

KAILASH MANASAROVAR YATRA

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At the foot of Patoala.

I had the good fortune of undertaking the Kailash Manasarovar yatra from 13th June to 1st July 2010.

It was indeed the most gruelling, interesting absorbing and contemplative tour I had. At my advanced age of 82, if I could complete the yatra, the whole credit goes to my daughters Ranjini and Nandini and my son in law Col. Ravi Ramaswami and other members of our group viz. Dr. Kumar and his wife Shuba, and Dr. Srinivasan and his wife Vinita, who had ensured that maximum comfort is provided within the constraints of availability and every possibly comfort is provided. The encouragement I got from all these people helped me to get the courage and confidence to successfully complete the trip.

We were fortunate to have two medical specialists accompanying us which made our trip more comfortable with the comfort of medical aid available at any time.

i) The background for our Kailash/Manasarovar Yatra

It was during winter of 2007 that I expressed a desire to make the Kailash/Manasarovar yatra when I am able and fit. I was approaching 79 years of age. My children Ranjini, Nandini, Hamsini and Ramnath supported this idea and also wanted to make the trip in August 2008. Our family group itself was around 10 people. Accordingly, airline tickets were bought for travel in August to Delhi and from there Indebo had arrangements for the tour via Katmandu through their agents in Nepal and Tibet.

However in early January, riots were reported in Tibet against the Chinese occupation and these riots were indirectly intended to disrupt the Olympic Games planned in Beijing during summer of 2008. The Chinese Authorities then put various restrictions on Indian pilgrims to Kailash/Manasarovar. Because of these uncertainties, we decided to cancel our plans for the yatra in 2008. Of course, I was greatly disappointed. In 2008 November, I celebrated my 80th birthday with sadabhishekam at Coimbatore.

All my children attended the religious function in Coimbatore. Since they had already made a trip to India from USA, another trip for Kailash/Manasarovar in 2009 was out of the question as they could not take vacation a second time within a space of eight months.

ii) Preparation

Since I was keen on undertaking the yatra during my lifetime as soon as I could, I started on a physical fitness regime. Daily breathing exercises, a few simple yogasanas and a one hour walk in the morning and at least 30 minutes walk in the evening was the routine in addition to controlled food intake. Breakfast was a bowl of oatmeal with and a banana. Lunch was a typical South Indian lunch comprising rice, sambhar, rasam, vegetables and curds. I used to limit the rice to four scoops. I loved potato chips and generally had a handful for lunch. Evening tea with a bite of savoury was routine.

Night meal was generally light - one or two dosas. When the dates were finalised for our trip, I was in Delhi with my daughter Nandini. For almost two months before our trip, every morning around 6 a.m. we used to go to the forest near Kutub Minar and walk briskly along the trails for almost two and half hours. Being the peak of summer, this was exhausting but helped condition us for the trip.

iii) The details of our yatra:

My daughter Nandini and son in law Ravi, who run Indebo Travels & Tours Ltd., New Delhi, revived the proposal to undertake the Kailash/Manasarovar yatra in 2010 with a departure set to 15th June from Lhasa. They suggested that we should see Tibet, its historical and religious centres before we undertake the Kailash Parikrama. This will also give enough time for acclimatization to the high altitudes. The dates were chosen such that we complete the parikrama on Full Moon Day and have our ritual bath on Poornima when the devas are assumed to descend into Manasarovar for a ritual bath!! So we planned our parikrama for 24th, 25th and 26th of June. Since only four from the family could join this yatra, we had spread word around. Two of our friends from Los Angeles, Dr. Kumar and his wife Shuba agreed to join the tour. The family doctor of Nandini/Ravi from Delhi Dr. Srinivasan and his wife Vinita also agreed to join the group. Since Srinivasan and Vinita wanted to travel by the train from Beijing to Lhasa arrangements were accordingly made for them. Ravi also joined them for the train journey. Because of visa problems, Nandini also flew to Beijing and then on to Lhasa. Whilst Ranjini, Kumar and Shuba flew into Katmandu from Los Angeles, I joined them from Delhi on 13th June.

The group which went to Beijing had the good fortune of seeing Beijing, the Great Wall of China and the most enjoyable train ride from Beijing to Lhasa enjoying the pristine beauty of the country side and facing the changing weather pattern all through. The train itself is an engineering achievement and provides for oxygen at high elevations. Although a pantry car was available, no vegetarian food was served. Vinita being a vegetarian faced a big problem. This group arrived in Lhasa on 15th evening. They were given a ceremonial reception at the station by our Tibetan Agent. Nandini who had arrived a day earlier was properly established at the Kyichu Hotel and had an easy change over to the rarefied atmosphere and was there to receive us at the Hotel.

13th June Three of us had arrived on 13th at Katmandu. For US citizens, visa is provided on arrival for periods of 15 days, one month etc. Depending on the number of days within which you plan to be back in Katmandu on the return trip, you should take your visa. On the evening of 13th, we were shown around the Darbar Place where the Nepal King used to give audience to his people. Then to the residence of the eternal Kumari. We were fortunate to have darshan of Kumari. We then proceeded to the Swayambunath Pagoda on top of a hill. One has to climb quite a number of steps to reach the top. Turned the prayer wheels, had darshan of Bhagwan Buddha. Also a panoramic view of the city of Katmandu. We stayed at the Everest Hotel, a comfortable five star hotel. The Nepali Agent took our passports away for obtaining the Tibetan pilgrim permit from the Chinese Embassy the next morning. Katmandu has become so congested. Roads and streets are yet to be developed. There is are traffic jams all around since the traffic has outgrown the city. To tap the tourist potential, a lot has to be done to improve facilities.

