarked on this journey on the principle of real-time ‘transboundaryness’, which allows for the possibility of common outcomes to be brought about by further understanding the science of cultural services and using the same to sensitize all decision-makers to pursue a convergence on common interests and hence enable a more coherent approach to preserving of the KSL.

We at ICIOD are aware that facilitating transboundary cooperation and regional policy coherence among the participating countries will remain a persistent challenge in a conflict-prone area. KSLCDI is designed to work together with participating countries on the principles of equity, transparency and mutual win-wins. This photo book, an addition to the existing corpus of knowledge on the KSL—represents an innovative way of communicating with anyone who loves and respects the landscape and anyone who might learn to do so in the future.

Eklabya Sharma, PhD  
Deputy Director General,  
International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development, Kathmandu

## INTRODUCTION | Rajan Kotru

With its physical grandeur, natural splendour and spiritual aura, the Hindu Kush Himalaya (HKH) has shaped culture, civilization and the lives of 1.9 billion people living upstream and downstream. The numerous landscapes of the HKH connect to human systems, providing villagers and urbanites alike with a sense of physical, mental and social well-being. However, in the past decade, the debate around the conventional problems of the HKH has become more complex, as multifaceted challenges such as forest fires, human–wildlife conflicts, water insecurity, land degradation and resultant socio-demographic changes have demanded more attention. The effects of climate change have also impacted the HKH in the form of shrinking glaciers, rising temperatures, changing monsoonal patterns and the increasing frequency of severe disasters. However, while the environment of the HKH has been well studied, the cultural services the HKH provides have not been subject to systematic analysis, conceptualization and application.

Mount Kailash and the ancient pilgrimage routes from India and Nepal that lead to this sacred mountain in the TAR, are part of an immensely valued spiritual and cultural legacy for several major religions—Buddhism, Hinduism, Bon and Jainism. This value was key to the conceptualization of the Kailash Sacred Landscape Conservation and Development Initiative (KSLCDI) in 2010 by national scientific and development institutions in China, India and Nepal. The ‘Kailash Sacred Landscape’ was envisioned as a transboundary project area spread across parts of China, India and Nepal, adjunct to the western tri-juncture of their borders—a transboundary region where Mount Kailash serves as a geographic and spiritual pivot. This ‘landscape’ is better defined by contiguous ecosystems and historic cultural linkages than by contemporary administrative boundaries.

KSLCDI was launched under the stewardship of ICIMOD. We are implementing our activities in coordination with partner institutions in China, India and Nepal, and across a spectrum of organizational types: government, non-government and the private sector. KSLCDI aims to achieve the long-term conservation of ecosystems, encourage sustainable development, enhance the resilience of communities in the landscape and safeguard and promote the area’s cultural heritage. In this context, we are evaluating which natural and cultural sites within the KSL are suitable for a UNESCO World Heritage Site nomination.

The transboundary concept applied in the KSL is grounded in the landscape approach, which recognizes the critical links between nature, culture and the community for the long-term sustainability of resources. Landscape in this context encompasses a mosaic of lands, from cultivated lands to wilderness that spread over a large geographical area, shaped and influenced by human interaction over time. In recent years, greater numbers of pilgrims and tourists are bringing rapid change, and efforts

to develop necessary infrastructure in harmony with the long-term needs of the KSL and its residents are ongoing.

In this book, KSLCDI takes the pilgrimage route to Kailash via Humla, which has not been substantially explored to date. This collection of narratives provides information about Kailash in four important ways.

First, it renews our knowledge of change—past and present—by revisiting memories, photographs and shared stories. Second, it provides an updated account of visuals for future generations of trekkers, tourists, scholars and pilgrims, who will some day have the treasured experience of walking through this sacred landscape. Third, it encourages the communities of the Kailash region to find ways to sustain healthy, productive and meaningful livelihoods in this remarkable transboundary region. Finally, it provides illuminating visions of the KSL that can be used in preparing the UNESCO World Heritage Site nomination dossier.

Subsequently, we hope this book will encourage greater cooperation for KSL's stewardship in an inclusive, participatory and democratic way. With these visual insights, we are positive about rekindling hope for maintaining this landscape for the benefit of its people, nature and, ultimately, the world.

Rajan Kotru, PhD  
Regional Programme Manager, Transboundary Landscapes  
International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development, Kathmandu

## NOTES FROM THE KAILASH YATRA | Kevin Bubriski

11 July-10 August 2016

The heavy monsoon clouds of late afternoon hung dark and forbidding over Nepal's border with TAR. It was 1977 and I was twenty-two years old. On a high mountain-pass in north western Nepal's Humla district, my travelling companions and I were surrounded by large rocks, which had been upended by pilgrims who had borne witness to the view of Mount Kailash and Lake Manasarovar, sites of sacred geography many miles away, beyond the northern fringe of the Himalayas. The upturned rocks honoured the view of Kailash and the 'darshan', or blessing, that the mountain's presence brings to the viewer.

In November 2016, at Yalbang Monastery in Humla, I met my old friend Sonam Gyalgen. We hadn't seen each other in nearly thirty years. It was he who recalled to me that day in 1977: how the dark clouds parted as we sat high on the mountain pass, the snows of Mount Kailash and the blue waters of Lake Manasarovar revealing themselves in the distant north.

For thirty-nine years I carried that memory of having seen Kailash and of having received the darshan that comes with witnessing the mountain. In the following decades, I never felt an urgency to return to Kailash, but I always had a quiet and deepening longing to get there, to make the *kora* (circumambulation), to actually walk the journey around the mountain, and to experience fully in all ways the scale of the mountain, its visual beauty and its rarefied air. The sacred landscape of Kailash is a gift to each person who reaches there. With the right awareness and intention, one can feel the deep power and beauty of the sacred landscape that is brought to life by the human presence of those on pilgrimage.

In the summer of 2016, an eclectic group of eighteen scholars, artists, geographers and anthropologists from Nepal, India, the United States and China travelled together on the sacred pilgrims' route around Kailash. As we walked through the landscape of Kailash and the remote monsoon-rain-soaked mountains of Humla, each of us was tasked with independent and collective research inquiry. The Henry Luce Foundation and ICIMOD generously supported this team, which was masterfully assembled by Ashok Gurung of the India China Institute and The New School in New York. The images that follow on these pages describe pieces of this journey, from the magic of Nepal's green vertical and diagonal landscape into the mysterious and powerful Tibetan Plateau and mountains, and through this the transboundary world where the primal landscape and human habitation exist together.

These photographs of the landscape and traditional village architecture present the ways in which the man-made environment is informed by local materials and integrated into the landscape. Just as the complexity of a landscape can be captured and revealed by the camera, the local people in front of the camera also reveal their strength and their vulnerability to the viewer. There is a delicacy, power and even brutality to the extreme environment and an equal resilience to the people who inhabit that place. One cannot help but come away with a humbling sense of the toughness of daily life today as well as an appreciation of the deep traditions and the complex interconnectedness of man and nature that are falling out of balance. The future preservation of the sacred landscape and the sustainability of the people who inhabit it demands reclaiming that delicate balance.

Our Kailash yatra began in Nepalganj. My first impressions of Nepalganj go back to the mid-monsoons of 1977, when I spent three days and nights sleeping above the mud on a cot in a Muslim tea shop at the airport. It was the only place to await the event of clear weather and sun to dry out the muddy airfield and thus the chance to make the flight to Simikot between the monsoon showers. There are now formal terminal buildings with arrival and departure halls and an extensive, large, paved runway that can accommodate medium-sized aircraft from Kathmandu. Nepalganj is now the largest city along the western Nepal Tarai, with a quickly growing number of hotels and guesthouses for Indian pilgrims awaiting their flights from the Gangetic plains on the Nepal-India border over the Himalayas to Simikot. One example is the Siddhartha Hotel, large, impressive and expanding quickly with new construction. The swimming pool, lunch-buffet table and accommodation for scores of Indian tourists on pilgrimage hint of the bright future for tourist revenue in Nepalganj.

I last flew in and out of Simikot, the most remote airfield of north west Nepal, in 2010. Six years later, the runway is now paved, and a shiny new Chinese pickup truck with a snowplough is parked on the side of the runway close to where helicopters shuttle Indian pilgrims and others between Simikot and Hilsa on the border of Nepal and the TAR. Ironically, the snowplough truck arrived in Simikot in pieces, airlifted by helicopter as well. At the Sun Valley Resort and the Manasarovar Resort there is now reliable electricity and phone coverage, Wi-Fi and a flat-screen TV, which even back in 2010 had drawn large audiences to the nightly World Cup coverage.

In the 1970s Simikot consisted of two traditional Humli Dalit and Chettri villages with a scattering of modest stone-and-timber government buildings housing the quarters and offices of the district government officers and workers. At that time in the remote Karnali district centre towns of Jumla Bazaar, Gumghadi and Simikot, there were no phones, and electrical power for telegraph communication was generated by bicycle. While an assistant vigorously pedalled the stationary bicycle to keep the

electrical juice going, the operator would tap out the telegraph signal. Now Simikot is a large bazaar with an extensive variety of consumer products available, including smartphones, electric cooking appliances and TVs. The bazaar's architecture presents clean rectilinear and diagonal lines of crisp cut-stone masonry walls, intricate window and doorframe woodwork, and corrugated blue metal and plastic roofs.

A rice storage facility sits in the lower bazaar below the airfield, a reminder and testament to the fact that north west Nepal continues to be a serious food-deficit area. In monsoon season, when the rain-soaked slopes are green with foliage, grass and moss, and some of the world's highest-altitude rice is growing along the banks of the Humla Karnali River at Dandaphaya and Choganphaya, it is hard to understand that the agricultural season is fairly brief in north west Nepal and that the region has historically faced and continues to face severe food shortages. Due to climate change, the increasing unpredictability of rainfall, the outmigration of young people who would otherwise be tilling, weeding and harvesting crops on the land, and the diminishment of the livestock whose manure replenishes the fertility of the land, the uncertainty of food sustainability in north west Nepal has reached a critical point.

The foot trails up the Humla Karnali Valley, the Limi high-altitude pasture areas and the trails along and high above the Limi River are much improved in comparison to decades ago. What were at times rudimentary and dangerous trails are now vastly improved with stone reinforcements and wider walkways. All the villages now have newer and much-larger buildings. Dhinga, Kermi, Yalbang and other villages overall have more solid architectural structures—most have small solar panels for indoor lighting and small appliances. Several villages have mini hydroelectric facilities as well, providing enough power for watching TV. Kermi is a perfect blend of old and new: the original architectural style of the village is not compromised aesthetically by the addition of electricity, public cement water-taps, cement drainage canals along the pathways and numerous vegetable and flower gardens. Yalbang shows evidence of extensive external NGO and private funds, which support the schools and the monastery. There are more blue metal roofs in Yalbang than any other village or town in the area except for Simikot. These roofs, while changing the visual appearance of the original village's architectural style, are excellent protection against heavy snowfall, which damages rooftops and houses. With outmigration and some houses vacant through the winter months, the gabled metal roofs are good insurance against roof collapse under heavy snowfall.

A day's walk north of Simikot is Choganphaya with its large high school for the region's villages of Dhinga, Hepka and Tangyin, and a water pipeline that supplies the village with adequate drinking water. But sanitation facilities here and in the region

are inadequate. Throughout this remote region of north west Nepal, the lack of functional and utilized latrines takes its toll on the mortality of the youngest and most vulnerable members of the communities. In several communities of Humla, locals speak of dwindling water resources they have experienced in their villages in their lifetimes. Water is crucial for all aspects of agriculture, as well as apple orchard development and medicinal herb cultivation for income generation. Above all, drinking water is absolutely essential for village life.

Along with the arrival of motor roads from the Nepal and TAR border, there has been a major shift in the Limi Valley due to the outmigration of many of the residents of the Til, Halji and Jang villages. While the roads will eventually bring Chinese tourism to the Limi Valley, and already brings plentiful Chinese goods, it is hard to measure the variety of environmental, psychological, social, cultural and economic impacts the road will continue to bring to what has always been one of the most remote regions of Nepal. The Limi Valley is still quite distant from any Nepali governmental or other influence. The police check-post between Jang and Halji does not exert much power or influence over the Limi communities compared to the impact the road is already making in the valley.

In Taklakot, north of the Nepal border, we met more members of the Limi community than we met while in their villages south of the border in Nepal. Many Limi community members have sold their herds of yaks and dzos and relocated to Taklakot, Kathmandu, Simikot and even New York. The agricultural and pastoral life of a generation ago is disappearing. With the outmigration of students and labourers there is no longer the critical mass of community members to do the chores of animal husbandry, or take care of basic planting, weeding and harvesting of produce and grains from their fields. Those who have sold off their herds of livestock have converted this wealth into trade, shops and businesses in Taklakot, Kathmandu and elsewhere.

Cultural preservation is a major priority for the Limi Valley, especially with the arrival of the motor road. The *gonpas* (Tibetan Buddhist monasteries) of both Jang and Halji are ancient original architectural treasures and demand the very best expertise and consideration for preservation work. The cliff-side Chhyase Namkhadzong caves and meditation cells on the trail between Halji and Hilsa also deserve attention. The caves are delicate and ancient, with beautiful original ancient Kashmiri-style frescoes that are in very poor shape from exposure to the elements and human habitation.

Many of the yak herders along our route in the Limi region were from Hepka, Dhinga and Kermi. While there is solid livestock wealth and cheese production at the high-altitude summer pastures of these Hepka Khola-area villages, these same villages all face

food deficits. On the last day of our journey, walking from the Hepka Khola back to Simikot, we were accompanied on the trail by forty or fifty individuals, each representing a separate family from Dhinga and Hepka on their way to Simikot to receive half a quintal (50 kg) of rice per household to supplement their own household agricultural production shortfall.

The pressures of food insecurity and the search for economic opportunity and livelihood has shifted the demographics of every Humla community. One of Dhinga's wealthy men sold off the entire family herd and opened one of the largest general merchandise shops in Simikot, where he now spends his days selling cigarettes, candy, shoes, notebooks and everything else. One of his sons is a successful businessman in Kathmandu; his other son travels internationally and runs a small NGO in Simikot to help the hearing-impaired of Humla. My old friend Sonam Gyalgen was a field commander throughout west Nepal for ten years in the Maoist insurgency. He is now settled into his role as a spiritual and civic community leader back in Dhinga, where he has kept the water system in good order, brought hydroelectrics to the village and is working on a community greenhouse. In Taklakot, we met his nineteen-year-old granddaughter, Pema Lama, who speaks fluent English, studies in Kathmandu, has never walked on a single footpath in Humla and has never visited Dhinga village, her ancestors' home. She is an individual who personifies some of the changes one finds in Humla.

The roadhead bazaar of Tumkot is truly the end of the road and the beginning of the road, depending on whether one is arriving from the north and reaching the end of the motor road, or arriving from the south and just reaching the motor road. While the traditional village of Tumkot has been there for many generations, the new market town of tents and corrugated zinc-sheet shelters did not exist back in 2010, when I walked through northern Humla. At that time, Pani Palbang was a busy place for shepherds and traders with their herds of saddlebag-laden sheep, goats, yaks, dzos, horses, donkeys or mules to spend the night on their way north to Hilsa or Taklakot. Pani Palbang is now abandoned; its once-busy tea shops and local overnight stops now fallen into disrepair and roofs collapsed by past winters' snows. There are other locations and villages that were once important places on the traditional foot trade routes. As the road pushes south, deeper into Humla on the way to Simikot, Tumkot's bazaar will eventually be abandoned or at least transformed as the beginning and end of the road shifts further south to Yalbang, Salli, Kermi, Lekh Dhinga and on to Simikot.

Before the advent of the motor roads, everything in Humla was measured by the length of a day's walk, and by rest stops for those carrying heavy loads. The road was a footpath rarely wide enough in areas for a couple of people to walk side by side on. Then, and now, the natural landscape of the original path was always within arm's reach and the trail's impact on the landscape

minimal. Barry Bishop described Nepal's north west Karnali region fifty years ago as a place where distances travelled on foot were described by how many stops for a pipe of tobacco a journey would take. Motor roads are quickly and irreversibly shifting that sensibility away from the traditional intimacy with the landscape.

The roads change the landscape aesthetically with the wide cuts across the mountains and along the steep river valleys; they shift and alter the watershed resources, create landslides and drastically change the patterns of human and livestock migration and travel. As the road goes south it cuts through the high alpine pastures of Lekh Dhinga, then switchbacks down and deep into the Hepka Khola below Aulo Dhinga and finally climbs and winds its way to Simikot. On the Humla Karnali above and north of Salli there is a remarkably beautiful, open, green *chaur* (a large, open space, like a meadow) that Tsewang Lama said used to be a rich place of pastoralist commerce between communities. The Tsong Tsa Valley, just south of the Nyalu La pass, and Lekh Dhinga were places where communities traditionally gathered to barter goods and have rich social and cultural exchanges at the end of the monsoon season before the winter snows arrived. These places are all to become just points along the new motor road. The transportation of goods and people will be greatly facilitated, but numerous impacts—both foreseeable and unforeseen—will change the landscape and the lives of all who inhabit it. Humla must be considered in relation to Kailash.

Hilsa is a border town with bright prospects, especially with the 2016 completion of the vehicle bridge over the Humla Karnali River connecting TAR and Nepal. While there is a new street of mostly Limi tea shopsbusinesses, homes and vehicles parallel to the river and the original main street, most of Hilsa feels like work in progress. The motor road to Tumkot is a major change and it is remarkable to ride a truck for three to four hours and cover what used to take two days of strenuous walking. The vehicle bridge now provides the motor road linkage between Nepal and China. The foot suspension bridge that has been the vital link between the two countries for decades will fall into disuse and the women who porter all the loads from one side of the bridge to the other will find other livelihoods.

It is striking to see the disparity of resources on either side of the border. The inequity and immense imbalance of political, economic, social power and resources is staggering, and perhaps alarming, when one considers the remoteness of Nepal's Humla district from the Central government in Kathmandu and the close proximity of the Chinese city of Taklakot to Nepal's Humla district.

After walking several days up from Simikot to Hilsa, the new city of Taklakot is all the more impressive in its size and modernity. What a few decades ago was a seasonal meeting place under yak-hair or muslin-fabric tents of trans-Himalayan and Tibetan

traders has now become the largest city of western TAR. The Nepali section of the city is a grid of several intersecting, unpaved, dusty streets with single-storey clay-brick buildings, which function as shops, restaurants and small enterprises or homes for the seasonally visiting Nepalis from the Limi Valley and other parts of Humla. Most of the shops sell *furu*, or maple wood bowls. Larger and taller concrete buildings surround this square area, about a large city block in size. In the next year, the neighbouring school will be expanded and the Nepali section will be relocated to a modern two storey complex, which will have modern facilities for the Nepali shop owners and their community.

Many of the young men one sees in the general Nepali area are unemployed or part-time construction workers from Syara, Simikot, Thehe and other Humla villages. Construction work is seasonal, but pays very well compared to Nepali wages and is a powerful incentive to draw the young men away from their villages where there is neither work nor food. As the strong Chinese economy and expanding urban centres in west TAR draw visiting Nepali workers across the border, it is essential to consider the positive and negative impact this outmigration has on the indigenous communities throughout Humla.

Tirthapuri sits along the swollen waters of the churning, grey Sutlej River. Upon our arrival there we were met with a powerful downpour that transformed the river from grey to thick, heavy, muddy red-brown as its waters scraped away clay with its sheer force. The landscape's ancient monastic dwellings and retreat caves feel very much a part of the landscape, as if self-emanating from the peculiar red-orange rock and white-and-red clay surfaces.

The smell of the sulphur hot springs permeates the air along the steaming stream where pilgrims bend down to dip their hands, sprinkle the hot sacred water over their heads and collect a little to bring home. These waters, like those of Lake Manasarovar, supposedly have healing properties that absolve one of past sins. Like the waters of Manasarovar, the Tirthapuri waters embody the female energy and spirit of Uma, also known as Parvati, the consort of Shiva. The red-rock-and-clay valley of Tirthapuri is also the geological counterpoint to the black-rock mountain male energy of Kailash.

The mani stones, mani walls and chorten echo the same colour configurations of white rock topped by red clay. Atop the mani walls throughout the landscape are numerous yak skulls and horns. An expedition member Tsewang Lama—a fifty-nine-year-old community leader and scholar from Humla—has told us that this is to respect the yaks which work hard, carry loads, and provide milk, yogurt, cheese, meat and wool. Tibetan prayers are carved into the forehead of the skulls, venerating the yaks and helping them on their way to an auspicious reincarnation.

Amidst this visual masterpiece of human-made forms integrated so smoothly into the original landscape, lies a large, flat space, as open as a soccer field, with a newly built, modern cement-and-cinder-block gonpa. Its clean, rectilinear walls are a stark contrast to the organic landscape and ancient natural man-made forms settled deeply into it. In the spacious concrete courtyard in front of the gonpa, a stout, middle-aged monk watched over the workers operating a compressor paint gun with which they methodically sprayed bright yellow paint along the rows of the numerous finial decorations that would soon adorn the numerous large, new concrete chortens just beyond the monastery courtyard.

We venture by bus on a newly constructed, widened pitch road to the brand new Gurugem Gonpa, a construction tour de force with a soaring interior space and woodwork richly painted with red enamel and other bright colours. The upper storey ceiling panels are adorned with mandalas, not hand painted but rather with commercial reprints on paper that are affixed to the ceiling panels. Below on the first floor walls surrounding the main prayer hall, a dozen young men paint bold, large fresco depictions of Tibetan Buddhist deities. We are told that these accomplished young artists are from eastern TAR, where they were well trained. A short walk from the large Gurugem Gonpa compound is a cliff-side hermit's retreat at the end of a steep, narrow rock-cut set of stairs. From the hermit's retreat the view of the valley's landscape unfolds beautifully.

