Chapter 3

Recreating the Divine Order: The Puranic Kailas

Introduction

Around the time of the final formulation of the Epics, a new Indic literary genre began to emerge, the Purāṇas. These texts presented a smorgasbord of philosophical positions and conceptions of the Absolute, and advanced increasingly detailed descriptions of the heavenly realms, including several versions of the cosmological model of the universe centred on Mount Meru. The Puranas reflect a culture in which references to Kailas multiplied. It acquired a set of signifiers and as a literary and mythical device Kailas proved pliant enough to be widely utilised in Sanskritic cultural conceptions and imaginings of the universe.

Like the Epics, the Puranas were popular texts appealing to a wide audience, in contrast to works such as the Vedas which were the preserve of the Brahmanical caste. Puranas therefore played a major role in spreading an understanding of Kailas in wider Indic society. What is crucial to understanding Kailas as it emerges in the Puranas however, is to analyse these texts as what Ronald Inden called “different claims contesting for hegemony rather than as expressions of a unitary tradition.”1 While broadly ecumenical in their acknowledgement of a range of deities, they were essentially sectarian documents intended to promote the primacy of particular deities, their theology, worship, and associated sacred sites. Most Puranas therefore made no mention of Kailas, presenting competing sacred geographies and world-views. Even those that did mention Kailas offered differing visions of its sanctity and its location; visions which were subject to no classificatory authority. The disparate representations indicate that in the pre-modern period there was no single Puranic Kailas, or any pan-sectarian shared vision of the identity or even location of a Kailas mountain.

In this chapter we discuss the pre-modern Puranic Kailas with particular reference to the ‘Central Mountain, Divine Lake, Four Rivers,’ mythology. This association of Kailas with a lake and four rivers, which emerges fully in the Puranas, is fundamental to its modern status. Yet Puranic citations in support of Kailas-Manasarovar’s ancient sacrality are invariably selective and lacking in

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1 Inden (2000: 91); also see Inden (1992: 556–577).
wider context. That context demonstrates that these texts do not support many essential aspects of the modern construction of Kailas.

The Political Context

While the Epic texts (and, as will be seen in Chapter 5, contemporary Buddhist literature) suggest some knowledge of actual Himalayan geography and tribal populations, there are no reliable records concerning the nature or holders of political power in the Kailas-Manasarovar region before the 7th century CE.2 From as early as 200 BCE, however, much of Kumaon and part of the Garwhal areas to the south of the Kailas region was influenced by the Kuninda dynasty and, for several centuries more after their collapse, by their successors the Katyuris. The *Mahabharata* refers to Kunindas as one of the mountain tribes offering gold, as well as fly-whisks (commonly derived from yak’s tails), and to their having neighbours who offered herbs and holy waters.3 These commodities all associate them with the source of rivers such as the Ganges and even the Kailas region, or at least with their having trading links to those areas.

According to copper plate evidence and the testimony of Chinese pilgrim Hiuen Tsang, the Katyuris ruled as far north as Tapovan (above Joshimath).4 This would have given them a knowledge of the headwaters of the Alakananda branch of the Ganges that flows past Badrinath to Joshimath. In the case of the Kundindas, Maheshwar Joshi concludes from numismatic and epigraphic evidence that their authority reached from the Sutlej to the Kali river, and that the kingdom gained prosperity by acting as an exchange point for trade goods between the mountains and the plains. But while that role is consistent with that of later regional polities, ascribing the forms of power manifest in later polities to such pre-modern formulations, particularly in the hill regions, is problematic. Claims to authority in that period refer more to centres than peripheries and the Kundindas and Katyuris were probably loose confederacies rather than kingdoms or empires, with their population centred in the lower hill districts, as with later polities in that region.

2 Pranavananda (1983: 218) refers to an [unlikely] account of the Kumaon Raja annexing Kailas under Asoka’s orders; his sources are not given.

3 Joshi (1988: 73–86); (1989: 22); (2009: 327); Joshi’s latest work dates the Kuninda collapse to around the 3rd century, whereas his earlier work favoured a date later by several centuries.

4 Walton (1911: 164); Pranavananda (1984: 218); the copper plate is from Pandukeshvar, a village between Joshimath and Badrinath. This is not to be confused with the Tapovan above Gau-mukh.