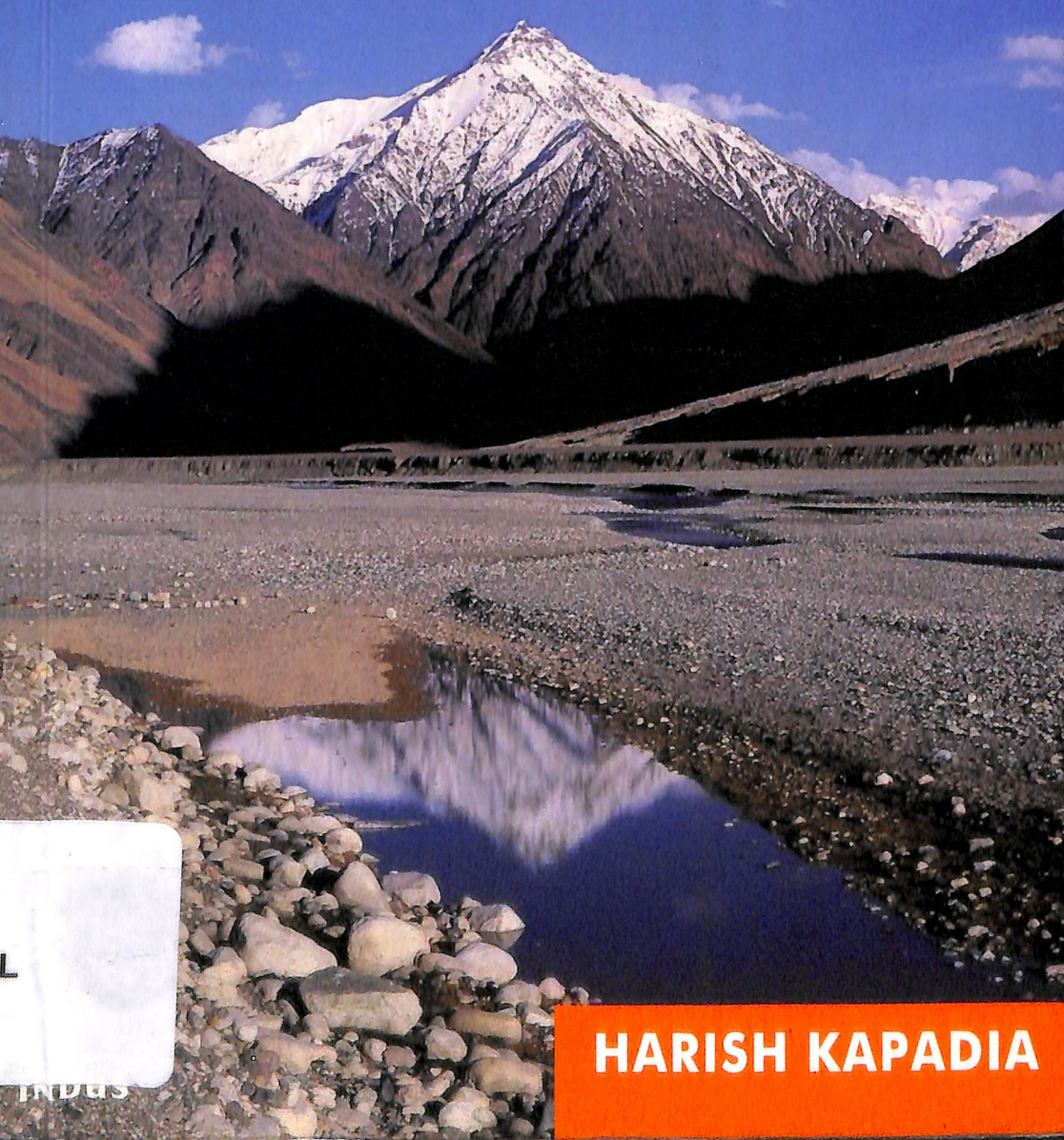


INTO THE UNTRAVELLED HIMALAYA

Travels, Treks and Climbs



HARISH KAPADIA

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INDUS

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Sketches by
Geeta Kapadia



INDUS
PUBLISHING COMPANY

To

Lt. Nawang Kapadia

He loved the Himalaya and gave his life defending them
'It is better to die in valour than be a coward'

Had I the heavens' embroidered clothes,
Enwrought with golden and silver light,
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths
Of night and light and the half light,
I would spread my cloths under your feet:
But I being poor, have only my dreams:
I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.

