Towering Tales
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PILGRIMAGE

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Rama's story is recited at Siva's Himalayan home

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It was Bapu's long-held wish to recite Ramayana on the banks of Lake Manasarovar, beside Mount Kailas, where, according to the sages, Lord Siva first narrated the sacred story of Lord Rama's life to His consort Parvati. I was blessed to be among 197 yatris (pilgrims) in August, 1997, with Rashtriya Sant Shri Morari Bapu gathered on the shores of Lake Manasarovar at a lung-fatiguing 16,000 feet for the renowned religious leader's 519th Ram Katha--presentation of Ramayana through song and inspired lecture. August 15th, India's Independence Day, fell mid-pilgrimage. It dawned cold with the promise of sun. Fresh snow had powdered the surrounding peaks. "On this day," Bapu told us, "our nation celebrates its greatness with the world. Satya and ahimsa--truth and nonviolence--is the strength of the Hindu soul or atma. Its influence has transformed the world. It is the victory of the sadhus, our monastic representatives of truth, that make this country great. The road to moksha, liberation from rebirth, is through India."

"Manas-Kailas Ram Katha" was inspired by Shri Morari Bapu as a "Prayer for World Peace." For three decades, Bapu has recited the Ramayana in sacred shrines throughout India, in dozens of countries, on land, on the sea and even in the air, on a chartered 747. In charismatic style, he inspires devotion and lends insight into the language and glories of the Ramayana of Tulsidas.

Kailas, the "Abode of Bliss," is the apex around which the world revolves, the Mount Meru of Hindu geography, mountain home of Lord Siva, sacred to five religions and within 50 miles of the source of four of India's major rivers. Kailas and Lake Manasarovar are imbued with Divinity and spirituality. Remoteness and awe-inspiring beauty protects its sanctity.

This was the first large group of Hindus permitted to visit Kailas in over forty years. After 1954, access was restricted due to the China-Tibet disputes. The border was closed in 1962. Policies were relaxed in 1982, and since then a limited number of Hindus have been granted access each year.

Bapu's month-long pilgrimage began on July 26 in Mumbai, India. The group of 197 yatris flew to Kathmandu where we remained for three days before flying to Lhasa, Tibet. Eleven nights were spent in Kathmandu, Lhasa and Shigatse, the rest traveling or at Kailas.

The expenses topped one million US dollars, mostly covered by generous contributions of several devotees of Shri Morari Bapu. The event was organized by the Indo-British Cultural

Exchange in affiliation with Sita Ram Seva Trust, UK, and Shree Satguru Seva Foundation, USA. It took several years of negotiations with Chinese and Tibetan officials to secure permission. This unique group was comprised mostly of Gujaratis, many of whom live in India, while others joined the yatra from the US, Canada, England and Africa. The youngest in the group was eighteen years old. The most senior was seventy-three. Hindi and English were the official languages, though Gujarati prevailed in conversation. The entire entourage from Lhasa to Kailas included 100 Tibetan drivers and helpers, 60 Nepali sherpas and 25 Chinese military escorts.

Chinese regulations required each pilgrim to undergo extensive medical tests prior to the arduous pilgrimage. There were several doctors and nurses among the yatris and a vehicle was outfitted as an ambulance. Specialized equipment included high mountain tents, oxygen cylinders, heavy-duty generators, high pressure stoves and infra-red cookers. A thousand cases of mineral water and 10,000 gallons of petrol were on hand. A period of altitude adjustment was required, so we remained in Lhasa for several days before driving 800 miles west across the great plateau of Tibet.

For four days we traveled along sandy and bumpy single-track roads in 55 Toyota Landcruisers. Aside from a few outpost settlements on the route, civilization was reduced to chance encounters with nomads herding their sheep or yaks. Travel was at times improvised, as when one Landcruiser driver opted to ford a major river instead of taking the bridge with the rest of the vehicles--"The engine stalled midstream, and a truck had to tow us out," reported passenger Hasmukh Patel.

Our main camp, Kailas Puram, was situated on the banks of the sacred Lake Manasarovar at 16,000 feet. A satellite phone link was available and helicopter evacuation facilities were in place. Luxurious bedding and thermal wear were provided along with puja articles, dishes, mirrors, walking sticks, a water purifier and canister, to list only a few of the gifts presented to each yatri--it was a "five-star" trekking trip.