Lake Manasarovar is brilliant, as is the less renowned yet sacred and feared Lake Rakshas Tal. The moods of both of the lakes change depending on sunshine, rain or wind, the time of day or the time of year. The slate-grey sky and the waters of the lake are transformed under the rainy skies into endless warm, welcoming waterscapes mirroring the deep blue sky when the sun shines and the winds are calm. The expansive beauty of the landscape and changing moods of the lakes are hypnotic, entrancing.

In contrast to the beauty of the lakes is the Manasarovar Visitors' Centre, a well engineered and designed structure at Hor that looms large as a striking foil against the simple solitude and wide open western TAR landscape. Inside the stainless steel and glass walls is a large gift shop, complete with wood tables and couches with plenty of upholstery and Tibetan carpets, large photo murals of traditional Tibetan culture and landscape and a clever, large prayer-wheel-like cylinder, that can be turned clockwise or anticlockwise, revealing photographs and extended captions as well. One member of the group joked, 'Where's the espresso bar?' It turned out to be just around the corner from the gift shop, and with excellent Wi-Fi as well. The pilgrim, trekker or tourist, while connecting with friends anywhere in the world by email or phone, sipping coffee or dipping chopsticks into a quart-sized tub of instant noodles, may even momentarily forget the wind, weather and rain of Manasarovar just outside the large glass walls of the visitors' centre.



Below Seralung Gonpa two pilgrims are dwarfed by the vast landscape reflected on the calm surface of Lake Manasarovar.



Darchen

Youth play pool, while buckets of umbrellas and canes for sale stand on display. These items are frequent impulse purchases for pilgrims setting out on their kora journeys.

Many of the facilities at Manasarovar's lakeside are a grim collection of abandoned and semi-inhabited compounds that cover a wide expanse of the shoreline. Out of respect for the sacred landscape it would be good to see these structures more carefully maintained and integrated into the landscape. Trash and other forms of desecration litter the shoreline. Considering that pilgrims are often barefoot as they bathe, it is essential to keep broken glass or other detritus away from what should ideally be a pristine location.

The entry to Darchen, the gateway to the Kailash pilgrims' circuit, wends through another visitors' centre, which has toilet facilities and a very good gift shop. Visitors go through the entrance; their permits, tickets and passports are checked, and then the exit takes them to their bus, which is waiting to take them to their hotel. It is a an efficient way to monitor incoming visitors and guests. Darchen is no longer the one-tent settlement of twenty years ago. Instead it is a swiftly growing Chinese town with a few scattered remnants of earlier Tibetan stone structures and clay-brick buildings. The main streets are wide, clean and busy with traffic. Many Tibetans with motorcycle taxis ferry their passengers through the streets while playing loud festive Tibetan pop, rock and folk tunes from the stereo speakers that almost all motorcycles are equipped with. Darchen, with its Chinese shops and Szechuan restaurants with Wi-Fi, will surely keep expanding as the Kailash region attracts greater numbers of pilgrims and tourists.

The Kailash kora route is an extraordinary place of geological and meteorological diversity that unfolds over the circumambulation. The massive black mountain and its cover of snow is a powerful and striking sight as are the surrounding mountains, valleys and rivers that envelop the sacred mountain. Motor roads encircle the entire kora route except for the steep areas on either side of the Dolma La Pass. Stories from Shekhar Pathak, Tsewang Lama and other friends who made the Kailash kora two decades ago—when there was no habitation in Darchen other than a tent, and no settlements at all elsewhere on the kora except for seasonal tents—are all a testament to the human impact on the kora route in two brief decades. Along the kora route there are numerous blue 208-litre drums for garbage disposal, which is a good way of keeping the garbage consolidated and free from being blown everywhere. The Kailash kora is replete with the powerful presence of nature. Yet time in the tea-shop tents that dot the entire circuit provide respite from the bright, burning sun, wind, rain or snow, depending on the momentary mood of nature. The trail around Kailash is at times crowded with pilgrims, trekkers and locals, especially the early morning climb up to Dolma La Pass. There is a very festive atmosphere in the mixed company of Hindu pilgrims on horseback with their horsemen, Tibetan families of multiple generations, gregarious trekking groups and the sound of voices singing and the rhythmic cadence of the horse and yak bells ringing with each step. Long stretches of silent solitary walking also unfold on the kora, when one can admire the constantly changing sacred landscape as one moves through it.

Diraphuk is intriguing in its mix of old and new, indigenous and foreign. Along with the pilgrims on foot approaching in the last light at dusk, there are also jubilant trekkers from China and elsewhere in the world, grazing horses that will carry Indian pilgrims over the Dolma La Pass, and also jeeps, trucks, luxury cars and motorcycles ferrying people, products and supplies in and out of Diraphuk. This is also the starting point for the walk up to the glacier on the north face of Kailash, where one can touch the glacier and drink the sacred waters from the feet of Shiva. Diraphuk is a blend of the sacred and the profane. Plastic tarps cover large piles of garbage. The public toilet, while it has a bit of the traditional Tibetan architectural motifs of white wall and red brick, is placed prominently along the path and is very poorly maintained. As the numbers of pilgrims, trekkers and tourists increase, there will be a need for more accommodations and services. One wonders how big Diraphuk will become in two decades and how well the place will manage to balance the sacred landscape with sustainable livelihoods.

Across the river at Diraphuk, the monastery is undergoing a major renovation. There are large bundles of new Tibetan prayer books to be placed on the empty shelves of the monastery library. Will there also be large numbers of monks to read the books and participate in the monastic life of the large, new structure? For now, the tent dorms, dining hall and large greenhouse below the monastic building are for the construction workers and painters of the new monastery. All the monasteries along the Kailash kora route, as well as the Bonpo monastery near Tirthapuri and others, are in a state of rapid transformation, with new frescoes being painted on the concrete walls and upgraded, new pitch highways under construction. It is wonderful to see the growth and additions to monastic structures, yet there are very few monks, lamas or practitioners in evidence. Perhaps this recreation of the monasteries gives visitors to the entire area a visual backdrop and reminder of the deeper and broader Tibetan culture of this sacred landscape as it existed generations ago. Ideally, the monasteries could become a vital aspect of cultural resurgence.

We approach Dolma La Pass on the wide motor road path in the early morning under heavy, dark clouds. Around us is a parade of stylish young teenage Tibetans and Tibetan families in the dress of their indigenous region of Ngari, located in the far west of TAR. Due to current restrictions on travel for Tibetans, there are no longer large numbers of Tibetans coming from further and more diverse regions of TAR as there were years before. In equal number to the Tibetan pilgrims are the Chinese trekkers, sometimes with brilliant, new Day-Glo mountain gear, as well as numerous Indian pilgrims on horseback, always with a Tibetan guide leading the horse and a young Tibetan woman at the rear giving a bit of physical encouragement to the horse to keep moving up the trail.

As the trail narrows and turns into switchbacks through steep boulder-fields, the sounds of the horse hooves, load-bearing yaks with their bells, mantras of *Om Namah Shivaya* and the songs of young and old Tibetans fill the space with a lively warmth: soothing sounds that comfort one, and encourage a personal space of meditative introspection and distraction from the physical exertion of the climb.



Tarboche

'Colours are the living language of light, the hallmark of conscious reality. The metaphysical significance of colours as exponents and symbols of reality is emphasized in the *Bardo Thodol* (*The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, as it is commonly known), where transcendental reality is indicated by the experience of various forms of light, represented by brilliant, pure colours...' <sup>1</sup>

While the sun tries to peek through the mist that rose out of the valley and plays hide-and-seek with the peaks around us, we walk through a thin, very wet, blanket of snow. The fresh snowfall covers the rocky slopes and creates intricate spiderweb traceries with the shallow, bright, white snow clinging to the thin ropes and prayer flags that cover the Dolma La. We never have a glimpse of Kailash on the climb that day, but we feel no sense of regret or absence as we walk through the sacred landscape.

There is also a powerful, hypnotic quality to the devotion of the solitary Bonpo pilgrims, moving quickly, walking counterclockwise, against the flow of all the other pilgrims. Some avoid the muddy, snowy main path and instead take a direct route up snow-covered boulder fields, not just walking, stepping, climbing or hiking on their difficult route of choice, but executing full-body prostrations on the irregular and precarious mountainside. This is a ritual of several prostrations, ten or twelve, before stepping a few paces forward in their anticlockwise Bonpo circumambulation. This ritual can take several days to several weeks depending on the intricacies and regimen the pilgrim follows. Usually it also requires a support team to prepare or deliver food and pitch a tent at midpoints along the several days of the journey.

At Zutrol Phuk, where we spend our night after the Dolma La, and before our return to Darchen, I see a very fast-moving Bonpo pilgrim approaching. He goes straight to a tea shop where, over the next forty minutes, he drinks numerous cups of tea from the small bowl he carries in a compact canvas bag slung across his chest, and from which he produces his bag of *tsampa*, roasted-barley flour. With machine-like precision, but with a deep, engaging warmth, he speaks with everyone in the comfort and very dim light of the tea shop. As soon as his *tsampa* and tea are finished, he packs up his small canvas bag and adjusts his shoulder sling in which he rests the bottom stub of his large prayer-wheel. With graciousness and humility, he bids farewell to all in the tea shop, steps back into the bright sunlight, revs up his prayer wheel in a Bonpo counterclockwise spin and sets foot, walking efficiently up the mountain at a jogger's pace. The complete anticlockwise circumambulation of Kailash is his daily ritual and practice. In just over three years he has completed over 800 circumambulations of the sacred mountain, an admirable and near-superhuman feat.

For most pilgrims a single journey to Kailash is the dream of a lifetime. We can then revisit Kailash daily and over the years through our memories, photographs, journals and shared stories. May future generations of trekkers, tourists, scholars and pilgrims have this treasured experience of walking the sacred landscape. May the Kailash communities on both sides of the border find ways to sustain their livelihoods in this remarkable transboundary region.

Kevin Bubriski  
28 January 2018





## CHAPTER ONE

# Simikot and Nyin Valley

CHINA

NEPAL

# HUMLA



**H**umla is a large Himalayan district in western Nepal that borders the Tibet Autonomous Region of China (TAR) to the north. The neighbouring Pulan County of TAR is where Mount Kailash and Lake Manasarovar are situated. The lower, southern parts of Humla are primarily inhabited by Khas, Dalit, and Byansi communities—all of whom in different ways identify with Hinduism and the caste system. The higher, northern reaches of Humla are home to several Tibetan Buddhist and Tibetan-speaking animist communities. For centuries, these Humli communities of the Karnali Valley and its northern tributary valleys have been important cultural and economic mediators between the midhill communities of western Nepal and the nomadic communities of western TAR. Traditionally, the Hindu Humli communities were involved in subsistence agriculture, localized pastoralism, and the trade of Tibetan merchandise (such as salt, borax, and wool) with midhill communities from Accham, Doti, Bajhang, and Bajura. The Buddhist Humli communities were more directly involved in the trade with Tibetans at various seasonal trade marts located both within Humla and in western TAR. The Buddhist Humili communities also conducted migratory pastoralism, which often involved distant Tibetan rangelands to the north of Humla<sup>1</sup>. For countless generations these Hindi and Tibetan-speaking Humli peoples, including their shamans, had been going on pilgrimage to Lake Manasarovar and Mount Kailash. Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in the Humla Karnali, Limi, and Nyin Valleys of Humla had sister monasteries in the neighbouring Tibetan highlands at places such as Khojarnath, Taklakot, and Gyangdrak.

The old economy of Humla was fundamentally undermined by the geopolitical and political-economic transformations initiated by the Chinese state on the Tibetan Plateau in the 1960s, the introduction of cheap iodized salt from India in Nepal during the 1970s, and the new community forestry regimes instated by the Government of Nepal in the 1980s. Transborder trade with Taklakot was allowed to resume for Humli communities at Taklakot in the 1970s. But the old barter trade was replaced by a more controlled and monetized trade, with an increasingly heavy influx of Chinese manufactured goods. Under an agreement between the Chinese and Nepali governments, transborder pastoral migrations by Humli herders in the TAR were gradually phased out, ending in the early 1990s. These forces, among others, were pivotal in engendering a downward spiral from a relatively stable borderland economy premised upon mobility to increasingly widespread abject poverty and brutal living conditions, including chronic food insecurity<sup>2</sup>. In 2011, Humla's Human Development Index (HDI) ranking was 71 among all 75 districts of Nepal, with Nepal itself placed at a globally low HDI index rank of 145<sup>3</sup>. Besides, the long-standing traditions of the Humli peoples' pilgrimage to Mount Kailash and Lake Manasarovar, including the ancient tradition of shamanic pilgrimage, have been severely restricted in recent years due to geopolitical tensions on the Tibetan Plateau.

Humla was opened to tourism by the Government of Nepal in the early 1990s. Stan Armington and Sushil Upadhyay's slim volume *Humla to Mt Kailas* (1993)<sup>4</sup> is the first tourist account of the pilgrimage to Mount Kailash and Lake Manasarovar in TAR via the Humla Karnali and Limi Valley routes in Humla. The remoteness of Humla is amplified by the district's continued lack of connectivity

to the rest of Nepal by road. This has inadvertently preserved several old patterns of community life, folk arts, and architecture, as well as the continued use of old pack and foot trails through some fantastical Himalayan and trans-Himalayan landscapes to this day. However, even two decades later, Humla had a rather low visibility on Nepal's tourism map. The majority of tourists passing through Humla would be pilgrims or trekkers bound for Kailash-Manasarovar via Humla—a cheaper and more readily available alternative to the Kathmandu-China overland route or the state-controlled Almora-Lipu Lekh-China route. On average, the numbers of such visitors through Humla would hover around 1,000 per year. Among these travellers was the famous British travel writer Colin Thubron, who recounted his trek to Mt Kailash through the Humla Karnali route in his haunting travelogue *To a Mountain in Tibet* (2011)<sup>5</sup>. However, Humla's marginality, at least on the Kailash pilgrimage map, was unexpectedly altered in the aftermath of the 2015 Gorkha earthquake. Besides causing a great loss of life and property in various parts of Nepal, the earthquake and its numerous aftershocks badly damaged the popular Tatopani-Zangmo overland route to Mount Kailash via central Nepal. This brought the Humla route for the Kailash pilgrimage to the attention of tour operators in India, Nepal, and TAR, who annually arrange large pilgrim groups headed to Mount Kailash and Lake Manasarovar. Thus, in 2016, more than 6,000 South Asian pilgrims entered Pulan County via Humla.

This journey to Mount Kailash and Lake Manasarovar via Humla begins at Simikot, the district headquarters of Humla. The usual way to arrive at Simikot these days is via two flights. The first leg departs Kathmandu and arrives in Nepalganj, a small frontier town in the western Terai. The second flight departs Nepalganj the next morning on a small aircraft, typically an old Twin-Otter or a single-propeller plane. Over the course of the 50-minute flight to Simikot, the view of the landscape below transitions from the flatlands of the Terai to the sparsely populated midhill ranges, and then to the 'true' Himalayan country which embraces Simikot. The dull grey concrete terraces of multi-coloured houses of the Terai and the midhills give way to densely clustered settlements of baked mud rooftops and stone and timber houses. The thin meandering ribbons of metalled and dirt roads on the low midhills rapidly disappear into the steep verdant ranges bordering Humla to the south. Narrow foot trails criss-cross the chartreuse grasslands of these ranges that seem to play hide and seek with deep forests of oak and conifer. Simikot is first visible just moments before landing, perched on a gently sloping grassland high above the Humla Karnali River and surrounded by high mountains on all sides.

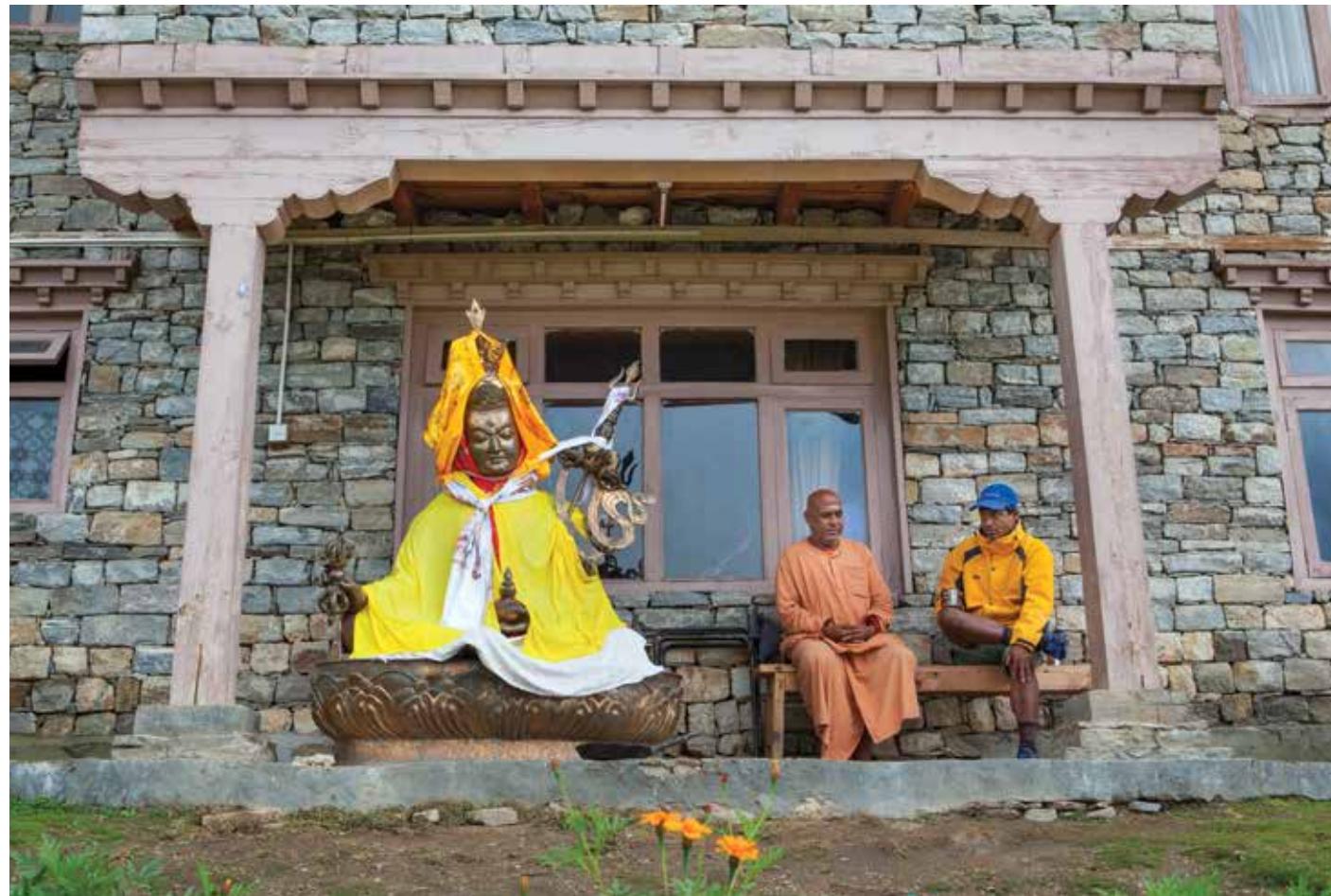
The first segment of our 'Kailash yatra', a journey to Mount Kailash, takes us through Simikot and the adjoining Nyin Valley to its east. Simikot has a bustling little bazaar and numerous government and NGO offices. Simikot also has a 550 metre long airstrip where small aircraft land and take off daily, carrying people, goods, and essential supplies—making it in many ways a lifeline for Humla. Simikot is a melting pot of Humla's Buddhist and Hindu communities, who otherwise continue to dwell largely in ethnically segregated settlements across Humla. Simikot is also where Indian pilgrims bound for Kailash-Manasarovar arrive

by plane from Nepalgunj, stay for a few hours or overnight, and then take a helicopter to Hilsa, a Humli settlement on the border with TAR. Adjoining Simikot, the Nyin Valley hosts Tibetan Buddhist Lama communities in its upper reaches, and Bahun, Thakuri, Chettri, and Dalit villages in its lower reaches. These communities share complex relationships of hierarchy and reciprocity, co-existence and contestations. But one thing that they all share is an affinity towards the sanctity of Mount Kailash and Lake Manasarovar— even if this sanctity manifests in different ways.

Perched at 3000 metres above sea level, Simikot is approachable either by small aircraft that fly from Surkhet and Nepalganj, or by a six-day walk from the nearest roadhead in Mugu district. The motor road from Nepalganj to Gumgadhi in Mugu makes for a memorable, beautiful and extremely precarious two-day-long drive. In early 2017, a dirt road was completed between Simikot and Hilsa.







An Indian pilgrim shares a moment with his Nepali guide at a hotel in Simikot. They sit next to a large copper statue of Padmasambhava, credited with bringing Buddhism to the Tibetan plateau and neighbouring southern countries in the 8th century AD. The statue, crafted in Kathmandu, had to be flown to Simikot in pieces and then reconstructed.