-W.B. Yeats



LT. NAWANG KAPADIA

“The World is a fine place and worth fighting for”
—Ernest Hemmingway

Nawang Kapadia, born on 15-12-1975, studied in the New Era School and the St. Xavier's Boys' Academy in Bombay. He graduated as a Bachelor of Commerce from the Jaihind College. He joined the family cloth business for a year. But since childhood Nawang had a desire to join the Indian army. He trekked extensively in the Western Ghats and in the Himalaya. He visited the Siachen Glacier during an expedition and met many army officers, which helped him to make up his mind to join the army, specially the Gorkha Regiment.

Nawang joined the prestigious Officer's Training Academy, Chennai, in August 1999 and was commissioned as an officer on 2nd September 2000. He joined the 4th Battalion of the 3rd Gorkha Rifles, and he was proud to be amongst them.

He was posted to Kupwara in the troubled valley of Kashmir where he participated in operations. While rescuing a jawan comrade Lance Naik Chitra Bahadur he was killed by a single terrorist bullet at 1110 hrs on 11-11-00, on Guru Nanak Jayanti day (*kartik* full moon). He was cremated with full military honours at Mumbai on 14th November 2000. Nawang leaves behind his grieving parents Geeta and Harish, brother Sonam and many friends in Mumbai and in the army.

His soul will Rest in Peace having achieved what he wanted to in service of the country.

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Introduction

I never see a map but I am away
On all the journeys that I long to do,
Over the mountains which are marked in grey,
Up all the rivers which are shown in blue,
And into those white spaces where they say unknown.

I started enjoying the hills at a fairly young age. It started like a train leaving a station slowly and then picked up speed. From early small treks, I branched off to climbs, international joint expeditions to the Himalaya and much more. I suffered injuries that almost crippled me, and sadly, lost few friends in the mountains. All these events are covered in my first two books: *High Himalaya Unknown Valleys* and *Meeting the Mountains*. The present book covers last decade of the Himalayan trips that I have undertaken.

Life has taken many turns in this period. My younger son, Lt. Nawang Kapadia proudly joined the Indian army as a Gorkha officer. He had that spirit of adventure within him along with immense pride of being an Indian. Sadly, he was killed in the ongoing war against terrorism in Kashmir. As my elder son Sonam became a busy professional, I had to seriously rethink my cloth business, which I would be now left alone to manage. This would have been almost the end of my visits to the Himalaya for longer trips. I had balanced well between business and mountains for 30 years and now it would prove to be difficult. The choice was obvious, to borrow a phrase from Bonington's book: 'I chose to trek'! Selling the 55-year-old business firm was a challenge as steep as climbing any mountain. But soon it happened, and I was free to explore, trek, write, lecture and edit full time. Other pleasures of life opened up too.

Then came laurels, a by-product of so much love for the Himalaya. I was made an Honorary Member of the Alpine Club, London, an honour I cherish. Later I received the Patron's (Royal) Medal from the Royal Geographical Society. I was happy that unknown valleys of the Indian Himalaya and explorations of these valleys were thus recognized. Again, there was a choice to be made, albeit indirectly. I decided not to let grass grow under my feet. There were areas in the Himalaya, which I had not visited due to clashes with business seasons. I had not visited valleys in Arunachal Pradesh, Bhutan and eastern Himalaya. Studying these, many ideas developed to explore them. Due to the reflected glory of my son, Lt. Nawang Kapadia, our army was cooperative and allowed permissions to trek there. Visiting the McMahon Line in the Tawang Tract and exploring the Tsangpo-Siang Bend were high points of my visits there. And in between, a quick trip to Bhutan allowed me to taste what could be future possibilities. Both these areas beckon me and I am sure to be there. Three trips to Tibet by three different routes, each in a different season and with different companions were pleasures of a different kind. These allowed me to observe changes in this vast land and study its Indian connections.

During these years I imbibed much wisdom from Sir Chris Bonington, with whom I had climbed before and who is now a good family friend. With age catching up, we teamed to undertake enjoyable trips to accessible but relatively unknown areas. One year it was Arganglas valley in Ladakh, then Tirthan valley in Kullu and last year Pangri valley in Lahaul. We enjoyed these smaller climbs and walks so much that it has become an annual ritual.

