

Kailasa Mountain (Significance and Pilgrimage)

Mount Kailasa is believed by Hindus to be the home of Siva and his wife Parvati. The mountain of Hindu lore is believed to have a number of sacred properties. Kailasa is said to be at the center of six mountain ranges, forming a lotus, and it is also said to be the source of four sacred rivers flowing into India (Bernbaum 8). Siva, the destroyer deity in the Hindu pantheon, is believed to be the ultimate ascetic. He is believed to sit atop Mount Kailasa in meditation, which allows him to dissolve the world of illusion and to observe all that is happening in the world.

In the mountains of Tibet there is a mountain that has come to bear the name Kailasa. This mountain is sacred to all of the religions in the area: Hindu, Buddhism, Bon and Jainism (Huber 128). To Hindus, this mountain is the fabled Kailasa. While it is not at the center of six mountain ranges, it is indeed the source of four rivers which flow through India. Hindus also believe that, in addition to being the source of a tributary of the Ganges, the Karnali, Kailasa is also the heavenly source of the Ganges itself. They believe that after touching earth at Kailasa the Ganges invisibly travels 140 miles through the locks of Siva's hair to the physical source of the river (Bernbaum 8).

The Tibetan mountain, which is near the borders of India and Nepal, is a site of remarkable beauty. At 6,714m (22,028ft) above sea level the mountain is not the tallest in the Himalayas, although the lack of significant peaks around it makes it appear loftier than it is. The base of the mountain is very square, with four steep cliffs rising from the ground. Above these cliffs, the rock begins to taper and the mountain is noticeably stratified, giving the impression of stairs to its peak.

At the southern foot of the mountain are two large lakes. The easternmost is Manasarovar, which is round in shape and contains ice cold fresh water (Johnson 41). Hindus consider the waters of Manasarovar to be nearly as holy as Mount Kailasa itself, and scriptures hold that Brahma, one of the Hindu gods, provided Manasarovar to a group of Siva worshipers so that they could perform their required ablutions (Johnson 42). It is

believed by Hindus that bathing in Manasarovar will cleanse away a lifetime of bad karma, and completely immersing oneself in the icy cold waters will ensure rebirth as a god (Johnson 48).

West of Manasarovar is Rakshastal, a lake which Hindus hold in much lower esteem. Rakshastal is said to have been created by the demon King Ravana during his own worship of Siva. Rakshastal's waters are salty and do not support either fish or plant life. Pilgrims worshiping at Manasarovar are instructed to give only a glance in veneration toward Rakshastal, as the dark forces of the lake are too powerful for those who linger (Johnson 41).

Between Manasarovar and Rakshastal is a narrow channel, said to have been tunnelled by a golden fish. This channel, known as Ganga Chu, ebbs and flows with the water level in the lakes, and for most of the last century has been dry. Tibetans believe this to be a bad omen, and that when the holy waters of Manasarovar flow through the Ganga Chu to purify Rakshastal, the world is in harmony (Johnson 41).

Pilgrimage to Kailasa was once an extraordinarily difficult venture for Indian Hindus, and it was considered the greatest pilgrimage that could be made (Bernbaum 12). While some extreme ascetics still opt to make the entire journey on foot, through several high Himalayan passes, it is now much more common for pilgrims to fly to Tibetan or Nepalese cities such as Kathmandu, and take vehicles to the Tibetan town of Darchen, before setting off on foot for the last leg of the journey (Johnson 22).

Once pilgrims reach the foot of Mount Kailasa, they must decide how they will perform their circumambulation. Hindus and Buddhists traditionally circle the mountain in a clockwise direction, setting off to the west from the mountain's south face. Jains and Bon Po will instead travel in a counter clockwise direction. Even with direction dictated by faith, the pilgrim must determine if they are healthy enough to make the 52km (32mile) journey in one day or three, or if they wish to prolong the experience by prostrating themselves every step of the way. The prostration circumambulation takes at

least four weeks to complete. Most pilgrims will make the journey in three days, opting to spend each night in one of the temples along the well established path (Huber 131).

Recently, the pilgrimage to Kailasa has been established as a tourist industry by the Tibetans. Many tourist packages are available online, even from North America, most costing approximately 150,000 rupees or \$2200 USD. These trips which range from 3 days to a month, will often include transit to Darchen, rental of Yaks, and a guided trip around the mountain.

In addition to the spiritual significance for Hindus, Mount Kailasa is also sacred to Buddhists, Jains and Bon Po. While the Bon religion was founded in the vicinity of Kailasa itself, Buddhists believe a story which tells of a yogi, Milarepa, who flew to the summit of the mountain in a race with a Bon priest. This is believed to be how Buddhism became the dominant religion of Tibet. Jains believe that the founder of their religion, Rshabhadeva, attained Nirvana atop Kailasa (Bernbaum 11).

The mountain is arguably one of the holiest sites on the planet, held sacred by more than half a billion people, and revered for its beauty by anyone who witnesses it, especially during sunset. The mountain forms a powerful landscape, spiritually and physically, and sets forth upon India some of the holiest waters in the subcontinent.

Resources

Bernbaum, Edwin (1990) *Sacred Mountains of the World*. Hong Kong: Toppan Printing Company (HK) Ltd.

Huber, Toni (1999) *Sacred Spaces and Powerful Places in Tibetan Culture: A Collection of Essays*. New Delhi: Indraprastha Press.

Johnson, Russel and Kerry Moran (1989) *The Sacred Mountain of Tibet: on Pilgrimage to Kailas*. Rochester: Park Street Press

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Noteworthy Websites

<http://www.sacred-destinations.com/tibet/mount-kailash>

http://www.absoluteastronomy.com/topics/mount_kailash

http://www.sacredsites.com/asia/tibet/mt_kailash.html

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