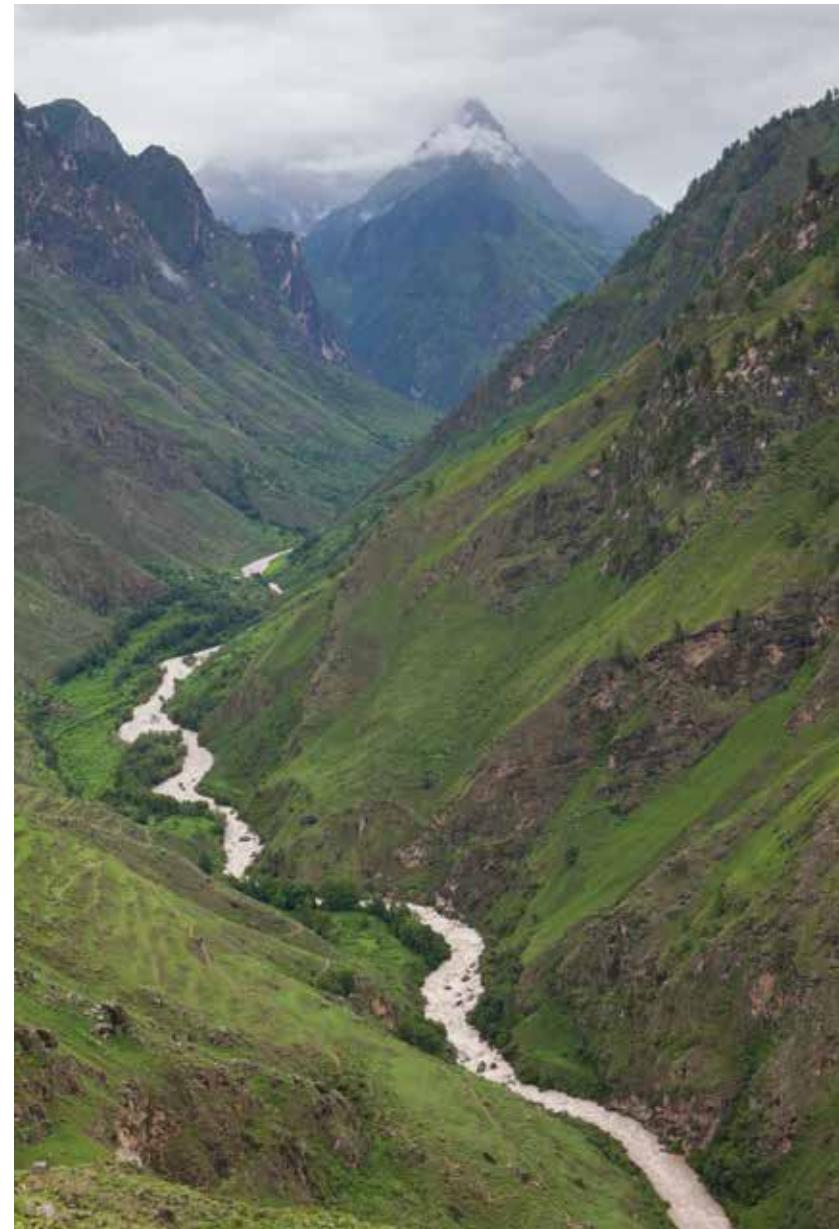
A Khas Hindu man sits atop his traditional home in the old upper village of Simikot.





Thehe is one of the largest villages of Nyin Valley, a densely built cluster of over 500 households connected by shared flat roofs and porches and ladders hewn from pine-tree trunks. Chetris form the majority of the population along with a small community of Dalits. Such densely clustered mud-and-stone houses are typical of Humli settlements.

*'There is no place in the modern world for journeys whose length is measured in pipefuls of tobacco [as was traditionally done in the Karnali region]. Time does become money and, unfortunately, a lack of money can cause a lack of time. But time had been a buffer and a friend here in Karnali Zone—life had been difficult but tolerable as long as the richness of options for trade and movement could be substituted for the poverty of immediate resources. Now the options are rapidly disappearing, and the cultural ecological subsistence system may be locked on to an ever-increasing, downward spiral of degradation.'*<sup>6</sup>



The Dozam River flows brown as the monsoon rains wash topsoil from the steep slopes of the Nyin Valley.

The indentations at the head of a newly carved wooden ladder at Thehe Village delineate the face of a household's protector spirit.





A young girl atop a ladder at Thehe Village is on her way down to the house's lower levels and the shared porches of her neighbours' houses as well.



A young Chettri woman carrying her infant and toddler gathers with the other women of Thehe Village before heading out to weed the fields.

'Women . . . are seldom idle from before dawn until after dark throughout the year. Each day they must process food, prepare and cook meals, milk and churn and carry water. They also must tend to their infants and young children until the latter are old enough to take over the babysitting role with younger siblings and aid their elders generally. In addition . . . they transport manure from home goth to the fields, collect firewood, fodder, pine needles and leaves from often-distant forests and meadowlands and carry them to the homestead. In Pahadi regions, women do the transplanting of paddy. During the growing seasons they manage the kitchen garden and spend long hours hoeing and weeding major field crops.'<sup>7</sup>

A man at Thehe Village with his kodalo (hoe) and rain gear sets out to weed fields on a monsoon morning.

*'Most of the men's time is spent in tasks that lie outside home maintenance and industry. They plow, harrow, and irrigate the fields, and when necessary build and maintain terraces . . . Beyond the homestead and extended arable land, men manage livestock in the grazing grounds, collect herbs in the highlands, fish, engage in intraregional and long-range trade, and work as porters and migrant laborers abroad. Through all their endeavors, men represent the family vis-à-vis the community and the world beyond. Thus free from most time-consuming tasks that must be undertaken each day of the year by women, men generally have a strikingly greater amount of spare time for relaxation, talking, smoking, and sitting.'*<sup>8</sup>







Shamans in western Nepal deliver verdicts on domestic and communal issues and conflicts. Common-law systems require written evidence, something that people who follow oral traditions and have widespread illiteracy cannot supply. In his book *Kailash Mandala*, Tsewang Lama comments that in the near absence of state or private infrastructure to deal with natural disasters, health issues and good governance, the shamans of Humla continue to enjoy an important role in the Karnali region. Shamans are found among all communities of Humla<sup>9</sup>. However, the presence of the monastic institution has significantly diminished the importance of shamans in Humla's Buddhist communities.



Seen in these photos are two shamans from Humla's Khas Hindu community. These shamans never cut their hair, which is considered a vessel of their mystical powers. They often braid their long locks of hair with coils of silver. A ritual bath in Lake Manasarovar is an important step for shamans to obtain their magical powers.

A Chettri woman of Dandapuri Village smiles quietly while on break from her household chores, which begin in the darkness before dawn and end only late in the evening. Along with raising the children, cooking the family's meals, gathering firewood and carrying water from the communal water-tap, the women must put in long hours in the fields as well.





On his wedding day in Thehe Village a young Dalit man is festooned with a turban, red-and-green ribbons and a generously large red tika blessing on his forehead.



A break in the heavy rain reveals the deep valley of the Dozam River, which flows from the north-east below the Nyin Valley villages and forms one of the several historic trade routes through Humla to western TAR.



A Kangnyi Chorten gate marks the entrance to the Nyin Valley village of Barangsia. Kangnyi is Tibetan for 'two legs', and therefore 'Kangnyi chorten' implies a two-legged chorten.

'Every Nyinba village has a Kangnyi. On the ceiling of this gate, which also serves as the main entrance to the village, the mandala of Amitayu is painted, and the side wall have coloured figures of different Buddhist protector deities and local village gods. It is believed that those who walk under the mandala are automatically purified of their sins and liberated from spiritual obstacles . . . The location of the Kangnyi in the south-western part of the village is due to the fact that in Buddhism the south-western direction is considered untamed and believed to be where danger and recurring obstacles can come from . . . So, the Kangnyi is a spiritual wall within which the villagers hope to achieve peace, harmony and prosperity. During the Mani festival, Amitayu is worshipped in the Kangnyi, the two-footed Buddhist entrance gate erected at the south-west end of every village.'<sup>10</sup>



Morning mist rises out of the Dozam River Valley after a heavy monsoon shower the night before at Limatang Village in the Nyin Valley.



Forbidding forceful waters rush past the last river crossing on the journey up to Raling Gonpa, in the Nyin Valley.

*'The journey had a dreamlike quality: rain, fog, and clouds transformed the virgin forest, the rocks and mountains, gorges and precipices into a world of uncannily changing, fantastic forms, which appeared and dissolved with such suddenness that one began to doubt their reality as well as one's own.'*<sup>11</sup>



Rocks and prayer flags are ritually placed as pious offerings by the faithful near Raling Gonpa. This striated, large, white rock appears as a miniature representation of Kailash.

*'The cairns of piled stones that mark the high passes are spiked with poles where prayer flags fly. Who hung them in these lonely defiles we cannot tell. As the wind funnels through the passes, their inscriptions stream in faded tatters. With every flutter, it is believed, the wind disperses their prayer into the world, to ease the suffering of all sentient beings. And they will propitiate whatever capricious mountain god controls the pass.'*<sup>12</sup>





Prayer flags adorn a view of the Nyin Valley  
on a sunny day. 'Nyin' means 'sun' in Tibetan.



At 4000 metres above sea level, Raling Gonpa is a Nyingampa Buddhist temple located at the base of the holy Shelmo Kang mountain in the Nyin Valley. While historic evidence dates this shrine to the 12th century AD, it has subsequently been renovated several times. The Raling Gonpa is an important centre of pilgrimage for both the Buddhist Lama and the Khas Hindu communities of Humla. On the full moon spring day of Saga Dawa, both the Buddhist and Hindu communities of the region converge here for worship and festivities that continue through the night around large fires.



## CHAPTER TWO

# Humla Karnali Valley: Simikot to Salli Khola



Children at Chauganphaya Village along the Humla Karnali River are surrounded by the rich, verdant plant life of the mid-monsoons. Folklore describes how fish from the lower Himalayas swam upstream to this location and brought with them the possibility of rice cultivation. The legend bears truth—some of the world's highest-altitude rice is grown at this site.

**T**wo trails in Humla are widely used by locals and trekkers alike for traveling from Simikot to the Sino-Nepal border at Hilsa. The first trail follows a rather straight, west-northwest course along the Humla Karnali River, crossing into view of the Tibetan Plateau at the 4,500-metre-high Nara Lagna Pass. Along this trail, a hazardous but motorable dirt road has been recently constructed from Hilsa to Simikot. In the next few years, it is expected to connect Simikot to Taklakot with a tarmacked surface. The second trail follows a more circuitous path, branching off north along the confluence of the Karnali and Salli Khola Rivers, a few kilometres ahead of Kermi. After a gradual climb up the 4,960-metre-high Nyalu La Pass, it descends into the luxurious high altitude pastures of the Talung Valley. The valley merges at its lower end in the Limi Valley. The Limi River joins forces with the Karnali River near the Chhyase Namkhadzong caves, and then for a few kilometres follows a path parallel to the first trail in the Humla Karnali Valley. A steep descent and a footbridge across the Humla Karnali lead to Hilsa. For the purpose of exploring the socioecological landscapes between Simikot and Hilsa, our expedition splits into two teams, and the team with the two of us decides to trek to Hilsa along the Salli Khola-Talung-Limi route.

The Simikot-Salli Khola walk is the first westward segment of the journey to Kailash. For the first two days of this leg of the journey, we walk through caste Hindu and Dalit villages. Near Kermi, we enter the realm of the Tibetan Buddhist communities, a transition that happens simultaneously on the other side of the Humla Karnali Valley as well. Beyond villages and fields, the route winds through forests of chir pine in the lower reaches and blue pine, fir, and spruce, mixed with oak-fir forest, further up.

Chhyachara waterfall near Kermi Village. Chhya means 'cliff' in Tibetan, while *chara* translates to 'waterfall' in Nepali. Several villages in Humla have two names, one Tibetan and one Nepali. And some places, like this waterfall, show an intermingling of the two languages. This section of the Humla Karnali Valley presents engineers and contractors with one of the biggest challenges to connecting Hilsa and Simikot by road.





Our expedition leader, Ashok Gurung, takes a photo while standing under a 'half tunnel' on a sheer mountainside sloping into the swollen monsoonal waters of the Humla Karnali River. The Dutch government funded the project to create this half tunnel two decades ago in an effort to improve pack-mule trails in Humla.



High school students return from a volleyball competition  
at Yalbang, a two-day walk up the Humla Karnali River  
from their homes in Dandaphaya Village.





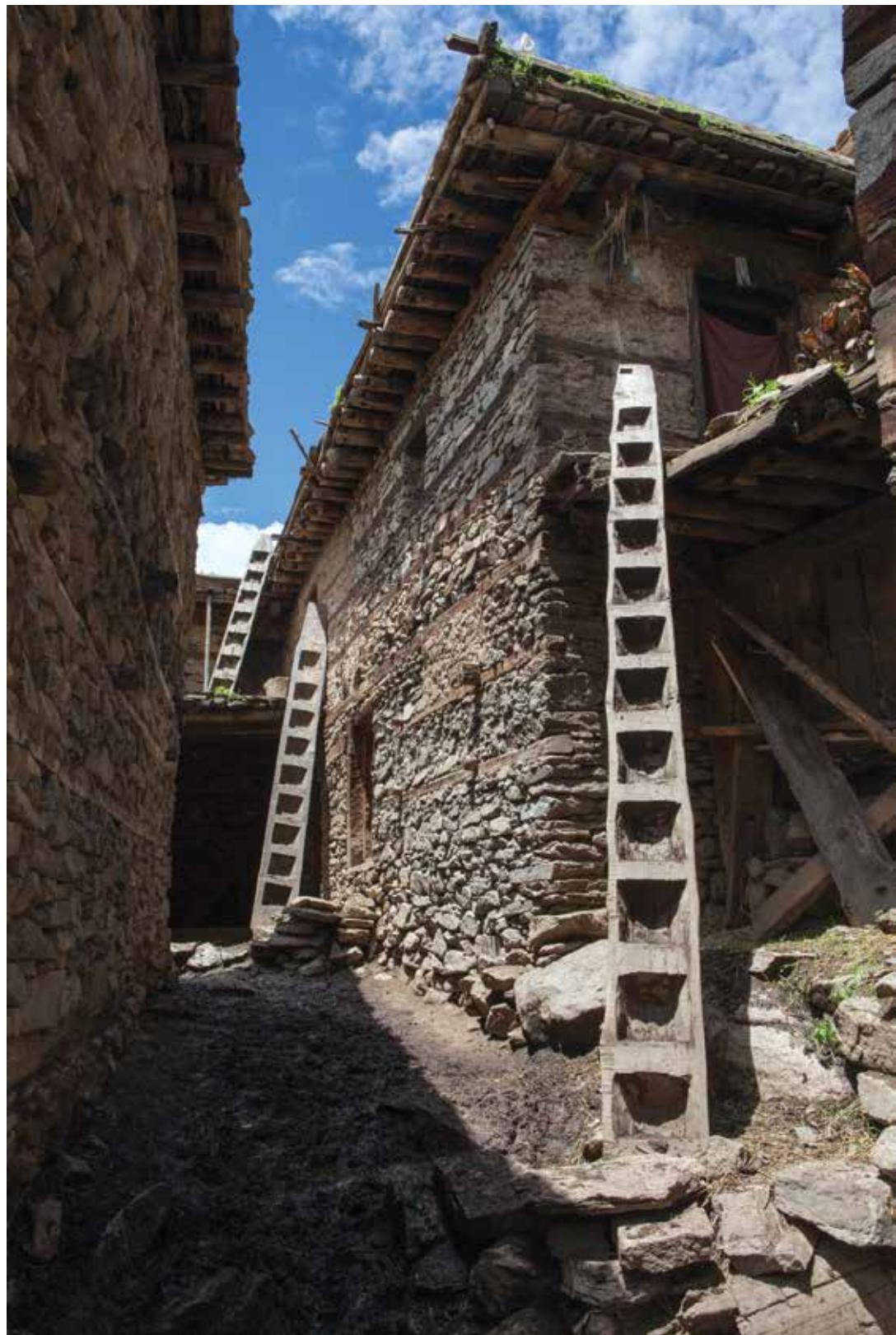
A worker from the south of Humla prepares wire mesh for gabion walls to support the Hilsa-Simikot road near Kermi.



Monsoon green foliage covers the Humla Karnali Valley looking north toward Choganphaya Village below. For centuries, the valley has been a busy route for traders, holy men and pilgrims moving between the mid-hills of western Nepal and the holy sites and trade markets of western TAR.

*'Mountains have a special power to evoke the sacred as the unknown. Their deep valleys and high peaks conceal what lies hidden within and beyond them, luring us to venture ever deeper into a realm of enticing mystery. Mountains seem to beckon to us, holding out the promise of something on the ineffable edge of awareness.'*<sup>1</sup>

Yangar Village features spectacular house-ladders that are typical throughout Humla.





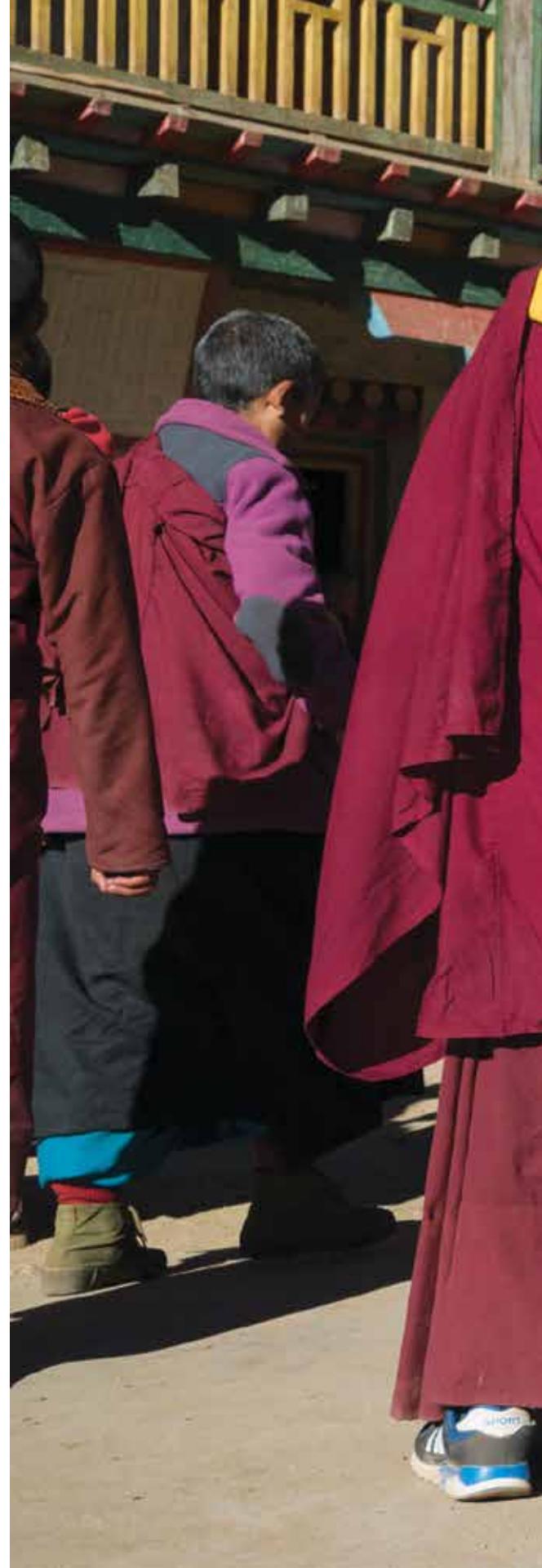
Yangar

'From a distance the village [Yangar] might be built of card houses. They mount on one another's shoulders precipitously above the river, until they merge with living rock, flat-roofed and raised in horizontal courses of timber and stones, their flagpoles streaming prayers into the wind. Women are washing clothes where a brook splashes down, and turn their oval faces to us, smiling. We might already be in Tibet. We cramp the labyrinthine lanes under blank walls and beetling eaves. Serried beam-ends poke out like tiers of cannon. The houses loom in an interlocking maze of shifting levels and walkways. The alleys are twilit ravines. All around us long ladders climb and descend to aerial yards and terraces, and the voices of invisible people sound from the sky.'<sup>2</sup>



In the courtyard of Yalbang Gonpa, Humla's largest Buddhist monastery, a group of laymen from Humla's Tibetan Buddhist villages are on a break from their worship.

During a large worship, nuns from all of the Tibetan Buddhist villages of Humla gather at Yalbang Gonpa.







Many of the young monks of Yalbang Gonpa come from distant villages across Humla, Mugu and Bajura districts of north western Nepal. Many families from the remote villages of the Karnali Zone consider themselves fortunate if their child finds a seat in the well-funded school at Yalbang, or a place as a monk at Yalbang Gonpa.





## CHAPTER THREE

# Salli Khola to Limi Valley



Swathed in monsoon clouds, the rocky pinnacles of Zhang Jungma tower above luscious vegetation of rhododendron forests and alpine meadows. A stretch of the Salli Khola-Lapcha La dirt road scars the foregrounded landscape.

**O**ur team leaves the Simikot Hilsa trail at Salli Khola, taking the longer, circuitous route to Hilsa via the Nyalu La Pass and the Limi Valley. This section is richly endowed with the bounties of nature—deep, dark forests of western Himalayan subalpine conifer and oak, sprawling alpine shrubs and meadows and countless milky-white waterfalls and streams that feed into the Humla Karnali system. However, this section is bereft of any permanent settlement, save two small shops and a lodge in Salli Khola. The abundant alpine grasslands here have been the customary grazing grounds for communities from the Kermi, Hepka and Nyin valleys for several generations. Prior to the 1950s, this section of our journey was part of an important trade route that connected various Humli communities to Tibetan communities via the Lapcha La Pass. The route went from Salli Khola to the Tsong Tsa Valley, up across the Nyalu La Pass into the Talung Valley, and bypassing the Limi Valley near Takche, up to the Lapcha La Pass, and then into the TAR. There were several designated trading spots along this route on the Humla side, where nomads and traders from TAR used to sell their wares to Humli traders over camps lasting several days or even weeks. The Lapcha La route is now formally closed for cross-border trade. Nonetheless, a motorable dirt road has been built in recent years along the route. It gives the people of Limi Valley, especially, limited access to bring the goods they purchase in Taklakot to Limi villages via the Lapcha La Pass, and to transport some of these goods by truck until Salli Khola. While the contours of transborder trade and pastoralism have certainly changed in recent decades, local pastoral practices still afford glimpses of a bygone era along this stretch—herders' tents made of yak felt and goatskin interspersed in the grasslands of the Tsong Tsa and Talung valleys, their occupants tending to small herds of horses, yaks, sheep and goats.