14th June - Since it was Monday, large crowds were expected at Pasupathinath Temple. So we left early. Our local agent had arranged for somebody to take us around. The crowd was too much. We finally arranged to get an abhishekam and pooja done to one of the Lingas outside the main temple and through the influence of the local priest, could enter the main temple to have a glimpse of the Pasupathinath linga - the only linga with the roopa of Shiva on all sides. The priests doing the pooja in the inner sanctum sanctorum are deputed by the Shankaracharya of Sringeri Mutt. They looked so thejaswis and attractive that one automatically develops faith in them. We then went to the linga with the fifth face outside the main temple where Nepali brahmin priests were doing abhishekam and pooja. Here we did abhishekam and pooja. Somehow, this commercialisation of worship left a bad impression but then that is what happens when there are large crowds of worshippers. We later visited Bodnath Pagoda, a gigantic structure 100 metres in diameter, 100 feet high. Very impressive. Saw monks doing paintings. And finally it was to Pantal to buy some musical instruments.

15th June - Since we wanted window seats for observing the Himalayas, we left for the Airport early morning to catch our Lhasa flight. We were the first in the Queue. As soon as the counter opened, got checked in, but they gave us only two window seats. Ranjini and ShubaI could occupy one each and clicked a number of photographs, the crowning glory being that of Mt. Everest. Lhasa airport is adjoining the Brahmaputra valley. A tricky airport for approach and landing in view of high mountains all around. It is a tribute to the Chinese that they could provide a well equipped airport with nose in parking having a number of gates. It seems they have over ten departures and arrivals per day from/to Lhasa. As we disembarked and started walking towards immigration, one could feel the rarefied atmosphere - Lhasa elevation around 11000 feet - I was feeling unsteady on my feet. Cleared immigration and customs and our Tibetan Agent Mr. Tsiri erring was there to give us a ceremonious welcome. The Airport is almost 30 kms away from the city. The Chinese have made a tunnel 12.8 kms long through some mountains to reduce the distance to town. The road is pucca. The city had well laid out roads and appeared clean. We stayed at Kyichu Hotel on the main road in the city. I understand this was a mansion belonging to a Monk converted into a hotel. The hotel was comfortable with large rooms and attached bathrooms. We were advised to drink as much water as possible and to take complete rest. By evening Dr. Srinivasan, his wife Vinita and Ravi who came to Lhasa from Beijing by train had come and checked into the hotel. According to them their train journey also was memorable and change in scenario was awesome, to be seen to be believed. The train had automatic supply of oxygen like in pressurized aircraft.

Himalayas from the flight.

16th June - We went sightseeing - first to the Jokhang temple in the city quite close to our hotel. This temple is the most sacred temple in Tibet. Bhagwan Buddha is called Sakya Muni' There is also a statue of Maitreya, the future Buddha in the sanctum sanctorum. There is always a big crowd of worshippers. At the entrance is a place where incense is offered. And we can see pilgrims prostrating in front of the temple. On enquiry, we understand that they are all praying for the safety and good health

of the Dalai Lama who is still highly respected and loved. Went inside the temple, we prostrated in front of the deities. Offering yak butter lamps inside is a common practice. Since yak butter leaves lot of smoke, nowadays, they use vegetable oil for such lamps. Because of fear, nobody wants to talk to you freely as they are afraid of Chinese spies.

Ancient Jokhang Temple, Lhasa

Since we had permission to visit the Paotoala Palace at 1201.30 p.m., we went there. This palace is the summer residence of the Dalai Lama. It is on a hill 400 feet high. One has to climb more than 250 steps to reach the top of the Palace. The view of the city from the top is panoramic. Climbing to the top was strenuous and everybody was gasping for breath, especially me. For every ten steps, I had to wait, rest and then only proceed. Dr. Kumar was always close by to help and encourage me during this climb. Somehow, I could also reach the top. As is the custom, devotees light many butter lamps at the various altars of the palace and also leave currency notes as offering. We saw the darbar hall of the Dalai Lama, the room where he stayed as a student, where he studied the scriptures, where he worshipped. These places are preserved. What was striking was even in Tibetan Buddhism, they have Mahakala, Mahakali, symbols like Conch, Chakra, Lotus, etc. Many similarities with Hinduism. The climb up to the palace was definitely worthwhile as we could see all these important aspects of Buddhism and how they have preserved them.

At the foot of Potala.

After this exhaustive trip, we returned to the hotel. Since the day was also warm, we decided to take rest for the remaining part of the day. Though I stayed behind, most went out to the bazaar near the hotel for shopping. During the night, Ranjini felt breathless and said she is getting choked. I had Dr. Kumar come and check. Since hotel carried emergency oxygen cans, Dr. Kumar helped administer the oxygen. Since the flow was not satisfactory, Ravi called our local agent to come and help admit her to the hospital. After she was given oxygen at the hospital for about two hours, she came back to normal and we brought her back to the Hotel. She was advised complete rest to get her breathing back to normal with the atmospheric oxygen. Arising out of this incident Dr. Kumar wanted all in the group to take Diamox capsules once a day. As a matter of fact Dr. Srinivasan had recommended this to us in Delhi that three days before the tour, all should take Diamox.