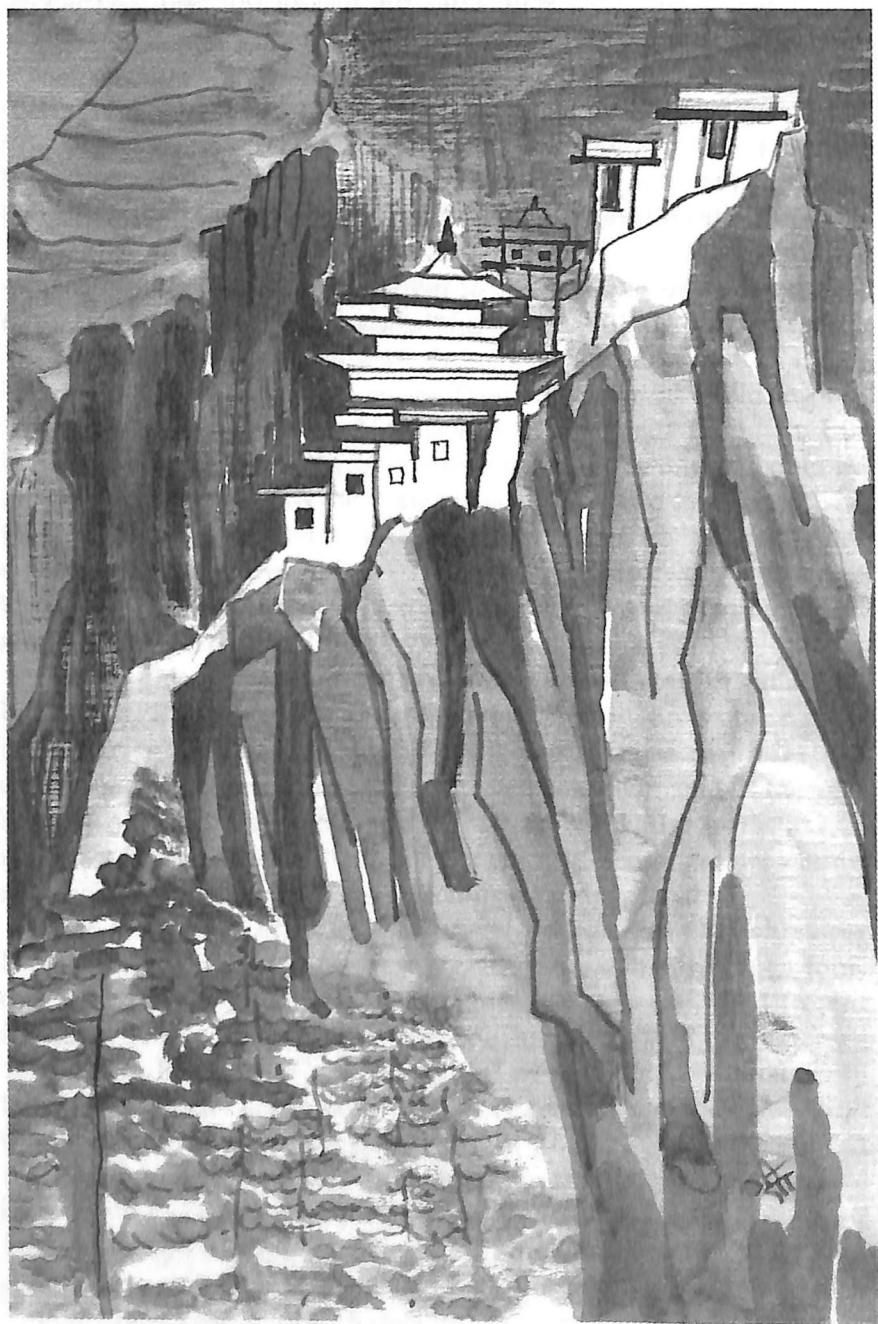
After retirement, I had free time for the whole year! So whenever I was tired of the city, there were smaller trips at hand; from a four-day jaunt to fifteen days. This was in the company of different friends who had less time. We reached Chur Dhar, Budha Pinat, Nag Tibba, Bara Bangahal, Shaone gad and many more. My affair with the Siachen glacier continued and I made two more visits there. With the war continuing on its heights, with groups of peers, I started working towards peace on the glacier. An Indian companion and I joined two Pakistani mountaineers and climbed a peak in the Alps as a symbol appealing for peace. After a long time, flags of both countries were unfurled together on a mountain summit.

In all these years, like always in the past, Geeta, my wife, gave

unstinting support, encouraged me to carry on with my love of mountains. Despite the pain after the loss of our son, she never stopped me from undertaking journeys, which were all dedicated to our son Nawang. Sonam is married to Charu, and both, despite their hectic schedules, take pride in my adventures. To them and all friends, past and present, I owe a lot. Today, old companions are taking interest in my ventures and younger friends are accompanying me. Their children, now entering their teens, are our hopes for the future.

As I enter the sixtieth year of my life, there is much enthusiasm and energy to explore and fill up those unknown white places on a map.

HARISH KAPADIA





TIBET

The traveller has to knock at every alien door
to come to his own, and he has to wander
through all the outer worlds to reach
the innermost shrine at the end.