*Lapche* (cairns) mark the pass above the shores of the holy Lake Seliman, 4500 metres above sea level. Among the peoples of the Tibetan cultural world, adding a rock to a cairn is a means to show respect and gratitude for safe passage to the resident deities and spirits of sacred natural sites. As such, one often finds several *lapches* around holy lakes, mountains, caves and passes—marks of faith deposited by pilgrims and travellers over long stretches of time. While heavy cloud cover obscures the larger and distant landscape, the pilgrim is encouraged to view the immediate landscape around the *lapche* more attentively.



At 4800 metres above sea level and about 2 kilometres north of the 4960-metre-high Nyalu La Pass, Jyator Tongsa is a sky-burial site for the local Tibetan Buddhist communities. Its sanctity is amplified by the local claim that on a clear, cloudless day, one can view Mount Kailash along the northern horizon from this point. Hundreds of *lapche* and upstanding rocks mark this spot, which also provides splendid views of nearby glacial cirques and the expansive grasslands of the Talung Valley.







*Time and again  
You, too,  
Must long  
For your old nest  
Deep in the mountain*

—Ryokan<sup>2</sup>

People from the Hepka and Dhinga villages and Limi Valley customarily graze their herds of yaks, goats, sheep, and horses in the rich pastures of the Talung Valley. In the local Tibetan dialect, 'talung' means 'valley of the horse'.

'We lack—we need—a term for those places where one experiences a "transition" from a known landscape ... into "another world": somewhere we feel and think significantly differently. They exist even in familiar landscapes: there when you cross a certain watershed, recline or snowline, or enter rain, storm or mist. Such moments are rites of passage that reconfigure local geographics, leaving known places outlandish or quickened, revealing continents within counties.'<sup>1</sup>



CHAPTER FOUR

## Limi Valley



Halji

Ancient mani stones line the footpath from the entrance of Kangnyi Chorten, just east of Halji Village. The stone-carved prayer rocks are daubed in locally available ochre and inscribed with Tibetan Buddhist mantras.

**T**hree long days of arduous trekking from Salli Khola brings our team to the chilly headwaters of the Limi River, Nepal's northernmost tributary that feeds into the Karnali River. The Limi River cuts a deep trans-Himalayan valley. The southern flanks of Gurla Mandhata, a 7694-metre-high mountain in the TAR, form the western border of the Limi Valley. Human habitation in the valley is concentrated in three ancient villages—Jang, Halji and Til. Limi Valley is a Tibetan cultural enclave, in terms of its religious communities, dialect, historic political economy, village layout and architecture and traditional modes of natural resource use. It is home to the nearly one thousand-year-old Halji Rinchenling Gonpa, claimed by many to be the oldest Buddhist monastery in the Nepali Himalaya. It is supposed to have been built by Lotsawa Rinchen Zangpo (958–1055 AD), a great translator of Indic Buddhist texts into Tibetan, who was also a prolific builder of monasteries in the western trans-Himalaya and western TAR.

The residing communities of Limi Valley were traditionally dependent on pastoralism and trade with TAR and some nearby mountainous regions of Nepal. The stop on cross-border pastoral migration, along with the rise of community forestry in Nepal, adversely affected the Limi communities' livelihoods. In recent years, most of the adult members of the Limi community have developed a livelihood strategy that combines small-scale agriculture and localized pastoralism with seasonal migration to Taklakot in TAR. Like many other Humli Nepali people, the Limi people get seasonal work at Taklakot as daily-wage labourers in building and infrastructure projects and run small eateries and shops selling wooden bowls known as furus. Lamas from Limi's three monasteries are also in demand for conducting various household ceremonies and prayers in Taklakot and the neighbouring Chinese settlements due to restrictions on monastic activity within TAR. This work season, which lasts from April to November, sees the Limi villages almost emptied of all adults, save some who are left behind as caretakers for the elderly and children. Several Limi families have seen outmigration, with family members settling in Kathmandu, India and even far-off places like New York and Hong Kong.

Limi Valley is connected to Pulan County (TAR) by two routes. The eastern route is a continuation of the dirt road that connects Salli Khola to Talung Valley via the Nyalu La Pass. This recently constructed motorable dirt road has dramatically reduced Limi Valley's remoteness to both China and Nepal. It connects the valley's Tungling Bazaar to the Lapcha La Pass on the Nepal-China border to the north and to Salli Khola via the Nyalu La Pass to the south. The western route is a continuation of a rugged foot trail connecting all the three villages of Limi Valley. Travellers ascend a steep mountain opposite Til to a pass, leaving the Limi Valley behind and re-entering the Humla Karnali Valley. A few kilometres ahead of this pass

lies a precipitous descent into the Humla Karnali Valley, actually more of a gorge than a valley at this point. Just around this corner, nestled in a natural cavity on a cliff face several hundred metres deep, are the ancient Chhyase Namkhadzong caves. According to Tsewang Lama, Buddhist hermits have used these caves as sites for meditational retreats for nearly a thousand years. He claims that Rinchen Zangpo started this tradition, pointing to the exquisite Buddhist murals in the Kashmiri art form at the caves—an artistic influence whose spread scholars credit to Zangpo. The caves had various uses but today are in decrepit condition, vulnerable to vandalism and careless use by passing travellers.

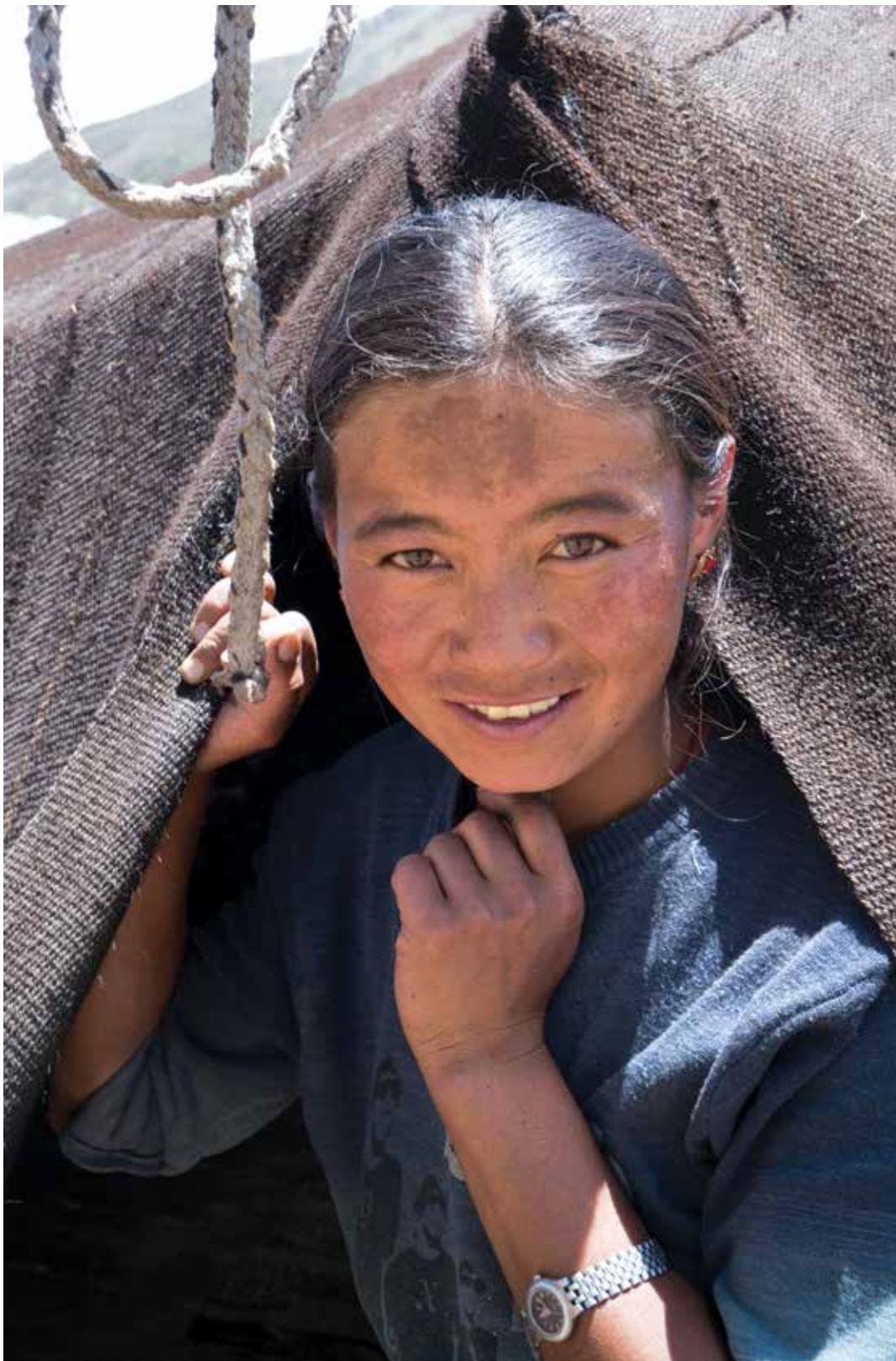


Prayer flags, and their shadows, flutter in strong winds just above the Limi River swollen with glacial meltwater. The roar of the rushing water can be deafening along the river trails.

A shop owner at Tungling Bazaar sells Chinese merchandise brought from Taklakot. Nepali traders purchase the wares, which are brought to the 5100-metre-high Lapcha La Pass on the Sino-Nepal border via Chinese-owned transportation. From there, Nepali-owned Chinese trucks drive this merchandise down to this small trading mart of Tungling Bazaar.





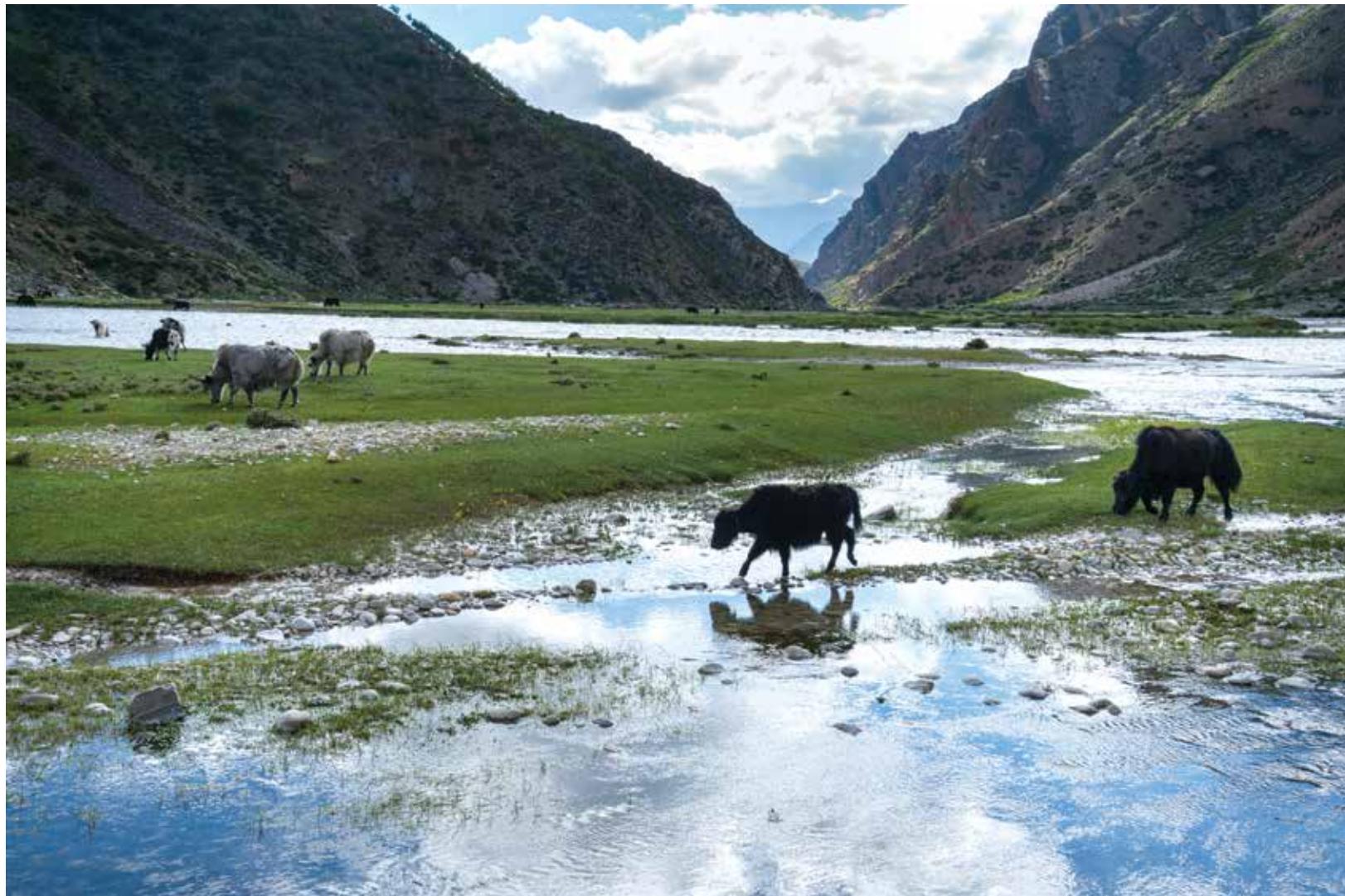


### Takche

Shepherds from Limi, Hepka and Dhinga spend the summer grazing season with their herds at Takche. Their yak-wool tents and camp are reminiscent of those used by the Drokpa herders in the western part of the TAR. Such tents are constructed with supporting tent poles on the outside, leaving more comfortable space inside for the hearth and living areas. These easily mobile tents help herders move their animals to the best pastures for grazing.







Calves of yak-cow hybrids graze at pastures along the Limi River near Takche.





While horses carry produce, cargo and humans on rough rock trails throughout the Himalayan regions that border the TAR, in Takche they luxuriate in the rich green pastures along the Limi River.



Jang

The precious green barley and yellow mustard fields along the Limi River at Jang Village ripen in the short agricultural season at high altitudes.



Other than a few cement public water taps, blue tarpaulins, photovoltaic panels, and electric lines, Jang Village and other Limi Villages appear much as they have for generations. Until very recently the villages of Limi Valley exhibited a strong Tibetan cultural flavor, almost completely untouched by modernity, in their architecture, landscaping, and forms of everyday religion and modes of community participation. These features of Limi Valley in particular, and upper Humla in general, attracted the name of the 'Last Shangri La' under the large and ambitious Great Himalayan Trail (GHT) project that attempts to create a single hiking trail connecting the eastern and western ends of the Nepali Himalaya. It is noteworthy that in a region studded with globally renowned Tibetan cultural enclaves such as Mustang and Dolpo, the GHT project chose to bestow the appellation of the 'Last Shangri La' upon Humla. However, Limi valley continues to be ridden with poor visibility and accessibility to western and domestic tourists alike.



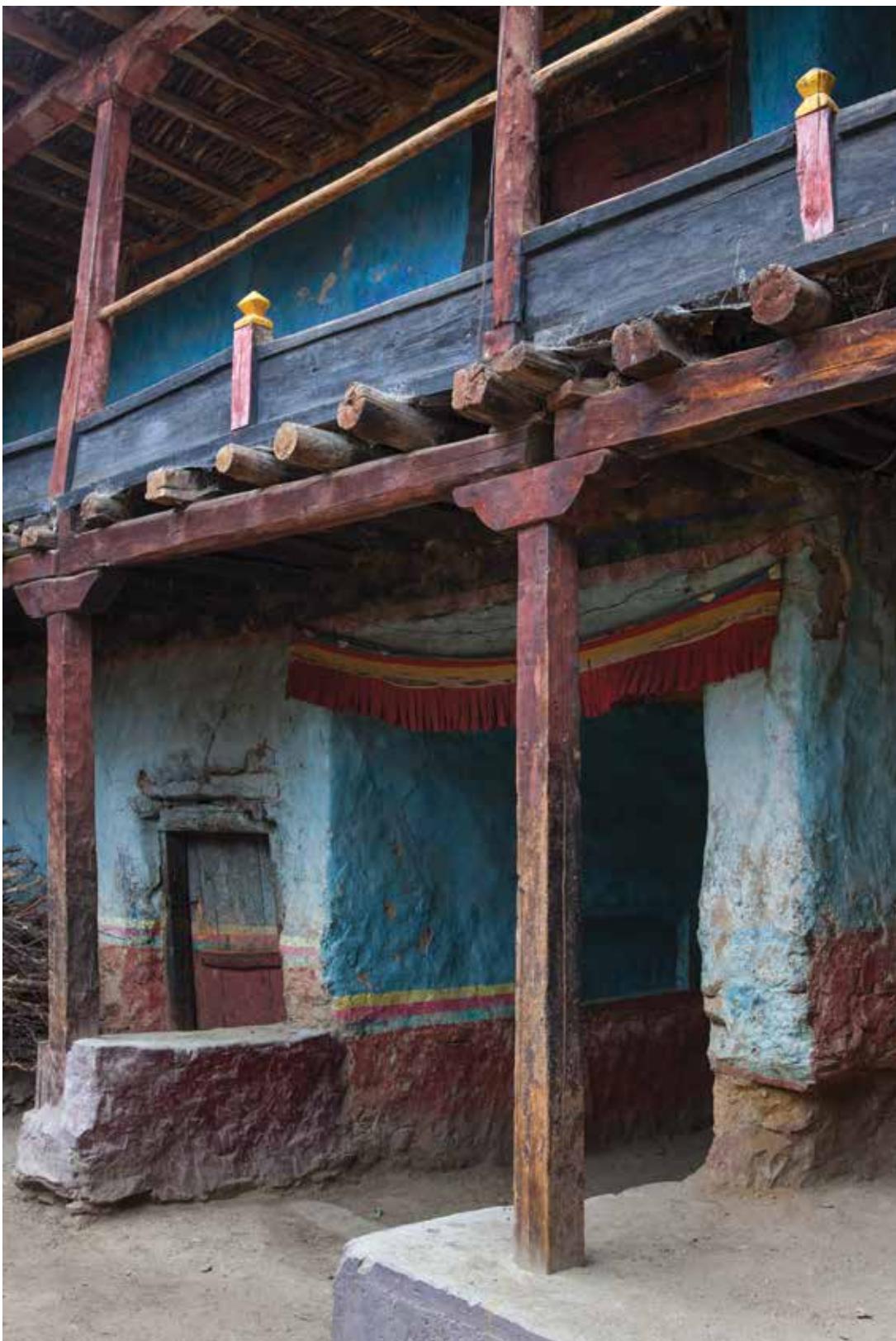
In the Chikhang community meeting hall in Jang Village, local men talk with our team about their livelihoods and their concerns regarding their children's future. At the time of our visit, most adult villagers were away for seasonal work in Taklakot.



Jang Village rooftops create a mosaic of dry earth, stone, greenery, flowing waters and rainbow colours of prayer flags.

A middle school student visits the upper gallery of the monastery in Jang Village.





The courtyard of the Jang Gonpa exudes blue coolness highlighted with old, worn wood, painted earthen-ochre red. The monastery and the space is welcoming, quiet, measured and intimate in human scale.

