CHAPTER 4

A Tantric Kailas: The Alchemical Trail

The Medieval Context

While a Sanskritic Kailas-Manasarovar emerged as a formulated ideal around the mid-first millennium CE, the actual site does not properly emerge into the Indic historical record until well into the second millennium. Even the Tibetan sources are reticent as to whether it was visited by Indic followers of the Brahmanical traditions before that time. There are references to tīrthikas (Tib: mu stegs pa), a term often used to refer to the Bönpo, but also to Hindus.¹ Yet it is notable that the Guge-Purang history (see Chapter 11), which refers to Buddhist practitioners at Kailas-Manasarovar in the 11th–15th centuries, do not mention any non-Buddhist visitors from India. Indeed, their only reference to Hindu pilgrims is a rather cryptic legend—which takes several forms—concerning seven “yogins” refused hospitality who turned into wolves before disappearing.²

There are no clear historical references to Hindus reaching the Kailas region from India until the 17th century when the kings of both Garwhal and Kumaon dispatched forces across the Himalayan watershed, notably in 1670, when King Baz Chand of the Almora-centred Chand dynasty sent forces as far as Taklakot (Purang), purportedly to protect pilgrims.³ As will be seen, this king also patronised Badrinath temple,⁴ and is credited with the Sanskritisation of the local

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¹ Das (1983: 967) defines tīrthika as, “a heretic ... or one indulging in pilgrimage ... a non-Buddhist.” Davidson (2005: 49) states that the term “may indicate Śaiva or Śākta yogins, Brahmans, or others outside a Buddhist affiliation” and sometimes (Davidson 2005: 137) clearly indicates Brahmical traditions/Hindus. Its use is attested in the Dunhuang sources, see McKeown (2010: 53, 247); and the term is also used for Muslims, see Kapstein (2011: 347).

² See for example, Vitali (1996: n. 491 318); also see Cutler (1996: 211–212).

³ Walton (1911); Pande (1993: 252, 259); also see Atkinson (1883: 67–71). I am advised by Roberto Vitali that he has not sighted any mention of the 1670 incursion in Tibetan sources. These incursions were obviously military rather than religious in intent, and the pilgrims needing protection may have been to Badrinath rather than to Kailas-Manasarovar so these are not proof of an Indic Kailas pilgrimage at that time.

⁴ Handa (2002: 82–84).
cross-border trading communities (‘Bhotias’/‘Jads’). Thus his forces’ incursion over the watershed was probably part of Sanskritising the region, and strengthening his northern frontier.

But if we cannot conclusively date a Hindu presence at Kailas-Manasarovar even to the 17th century, earlier visits seems certain. Travel there by renunciates probably predates this by four or five centuries, or much earlier if we accept that early sources reflect some knowledge from actual journeys to the region. Peripatetic groups such as the *Pasupatas* travelled widely in the Himalayas and as there were also early sects that focused pilgrimage on the Ganges, that they at least reached Badrinath is probable. Other routes to Tibet were also open. A Nepali inscription from 695 CE., records the royal grant of a village to support *Pasupatas* en route to Tibet. But there is no evidence that they were bound for Kailas; Lhasa is a more likely destination.

From the 18th century onwards however, there is evidence of Hindu renunciates travelling to Kailas-Manasarovar, and in this chapter we shall consider why certain renunciate groups were attracted to the site.

**Tantra, Renunciates, and Their Communities**

We have seen that renunciates as a category were prominent from the earliest period of recorded Indic history, and that conceptually they complemented their fellow Brahman ritualists, with the fulcrum of division between the two being their pure/impure status. The renunciates, equipped to travel beyond the purified norms and realms of Indo-European society, acted as agents of that culture in a two-way process of cultural encounter and expansion. The strictures against travel to heavenly realms such as the Himalayas, so prominent in the Epics and *Puranas*, did not apply to them for they were understood to be equipped with the *tapas*-derived magical powers that qualified them to travel there.

During the first millennium CE., new ritual technologies, or systemised sets of disparate existing technologies, became part of the armoury of the renunci-