—Rabindranath Tagore (*Gitanjali*)

Tibet, known as the roof of the world, has a reputation of being remote and difficult for travel. During my three visits to this charming land, I experienced exactly the opposite. A flight takes you to Lhasa easily or there are roads to drive in. Lhasa itself is like a mini Hong Kong, and roads though not highways, are comfortable enough to travel.

During my visits, spread over five years and by different routes, I was able to observe Tibet from different angles; infrastructural development, religious hegemony, Chinese rule, interaction with Tibetans and Indian connections with Tibet. All this, coupled with its long history and its present.

My last visit to Tibet started exactly to the day, 100 years after the Younghusband expedition in 1904. Younghusband marched through a prominent chorten in front of the Potala palace and 'unveiled Lhasa'. Tibet today is fast developing as a major destination. Within a few years it may be a different world. But the main occupant of the Potala, the Dalai Lama, is in India and not allowed to return. He is revered by every Tibetan and has declared recently to accept the Chinese rule for peace and progress of his people. These are the choices for this wonderful country.



1

Tibet: Hundred Years After Younghusband

Travels in Tibet

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

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

The Younghusband expedition 1903/04 was organized to thwart the Russian interest in Tibet, so it was thought. Lord Curzon, the then Viceroy of India felt that the Russians were supplying weapons to Tibet. He persuaded the British Government to authorise a major military expedition to reach Lhasa, which had been closed to visitors for a long time. Thus the Younghusband mission was born. Soldiers gathered in Darjeeling; Sikhs, Dogra and other Indian *sepoys* under British officers including L.A. Waddell and F.M. Bailey, and marched

across Nathu la at the height of winter in December 1903. Supply lines were built up and they penetrated deep inside the Chumbi valley with usual British military efficiency. Finally, Lhasa was reached but like the present-day Iraq, no WMD (Weapons of Mass Destruction) or Russians were found. After signing a one-sided treaty which established a permanent British presence in Tibet, Younghusband returned.¹

Lhasa and Surroundings

Much water has flowed down the Tsangpo since, as the old adage goes. Tibet has undergone change, political upheavals, ethnic rivalries, development of its infrastructures and now is a part of the international tourism circuit. Many border roads have been built and entry points opened. A modern international airport and a super fast railway line with modern carriages to Lhasa will be ready in time for the Olympics to be organised in Beijing in 2008. After the symbolic opening of Tibet by Younghusband, the world has changed for the Tibetans.

A modern jet, operated by the Chinese airlines connects Lhasa with Kathmandu. They serve some of the worst food but the aerial view compensates for everything. The panorama starts with Gaurishankar, Everest and Makalu, a grand view beyond imagination. As the aircraft takes a sharp northerly turn, focus shifts to the right as the Kangchenjunga massif and peaks of Janu and Jongsong come into view. Soon 'the Plateau' of north Sikkim is seen and then we fly over Tibet. It was time to fasten seat belts for landing at the Gonggar airport, which was under renovation and expansion. Younghusband had taken more than 9 months to reach here with guns drawn on *ekkas*² and long supply lines. We were here in 2 hours and the only formalities required were passport and visa. We drove the 96 km to Lhasa on a four lane highway crossing the Tsangpo at the Gonggar bridge, imagining the crossing by the early teams on inflated yak skins—romantic but dangerous.

This was my third visit to the Tibetan plateau, each time following

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

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

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

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

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

In centre of the Potala Square, flutters the Chinese flag near the site of a pillar that was erected in 821 signifying the Sino-Tibetan treaty. This treaty gave China the first foothold in Tibet, roots of their

3. 1999; trekking from Simikot to Purang, Mansarovar area.
2000; Lhasa to Raga, northern route to Shinquen, Mansarovar, Everest base.
2004; Lhasa, Shigatse, Gyantse, Kailash, Tirthapuri, Guge and Tsaprang.

claim date thus far back. It was again at this place under the 1959 'Lhasa uprising', hundreds of Tibetans had gathered to protest. They were dispersed and the Dalai Lama fled to India. Rest, as they say, is history.⁴

The spiritual centre of Lhasa is the Jokhang temple with the Barkhor circuit around it. At anytime of the year, you will find devout pilgrims from far away villages, performing *chham*, the Tibetan way of bowing to the deity. It wore a colourful look and in small stalls in the mall, statues of Mao were being sold with that of Buddha! Near the temple and in Potala Square, boards were pasted with Chinese circulars, and statues of liberated peasantry were erected in *Beijing* style. Tibetans read them with curiosity. They seem to be living without much fear and not much poverty was evident—less than what you would see in India. The three monasteries around Lhasa are ancient and holy. Sera is the nearest one, with Ganden and Drepung a little away. Each of these represented a way of life with hundreds of lamas being trained here. When we visited them, they seemed to be flourishing, well maintained and with several lamas performing rituals. Norbulinka, the summer palace of the Dalai Lama was another attraction. With its Japanese style garden and long walls, it was a peaceful haven for his holiness when he stayed here. A large radio, presented by the Prime Minister of India in 1952 is displayed and one wonders how it must have been ferried across passes by humans and mules.