## Halji

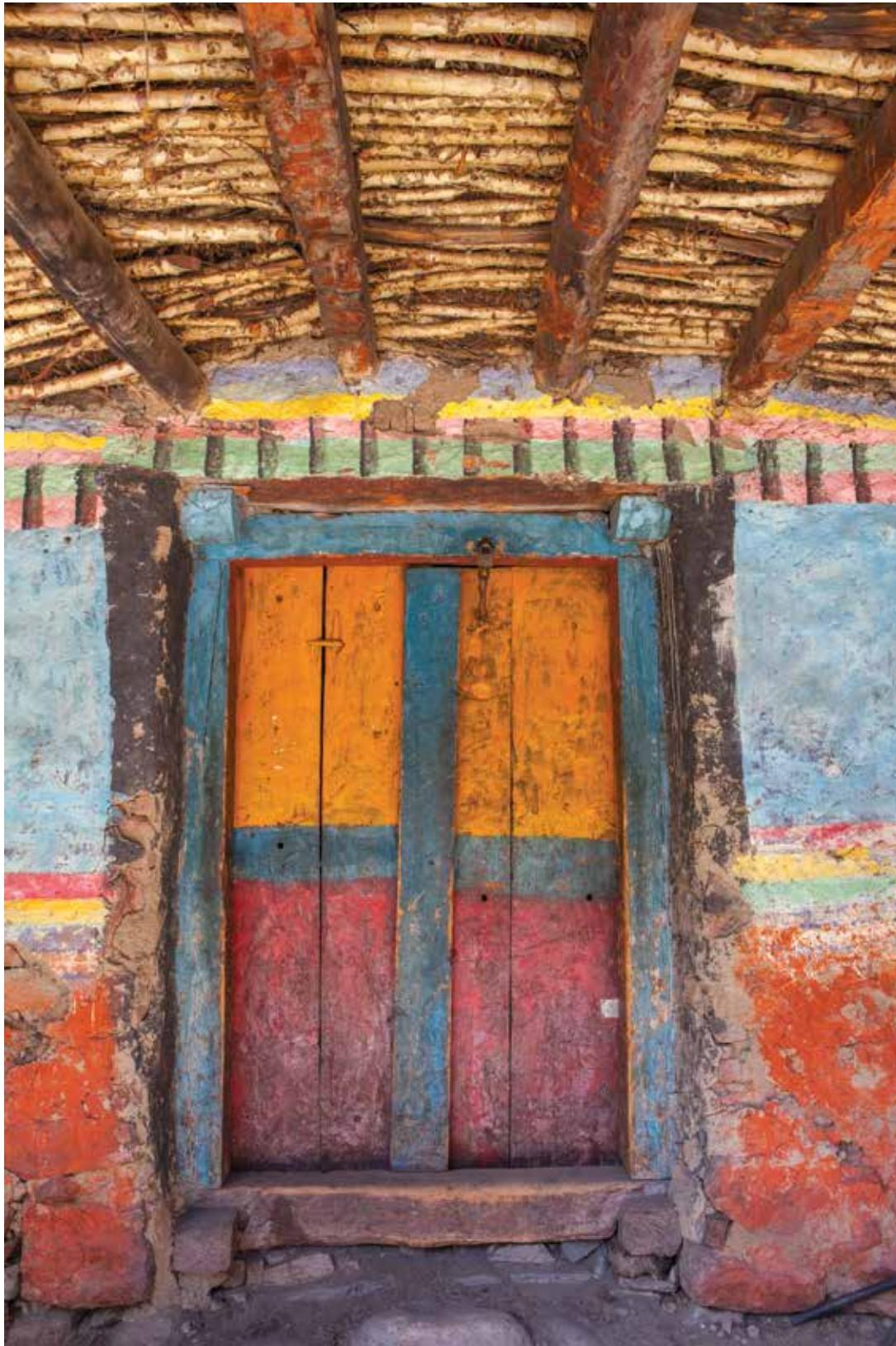
Located in Halji Village in the Limi Valley, the Halji Rinchenling Gonpa is believed to be the last monastery built by Lotsawa Rinchen Zangpo, a renowned 11th-century-AD translator of Indian Buddhist texts into Tibetan, a prolific builder and a patron of Buddhist sacred art in the Kashmiri style. Belonging to the Drikung Kagyu sect, this monastery shares historic religious ties with the Gyangtrag Gonpa—a Drikung Kagyu monastery on the southern flanks of Mount Kailash in western TAR. The monastery is richly endowed with ancient Tibetan Buddhist murals and scriptures. In the Kashmiri artistic style of its murals and sculptures, the Halji Rinchenling Gonpa is said to share several similarities with other surviving monasteries built by Rinchen Zangpo, such as Tholing Mutt in western TAR and Tabo monastery in Spiti (India). It forms the pivot of Limi Valley's religious life. However, over the last ten years, the monastery has been annually threatened by Glacial Lake Outburst Flood (or, GLOF), resulting from a glacial lake a few kilometres above and north of the village. The channel of this destructive annual flow is now less than 10 metres away from the walls of this monastery. Villagers have tried to construct gabion walls to protect this monastery, but to little avail. The internal parts of the monastery have also suffered some damage due to rains and poor maintenance.







This worn and water-damaged wall painting at the Halji Rinchenling Gonpa is a representation of Chokyoing (Lokpalas), one of the Four Guardian Kings in Buddhist mythology often found at the entrance hallway of monasteries and believed to protect the four cardinal directions<sup>1</sup> of the world.

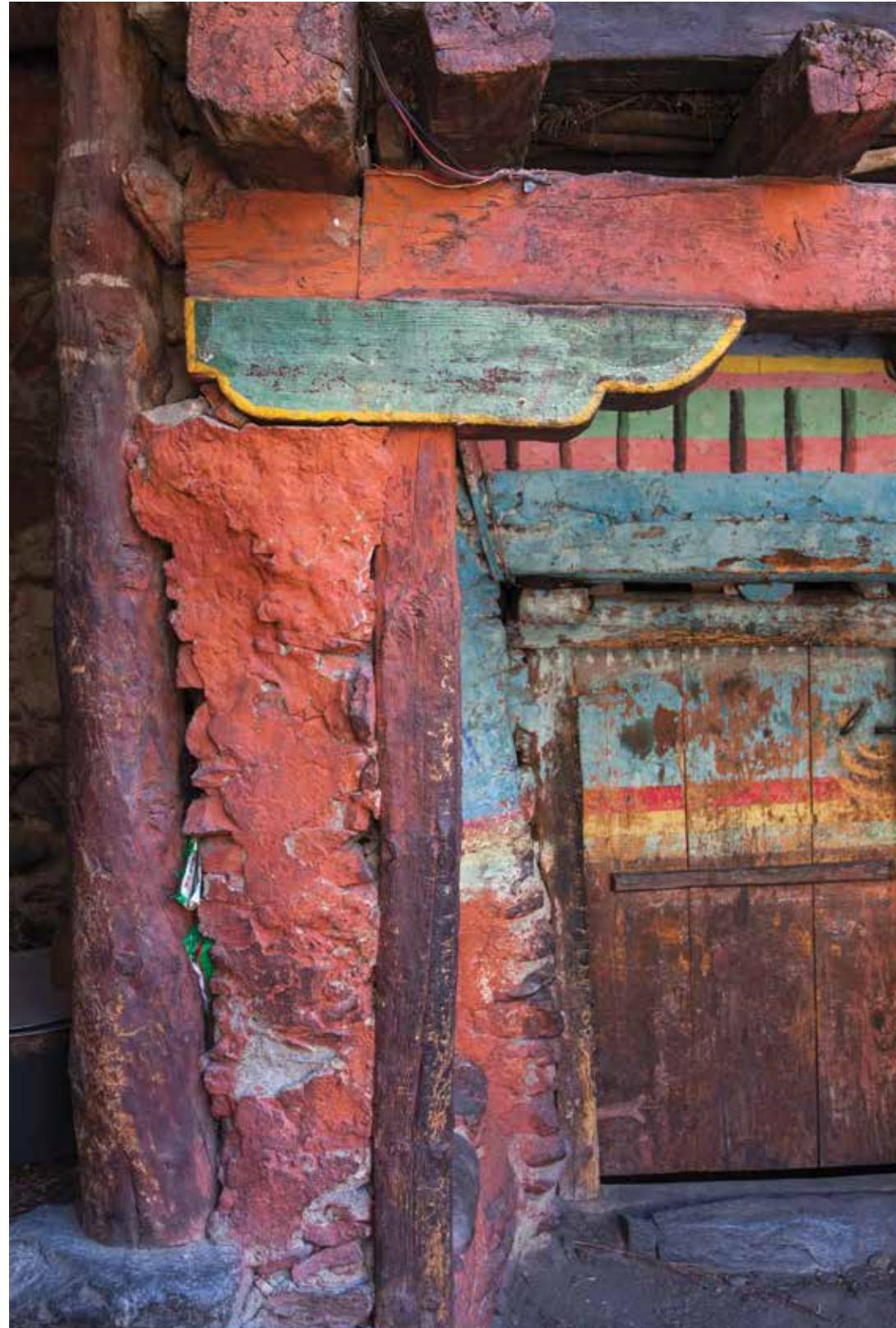


The birch bough ceiling of the second-floor gallery that encircles the spacious courtyard of Halji Rinchenling Gonpa is evidence of the restoration work that has been going on for decades. The patina of paint on the ancient hand-hewn wood is a palimpsest representing generations of hands and pigments.

In the summer and winter seasons, the majority of inhabitants at Halji Village are the very young and the very old, while most adults are working as traders or labourers in Kathmandu, Taklakot, or India.



The courtyard corner doorway of old weathered wood and paint at Halji Rinchenling Gonpa appears as a two-dimensional surface that is an organic visual architectural ensemble. The restoration of such ancient architectural gems as this requires a delicate combination of aesthetics, logistical support, and art history knowledge.





Halji's tall stone houses are grand in scale, yet comfortably connected to the landscape from which they rise. In one of Nepal's remotest corners, one experiences an urban sensibility walking the streets, alleys and tunnels of this grand village. Depending on the time of day, the position of the sun, or its absence, the townscape shifts and is continuously engaging. Its walkways are especially quiet, empty and meditative in the midday hours when the few working residents are tending cattle and toiling in the ripening barley fields.





### Till

Scarcely vegetated, rock-strewn mountainsides crowned by dark, serrated ridges provide a sombre background even on a clear, sunny day, as one walks from Till Village towards the Chhyase Namkhadzong caves.



The approach to the Chhyase Namkhadzong caves climbs along a narrow trail which winds around precipitous cliffs in the upper Humla Karnali gorge. Breathtakingly beautiful, especially in crisp, sharp-edged morning sunlight, the gorge plunges down several hundred feet into the Humla Karnali River, close to its confluence with the Limi River.



The trail from the Chhyase Namkhadzong caves to Hilsa traverses a dry, day-long stretch of rocky terrain.

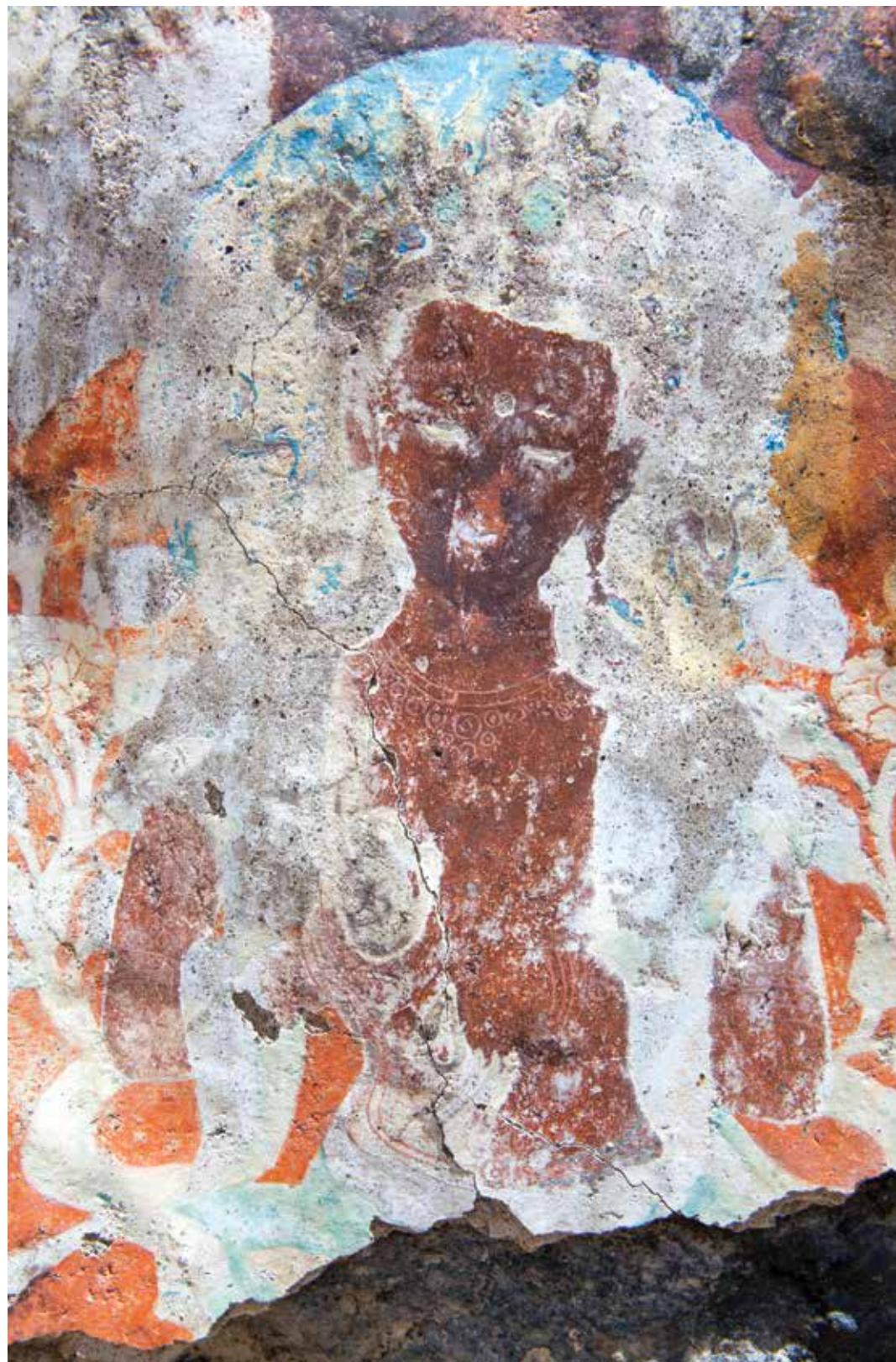


The Nara Lagna Pass-Hilsa section of the new Simikot-Hilsa motor road is a beautiful, man-made earthwork visible from the north side of the valley. In 2017 the road was single-track with irregular and infrequent pull-offs for oncoming vehicles. Even in the future, when widened to two lanes, the road will continue to be a precarious route with its sharp switchbacks and steep slopes that whiten the knuckles of passengers anxiously gripping their seats.

*'We clamber down toward the frontier by slopes already fractured and slippery. Torrents of shale oversweep the track. The colours around us are pastel grey and shell pink. Whole valleys sides are a confusion of debris sliding between shields of dark rock. Their spurs bulge like flayed bones. Sometimes our way is littered with igneous boulders that glint like beetles' wings, and once we trudge across virgin snow.'*<sup>1</sup>



The decaying, ancient Kashmiri-style, 11th century AD murals of Tibetan Buddhist bodhisattvas and deities at the Chhyase Namkhadzong hermitage caves show the impact of centuries of exposure to the sun and rain, as well as the impact of traders' campfires and, most recently, trekking groups that have made camp along the narrow, precipitous trail.





## CHAPTER FIVE

# The Border: Hilsa and Taklakot



**O**ur team reaches Hilsa after two long days of walking under a scorching sun, through a dry, vertiginous trans-Himalayan landscape scarred by frequent landslides and avalanches. From the Chhyase Namkhadzong caves, the confluence of the Limi and Humla Karnali rivers is visible. Occasional strands of juniper and patches of alpine shrub are often the only signs of life on this tiring stretch, although Himalayan griffon vultures and herds of blue sheep may be spotted. A single stream about midway between the caves and Hilsa is the only source of water. On the other side of the valley, the Nara Lagna–Hilsa section of the Simikot–Hilsa dirt road becomes visible, winding down ever so slowly westwards. This road section leads down from the high Nara Lagna Pass (at 4500 metres) to the settlement of Hilsa (at 3650 metres).

Hilsa is a small Nepali settlement that lies next to the officially open border between Humla district, Nepal and Pulan County, TAR. It has a Nepali Border Police check-post, a few shops, lodges and hotels, a few trucks and stone and mud buildings housing Nepali people who seek seasonal work on the border or in Taklakot (Purang in Tibetan, Pulan in Chinese). It boasts an improvised helipad, where helicopters carrying Indian pilgrims from Simikot land and take off. It is said that no one calls Hilsa home, since it always has been a seasonal border settlement, a place of transit. A steel suspension footbridge connects Hilsa to the foot trail coming from the Limi Valley, on the other side of the Humla Karnali River. It also connects Hilsa to the no-man's land and the Chinese immigration post in the Chinese border village of Shera (Shera in Tibetan, Xierwa in Chinese). Both these Chinese sites lie just a little farther west of the point where the Limi Valley trail descends to meet the footbridge over the Humla Karnali, and are in full sight of Hilsa.

From Hilsa, Indian pilgrim groups cross the Humla Karnali, walk some distance across the no-man's land, get their papers checked by Chinese army officials and board designated tourist buses headed to Taklakot. Reunited the previous evening with the group coming up the Humla Karnali route, our team does the same. Humli people are issued a special border area pass by the Nepali government that enables them to cross the border and seek work in Taklakot. However, this permit doesn't allow them to go farther north, which implies that they cannot do the Kailash–Manasarovar pilgrimage on this permit.

Taklakot is an ancient Tibetan borderland mart. It is located in a narrow, shallow valley walled by sandstone cliffs riddled with ancient meditation caves. Immediately to its east towers Mount Gurla Mandhata. Taklakot figures as an important religious, political and economic site in the history of ancient, medieval and modern western TAR. Today, the town is the headquarters of Pulan County, connected to Hilsa by a two-way metalled highway, and by other metalled roads to Lhasa as well as the China National Highway 219 (which links Lhatse in southern TAR, China, to the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, China). The Ngari Gunsa Airport at Shiquanhe, the fourth-highest airport in the world, with flights to Lhasa, Kashgar and Urumqi, is just a day's bus ride from Taklakot. Pilgrims to Kailash–Manasarovar, who come from all over the world, need to get customs clearance at Taklakot. Taklakot is a sizeable town, with several government and army establishments, a branch of the Agricultural Bank of China, ATMs, a hospital, schools,

a Chinese market and a designated transborder market for Indian and Nepali traders. Vehicles of all kinds, including trucks, SUVs, luxury cars and two-wheelers, ply its roads. Humli people, and Limi people in particular, run shops and eateries in the transborder market, which, until a few decades ago, was the largest establishment in Taklakot. Humli people bring mainly *furu* bowls, rosaries and herbs to Taklakot. In return, they purchase various goods such as clothes, electronics, wood stoves and maida (wheat flour).

A steel-and-concrete Friendship Bridge completed near the end of 2016 links the Hilsa-Taklakot road to the Hilsa-Simikot road.



Colourful prayer flags atop a commercial establishment in Hilsa.



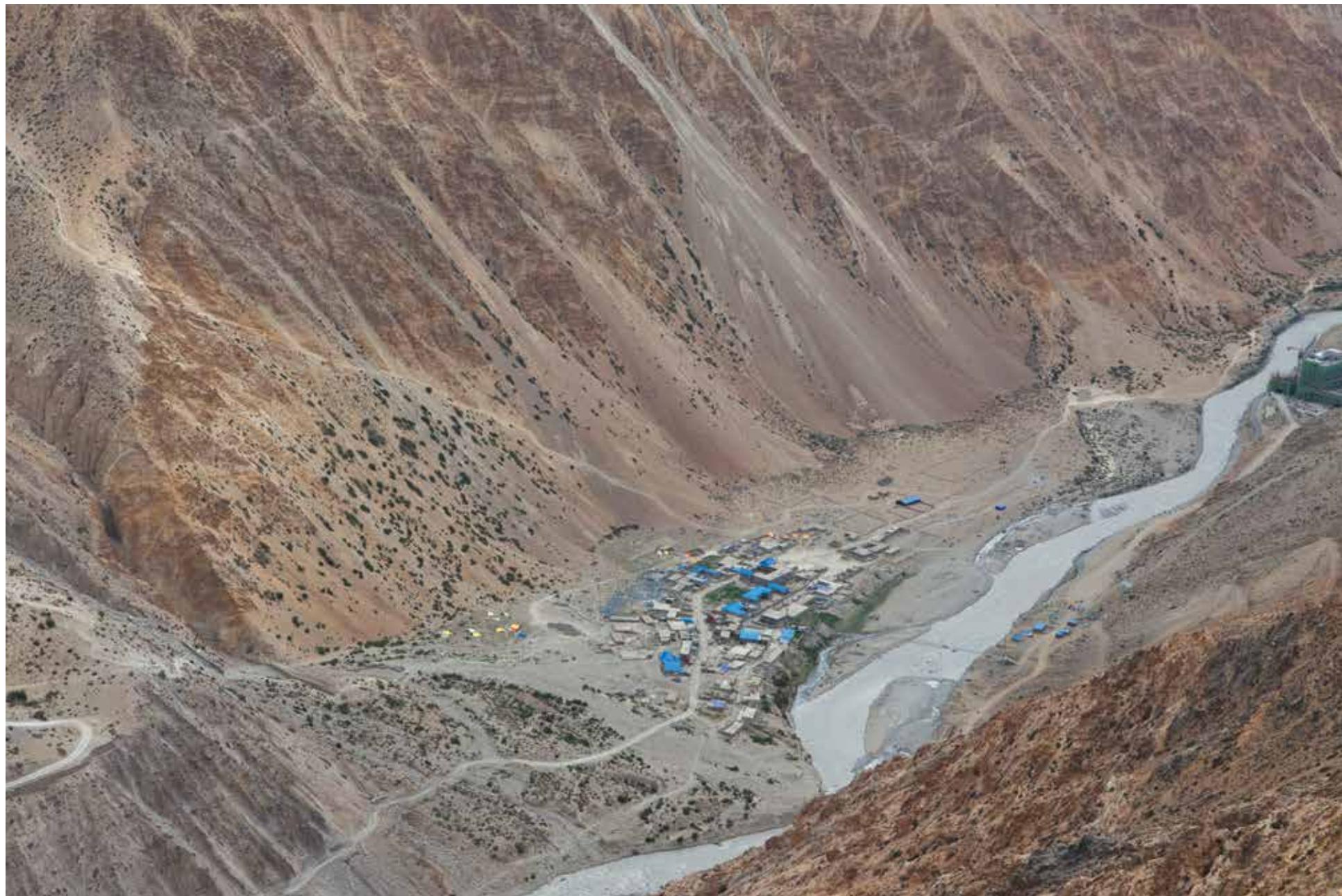
Like a camouflaged serpent in the desert, the motor road snakes its way up the steep mountainside from the border at Hilsa, 3670 meters above sea level, to the Nara Lagna Pass, at 4500 meters above sea level.



Hilsa

The Friendship Bridge at Hilsa, under construction in this picture, was completed in late 2016.

In early 2017 Nepal's Prime Minister, Pushpa Kamal Dahal, arrived by plane in Simikot and from there flew to Hilsa by helicopter to inaugurate the new motor bridge. Prior to that, all visitors had to make the journey on foot over the narrow, rickety suspension-footbridge that connected Nepal and the TAR, and every piece of cargo had to be carried on the backs of porters over the bridge from one country to the other. Nepal's Humla district and the Pulan district in the TAR are now effortlessly connected.