17th June In the morning Ravi went for a kora of Potala Palace and had interesting meetings with a Doctor of Tibetan Medicine and several devout Tibetans who perform the kora as daily ritual. After breakfast few of us went to visit the Drepung Monastery. I stayed behind in the Hotel room as the visit to Potala had taken a heavy toll of my energy.

In the afternoon, we went to see the Sera Monastery where the young student lamas hold an open discussion of the subjects they are learning. It was entertaining to see the discussions and the way they are held. Of course everything was in Tibetan, so we could not understand the discussions but the vigour with which they were discussing was a delight to watch. We could not see the Drepung rest of the Monastery, as by the time we watched the discussions between the monks at Sera, the monasteries were closed for public viewing. We also cancelled a visit to Norbulinka Monastery.

At the Sera Monastery.

In the evening, our agent had arranged for a lecture at the Tibetan School of Medicine on the system of medicine followed by Tibetans from ancient times. Theirs is similar to ayurveda. All diseases are categorised as Blue, Yellow and White. Blue pertains to nervous problems, old age, yellow representing arthritis, bronchial problems, etc. and white gynaecology, children's diseases, etc. In Tibetan medicine also diagnosis is done by looking at the person, touching the person, smelling the person and discussing problems with the person. The medical treatment depends upon age of the patient, region from which he /she is coming, family history, food habits, nature of job done, etc.

Astrology is used to determine the correct date for commencement of treatment. The lecture was very interesting. By the time we returned from the lectures all the ladies including Ranjini had gone out for shopping!!!

Shopping at Barkhor, Lhasa.

College of Tibetan Medicine

18th June - We commenced our yatra. We were loaded in three Toyota Land cruiser jeeps and our baggage, tents, cooking vessels and provisions in a truck. We proceeded to Shigatse town (elevation 12600 ft) which is the seat of the Panchen Lama. There are two roads to Shigatse. One takes to Kampa La Pass at 15724 feet and Turquoise Lake covering 372 sq. miles. The other road skips this and takes you direct to Shigatse. Both roads are with black top and very comfortable. Since Ravi was concerned that I may not stand the sudden exposure to a high altitude, myself, Ranjini, and Ravi took the direct path. Others came via the Kampa La Pass. According to them, the pass and the lake were beautiful and they enjoyed the scenery. We were lucky that on this day the Panchen Lama was returning from Beijing to his headquarters in Shigatse and could see his entourage of a dozen cars and jeeps passing by. All other vehicles were asked to stop over so that this entourage can pass without let or hindrance!!

Turquoise Lake.

In the afternoon, we visited the Tashilumpo Monastery one of the six great Gelugpa institutions. This monastery was built by the first Dalai Lama. This Gumpa is the official seat of the Panchen Lama, the second highest position in Tibetan Buddhism after the Dalai Lama. This monastery can house more than 4000 monks. The entire complex is surrounded by high walls. The main highlight of the monastery is a five storey temple housing a fantastic 26 metre copper gold plated statue of Maitreya Buddha, known as the future Buddha and the tomb of the 4th Panchen Lama containing masses of jewels and gold.

Tashilumpo Monastery.

Dalai Lama is the top spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism. Dalai Lama meaning the Lama with the ultimate wisdom. Panchen Lama is the ultimate researcher and scholar. Conflicts always existed between the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama. In Shigatse, at one of the schools originally established by the first Dalai Lama, we learnt that there was a Lady Lama who was also a teacher for the first Dalai Lama.

Like Zorashtrians, Tibetan Buddhists also feed their dead to vultures. Tibetans cut the dead bodies in small pieces, mix it with barley atta and then feed them to vultures on an auspicious day amidst chanting of hymns. The people who cut and prepare the bodies are the lowest class in Tibetan society. Other low classes are butchers, carpenters and people who trade in animals.

Yangste Monastery.

19th June - After a comfortable stay in a Shigatse Manasarovar hotel on 18th at Shigatse, we left for Saga, and so started our agonising mud road journeys. Our destination was Saga (elevation 15026 ft.) 424 kms. away. There was no road. It was all mud track with ups and downs along slopes of mountains. It was a long drive. As we were keen on visiting a village to see how Tibetans live, we stopped at one of the villages. Went to a farmer's house. He has a solar heater for warming water which he sometimes uses for cooking too. Otherwise they use yak dung dried cakes for firewood. Main food is barley, vegetables and yak meat. They also use yak cheese and butter. The house is fairly clean. They appear to be people who are easily satisfied with small mercies. Most of them possess small piece of land which they cultivate. They also have some cows, yaks and goats for their domestic needs of milk, etc. Since agricultural land is limited, most Tibetans are nomads and their livelihood is from grazing cattle, yaks, sheep and goat. They have great respect for the Dalai Lama and worship him. They even asked us if we have a photograph of his holiness the Dalai Lama. If you happen to go on this yatra, do carry a few copies of His Holiness' pictures. The Tibetans at large will

greatly appreciate this gesture.

Drying yak's cheese.

On the road to Saga.

Apart from the rarefied air, we had to face the dust raised by vehicles. We reached Saga exhausted and checked into a hotel. This hotel can provide running water only after 8 p.m. for two hours.