The Younghusband Mission

Soon, it was time for us to start on our journey across the Tibetan plateau. In 2004, the road to Gyantse was being repaired and widened into a four-lane highway. Shortly, a wide road from Gyantse to Yatung would be joining the road from Nathu la in Sikkim and to Kolkata. As per the agreement reached between India and China, large container traffic from the warm water port of Kolkata would drive across this road to supply Lhasa, giving fillip to trade and bring supplies to Lhasa directly rather than driving across the entire Chinese mainland.

We passed the beautiful Yamdrok Tso (lake), Karo la and the foot

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

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

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

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

The final storming of the fort began at 3.30 am, on 6th July 1904. Lt. J.D. Grant and Havildar Karbir Pun led the assault. They climbed a cliff as Tibetans threw stones and mud at them. They got nearer

to the wall along a route on which stones could not reach, but many climbers slipped. Finally, these two reached the top at 6 p.m. followed by others. As Gorkhas made a charge with khukris, the Tibetans ran to the top and jumped off the cliff to their deaths. Over 500 Tibetans died in the assault. For their bravery, the 8 Gorkha Regiment received a special citation. Lt. J.D. Grant was awarded the Victoria Cross and Havildar Karbir Pun was awarded a First Class Order of Merit. The Gorkhas marched ahead across Karo la, Yamdrok Tso and without any resistance entered Lhasa through the chorten.

Gyantse and Shigatse

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

Between Gyantse and Shigatse, the second most important town in Tibet, there is a wide road, covering the distance between them quickly. Shigatse was a mini Lhasa with modern facilities and its centrepiece was the Tashilumpho monastery, the headquarters of Panchan Lama. Sven Hedin, the Swedish explorer had drawn excellent black and white sketches of the monastery and comparing them a century later, one can see that nothing has changed much, the streets and buildings are the same. One hopes that the people's faith is the same for there are disputes about who is the 'real' Panchan Lama. While we were in Shigatse, the Panchan Lama drove through the streets in a cavalcade, strictly guarded by the Chinese soldiers. People quietly bowed to him and some celebrations were held. As Indians, we had more respect from the locals ('as you come from the country where the Dalai Lama lives') and we interacted with lamas, locals and guides.⁵ They were comfortable talking to us but their eyes were always alert for eves droppers, even within their group. Grains are collected as tax from rural areas, and at vantage

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

points there were clusters of road builder's huts. Many Tibetans felt that what China took from Tibet (gold, precious metal, gems, food) was far greater than what was given back to them (roads, houses, infrastructure).

From Shigatse, starts the second part of Tibet. The road is rough and as you drive across the Tibetan plateau, population is sparse and towns become smaller. Lhatse is at the junction where a bridge across the Tsangpo leads south to Kathmandu, while the road west goes along the river. There is a pass to be crossed where we met Mr. Po, a Chinese cyclist who was going across from Peking to Central Asia, 'to see *my* country'. He was staying with Tibetans and had no qualms about travelling alone amidst them. On the road, frequently we saw double-decker buses carrying Chinese tourists visiting Lhasa and proceeding to the extreme west of Tibet. These tourists looked interested in the country but it was difficult to judge whether they were sponsored by their Government or were travelling on their own.

The Northern Road

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

road, unafraid of our cars. We heard the stories of Chinese soldiers using guns to hunt wildlife while travelling on this route.