Hilsa, as seen from the last mile before descending down to the Humla-Karnali River. The tiny bit on the lower-right-side of this picture—on the right side of the river, and above the fencing—falls in China.



Shera (Xierwa in Chinese) is the first Chinese settlement to come into our view as we walk from Humla into the TAR. The buildings seen in the lower left corner are the Chinese immigration and customs posts. The fields and houses towards the centre belong to Sera. In earlier times, the people of Limi Valley had customary ties of kinship and pastoral rights at several nearby borderland Tibetan villages like Sera.



Unnumbered Chinese trucks owned by Humli locals carry all manner of goods and people from Hilsa on the road south to Tumkot and, as the road pushes southwards, to Simikot.

*'Ten years ago, Iswor says, Hilsa was no more than a huddle of cottages and tents. Now it drifts along the river in a sordid trickle of blue-grey stone, half-built or deserted dwellings, and its tottering wooden gangplank has been replaced by a clanking cable suspension bridge, hung with prayer flags and washing. Cascades of rubbish pour beneath it into the river: Chinese beer bottles and layers-deep plastic. The Tibetan frontier is on the far side, a few hundred yards away. A Chinese road is being stretched down to the Karnali to the grumble of bulldozers. The traders' caravans cross the bridge with bovine ease, the yaks and jhaboos indifferent to the thin treads under their hooves and to the river boiling fifty feet below.'*<sup>2</sup>





Taklakot

A Humli worker crafts a furu bowl using a pedal-driven lathe in the transborder market at Taklakot. Furu bowls are made from maple wood and vary in size, shape and degrees of ornamentation. They are multipurpose bowls—for eating, drinking and making sacred offerings. These items are in high demand among Tibetan communities everywhere, especially China.

Until recently, Humla was a known producer of furus. Traditionally, furus are made from the burls growing on maple trees, which used to occur in abundance in Humla a few decades ago. However, due to large-scale deforestation, the wood is currently sourced mostly from the north Indian state of Himachal Pradesh. From there, the raw wood is transported to Saharanpur, a major woodcraft centre in north India, where it receives preliminary cutting and carving. These carved elements are then transported to Kathmandu, where they undergo finishing. From Kathmandu, the furus are transported to Taklakot via the Tatopani border. Another route sees these bowls being taken into Nepal near Nepalganj, and from there to Simikot and then up to Hilsa and beyond to Taklakot. In some cases, the finishing takes place in Humla or even at Taklakot itself, as seen in this photo. The most basic furus can cost about 200 yuan, while the most prized ones available in Taklakot can cost up to 10,000 yuan or more.



A trader from Dhinga Village, a day's walk north of Simikot, sells furus at her shop in the transborder market area of Taklakot. This market comprises shops owned by Nepalis and Indians from the borderland regions adjoining the Pulan County of the TAR. These include the Limi Valley, the Nyin Valley, some Humla Karnali villages (like Kermi, Hepka and Dhingal), the nearby district of Darchula in far western Nepal and the upper valleys of Pithoragarh district, India.

*Yarsagumba* (*Ophiocordyceps sinensis*) sells at several herbalist stores in Taklakot's Chinese market. This strange-looking herb grows where alpine grasslands meet glaciers in high Himalayan valleys on the Tibetan plateau. Winkler (2006)<sup>3</sup> notes that in Tibetan, *yarsagumba* means 'summer grass, winter worm'—indicating the life cycle of the larva upon whose corpse the fungus, colloquially understood to be a herb, grows—resulting in the hybrid of a larva and a pointy fungus which is harvested during the summer. Indians know this fungus as '*kida jadi*' (insect herb), and worldwide it is popular as 'caterpillar fungus'. Many collection sites for this herb are found in the adjacent high Himalayan valleys of far-western Nepal and the north-eastern parts of Uttarakhand, India. The herb is highly valued in traditional Chinese medicine as an aphrodisiac and panacea for many ills, fetching very high prices among the upwardly mobile classes of modern China. As such, *yarsagumba* is an important trade item for members of the Shauka community who inhabit the borderlands of Nepal and India adjacent to Pulan County.







CHAPTER SIX

Tirthapuri



Tirthapuri

Tibetan pilgrims collect the steaming hot waters believed to be imbued with spiritually empowering substances from the Tirthapuri springs.

Tirthapuri lies a few hours' bus ride to the northwest from Taklakot. At 4310 metres, this site is nestled in the lap of a spectacular canyon with red, white and yellow rock stratifications, through which the nascent Sutlej River, originating near Mount Kailash, flows westwards. But its distinctive feature is the presence of several natural hot springs. Tirthapuri also possesses a sacred hill, whose thirteen *koras* (circumambulations) are believed to bestow the pilgrim with merit equal to one Kailash kora. Expedition member Dr Shekhar Pathak, an eminent historian of the Uttarakhand Himalaya, remarks that before the India-China border conflict of 1962, Tirthapuri was the first site of pilgrimage for Indians entering TAR through passes west of Lipu Lekh, such as Niti, Mana and Kungri Bingri. Alex McKay, author of *Kailas Histories* (2015)<sup>1</sup>, a recent yet seminal work on the history of the Kailash-Manasarovar pilgrimage, states that Tirthapuri has been an important site for Tibetans and certain Saivite orders of Hindu renunciates for several centuries. The sulphur springs of Tirthapuri are particularly rich in substances considered among Indic renunciate sects to possess alchemical powers. The hot springs are taken to be the flow of 'white yogic awakening fluid'. According to Swami Pranavananda, who made several pilgrimages to Kailash-Manasarovar in the 1930s and 1940s, both Indians and Tibetans believe the pilgrimage to Kailash is incomplete or fruitless without a visit to Tirthapuri as well<sup>2</sup>. In her study of Hindu pilgrimage traditions, *India: A Sacred Geography*<sup>3</sup>, Diana Eck remarks that the Sanskrit word 'tirtha' designates a pilgrimage location, which acts as a portal between this world and other/higher realms of existence. Therefore, a *tirtha* is a place where the contact to higher beings—gods—is easier and more likely to happen. Consequently, a pilgrimage is also called '*tirtha yatra*' in Sanskrit. Another name for Tirthapuri is Pretapuri. *Pretas*, the hungry ghosts dwelling in the second lowest of Buddhism's six realms of existence, are known among the other Indic religions. In Buddhism, they are a metaphor for those who are perpetually frustrated trying to fulfil their illusory desires. Perhaps the unearthliness of Tirthapuri's environs could have influenced this etymology.

Among other things, the famous autobiography-cum-travelogue *The Way of the White Clouds* (1966) by Lama Anagarika Govinda—a Buddhist scholar-mystic of German heritage—describes the author's travels through the western Tibetan plateau in the late 1940s. Combining keen observation with informed insight, Lama Govinda highlights the importance of minor sacred sites that pervade both the Kailash and Manasarovar kora routes as well as along routes leading to these emblematic sites, in shaping the overall experience of the devout pilgrim. Even in our present, for many of the sites that we traversed in the Chinese part of our expedition, Lama Govinda's descriptions, made over half a century ago, were deeply helpful for us in reflecting upon a pilgrim's understanding of this sacred landscape.



'At the foot of a group of ragged rocks, piled one upon the other on the flank of a steep mountain, there appeared to be a few stone hovels, whose cubic forms were hardly distinguishable from the tumbled rocks. A strange contrast, however, was provided by innumerable whitewashed chorten, religious monuments which have their origin in the ancient stupas of India... Millions of such monuments are scattered all over Tibet. They are found wherever human beings live or have lived, and even on dangerous passes, at the entrances of precariously constructed suspension bridges, or on strange rock formations near the caravan routes. The great number of chortens which appeared here, as if the rocks had been transformed into these shapes by magic, indicated the vicinity of a temple or a monastery.'<sup>4</sup>



'The deepest sources of inspiration are not the big monasteries or the great monastic colleges and universities (like Sera, Drepung and Ganden, the greatest seats of learning in Tibet), but the humble hermitages, tucked away in the folds and cracks of mighty mountains, or in lonely valleys and in inaccessible canyons, or perched on high cliffs like eagles' nests, or scattered over the solitudes of remote highlands and along the shores of placid lakes, far away from the tracks of caravans and the noise of trading camps and market towns. It was in these hermitages that those who want to tread the path of wisdom and liberation return again and again. It is for this reason that every monastery possesses a number of isolated cubicles for meditation, as well as mountain retreats (*ri-khrod*, pronounced *rito*) and hermitages.'<sup>5</sup>



Yak skulls adorn a mani wall at Tirthapuri. Yaks are central to the pastoral way of life across the TAR, providing transport, wool, milk, meat and other services. Upon a yak's death, Tibetans engrave its skull with sacred mantras and place it on a mani wall or a lapche. This is done as a gesture of gratitude to the deceased animal for its lifelong service, and as a prayer for its better rebirth.

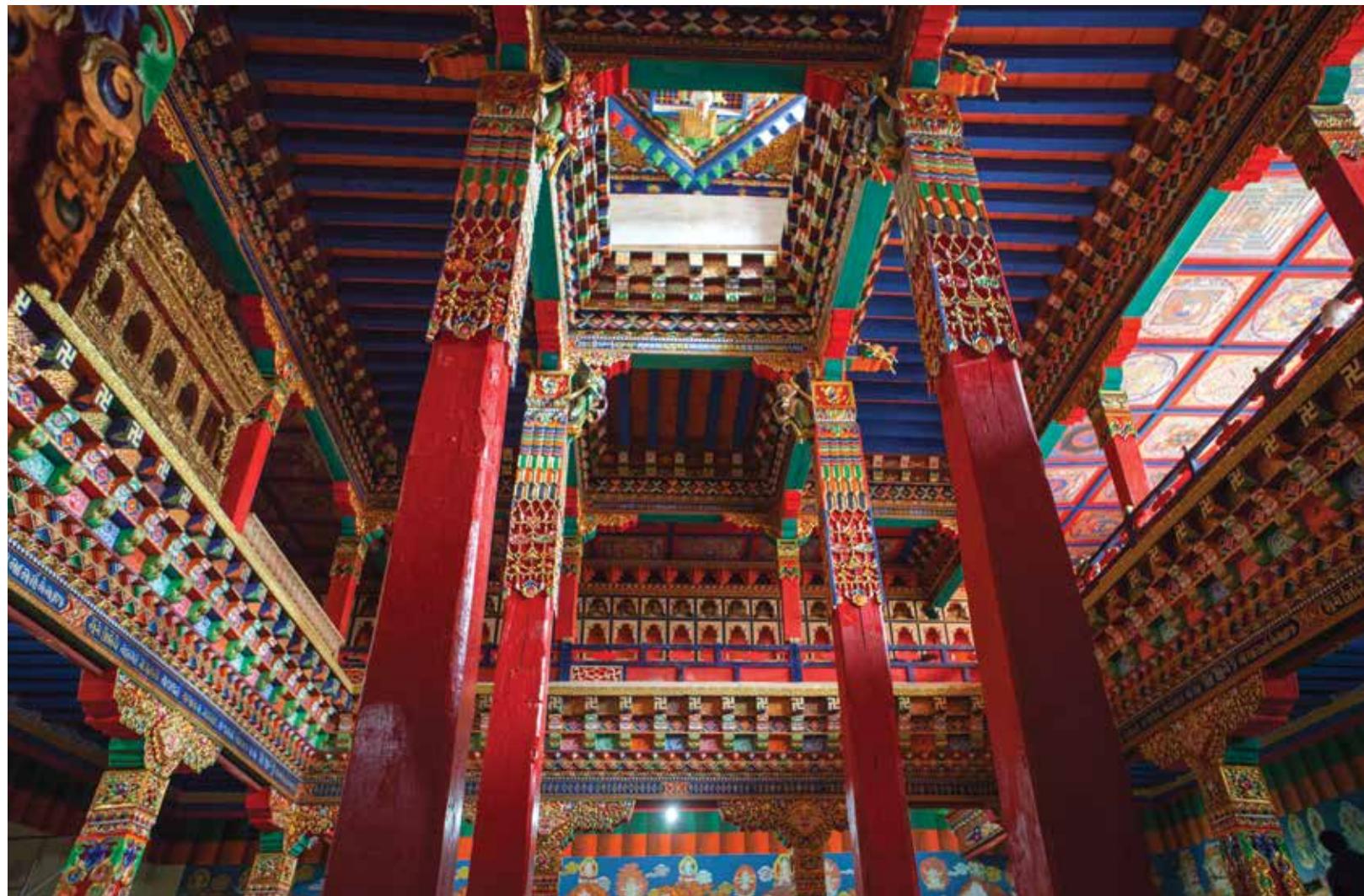


The cylindrical shape of the chorten is mimicked by the magnificent thundercloud of a storm arriving from the west. The highlands of western TAR are notorious for sudden changes in weather and electrical storms.



Tucked into the mountain beyond the festive *tarboche* (prayer-flag staff) pole and flags and newly constructed, whitewashed concrete wall, a cliff-side Bon meditation cell at Tirthapuri beckons monks seeking retreat from the busyness of the Gurugem Bon Monastery below.





The lavishly painted interiors of the refurbished Gurugem Bon Monastery. Located about 20 kilometres west-south-west of Tirthapuri, this Bon monastery was first built in 1936. It suffered extensive damage during the Cultural Revolution in China (1966-76), but was subsequently rebuilt. We witnessed a team of artists from eastern TAR painting exquisite works under the supervision of a young master painter and some Bon monks.

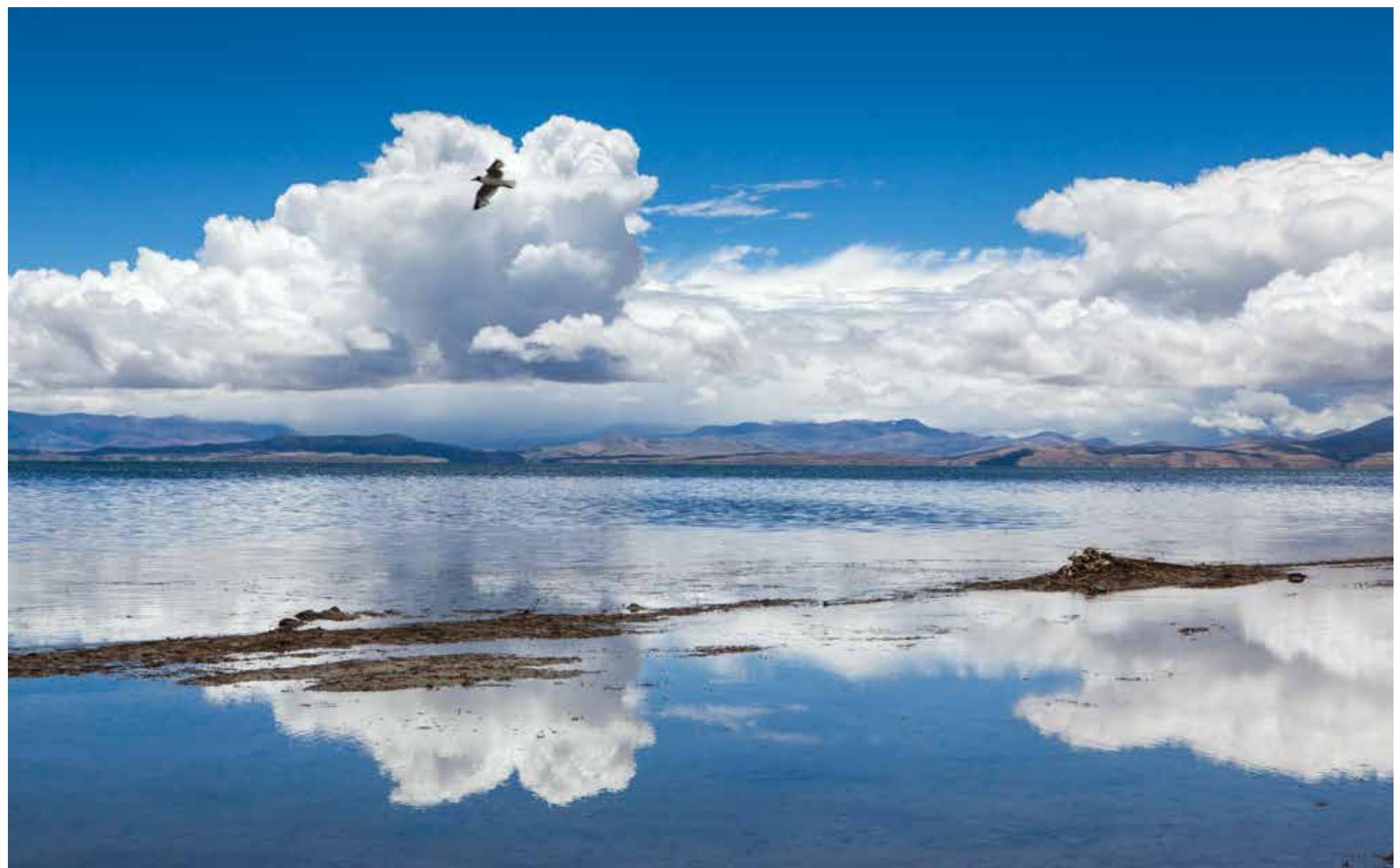


A monk oversees a worker spray-painting the rooftop finials which will adorn the large, new concrete chortens at the newly constructed Buddhist monastery on the bluff above the hot springs of Tirthapuri.



CHAPTER SEVEN

Manasarovar and Rakshas Tal



A migratory bird takes flight over the cerulean blue waters of Lake Manasarovar.

**A**t an hour's bus drive north of Taklakot lie two expansive lakes. Lake Rakshas Tal (Langak Tso in Tibetan, La'ang Cuo in Chinese) is a saltwater lake covering 250 square kilometres at an altitude of 4,575 metres. To its east lies Lake Manasarovar, a slightly higher, larger freshwater lake. The two lakes are separated by a narrow isthmus. Lake Manasarovar (Mapham Yumtso in Tibetan, Mapamyong Cuo in Chinese) flows into Lake Rakshas Tal through a stream called Ganga Chhu. It is believed that the darker hued waters of Lake Rakshas Tal possess demonic qualities, and that the waters from Lake Manasarovar purify them. In Hindu mythology, the demon god Ravana is believed to have done penance on the shores of this lake to propitiate Lord Shiva. Unlike Lake Manasarovar, Lake Rakshas Tal has two islands, Topserma and Lachato. Unlike the long, even shoreline of Manasarovar, the shoreline of Rakshas Tal is hilly and deeply indented, similar to the Norwegian fjords.

Lake Manasarovar covers 410 square kilometres, with a circumference of 88 kilometres, and lies at 4,590 metres above sea level. Manasarovar is a sacred body of water for Bonpos, Tibetan Buddhists, and Hindus. To the Bonpos, Manasarovar is associated with Shenrab Miwoche, the founder of the Bon religion, who is believed to have bathed in the lake. For Hindus, the lake was created from the mind of Lord Brahma, one of the three gods in the Hindu supreme trinity. Taking a dip in its waters is believed to wash away the sins of all previous lifetimes. For the shamans of Humla, special rituals and a bath at the shores of Manasarovar are traditionally prescribed as necessary steps in the attainment of mystical powers. For Tibetan Buddhists, Lake Manasarovar is believed to be the mythical lake Anotatta, where Maya conceived the future Buddha Shakyamuni. They undertake a clockwise circumambulation of the lake, believing one circumambulation to be the equivalent of one 'turning of the wheel' of the Buddha dharma. According to *The Sacred Mountain*, John Snelling's encyclopaedic guide to the Kailash-Manasarovar pilgrimage complex, the several Buddhist monasteries that dot the shores of Lake Manasarovar have all been rebuilt in recent decades with support from the Chinese government, following their destruction during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76)<sup>1</sup>.

Snelling notes that certain recent interpreters see Lake Rakshas Tal and Lake Manasarovar not as two disparate entities, but as complementary parts of a ying-yang whole—one with dark, murky waters, the other with clear, colourless waters, one with demonic qualities, the other with divine qualities. It is perhaps then also fitting that in 2004, Lake Manasarovar and Lake Rakshas Tal together were designated as a singular Ramsar wetland complex—a globally recognized designation accorded to wetlands of global importance—named Mapangyong Cuo. These lakes are home to several endemic fish species, and the surrounding landscape hosts rare faunal species such as the black-necked crane (*Grus nigricollis*), the chiru/Tibetan antelope (*Pantholops hodgsonii*), and the snow leopard (*Uncia uncia*).

Our team does a kora of Lake Manasarovar by bus, and some members also take the opportunity to take a sanctifying dip in the lake's holy waters.



Rakshas Tal

Trekkers pause under dark skies to take in and admire the sweeping landscape at Rakshas Tal.



On the elevated isthmus between the Manasarovar and Rakshas Tal lakes are cairns draped heavily with white ceremonial khada scarves. Atop this cairn yak horns provide a sharp contrast against the lake's bright surface. The long trail of prayer flags lays on the barren landscape like a creature's tail.





Our team escaped the hard rains at Manasarovar with tea, instant noodles and Wi-Fi in the 'Manasarovar Tourism Interpretation Centre' at Hor. This large, modern establishment of glass, steel and concrete, with tiled flooring and carpet-upholstered couches, stands in stark contrast to the earthier, smaller-scale traditional architecture of this region. It is one of the many efforts being made by the Chinese government to promote tourism, both religious and secular, in the Kailash-Manasarovar region of the TAR.