Similarly, water will be available in the bathrooms only after 7 a.m. We went to a Chinese Restaurant and had our dinner. Though the restaurant was about 100 yards away, it was a struggle to walk even this short distance due to the rarefied air (we were now over 15000 feet). Fortunately, the restaurant could make vegetarian food!!! Food was tasty. They make modaks, call it momos with barley flour stuffed inside with cabbage. Their finger chips were spicy and crisp.

20th June - Drove to Tsamda (elevation 11975 feet) driving through Paryang (elev. 15583 ft.) to visit the ruins of Guge kingdom through unfinished roads, taking detours over mud tracks and across rivers. By evening we arrived at the campsite an hour's journey (25 kms) beyond Parayang. The Supplies truck had already erected the tents on this cold windy tract by the stream. The camp was comfortable but too cold. Camps are usually set up close to river banks so that water will be available for cooking and drinking. The most difficult part of camping is that one lies down on the ground. From this position, to get up, crawl out of the tent for nature's call is an ordeal. One should slowly get up from the sitting position as otherwise you will feel vertigo. Every effort involves a lot of breathlessness. After every movement, allow time to regain your composure. Sudden movements can result in your facing a black out!!!

Welcome drink at Parayang, first camp.

21st June - We began our journey following breakfast and drove past the devils lake and over dusty roads, to reach a promontory from where we got our first sighting of the Manasarovar Lake as well as the Holy Mt. Kailash. After prostrating we proceeded to Tirthapuri Hot Springs where we camped for the night.

First sight of Holy Mount. Kailash.

22nd June - Following early breakfast and arranging for the supplies truck to proceed to Darchen we resumed our journey, this time to Tsamda in the ancient Guge kingdom. Very long drive followed through muddy roads, along steep slopes, climbing and descending through a number of mountains. The ride was very rough over uncharted territory with no land marks. I wonder how these drivers were able

to take us through with no GPS or landmarks. In Tsmada we could locate a hotel called the Bei which was originally intended for Military Officers - there is a Military garrison at this place. We stayed in this hotel which took away our exhaustion. This place is quite close to the Indian border and Ravi told us that his father was posted here close by at the Indian outpost. The total distance travelled on this day was over 500 kms. We explored Tolling, the capital of Tsmada. Visited the ruins of the Guge kingdom and the monastery on a hill. Very impressive paintings. Stay at the Hotel was refreshing. We went to the local Buddhist temple - desecrated during the cultural revolution - being rebuilt and Sutlej river flowing nearby.

At Tsmada.

23rd June - Our next stop was Darchen (15010 ft.) , a distance of 300 kms. Our first glimpse of the Holy Mountain and Manasarovar was when we were approaching Darchen. Again mud roads, hills and valleys, tough ride. We could locate a new guest house - we were the first occupants of the same. The toilets are common at a distance from the rooms. Since the place was new, this did not impose any problem. Our cook and helpers were there to provide us with dinner and tea and breakfast next morning. Since the parikrama was to start the next day, could not sleep.

24th June - After breakfast consisting of barley porridge and toast, we proceeded to the starting point of the parikrama (Tibetans call it the Kora) around 10 a.m. We had to get our yaks for taking camping materials and cooking vessels and provisions for our first camp. Also it was decided that we will hire four horses for whoever finds the need for the same during yatra. Since arrangements for these are to be made with the Tibetan Authorities and the horse owners had not arrived, we left this to our Agent to arrange and commenced our pada yatra. What surprised me was there was no laid out path, no foot marks or defined path laid out for the yatra. Like sheep, one followed the group going ahead. The path was strewn with stones. No growth of grass or shrubs. One had to trudge along very rough ground, climbing and descending mountains. To add to the problem was the rarefied air. One got exhausted after walking hardly hundred yards. Chanting mantras was difficult as it required exertion. At the most one could chant OM Namasivaya.

Day 1 of Kailash Parikrama.

Mostly all chantings had to be in one's mind. I had to stop constantly for taking a deep breath. I found others from our group also had similar problems. We would have walked about 5 kms. when the horses arrived. I opted for a horse immediately as I found I cannot walk and do the parikrama. Shuba and Vinita and after some time Srinivasan also decided to use horses. That left Ravi, Nandini, Kumar and Ranjini to follow us on foot. To add to our problem, it started snowing - a light snow or sleet, so it was biting cold. The wind was also strong. and the obstacles on the path far too many - big boulders, small gaps through which the horses have to manoeuvre. Every time the horse climbs a steep slope, one should put all his weight forward and when descending backward. It was scary and one had to tell the horseman to hold the reins close and walk along with the horse slowly. Half way, we stopped at one of

the Tea House stops.. Had hot green tea and ate our packed lunch consisting of a nan and cheese. I wonder how we could trudge along the rough, uneven and treacherous path for 21 kms. and reach our camp site at Drhiraphuk. (elevation 17716 ft.). You can imagine what the plight of the walkers would have been. During this day, we could see Mt. Kailash only in patches as it was cloudy and raining/snowing off and on. It was almost Sunset when we reached the camp site near a river bank. As soon as our dinner was ready consisting of Dal, chaval and subzi, we had our dinner and went to sleep.