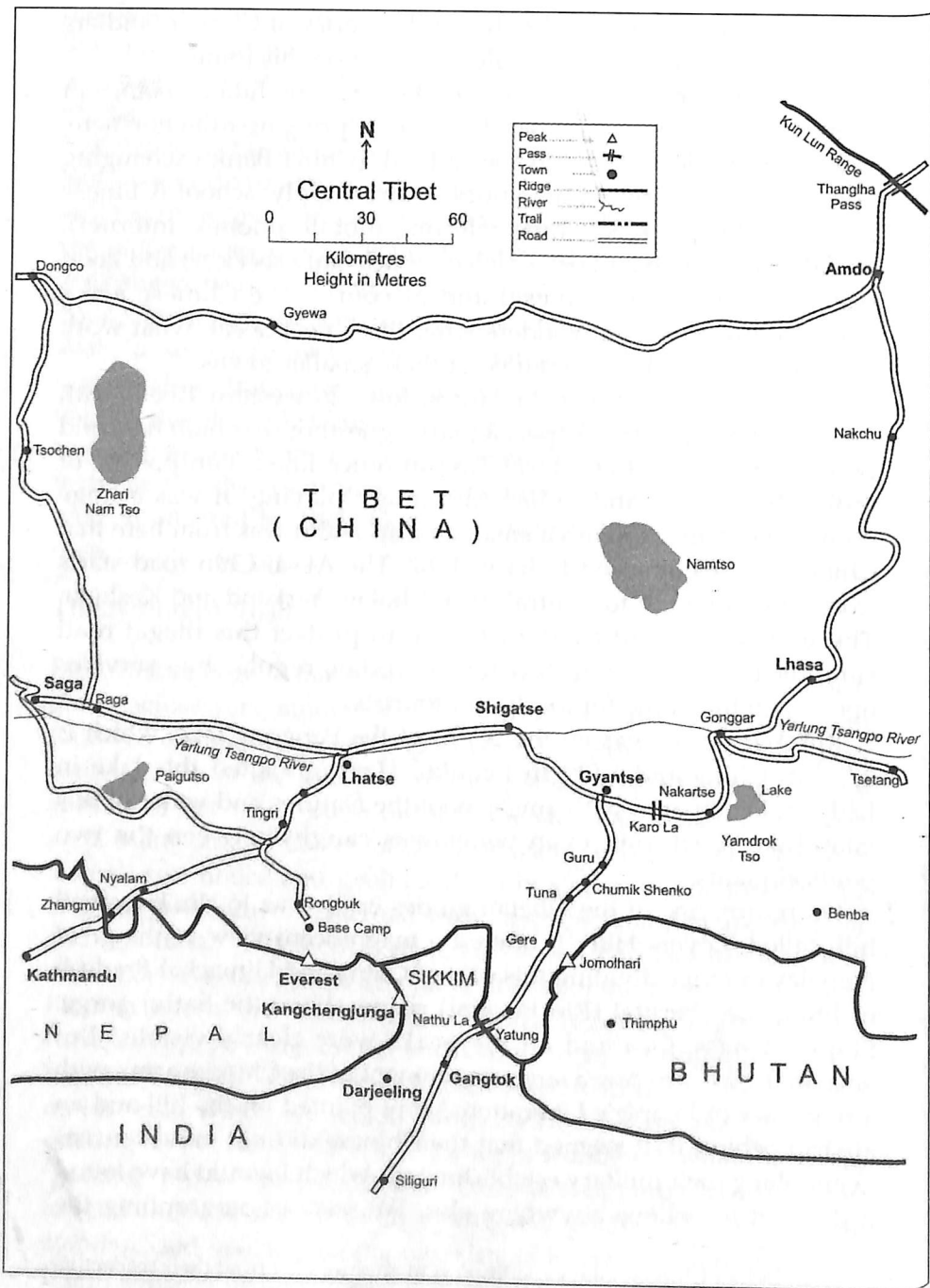
Most of the time after driving 200 km, with no human beings in sight, suddenly a modern township would spring up from nowhere, like for example Tsochen. It had a bank (China Bank exchanging dollars), hotels, modern amenities, water supply, school (Chinese teachers), telephones (China telecom, mobile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

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

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

On return, one of the Tibetan guides cajoled us to climb a small hill, called 'Lovers Hill'. It offered a magnificent view of the great Himalayan range dividing this part of China and Himachal Pradesh of India. Leo Pargial (Rio Purgial) rising above the Satluj gorge, Shipki la pass, Gya and all the peaks were clearly visible.⁶ But amazingly, we also saw a large cantonment of the Chinese army with a huge star of People's Liberation Army painted on the hill and an airstrip behind it. It seemed that the Chinese did not mind tourists overlooking their military establishments, which I would have found it difficult to believe anywhere else. We were photographing the