Manasarovar

'The rarefied air of high altitudes has similar effects as certain exercises of pranayama, because it compels us to regulate our breathing in a particular way, especially when climbing or walking long distances... Tibetans themselves walk very slowly, but at a steady pace, bringing their breath in perfect harmony with their movement. Walking, therefore, becomes almost like a kind of conscious hatha-yoga, or breathing exercise, especially when accompanied by rhythmic recitations of sacred formulas (mantras), as is the habit with many Tibetans. This has a very tranquilizing and energizing effect...' <sup>2</sup>



Numerous piles of mani stones adorn the western shores of the holy lake. These piles were installed in exponentially large numbers by Tibetan pilgrims visiting Kailash-Manasarovar during the last 'Year of the Horse' (2014), which happens once every twelve years. The mani stones in these piles were carved using electrical drills, rather than the traditional hammer and chisel.



Delicate ripples dance over the water on a windless morning as a pilgrim collects the sacred waters of Lake Manasarovar. For Hindus and Jains, a dip in this lake is considered to wash away sins of this and previous lifetimes. For Buddhists and Bonpos, a dip would mean desecration of the sacred abode of the water spirits. While the differences remain, it has never led to serious conflagration and there is generally a mutual respect and tolerance for each other's ritual practices.





Sunshine on a quiet, windless morning turns Manasarovar's surface  
into an infinite mirror of sky, clouds and the distant horizon.



*'It is the unwritten law that nobody is allowed to kill or hurt the animals inhabiting this region, and as if the animals were conscious of their divine protection, they behave as they were supposed to behave in a long-forgotten paradise.'*<sup>3</sup>







CHAPTER EIGHT

## Kailash Kora



The north face of Mount Kailash.

**V**iewed from the north shore of Lake Manasarovar, the majestic, finely indented south face of Mount Kailash (Tise and Kang Rinpoche in Tibetan; Mount Kailash, Kailas Parvat and Meru Parvat in Sanskrit; Gang Rinboqe in Chinese) lords over a range of lower snow-capped peaks. The mountain, rising 6700 metres above sea level in the wilds of western TAR, is formed of black metasedimentary rock. According to Alex McKay, numerous claims ascribe the sacredness of this oddly symmetrical mountain to the distant, preliterate past, but the earliest credible records of Buddhists, Bonpos and Hindu renunciates discovering and consecrating the site date back to the first half of the second millennium AD. The mountain became increasingly recognized as Mount Kailash among hundreds of millions of Buddhists, Hindus and Jains only over the last two centuries, as a result of a diverse range of colonial, postcolonial and New Age knowledge-making practices<sup>1</sup>. Today, the Bonpos, followers of Tibet's ancient indigenous religion, identify Mount Kailash with the legendary Mount Tise, the place where the legendary founder of their religion, Sherab Miwoche, descended from heaven to Earth. To the Tibetan Buddhists, the mountain is the mythical palace of the powerful meditational deity Chakrasamvara, or Demchog in Tibetan. To the Hindus, it is the abode of Lord Shiva—the god of yoga, death and destruction—and his consort, Parvati. To the Jains, it is the site where their first *tirthankara*, or great master, attained salvation. For all these religions, it is also the *axis mundi*, the axle around which the whole world revolves. Mount Kailash is also deeply embedded in the lore of the Tibetan epic Gesar of Ling, and in the story of the legendary rivalry and spiritual contests between the Buddhist yogi Milarepa and the Bon mystic Naro Bonchung<sup>2</sup>.

This symmetrically-shaped mountain is surrounded on most sides by trough-shaped valleys, marking a natural circumambulation route. The 52-kilometre route starts and ends at the rapidly growing settlement of Darchen, and varies in altitude from the lowest point at 4670 metres (Darchen) to the highest point at 5650 metres (Dolma La Pass). Several Buddhist monasteries dot this route, all of which have been rebuilt with support from the Chinese government following their destruction during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). Many other sacred natural sites, such as sky-burial sites, holy imprints on rocks, sacred cliff-faces, mountains and streams, also lie along the route. Every year, thousands of pilgrims of several faiths hailing from various parts of China, South Asia, East Asia and even Western countries journey to this remote, windswept corner of the Tibetan Plateau to undertake a ritual circumambulation of the mountain believed to create great merit and wash away sins—an act called 'kora' in Tibetan and 'parikrama' in Sanskrit. Normally, Buddhists, Hindus, Jains and most tourists do the kora in a clockwise direction, while the Bonpos move anticlockwise. Once every twelve years—the Year of the Horse according to the Chinese and Tibetan calendars (the last one being 2014)—exponentially high numbers of pilgrims undertake the kora due to the belief that one circumambulation done at this time has the merit of twelve done at other times.





## Darchen

On his visit to Mount Kailash more than two decades ago, Tsewang Lama noted that Darchen consisted of only two mud buildings and some tents. However, this site, where the Kailash kora begins and ends, has rapidly grown in the last decade. Darchen now hosts several hotels, restaurants, supermarkets, taxi and rickshaw services, pool and snooker halls, shops catering to pilgrim needs and the Swiss-funded Tibetan Medical and Astrological Institute.



In the wind-protected courtyard of a glass-sided guesthouse for Hindu pilgrims near Seralung Gonpa, young Tibetans on break from guide duties play snooker at an outdoor pool table. Snooker and pool are popular activities to pass time in Taklakot and Darchen; it is common to see youth hanging around the numerous roadside snooker and pool establishments in these towns. This pastime has not failed to impress the seasonal immigrants from Humla either. Our team's Humli guide, Sonam, runs a snooker and pool establishment in Simikot, when he is not guiding tourists around Humla and western TAR.



A young sister and brother stand in the parking area for the numerous guesthouses near Chiu Gonpa on the north west shore of Lake Manasarovar. This is a popular overnight stop for pilgrims on their way to Darchen, and a popular location especially for Hindus to take a sin-cleansing dip in Manasarovar's holy waters.

At the western edge of Darchen, an old Buddhist pilgrim from eastern TAR pauses at the beginning of his clockwise Kailash kora. Rather than simply walking around the mountain—a distance of 52 kilometres—he makes full-body prostrations. Many Indic religions, including Buddhism, Hinduism and Bon, believe that making the pilgrimage more arduous brings greater reward. The heavy-brown vinyl apron protects his clothes and body from wear and tear as he repeats the prostrations. His forehead is scarred with callouses from touching his head to the ground with each of his thousands of prostrations.





Prayer flags marking the southern changjegang (Tibetan for a site for full-body prostration) of Mount Kailash, near Darchen. Traditionally, the prayer flags were made of cotton, and would naturally disintegrate with time. However, in the recent years more and more devotees have been using prayer flags made of synthetic material, which do not disintegrate. All across the Pulan County (TAR, China) and Humla, the disposal of these synthetic prayer flags is a significant concern in terms of waste management.



An elderly Bon pilgrim makes her way past the Chorten Kangnyi, known to Indian pilgrims as 'Yam Dwar', meaning 'the gateway of the god of death'. 'Yama' is the Indian lord of death, while 'dwar' means gate. As a Bon pilgrim, she does the Kailash kora anticlockwise.



Tarboche

A tarboche is a several-metres-high prayer flag staff. This one dominates the natural amphitheatre-like space at the eponymously named Tarboche. Every year, thousands of Tibetans and devotees from the nearby regions of Nepal and India gather at Tarboche during the late spring season festival of Saga Dawa—the Buddha's birth and death anniversary. This happens during the full moon in the month of May or June. Every year, the highlight of this festival is the installation of a new tarboche amidst much festivity, music and rituals.

On a red motorcycle draped with a ceremonial khada scarf, a monk in sunglasses rides down from Diraphuk along the western changjegang of the Lhanlungdo Valley. Motorcycles, often with Tibetan pop music blasting from their speaker systems, serve as taxis and transport on the kora. A motorable dirt road links Darchen to Diraphuk, located to the north of Mount Kailash, and now extends miles beyond Diraphuk toward the Dolma La pass.





Lhalungdo Valley

A family of Tibetan Buddhist pilgrims walks the kora, with the Lhalungdo Valley and storm clouds looming ahead. The trough-shaped Lhalungdo Valley is located to the west of Mount Kailash. It has many unusually shaped rock formations and streams, many of which carry a sacred meaning, especially for Tibetans.



From the Lhalungdo Valley the lower western face of Mount Kailash emerges mysteriously from thick cloud cover. This downward-tapering cleft through which this face becomes visible is called 'Kangri khedjung go'—the gateway to Kang Rinpoche (as Mount Kailash is called by Tibetans).



Western Changjegang, Lhalungdo Valley

A Tibetan Buddhist man prostrates his way up along the western changjegang, or prostration point. Tibetans normally complete the kora in two days, while some stronger individuals can do it in a single day. Performing a kora using full-body prostrations can take up to twenty-one days. Such pilgrims stop at a point later in the day and walk to the nearest tented teahouse, where they stay for the night. The next day, they walk back to the point where they had stopped the previous day and continue their journey. Some of the pilgrims who do full-body prostrations also bring along a person or two to help carry some food supplies, and possibly a tent, so that they stay for the night nearly anywhere on the kora route.





Lhalungdo Valley

A group of Tibetan Buddhist women from Gerze in north-western TAR make their koras using full-body prostrations. They tell us their koras are done to remove their sins and demerits and to repay the kindnesses of their parents. The three women with full-length aprons and warm clothes are well-equipped for the long spiritual and physical journey. Their matching bright-pink face masks and Day-Glow orange gloves give them the look of a uniformed team.





A Tibetan woman arriving at Diraphuk at dusk  
talks on her mobile phone.



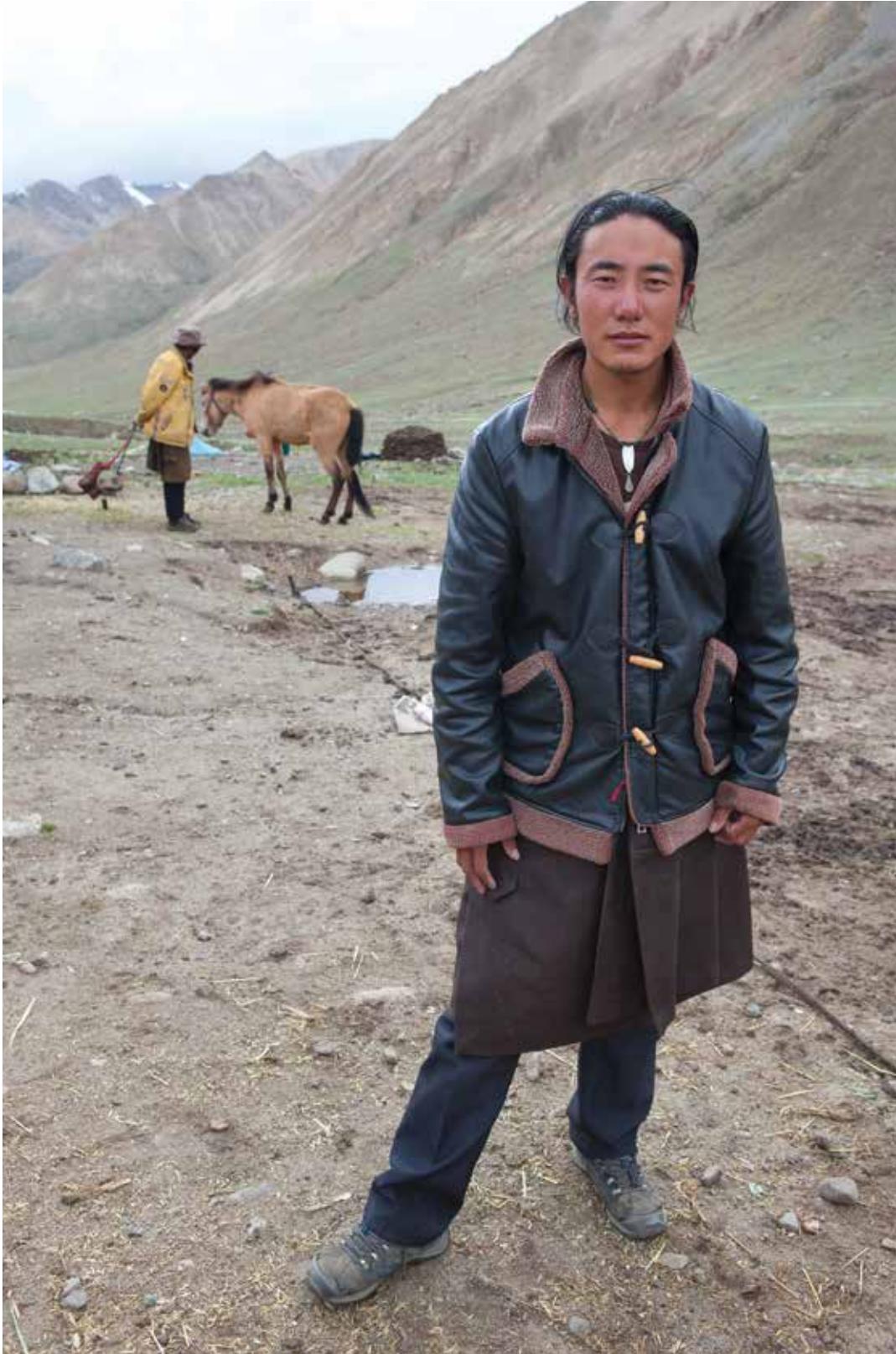


Diraphuk

At a height of 5100 metres above sea level and a few kilometres west of the Dolma La Pass, Diraphuk is an overnight station for pilgrims doing the Kailash kora. Its tented teahouses serve hot tea, fast food, beds, quilts and—to deal with the thin air—oxygen piped into masks from cylinders. Diraphuk also has an expanding collection of sturdy 'hotels' built with concrete and brick, and other smaller ones built like truck containers, in the fashion of barracks. Diraphuk is named after the Diraphuk Gonpa, built around a cave that plays an important role in the story of Gotsangba and the discovery of the Kailash kora route.



At dusk Chinese trekkers approach Diraphuk, where they will spend the night before their climb the next morning up to the Dolma La Pass. The Kailash–Manasarovar region is increasingly gaining popularity among Han Chinese visitors—for those with religious leanings as well as for those allured by exotic locales and adventure.



This Tibetan wrangler is one of the many who spend their nights at Diraphuk tending their horses, which they will lead in the morning ferrying tourists up and over the Dolma La Pass the next day, a lucrative business during the peak Kailash summer pilgrimage season.



Inside the new Diraphuk Gonpa a worker paints woodwork. His mobile phone plays popular Tibetan rock music that mingles at times with the voices of the two caretaker monks reciting mantras in the *lha-khang* ('house of gods' in Tibetan) shrine-room next door.

Nine bright-golden brass rooftop elements lie at the base of the Diraphuk Gonpa, awaiting installation. The heavenly dome of Mount Kailash lies hidden among clouds in the background.







From Diraphuk one may follow the rushing stream of glacial meltwater an hour's hike up towards the north face of Mount Kailash. Along the trail are numerous small cairns of delicately balanced stones left by earlier pilgrims to commemorate their journey, guide others and add visual accents to the natural landscape.



North face, Mount Kailash

This glacier at the foot of Mount Kailash's north face is holy to many communities. Buddhist pilgrims sometimes drape prayer flags at this site to propitiate the water spirits of the glacier. To Hindu pilgrims, this site is known as the 'toes of Lord Shiva'. They bow down in salute at the site, touching the base of the glacier with their hands and forehead. This ritual salute mirrors the act of bowing down and touching the feet of elders and saintly persons as a mark of respect. Some Hindu pilgrims leave photos and clothes of deceased family members at this site, in the belief that doing so would help the departed souls reach heaven.

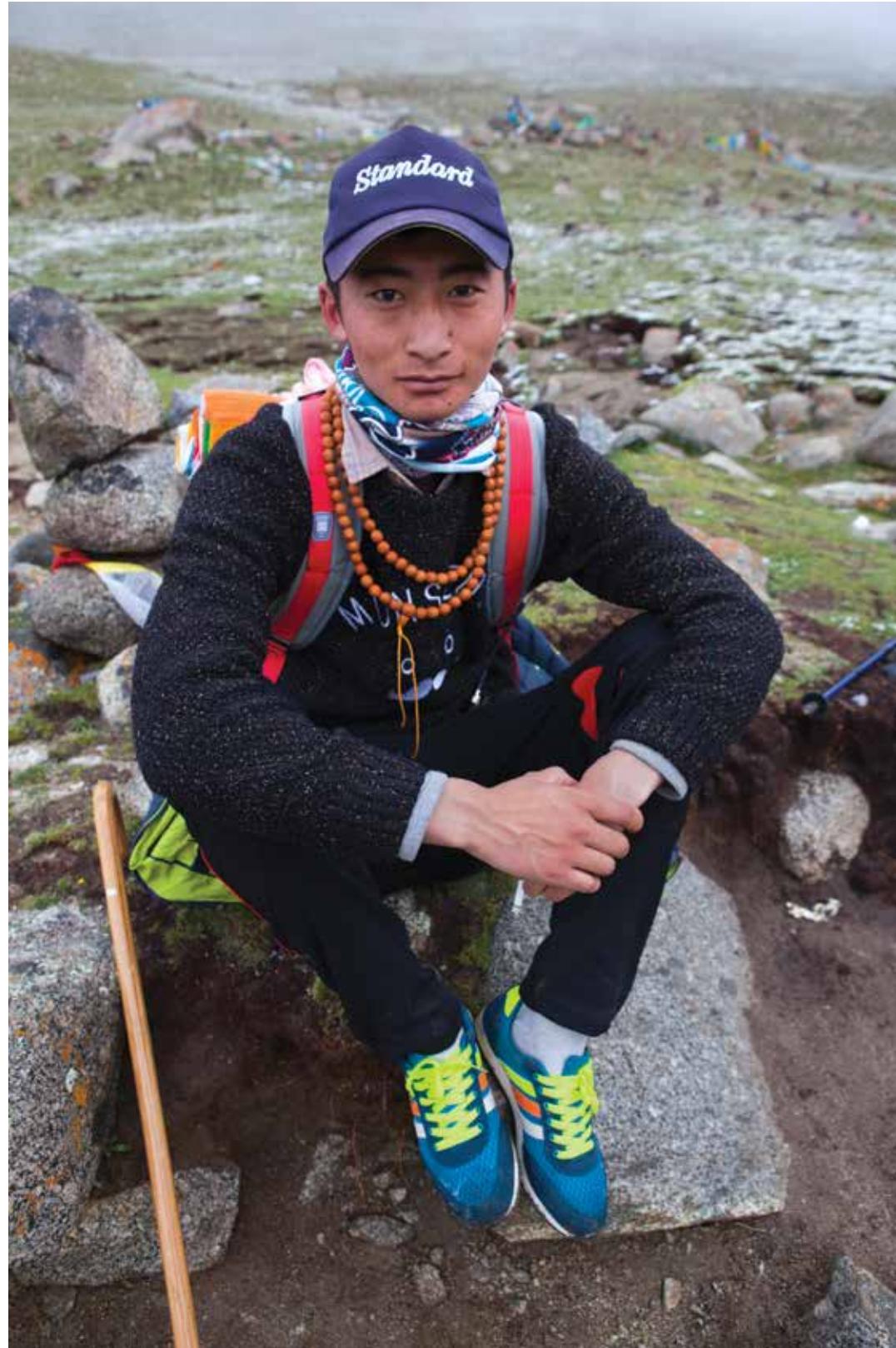




'There are mountains which are just mountains and there are mountains with personality ... Personality consists in the power to influence others, and this power is due to consistency, harmony, and one-pointedness in character ... If these qualities are present in a mountain we recognize it as a vessel of cosmic power, and we call it a sacred mountain. The power of such a mountain is so great and yet so subtle that, without compulsion, people are drawn to it from near and far, as if by the force of some invisible magnet; and they will undergo untold hardships and privations in their inexplicable urge to approach the centre of this sacred power. Nobody has conferred the title of sacredness on such a mountain, and yet everybody recognizes it; nobody has to defend its claim, because nobody doubts it; nobody has to organize its worship, because people are overwhelmed by the mere presence of such a mountain and cannot express their feelings other than by worship.'<sup>3</sup>

The climb to Dolma La Pass

On the early-morning climb up to Dolma La Pass, a fashionably dressed young Tibetan pilgrim takes a momentary rest to wait for his friends and family members to catch up with him.





A Tibetan father carries his young daughter up the trail towards Dolma La Pass.

His smile contrasts with his daughter's tears.



A Ngari Tibetan woman's colourful clothes bring a festive air to her work as a wrangler leading pilgrims on horses over the Dolma La Pass.



Hindu pilgrims on horseback are led across the last alpine pasture area before the trail narrows through rocky terrain up to the Dolma La Pass.

