Sri Kailas: The Mountain at the Source

Introduction

Sri Kailas is a 23,083 feet (6932 metre) high peak located to the northeast of Gaumukh in the ridge of mountains between the sources of the Alakananda, Jadh and Bhaigirathi feeders of the Ganges. The Raktavarna, Sri Kailas, and Lambigad glaciers separate the peak from these rivers (see maps 8, 9). Major K.S. Dhami, who led an expedition that climbed Sri Kailas in 2001, describes it as “one of the dominating peaks of Garhwal Himalaya … [it] has a unique pyramid shape which makes it totally different from the other peaks in the region.”¹ That distinctness had been noted earlier by German mountaineers whose leader, Professor Rudolph Schwarzgruber, recorded that when his party climbed Chaturangi peak in 1938;²

[W]e were particularly impressed by what we saw to the north. There a pyramid-shaped, snow-covered mountain rose from the glacier below ... To the north of this mountain the brown, desert plains of Tibet appeared.²

The German team subsequently trekked via the Raktavan Bamak (‘glacier’) on the first ascent of, “Sri Kailas, that mountain which had impressed us so much.”³

While this Kailas has attracted mountaineers it is the most remote of India’s Kailas mountains, visible only when traversing difficult terrain above the Bhaigirathi Ganga source at Gaumukh or the now-largely deserted Jadh Ganga course.⁴ There are no pastures to attract tribes to graze their flocks around

---

¹ Dhami (2001: 171–173). Before ascending, Major Dhami’s party acknowledged the mountain’s sacred nature with prayers and puja.
² Schwarzgruber (1939: 145).
³ Schwarzgruber (1939: 145); also see Schwarzgruber (1939A). Schwarzgruber gave the peak’s height as 22,742 feet; he encountered Major Gordon Osmaston who was then surveying the region. It was presumably Osmaston who established the height accepted by The Alpine Club (London).
⁴ The Jad(h), an ethnic group, closely linked to, if not synonymous with that known as the Bhutia in Kumaon (Lecomte-Tilouine 2009: 176–177), are associated with the course of the Jadh Ganga, which was a trading route for them with western Tibet.
the mountain, there are no permanent settlements or temples closer to it than Gangotri, nor is there any evidence that there ever have been. Sri Kailas is not within local ritual or mythological worlds, nor is there any history of its use as a symbol of the region or its power structures. Unlike the other Kailas mountain that is not locally sacred (Adhi Kailas), this is not even a site promoted by the tourist industry. While it appears on maps, no pilgrims or even renunciates seem to visit it today. The designation ‘Kailas’ thus serves no obvious interests, for although Gangotri is now a major Pan-Indian sacred site the mountain is effectively inaccessible to popular pilgrimage.

While located on a cultural frontier, this Kailas mountain clearly does not fit into the Indic Kailas models and processes discussed in the previous chapters. Yet a study of this peak, the history of its naming, and its location within a sacred region suggests it could be the model Kailas mountain in the Indic tradition.

The Kingdoms of Garwhal and Kumaon

During the first millennium CE, the Kuninda kingdom and its successor dynasty the Katyuris may have extended to the upper Ganges region. But these kingdoms were centred around the regions of present-day Josimath and Almora and we cannot be certain that their writ extended as high into the mountains as Badrinath.

Following the decline of the Katyuris in the late 11th century, regional dominance passed to the Khas Malla kings of the Jumla region (western Nepal), whose territory included parts of Ngari (western Tibet). In 1191 they invaded Kumaon and Garwhal and became the dominant power there during the 13th century.5 Originally Buddhist but later increasingly Hinduised,6 the Malla7 roy-

---

5 On a 1223 inscription in the Baleswar temple complex (Champawat; Kumaon) confirming this, see Vitali (1996: 448).
7 On which see Lecomte-Tilouine (2009: esp., 11, 254–276). She argues for the Mallas ruling “a defined religious territory” embracing a triumvirate of flame sites, with Jvalamukhi (H.P.) the third such centre. Yet there is no evidence that Malla authority extended that far west, suggesting that the construction was an ideal. But perhaps the flame site at Panwal outside Kedarnath on the route to Gangotri may have been intended? (Atkinson [1884: 19] states that Kedarnath was conquered by Aneka Malla in 1191.) Lecomte-Tilouine (2009: n. 18 257) notes an inscription from 1299 that may refer to a Nath presence in the polity and Kedarnath was, along with these other flame sites, a Nath centre. Chronologies, however, are unclear.