25th June - Winds were strong and there was light precipitation in the form of snow. It was biting cold. The air was further thinner due to the higher elevation. Because I had to get up a number of times in the night, I hardly slept. But then most of us could not because of the anxiety of the tough climb ahead in on the second day of the parikrama. My daughter Nandini brought me hot water to brush my teeth and wash my face. She also got me a hot cup of tea. It was an effort to go up to the toilet tent, but somehow I did it. Got ready. Went to the dining tent and had breakfast of kanji and bread and biscuits. On our persuasion both Kumar and Ranjini hired horses for the ride up to Drolma Pass (19800 feet). This was indeed a difficult ride through boulders and slush and a steep climb. We somehow reached the Drolma Pass (elevation 19800 feet). Nandini and Ravi walked all the way up to the Drolma Pass. We were asked to dismount our horses and to walk downhill, a distance of 8 kms. to the foothills as the horsemen said their horses cannot come down with a load as there is every likelihood of their tripping and breaking their legs. We had our lunch consisting of rotis and cheese gulped with green tea. It was snowing and it was mighty cold. The air was very thin and breathing was difficult, let alone walking. The downward path from Drolma Pass was as though a mountain has been blasted scattering big boulders all over. Literally one had to dance through these boulders. Every step was an agony, breathlessness, little strength to move forward. On top of it, one had to give way for horses and yaks who also follow the same route. Gauri Kund lies to the right of this descending path, down a few thousand feet below. The water looked bluish and some enterprising young people were going down to fetch thirth from there!! I was literally led by our guide and another helper during this descent as I was finding difficulty to keep moving and be steady. When we were almost near the foothills, my horseman found me struggling to walk amongst these boulders and came up and carried me on his back for the last 100 yards. It amazes me how everybody else could walk this treacherous path. We once again mounted our horses and after traversing another four kms. reached our base camp at Zuthulpuk (elevation 17211 ft.). Our camp was beside a river bank. There was a hill on one side which reduced the wind speed at the camp site. We were totally exhausted. Our Nepali cook prepared some hot food - rice, Dal and vegetables with pappad and pickles. This was like amrut. We had a good fill and hit the bed and had a fairly good sleep. The total distance travelled on the second day was 16 kms.

Resting.

Close to Drolma Pass.

26th June - The final day of our yatra Parikrama. It was pournami day. We started as usual around 9 a.m. after breakfast. The first part of our leg was on level terrain but undefined area with loose stones and mud. It was on this day we met a few Tibetans doing the Kora by prostrating all the way. They have special knee pads and breast pads and hand pads. It seems they take more than a month to complete the Kora. Very devoted - all the time chanting hymns. On all the three days I used to do my nitya pooja generally in my mind - Ganapathi Atharvasheersham, Rudram, chamakam and Purusha Sooktam followed by mrutyunjaya japam. Of course Gayatri japam whenever I could and Om Namasivaya. It is only these that could have enabled me to complete the yatra. After covering 5 kms. the horsemen disembarked us at the foot of a mountain which had to be crossed saying that they cannot make their horses climb a mountain on the way which had to be crossed. Perforce, we had to get down and start climbing and walking. For me it was an ordeal. Anyway somehow managed to reach the top most point on this track - they call it a pass. Ravi had arranged for a member of the team to tie a flag along the flat post at each place. Since this was the last such high point, I was asked to tie this. Very satisfying. It was very warm. We had to walk another five kms to reach our base where our vehicles were waiting to take us to Manasarovar.

Camp site getting dismantled. Day 3 Parikrama.

It was quite warm but there was a breeze 15 - 20K. It was around 4 p.m. we decided to go and have a bath in Manasarovar. Initially, we thought we will put a toilet tent on the banks so that after our dip we can rush to this hut for change of clothes but unfortunately, winds were getting stronger and we could not put a tent for clothes change. First we four men entered the water. On top the water was warm but cold at the bottom. We waded inside the tank for almost a furlong but the water was still only knee deep. We did not wish to take further chances. We sat down and prostrated and thus had a holy dip. Rushed to the shore. My daughters were ready with a towel and change of clothes which I did quickly, lest all catch a cold. Everybody was more concerned with my welfare being the senior most person. We collected theertham from Manasarovar and left for our camp site which was a kilometre away. After putting sacred ashes, I did deva rushi pithru tharpanam. Everybody touching me during tharpanam felt they also will be benefited!!! I had brought my pooja vigrahas and vilvam and akshathai. I then performed rudrabhishekam, pooja and aarti. We were all well satisfied that the yatra was duly completed and we had the blessings of Parvathi Parameswara.

Puja after bath in the Manasarovar.

We then had a sumptuous dinner and went to sleep with a heart full of thanks to the Almighty for our successful yatra.

One thing to note is that the parikrama path is not along the base of Mt. Kailash but far removed from it. When we do the parikrama, only at times Mt. Kailash is visible provided we are lucky and having good weather with no cloud cover. Also there is no chance of taking a bath in the morning when we do the

parikrama or whenever we stay in camps. It is always a sponge bath. What matters is the mind. Also there is no temple at Kailash or Manasarovar. Mt. Kailash in Linga roopa is Parvathi/Parameswara and we prostrate to THEM.

27th June - Left Manasarovar - bright sunny day - along the same dirt road by which we had come to a camp along the Brahmaputra after crossing Paryang town. Nothing special. We all were looking forward to the Everest base camp.

28th June - We drove down to Saga, Stayed at the same hotel as before. Had our dinner at the Chinese Restaurant.

Dinner at Chinese restaurant near hotel.