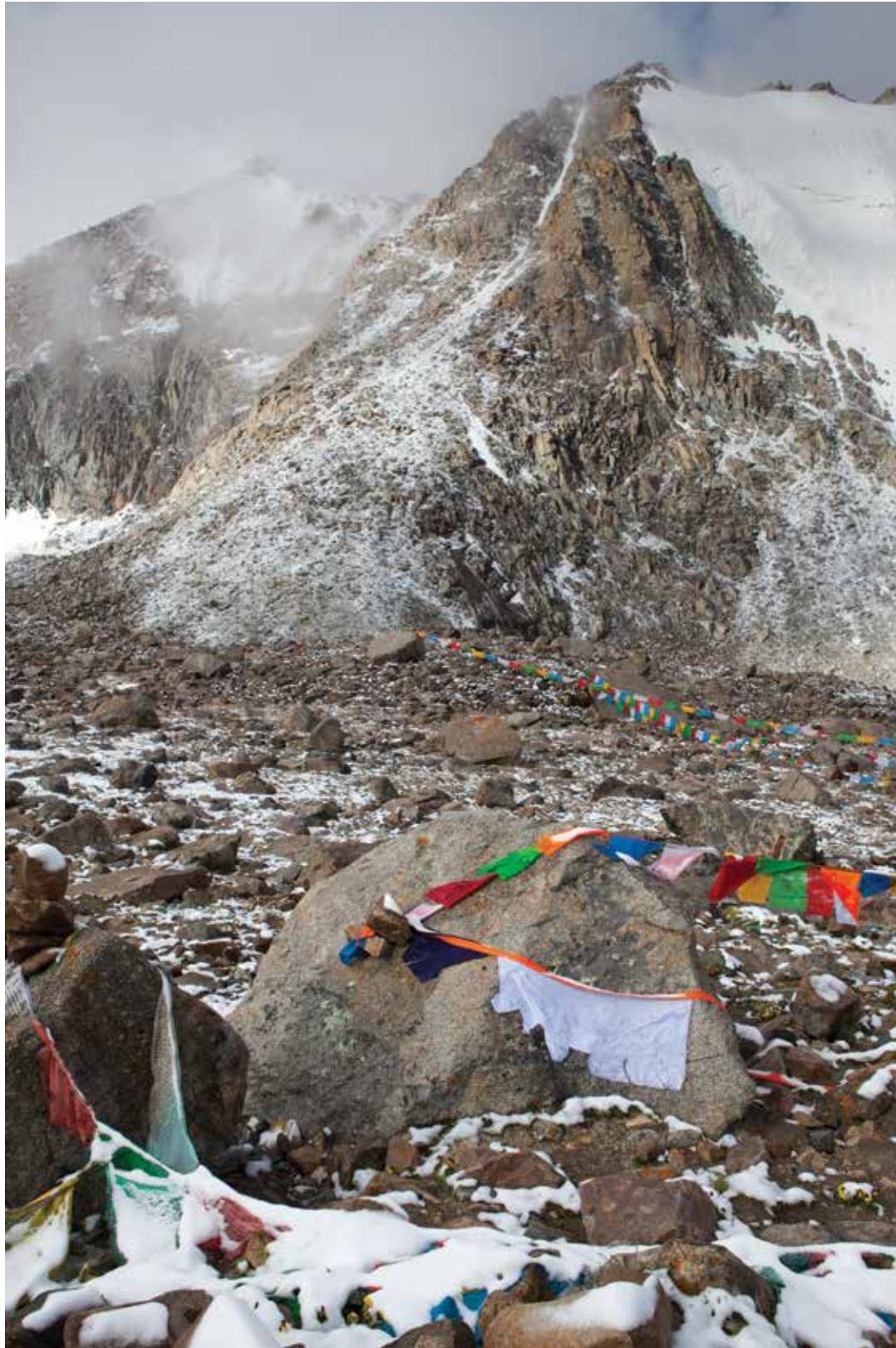




Pilgrims wind their way up to the Dolma La Pass at 5650 metres (18,537 feet) above sea level. This is the highest point on the Kailash kora. The final few hundred metres to the pass lie thickly festooned with prayer flags, partially blanketed by snow.



Yaks carry supplies for pilgrim groups. Owned by Tibetan locals, these hardy animals and horses are important components for every pilgrim group from India, carrying loads and occasionally carrying pilgrims fatigued by the altitude.



*'Like many a pilgrim before me, I solemnly circumambulated the cairn that marked the highest point of the pass, and repeating the Guru's mantra, I gratefully added a stone to the monument as a token of gratitude for having been safely guided up to here, as a pledge for the future pursuance of the path I had chosen, and as a blessing to all the pilgrims and travellers who would pass this way after me.'*<sup>4</sup>

Looking back up to the Dolma La Pass while descending into the eastern valley, fellow pilgrims and trekkers dot the horizon.





Bon pilgrims doing full-body prostrations on their way up to the Dolma La Pass navigate their own route away from the established footpath. Their route is one of unstable rocks wet from the previous night's snowfall. Below them is the milky blue green water of Gauri Kund. As they approach the pass, they increase the number of prostrations done at each point from one to ten, in order to multiply the merit they can gain.

*'Many a pilgrim has died from exertion on the ascent to the terrific altitude of nearly 19,000 feet, where a blizzard can freeze a man within a few minutes and where every gasp of breath has to be husbanded as if it were the elixir of life. But death is not feared by the devotee who dies in the presence of the gods on the most sacred soil, because he will die in the most exalted moment of his life, thus realizing his highest aspiration.'*<sup>5</sup>





'[The pilgrim] crosses the threshold of his new life on the snow-covered pass of the all-merciful mother Dolma. And lo, at his feet there is a lake of the purest emerald colour (which is the colour of Dolma or Tara) in the midst of rocks and snows. In Tibetan it is called the Lake of Mercy while the Hindus call it Gaurikund. In it the pilgrim receives his first baptism as a new-born being.'<sup>6</sup>



A tiny lapche emerges from the turquoise waters of Gauri Kund.



Pilgrims from Ngari follow the path above the Dzondu Chhu  
River between Zutrul Phuk and Darchen.



Tibetan girls from Ngari on the kora pilgrimage with their families, doing five consecutive circumambulations over their five day visit at Kailash.



The Dzondu Chhu River flows through the eastern valley surrounding Mount Kailash. It cascades into the expansive, lush-green Barkha plains, with the Himalayas in the distant background. Darchen lies just a few kilometres west of this point.





## KAILASH BEYOND WORLD RELIGIONS | Mark Larri more

I have had the extraordinary good fortune to go twice to the mountain Indians call Kailash and Tibetans call Kang Rinpoche and Tisé—the first time in 2013 and the second time in 2016. I circumambulated clockwise both times. My first circumambulation of Kailash was a pure experience of discovery, a more lateral version of the mountaineer’s conquest of an ‘unclimbed peak’: one sees it from every side. My second trip was different from the first in several ways. My travel companions were different, as also the route we travelled to get there. The season was the same but the year was different—the intervening Year of the Horse (2014) had left its mark in the landscape, as had road and temple building. And it was, of course, my second time—I wasn’t the same.

Most eventful for me, as a scholar, was the appearance of a book: Alex McKay’s *Kailas Histories: Renunciate Traditions and the Construction of Himalayan Sacred Geographies*<sup>1</sup>. The first work to historicize pilgrimage around this mountain, McKay’s book provocatively found the mountain’s significance to be relatively recent, less widespread and more contested than is allowed by the myth of an axis mundi from time immemorial.

This time I was aware of not following in the footsteps of pilgrims who had braved the journey for 10,000 years. Rather, I was aware of the numberless visitors soon to come as Kailash becomes part of a world-religion and natural-tourist menu<sup>2</sup>, and of my belonging not to the pious multitudes of a mystical past but the thrill-seeking throngs of a globalized and secularized late modernity. What I’d like to share here are some ideas for the *yatris* of the future, those, who, but for these relatively recent developments, wouldn’t have gone<sup>3</sup>.

\* \* \*

You know the story. ‘More than a billion Hindus and Buddhists revere Mount Kailash in the TAR as the centre of the universe and the abode of deities who embody the highest attainments of spiritual liberation.’<sup>4</sup> It is also regarded as the cosmic axis by Bonpos, Jains and, in some accounts, Sikhs around the world. It is discussed in the oldest Hindu texts. It is where the Buddha’s mother flew in a dream in order to give birth to him. It is the abode of Shiva. It was the centre of the ancient Zhangzhung kingdom revered by Bonpos. Coming to Kailash is the greatest wish of people across Asia and an increasing number of people in the rest of the world, drawn to join the ageless train of what its most eloquent modern prophet called the ‘brotherhood of those who have performed the pilgrimage’.<sup>5</sup> You get a sense of a great parade of *yatris*, delighting in the mountain, delighting in their cosmic discovery, delighting in each other.

This Tibetan mountain seems superlatively sacred by universal consensus. But as McKay has argued, Kailash has only relatively recently been the object of all these attentions. Even without challenging modern constructs of ‘world religions’, one has to concede that it is not all ‘Hindus’ and ‘Buddhists’ who revere it—just Saivites and a subset of Tibetan Buddhists, respectively. And when these pilgrims come together for their yatra or kora or parikrama, they ignore each other. If the shared mountain is common ground, this is hardly seen as important, at best a sign, but in no way a constituent of its sacredness. Associated religious stories aren’t about comity either, but conflict and usurpation: Ravana almost getting away with stealing the mountain, Demchok bouncing Shiva, Milarepa evicting the Bon magician Naro Bonchung, everyone sensing things others can’t.

Whence, then, this myth of a shared world mountain? McKay has laid out the components, spanning Hindu, Buddhist, Bon and more modern colonial sources. Meru wasn’t originally connected to Kailash, and even when connected, they were defined by inaccessibility. When actual material Kailashes were considered, this western Tibetan one wasn’t the first. Shiva wasn’t a part of the picture, at least not at our mountain, until after the Buddhists arrived there not more than 800 years ago. Kailash is mapped on to world religions only in modern times, as a British colonial official plans a pilgrimage route to generate revenue in his remote district of the Indian Himalaya. The idea of Kailash as a shared cosmic centre comes even later.

But I must confess that the myth speaks to me. Kailash as the mountain sacred to many of the world’s most ancient and influential religions offers something very special. It’s not proof that all religions are in fact one, like the inclusivist story of all-absorbing modern Hinduism. A multireligious Kailash shows that *different* cosmologies nevertheless overlap, and at a cosmic centre no less. It is paradoxical: difference *and* unity. But the idea of such a place is immediately intelligible. Why? The world-religions discourse constructs religions as isomorphic enterprises. Everyone has heard of the multiple paths to a single summit. When you consider how orientalism has shaped ideas of a monolithic ‘East’ attractive in colonial metropoles and peripheries alike, a Western Himalayan mountain’s coronation as the most sacred spot on earth seems almost overdetermined.

The consequence of this myth might be no more than that some of the travellers to Kailash, gliding in on new Chinese roads, bring with them the baggage not of particular traditions (even in their modern forms) but of the tolerant pluralism of what Charles Taylor has called our ‘secular age’. It might not be a bad thing for Western travellers to learn from the no-fuss way in which religious plurality is managed in so many Asian settings. And yet world religion discourse, even in its pluralist form, is not benign. It implicitly supports centralizing elites even as it glosses over meaningful differences in cosmology and practice, not to mention indigenous lifeways and livelihoods at the local level. Pluralism preserves the colonial universalism that anoints some world

religions with superior significance, supporting the often-dogmatic leaders of these religions in their efforts to stamp out dissent and syncretism.<sup>6</sup> A performance of the compatibility of world religions in circling the shared sacred mountain would support a sort of Hobbesian realism in the rest of the world: since any religion is fine, defer to the one you're dealt back home.

McKay's book seems inspired in part by the hope that awareness of the more complicated legacies which layer in as the world's sacred mountain will break the grip of the world religions. In the particular case it might lead not only to an awareness of rich and complex local cultures like those of Humla—and to the multiple Kailashes of the Western Himalaya—but to a greater appreciation of the role that renunciates have always played in South Asian and Himalayan history. Some line seems, for McKay, to be crossed when middle-class laypeople propose to follow in the footsteps of ascetics, collecting a commodified pilgrimage experience from a place, an idea, an outer beyond once constituted by its inaccessibility. The renunciates centrifugally left the world; they didn't gravitate centripetally to its centre.

\* \* \*

But it's too late to convince visitors not to go, and it only makes it a more urgently desirable destination to suggest that it's about to change irrevocably. It might be possible to affect future pilgrims' experiences there in ways that make for an experience truer to what the mountain, what lore around Kailash and its kindred, and what religion are really about. Instead of anchoring a deceptively pluralistic discourse of world religions, our Western Himalayan peak might provide a teaching moment. Kailash would point beyond world religions—not in the sense of a nebulous transcendence of the particularities of history, tradition and locale, but by reconnecting visitors to the vibrant and messy world effaced and distorted by world religions. I am not about to suggest that tourists can or should imagine themselves renunciates here. Seekers though they may be, they are coming to partake of a shared experience, something known. How might they then come to know more about the true ecologies and histories of the Western Himalayan Kailash? Here are four suggestions.

**1. Mountains and waters** - What if one made clear that for most South Asians Kailash is part—perhaps not even the most important part—of a complex with Lake Manasarovar, and other sites too, like the hot springs at Tirthapuri, not to mention the four great rivers thought to flow from it. This might lessen the mountain charisma of the supposed axis mundi and draw attention to concrete histories and landscapes, including, crucially, the rivers and lakes intimately connected to mountain veneration here, as in most places. (The people of the plains watered by rivers honour the mountains thought to be the rivers' sources quite differently from those who live on the flanks and in the shadows of these mountains.) This might still lead to 'ultimate'

experiences, but the connection of water and mountains on the plateau and in environments and settlements downstream would anchor the visitor in the particularity of the Indo-Tibetan world.

**2. Mountain networks** - What if one laid out Kailash's relations and resonances with other mountains, starting perhaps with Gurla Mandhata? Tibetan Buddhists have other sacred mountains. Shiva has other abodes. McKay discusses several other mountains named, and venerated like Kailash, some even with a stronger claim to be the avatar of Meru and the abode of Shiva and Parvati. Our research has also found multiple Kailashes in Nepal and India adequate to local needs and resources. The point is not to challenge the beliefs of those for whom one or another Kailash is important; one honours these beliefs by acknowledging them. There might be a chance to acquaint pilgrims and other visitors with Diana Eck's 'critical rule of thumb' for Hindu sacred geography: 'Those things that are deeply important are to be widely repeated.'<sup>7</sup> Sacred mountains work in many more, and more edifying, ways than just as single breaks in a horizontal world.

**3. Pilgrimage routes** - What if one made the journey central? The extent and antiquity of pilgrimage to Kailash may be exaggerated by modern myths, but the holy site is defined by long-standing pilgrimage routes. (The inseparability of Kailash-Manasarovar from the pilgrimage routes linking it to South Asian devotees is at the heart of the concept of ICIMOD's Kailash Sacred Landscape initiative.) Getting there has always been arduous, and for travellers coming from different directions involved distinct trajectories—most obviously when routes westwards across the Tibetan Plateau are contrasted with routes northwards making their way through the particular ecologies of Himalayan valleys and mountain passes. In their flows and blockages, these routes provided multiple narratives of struggle and attainment, failure and release, each navigating very specific topographies and cultural as well as geopolitical borderlands. Maps of these pilgrimages over particular pathways could provide depth and contingency to the narratives of future yatris.

**4. Kora** - Each of these first three suggestions would involve amplified itineraries for visitors, different places to be shown or described. A final lesson might be attached to the experience of the circumambulation. Not all visitors perform a kora, of course, and even many enjoy their peak experience (sic!) in some personal contact rather than with the mountain itself. For that matter, kora wasn't important to most of the renunciates who went there in the past. Like Milarepa, most devotees sought out caves. But my concern isn't to reify or recreate historical heritage so much as to nudge future travellers' experiences of the mountain towards understanding it as a place where multiple heritages have long been at play.

For the yatris of the future, kora is to be commended. Going around a mountain is a significant and unusual feat. Circumambulation reverences a site in an entirely different way than ascent would. There is no substitute for the embodied practice of going around a mountain; unlike contemplating Himachal, you have to be there, and give yourself to its demands. You can't have the experience of being on a single trail which leads only back to itself just by thinking about it. You can't keep a mountain always to your right for days and nights—its peak out of physical sight most of that time—just in imagination.

Going even once, the circumambulator is strangely moved by those who make their way at different speeds—the fullbody prostrators especially—or in the opposite direction. But if I may make a proposal, let me suggest that visitors be encouraged to deepen their experience of the sacrality of the place and the skein of routes and communities which swirl around it by going around twice. Going more than once marks the yatra's difference from a mere hike. The yatri will move beyond experiencing the trip as a discovery, a conquest of the unknown, and feel a part of the many whose struggles and hopes have so long identified Kailash/Kang Rinpoche/Tisé with powerful transformation. They may gain an appreciation for those Tibetans who go around as many times as their permits allow, for the Hindus who come back as often as they can.

Where the first circumambulation was a gift to themselves, the second may feel like a gift to the mountain and all its devotees.

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Kevin Bubriski  
Abhimanyu Pandey



## NOTES

### NOTES FROM THE KAILASH YATRA - Kevin Bubriski

<sup>1</sup> Lama Anagarika Govinda, *The Way of the White Clouds* (New York: Random House, 2012).

#### Chapter 1 - Simikot and Nyin Valley

<sup>1</sup> von Führer-Haimendorf, Christoph. *Himalayan Traders: Life in Highland Nepal*. London: John Murray, 1975

<sup>2</sup> Pandey, Abhimanyu, Nawraj Pradhan, Swapnil Chaudhari and Rucha Ghate. 'Withering of Traditional Institutions? An Institutional Analysis of the Decline of Migratory Pastoralism in the Rangelands of the Kailash Sacred Landscape, Western Himalayas'. *Environmental Sociology* 3, no. 1 (2017): 87-100.

<sup>3</sup> National Planning Commission, Nepal, and UNDP, *Nepal Human Development Report 2014: Beyond Geography, Unlocking Human Potential*, <https://bit.ly/2sHRM4E>.

<sup>4</sup> Stan Armington and Sushil Upadhyaya, *Humla to Mt Kailas* (Kathmandu: Mandala Book Point, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> Colin Thubron, *To a Mountain in Tibet* (New York: Random House, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> Barry C. Bishop, *Karnali under Stress: Livelihood Strategies and Seasonal Rhythms in a Changing Nepal Himalaya* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Id.

<sup>9</sup> Tsewang Lama, *Kailash Mandala: A Pilgrim's Trekking Guide* (Kathmandu: Humla Conservation and Development Association, 2002)

<sup>10</sup> Tsewang Lama, *Kailash Mandala: A Pilgrim's Trekking Guide* (Kathmandu: Humla Conservation and Development Association, 2002)

<sup>11</sup> Lama Anagarika Govinda, *The Way of the White Clouds* (New York: Random House, 2012).

<sup>12</sup> Colin Thubron, *To a Mountain in Tibet* (New York: Random House, 2012).

#### Chapter 2 - Humla Karnali Valley: Simikot to Salli

<sup>1</sup> Edwin Bernbaum, *Sacred Mountains of the World* (California: University of California Press, 1990), xviii.

<sup>2</sup> Colin Thubron, *To a Mountain in Tibet* (New York: Random House, 2012).

#### Chapter 3 - Salli Khola to Limi Valley

<sup>1</sup> Robert Macfarlane, *The Old Ways: A Journey on Foot* (Oregon: Blackstone Audio, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> John Stevens, *One Robe, One Bowl: The Zen Poetry of Ryokan* (Boston: Weatherhill, 2006).

#### Chapter 4 - Limi Valley

<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey Hays, 'Tibetan Buddhist Gods', FactsandDetails.com, 2008, <http://bit.ly/2DpnISe>.

#### Chapter 5 - The Border: Hilsa and Taklakot

<sup>1</sup> Colin Thubron, *To a Mountain in Tibet* (New York: Random House, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Winkler, 'Caterpillar fungus (*Ophiocordyceps sinensis*) production and sustainability on the Tibetan Plateau and in the Himalayas', *Asian Medicine* 5, no. 2 (2009): 291-316.

#### Chapter 6 - Tirthapuri

<sup>1</sup> Alex Mckay, *Kailas Histories: Renunciate Traditions and the Construction of Himalayan Sacred Geographies* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Swami Pranavananda, *Kailas-Manasarovar* (Calcutta: SP League, 1949).

<sup>3</sup> Diana L. Eck, *India: A Sacred Geography* (New York: Three Rivers, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> Lama Anagarika Govinda, *The Way of the White Clouds* (New York: Random House, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

#### Chapter 7 - Manasarovar and Rakshas Tal

<sup>1</sup> John Snelling, *The Sacred Mountain: The Complete Guide to Tibet's Mount Kailas* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsi das, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> Lama Anagarika Govinda, *The Way of the White Clouds* (New York: Random House, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

#### Chapter 8 - Kailash Kora

<sup>1</sup> Alex Mckay, *Kailas Histories: Renunciate Traditions and the Construction of Himalayan Sacred Geographies* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015)

<sup>2</sup> John Snelling, *The Sacred Mountain: The Complete Guide to Tibet's Mount Kailas* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsi das, 1990).

<sup>3</sup> Lama Anagarika Govinda, *The Way of the White Clouds* (New York: Random House, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> Id.

<sup>5</sup> Id.

<sup>6</sup> Id.

## KAILASH BEYOND WORLD RELIGIONS - Mark Larrimore

<sup>1</sup> Alex Mckay, *Kailas Histories: Renunciate Traditions and the Construction of Himalayan Sacred Geographies* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Doug Schnitzspahn listed Kailash as first among the 'World's Best Hikes: Epic Trails', *National Geographic*, 31 July 2012, <http://on.natgeo.com/2D3cSh0>.

<sup>3</sup> There will be yatis of many kinds. For reasons of space and limitations of my expertise, I have in mind those who whose main sources of knowledge about Kailash, and about travel, are in Western languages. Mainland Chinese tourists will surely make up a large portion of future yatis and will bring with them specific preconceptions about the TAR as a part of a cosmopolitan China, which I cannot address here.<http://on.natgeo.com/2D3cSh0>.

<sup>4</sup> Edwin Bernbaum, 'Sacred Mountains and Global Changes: Impacts and Responses', in *Sacred Natural Sites: Conserving Nature & Culture*, ed. Bas Verschuuren, Robert Wild, Jeffrey McNeely and Gonzalo Oviedo (Abingdon, UK: Earthscan, 2010), 33–41, 34.

<sup>5</sup> Lama Anagarika Govinda, *The Way of the White Clouds: A Buddhist Pilgrim in Tibet* (Boulder, Colorado: Shambala, 1970), 208.

<sup>6</sup> Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism and Diversity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> Diana L. Eck, *India: A Sacred Geography* (New York: Three Rivers, 2012), 5.



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