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



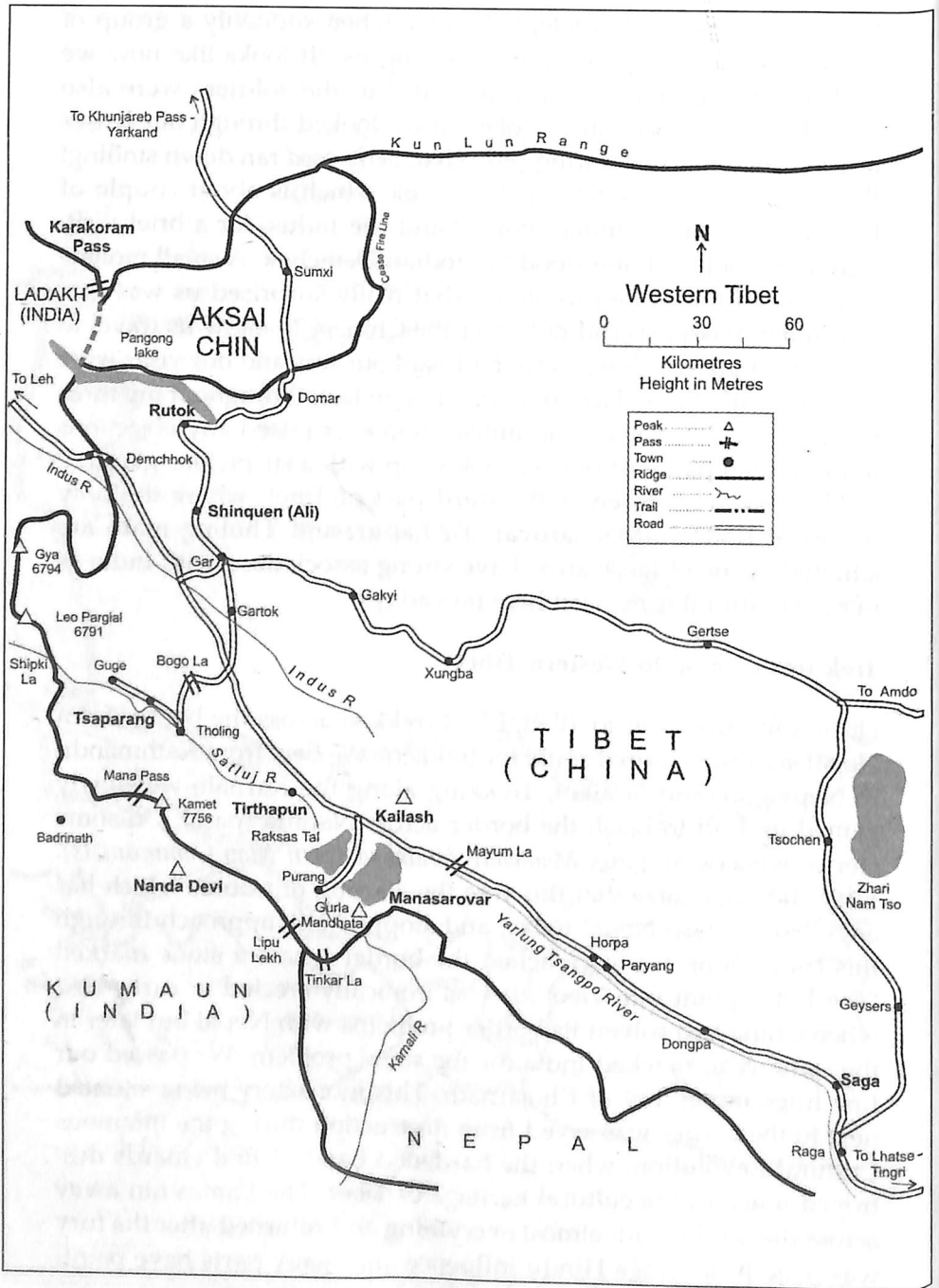
mountain peaks with a telephoto lens, when suddenly a group of Chinese soldiers were seen approaching us. 'It looks like now we will return via Beijing', I murmured. But the soldiers were also tourists like us; they came, looked at us, looked through our lenses at the peaks and murmuring *verly good, verly good* ran down smiling! From Shiquen we drove to Demchok which is about couple of kilometres from the Indian border and the Indus, for a brief visit. Across the political line stood the Indian Demchok. A small monastery was all that it had to offer. What really surprised us was that our Indian passports did not deter the Chinese to allow us travel to any border areas as long as we had paid our fees and our visas were stamped with these places marked on it. In fact, throughout my three visits no official, army or administration ever raised any objections to my Indian passport or ever looked up with a suspicious glance.

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

Trek from Nepal to Western Tibet

During my first visit to Tibet, I had trekked across the border from Nepal, a most favoured route for trekkers. We flew from Kathmandu to Nepalgunj and Simikot. Trekking along the Karnali, we slowly gained ground to reach the border across Nara la (pass). On some stones we saw slogans *Maowadi Zindabad (Hail Mao Communists)*. Little did we realize that this was the starting of trouble which has engulfed western Nepal today, and stopped any approach through this route. Soon we approached the border where a stone marked 'The Entry point into Tibet'. It was ironically erected in early 1962 when China had solved its border problems with Nepal but later in the same year attacked India for the same problem. We passed our first huge monastery of Khojarnath. This monastery being situated next to the border was saved from destruction during the infamous Cultural Revolution, when the hardened band of Red Guards destroyed much of the cultural heritage of Tibet. The Lamas ran away across the border with almost everything and returned after the fury was over. It has huge Hindu influence and many parts have paintings of Hindu Gods and Goddesses.