During the first three days, some members of the group performed the parikrama of Kailas. Arrangements had been made for everyone to join the circumambulation, but incidents of acute mountain sickness became a concern--fifteen members had already been evacuated to lower elevations. Bapu appointed 11 representatives for the group and cautioned only those who felt highly motivated to proceed. I was among those who chose to walk the 32 miles around the holy mountain. I had been to all the prominent shrines in the Himalayas, but nothing prepared me for the high-altitude conditions where deep breathing is difficult and even speaking requires great effort.

An old Tibetan sherpa woman led me along the rugged path around Kailas, and at night she slept beside me in the tent. We crossed streams, balancing upon stones and reached Dolma La Pass (above 17,000 feet) early on the second day. It was a triumph. Gazing upon the majestic beauty of Siva's throne, we celebrated with chocolate and dried apricots. The rock strewn descent led across a snow field before reaching the valley floor. I followed the old mountain woman down gentle slopes over grassy fields of delicate flowers back to camp.

August 10 marked the 500th birth anniversary of Sant Sri Tulsi Das. The sun rose to a cloudless sky and temperatures rose into the 70s .There was no wind. "Tulsi Das gave us Ram mantra (sacred word)," said Bapu. "No saint has given so much. In the Kaliyuga (the present Age of Darkness) Ram nam (name) and Ram katha (recitation of Ram's story) removes delusion and instills devotion." Hari Ohm Patel, one of the youngest yatris, recalls the evenings, "We loved to sit near Bapu by his fire and watch the moon and how it would light the whole camp. Kailas glows at night. It was so peaceful. I realized how fortunate I was to come here." The youngsters enjoyed exploring the area on the bright, moon-lit nights.

Shri Morari Bapu recently celebrated his 50th year of his life. A soft rain began to fall as he began the selected chaupai or verse for this katha, "Kailas is the noblest of mountains and very beautiful, since Siva and Parvati have made it their eternal home." An inspired orator, he quotes scriptures interspersed with singing and chanting. In his unique humor he advised those complaining of sleeplessness: "Reciting the name of Ram at night is the medicine for the body and the soul." He said, "Whatever name pleases you, take it, take refuge." Bapu seldom uses English words, but once he said, "Pilgrimage to a tirtha (holy place) is not a picnic."

Climate is unpredictable in Tibet, particularly during August. Though extreme conditions were expected, fine weather prevailed with the occasional auspicious shower. Every style of jogging suit, fleece-wear and woolen kameez was sported by the participants. But after sunset, when the temperatures dropped, the singular fashion was the group-issued navy German military mountain jacket. Nepali sherpas attended to

every detail of earthly comfort. We enjoyed soft beds and excellent vegetarian food.

Three venerable swamis from India graced the yatra with their presence. A Sivalinga was installed upon the banks of Lake Manasarovar. Each evening, the group gathered and sang the entire Sri Ramcharitmanas--story of Rama's life. Into the dark, songs of praise to Lord Siva were chanted, creating a powerful prayer for world peace.

Near the end of the pilgrimage, Saroj Goel said, "I'd return tomorrow. To see Kailas, pure white, shining is beyond description. Taking a bath in Manasarovar, being away from civilization, with no pollution, I felt close to God. It has broadened my outlook. My values have changed, small matters don't bother me now."

The final morning was particularly cold. Frost glistened in the grass as we gathered at dawn to listen to Bapu's closing blessing. "Ramayana is more than words, it is superconsciousness, protected by those who sing it, recite it and ponder its meaning." At this holiest shrine, so close to the home of the Gods where four great rivers arise--Sutlej, Brahmaputra, Indus and Karnali (a Ganges tributary)--Bapu concluded his recitation, saying, "Attain to the heights of Kailas and the depths of Manasarovar."

Hasmukh Patel said about his yatra, "I'm glad I went. Bapu gave me the opportunity to see Kailas and bathe in Manasarovar. Every day when the picture of Kailas and

Manasarovar comes before me, I must turn off the car radio and loudly sing the sacred verses in praise of Kailas and Lord Siva."

The Hindu community the world over will share in the fruit of this historic yatra. As mutual understanding develops between India and China, the possibility opens for future pilgrims to reach Kailas without restrictions. On the return journey I heard Tibetan Buddhist drivers singing, "Dalai Lama, Sita Rama

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