29th June - After breakfast at another Chinese Restaurant - Kanji vellam - rice porridge!! and momos. Left for Rongphu the Everest base camp. Half way, we halted near a river bed as Ravi suggested that we relax a bit. I was feeling tired and remained in the vehicle but Ravi suggested that I come out and freshen up. I went to the river bank, bent down felt the freezing water and touched my face. As I was getting up, I felt uneasy and giddy and shouted to Ravi for help. That is all I remember. It seems I passed out and fell. Fortunately Ravi caught me from hitting the rocks. After Kumar gave resuscitation, I revived and asked those surrounding me what happened!!! Since my problem was basically due to the lack of oxygen, the doctors advised that I should go to a lower level as soon as possible and that I am not fit to climb to the base camp of Everest which is at an elevation of 16700 feet. So one of the Landmasters along with Ravi and me drove down to Zangmu (elevation 7546 feet) which is close to Katmandu. The others left for the Everest base camp. We arrived at Zangmu in the evening. Imagine from a cold desert without any vegetation, the moment we were close to Zangmu, the hills had vegetation and as we closed in, thick forests and greenery. The valley was covered with clouds and it was raining!! My breathlessness disappeared and I was getting back to normal. We had a nice hot meal at one of the Tibetan restaurants serving Nepali food of rice, Dal and vegetables. Had a sumptuous meal and went to the hotel for a complete rest - imagine the pleasure of sleeping on a cot with a mattress!!

30th June - Had breakfast at the hotel - Rice Kanji, bread and butter and coffee. We then went for a walk to survey the town. Since this is the last town where provisions can be bought before leaving to Saga to commence the Kailash/Manasarovar parikrama, there were many shops selling requirements. The crowd were generally Indian pilgrims. By afternoon, the other members of our group came after visiting the Everest base camp. It seems they had a wonderful view of Mt. Everest and had enjoyed the trip. After they had checked in and freshened up, we all went out and had dinner at a Tibetan Restaurant. Food was good. The ladies tried to do some shopping. We returned to the hotel for a well deserved rest. At the Restaurant, we met another group, one of whom happened to be a friend of Shuba and Kumar. It seems they all returned without completing the parikrama as they felt it was too difficult. They also were huddled together six or seven to a room in Saga, so had no proper rest. Poor

pilgrims.

Mt.Everest. Sunset time.

1st July - Got up early as we wanted to be the first to cross Chinese customs. We reached the freedom bridge dividing China from Nepal. Had to wait till 10 a.m. for the Customs to open the doors. Thanks to our Agent, we could clear Immigration and customs very quickly and walked over the bridge to Nepalese territory. Had our Immigration check. Our Nepalese Agent Mr. Anil Agarwal had sent vehicles to pick us up. We drove straight down to his house for lunch. Mr. Agarwal and his wife were very hospitable and served us a very tasty Indian vegetarian meal. We really enjoyed the food, thanked them profusely and left for the Airport. We checked in as a group and so got the advantage of group bookings for baggage. Managed to check in all our bags. Reached Delhi. Indebo cars were waiting to take us home.

Nepal across the river.

Indebo team getting ready to leave for the Nepal border along with drivers and guide.

Visiting too many monasteries in one trip makes you lose interest. Perhaps we could have avoided the trip to Tsamda to see the Guge kingdom ruins. We could have saved three days from our schedule.

iv) TIBET - its historical, social, economic, religious and political history::

To fully appreciate the various socio-economic- political environment of the tour, it is essential to understand Tibet and the various problems that country is facing.

Tibet has been an independent country having a unique history. It is a vast country sparsely populated. Having an average elevation of 15000 feet, it is considered as the roof of the world. It is only because of the anticyclone in the Tibetan plateau that we in India are blessed with the monsoon depressions and distribution of rainfall in our country. The culture and religion of Tibet was an echo of the spread of Buddhism to those parts by the direct disciples of the great Gautama Buddha. Tibet has ever since maintained very strong relationships with India. India has always provided asylum to the Dalai Lama whenever his freedom is at stake as can be seen from the fact that the 6th Dalai Lama fled to India when there was an uprising against him. So also the present Dalai Lama, the 13th when the Chinese forcibly took over Tibet in 1955.

To us Hindus, Tibet is very important in as much as Mt. Meru or Mt. Kailash happens to be in Tibet, so also the sacred Manasarovar Lake. As much as for every Muslim, a visit to Mecca is a life fulfilling

dream, as much as for every Christian, a visit to Jerusalem is most sacred, for every Hindu a parikrama of Mt. Kailash and a bath in Manasarovar, is considered a bliss very rarely achieved. For there are far too many obstacles to face for fulfillment of this dream.

To understand the difficulties of making this yatra, one has to understand the magnitude of the problems one has to face. An understanding of the country in which Mt. Kailash/Manasarovar is located, its socio-economic, political and historic problems are necessary.

Tibet covers a very large area. Chinese have always claimed suzerainty over this area. With the establishment of the People's Republic China, their troops marched over Tibet and occupied the country. There was hardly any resistance as the peace loving people of Tibet never thought such a deliberate aggression will take place. China had their own designs. The area of Tibet is equal to one third the land mass of China. While the eastern parts of Tibet are fertile, the Tibetan high lands were sparsely populated but had untapped mineral deposits. This region comes under the Tibet Autonomous Region headed for by a Tibetan with a Chinese Head also supervising the region.