Purang, the district headquarters for this part of Tibet was near.



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

The road from Purang passes Toyo village, which houses a memorial to the great Dogra General, Zorawar Singh who died here in battle. The Dogras starting from Kishtwar had conquered Ladakh and marched eastwards into Tibet. The Chinese and Tibetans withdrew and allowed them deep inside. When the winter approached, the Dogra army was trapped in these inhospitable surroundings and was attacked by the defenders.⁷ On December 12, 1841, the gallant Zorawar Singh fell to a bullet in the war—his army was massacred with the usual Mongoloid ruthlessness. Taklakot (Purang) was abandoned. The flag of Lahore Durbar, however, continued to flutter in Leh. The Tibetans believed Zorawar to be a powerful person and in their primitive superstition began chopping his body and collecting different parts for strength. Some body parts were buried at Toyo where a monument was erected and the place of worship is locally known as 'Singhba chorten'.

Mansarovar and Kailash area

A long winding two-lane road now takes visitors comfortably and fast to Rakshas Tal and Mansarovar with the grand view of the holy Kailash. We gave a lift to a Chinese army officer in our car. After

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

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

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

From the southwest of Mansarovar near Tirthapuri originates the Satluj, flowing past the old kingdom of Guge. It passes through a gorge at the foot of Shipki la to enter Kinnaur and flow into the Punjab plains to merge finally with the Indus. Towards the south from the foot of Gurla Mandhata originates the Karnali river, which flowing through Nepal ultimately joins the Ganga. Thus, the major water sources of India, apart from the Ganges, originate north of the Himalaya and particularly from the vicinity of the Mansarovar and Rakshas Tal lakes. The channel between these two lakes called Ganga chu, is situated almost on the same longitude as the holy confluence of Ganga, Jamuna and the mythical Saraswati at Allahabad in India. These factors may have given a religious halo to the peak and the area. Perhaps some day, a researcher would discover that early saints and Indian *shastras* (holy books) actually knew about the

geographical significance and hence declared the area holy. There are gold mines at Thok Jalung, on the channel between the two lakes.⁸

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

Tirthapuri, Tsaprang and Guge

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

From Tirthapuri, we drove across Bogo la (pass) to enter the southernmost district of Tsaprang. No words can describe the scenery, which must be seen to be believed. Surreal colours of mountains, deep gorges, backdrop of range after range of unbeliev-

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

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

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

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

A few kilometres from Tholing stand the ruins of Guge, a place of mystical quality. A huge fort stood here and today, though you can see only ruins, one is awestruck by its magnificence. From the Satluj valley at its foot, you see a high hill in a brilliant setting, with many holes, which soon turn out to be caves, mud walls and monuments. Inside are paintings, which have luckily remained intact, showing the variety of visitors to the court of the King of Guge and Indian gods and goddesses. Jesuit Father Andrade had crossed Mana pass after Shankaracharya had stayed here and converted the King to Christianity! After a few years, the local lama clergy took objection and rose in revolt. The King had to run away for a few years and he returned as a Buddhist to restore the kingdom.

The centrepiece of attraction at the Guge ruins is the Winter Palace. It is a huge cave through which one has to descend and its

dark rooms with small windows are uniquely placed to keep the king and his entourage warm during the very cold winters of the Tibetan plateau. It offers a good view and gives you the feeling of how the king must have spent long months of winter—warm but without many of the modern day comforts.

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

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

—Lama Angarika Govinda,
Way of the White Clouds, p. 232

Rongbuk and Everest Base Camp

With this, the third part of Tibet was over and the only thing that remained was the visit to the Rongbuk monastery at the foot of Everest. We crossed the Tsangpo by a ferry at Saga (where a bridge is now being built) and drove to the banks of the beautiful Paigusto Tso, admiring the northern face of Shisha Pangma. A rough road,¹⁰ now a major shortcut, took us to the Rongbuk monastery, looked after by several nuns. Many Everest expeditions have camped here and today, vehicles reach the base camp which has built-in toilets, quarters for liaison officers and in season you can imagine over 300 tents spread around. The stories of ascents of Everest from the north

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

are many. As a vignette from the Younghusband days, small colourful *ekkas* drawn by mules would have taken tourists from the monastery to the base camp. The Everest was almost within touching distance and the play of light at different times of the day would have to be seen to be believed. The last rays of sun made the mountain golden, soon to be followed by reflections of radiant moonlight. One member of our group had tears in her eyes looking at this magnificence.

Return

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

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

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

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