The Chinese set up military garrisons all over Tibet especially in the regions adjoining Nepal and India and strengthened their tight hold on all regions of Tibet. All police stations are manned by at least a few Chinese soldiers. In order to tap the mineral resources of the country, the Chinese have started building extensive road net work along the length and breadth of the country. However, only dirt roads which follow the slopes of mountains are now available which raises clouds of dust. The path is dangerous and one is left to the mercy of the drivers and the reliability of the Toyota Landcruiser!! It is really a wonder how these drivers are able to navigate through these roads without GPS or other land marks. The entire horizon looks barren. It is a cold desert with high mountains and valleys and strong surface winds. To call Tibet a plateau is a misnomer. There is no flat land available as the entire country is full of hills, mountains, ups and downs and by the time one travels hundreds of kilometres on these dirt roads with the mountain passes, half your limbs are almost broken and one is exhausted, Lhasa is connected to mainland China by a railway line which is a masterpiece in engineering technology. The Chinese are contemplating connecting Lhasa to Kathmandu by a railway line in the not so distant future. The Chinese have started investing large amounts of money in infrastructure development of roads and railway lines to enable easy access to all parts of Tibet.

Religion - Tibetans are very religious people. Not a day passes without their visiting the Buddhist shrines, offering incense and worship. Religion is extremely important to the Tibetans and has a strong influence over all aspects of their lives. Bon is the ancient religion of Tibetans which is now replaced by Tibetan Buddhism, a distinctive form of Mahayana and Vairayana introduced into Tibet from the Sanskrit Buddhist tradition of Northern India. During China's cultural revolution, most of the Tibetan monasteries were ransacked and destroyed. There is a new awakening to rebuild these monasteries. Of all the sects of Tibetan Buddhism, the most prominent are the Gelugpa or yellow hat whose spiritual head is the Ganden Tripa and whose temporal head is the Dalai Lama.

The influence of the Dalai Lama is immense. They venerate him even though he is not in their midst. They prostrate in front of temples for his long life and benevolence. There are two power centres in

Tibetan Buddhism - the Dalai Lama who stands for the eternal wisdom and so revered. Then comes the Panchen Lama who is the renowned researcher of the religion whose headquarters is in Shigatse. There have been constant conflicts between the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama. Most Tibetans have their prayer wheel with them and whenever they get time chant mantras rotating the wheel. There are a small minority of Muslims also there, so also a handful of Christians. Indians are highly respected by Tibetans as we have provided asylum to the Dalai Lama and his followers.

Economy - Since agricultural land is very limited, only barley and mustard are grown. Grazing is an important occupation and yaks, lambs and goats are reared. These and associated products are exported to neighbouring countries. Dough made from barley flour called tsampa is the staple food of Tibet. This is rolled into noodles or made into steamed dumplings called momos. Mustard grown locally features heavily in its cuisine. Meat dishes are yak, goat or mutton often dried or cooked into a spicy stew with potatoes. The main income for the State is from tourism, especially the Kailash/Manasarovar yatra.

The important cities in Tibet like Lhasa, Shigatse, Gyantse and Chamdo. These have paved roads, electricity and water supply. But the villages beyond have only mud access roads. Water has to be fetched from the nearest river. Electricity is irregular. Medical facilities are limited to the important cities. Most of the shops and eateries are owned by the Chinese. Vegetarian food freshly made is available in all these Chinese restaurants.

v) the problems faced by tourists/pilgrims visiting Tibet:

1) It is necessary to educate the pilgrims what they should be ready to face when undertaking the yatra in Tibet. The most important aspect is the rarefied atmosphere. The oxygen available at 15000 feet is only about 40% of the oxygen at sea level. Breathing then becomes a very big problem at these high altitudes in Tibet. Indian pilgrims seldom consider this aspect. The travel agent wants business and does not emphasise these hardships. Months before one thinks of this yatra, they should regularly undertake breathing exercises with a yoga teacher. They should also exercise their limbs - brisk walking for an hour. When planning the trip, allow at least three days acclimatisation as soon as you reach this high altitude. These three days should be spent with no activity so that your body is able to adjust to the changed environment. If this is not done, many are the cases when pilgrims have to be rushed for medical aid administering oxygen. In many cases, their yatra is interrupted and they have to be rushed to a lower elevation to revive their breathing.

2) There are two routes one can take for this yatra. One is from Katmandu following the land route to the Chinese border town of Zangmu. Zangmu's elevation is 7500 feet. Hotels are available. Staying in Zangmu for a few days will help the human body to adjust to the rarefied atmosphere but when you travel from Zangmu to Saga whose elevation is 15000 feet, there is a sudden change in the elevation and the consequent deprivation of oxygen and the attendant breathing problems. Saga has a hotel but minimum facilities. Availability of water in the bathrooms is from 8 p.m. to 10 p.m. and in the morning from 7 a.m. to 9 a.m.

- 3) The second route is to fly down from Katmandu to Lhasa whose elevation is almost 11000 feet. If one allows for three days acclimatisation in Lhasa the body is able to adjust to this rarefied air and further travel to higher elevation does not cause much discomfort. Also Lhasa has better hotels, reliable water supply and electricity and also good medical facilities.
- 4) Sudden change to rarefied air affects all people including young people. Nobody is free from this malady. I, 82 years old, did not face breathing problems in Lhasa but my daughter 48 years old felt choked and breathless within 12 hours from arrival and had to be administered oxygen. The point I wish to make is that all irrespective of age or sex can face oxygen starvation at these high altitudes. It is therefore absolutely necessary to provide for two to three days rest with no activity when one changes over from a lower elevation to a higher elevation. Also tourists/pilgrims should take Diamox tablets once a day a day or two prior to reaching Tibet to help improve breathing in the rarefied atmosphere.
- 5) I would recommend that all pilgrims should commence their yatra from Lhasa as not only does it allow time for a better transition to high altitude, it also enables one to see the historical and cultural side of Tibet.
- 6) Masks are recommended to avoid inhaling the dirt when travelling on unpaved roads.
- 7) After being in the land cruiser for over 2 hours, stop the vehicle, and stretch your legs and body. May be a short walk.
- 8) Wear loose fitting clothes so that there is space for expansion and contraction of the body with breathing.
- 9) Drink lots of water as the air is dry and the body needs refrigeration!! Also eat some food or other - may be chocolates. No oil stuff.
- 10) Never make abrupt body movements. When getting up from a sitting posture, do so slowly and allow a few minutes to steady yourself. Blood circulation to your head and brain takes time. Otherwise, you will feel vertigo and may collapse.
- 11) Never be in a hurry to walk fast. Take slow steps. When climbing steps, one step at a time. Raise one foot per step to be followed by the next foot in the same step. This conserves energy.
- 12) A bath is a luxury. You can have a bath in hotels where facilities are available. You just cant do this when living in camps.
- 13) Guest Houses have common toilet facilities like in our villages. They are not clean and at night with no electric illumination available, can be a nightmare. It is more hygienic to stay in camps where toilet tents are available than staying in guest houses.

14) With freezing temperatures and paucity of water, one should be prepared to use toilet paper or wipes.

15) Travel agents pack six or seven people per room in hotels. This is most inconvenient and takes away your privacy. Ask for two per room.

16) Since travelling in jeeps cannot be avoided for long distances, advisable to limit maximum to three per land cruiser. One need this comfort to take this long journey. Also advise the Agent making your travel arrangements to ensure that the Guide accompanying your group is trained to provide first aid, resuscitation, etc. This is absolutely important as even the healthiest person, even young, can collapse due to the low oxygen in the atmosphere.

17) The Kora or parikrama is undertaken by Tibetans as well as Hindus. The Bon Tibetans do the pradakshina anticlockwise and the Tibetan Buddhists and Hindus do the parikrama clockwise. The orthodox Tibetans prostrate all through the parikrama path. All people consider circumambulating Mt. Kailash as sacred and sarva papavimochana. The fervor shown should be seen to be believed. The path is far removed from the foot hills of Mt. Kailash as these regions are difficult to traverse. The path itself is not a level ground nor a beaten path which has left foot prints from time immemorial. It is a path strewn with rocks, boulders, loose earth, mud or sleet interspersed with small water flows.

The entire area is devoid of any greenery as we are in an area of a cold dry desert. The only indication of the path are the small mounds of rock pieces put together. It has far too many ups and downs some of which are steep. With the rarefied atmosphere and constant climbing and descending one is left out of breath most of the time. The Kora is completed generally in three days. The first day is a trek of 21 kms. climbing from 15500 feet to 17500 feet. Only if one has the will power and constant thought of the Lord and his blessing, he or she can fulfill the yatra. The second day's path is the most arduous. Now the path initially is steep full of boulders and puts a big strain on one's strength and determination. We climb from 17500 feet to 19800 feet to reach the Dolma Pass on this day. On reaching this point, even those who ride horses are asked to dismount as the further downward path is more treacherous, steep and full of boulders and even horses cannot pass with load as there is likely hood of their tripping and injuring themselves. So all pilgrims are necessarily required to walk down on this treacherous boulder strewn path. To add to the misery, the path is shared by horses and yaks and one has to give way for these animals. This walk through steep boulders takes the breath out of most and only will power sustains us as we have to cover almost 8 k.ms. before we reach the foot hills at 15000 feet. Then towards the camp which is a few kms. away through winding hills and valleys strewn with rocks and ditches and ups and downs. On this second day, the distance travelled is 16 kms. The last day's walk is fairly easier as it involves only a walk of 10 k.ms. The path is fairly even for the first half but later you have to climb up a mountain along a narrow path and descend to lower levels. Scary but achievable. On completion of this parikrama, we drive down to the camp near Manasarovar for the holy dip.

18) The most essential items each pilgrim should have are:

1. A pair of good quality water proof trekking shoes covering the ankle. Buy good

name brands.

1. Woolen socks - at least two pairs.
 2. A pair of waterproof walking shoes for normal travel.
 3. Two pairs of thick woolen trousers.
 4. under wears - one dozen
 5. thick cotton bani-ans with half sleeves - a dozen
 6. thick cotton/flannel shirts - 6
 7. A thick weatherproof jacket which has a pocket along sides as well as in front where you can keep yr travel documents, money, specs, etc.
1. Glare glasses iv proof.
 2. A bag to keep the essential clothing and articles required during the parikrama.
 3. Urination will become difficult if you have layers of clothing. So a good thick woolen trouser will suffice.
1. A monkey woollen cap and a sun hat.
 2. Cold cream and body cream. When you are camping or during parikrama, only you can wipe yr body with a wet cloth or sanitary towel. Creams will help prevent dry skin.
 3. A rain coat is essential as weather during parikrama is unpredictable - it can be sunny but suddenly turn to freezing rain, snow or sleet.

Medical supplies as required by individuals. The kit should contain Diamox capsules.

These are my personal observations. I am sure this will help others making the trip by forewarning them about the hardships and pleasures.

Ramakrishnan