

## **Tibet in the India-China Relations**

### **A possible way ahead**

#### **New Mechanism on Cultural and People-to-People Exchanges**

A first meeting of the newly constituted India-China High Level Mechanism on Cultural and People-to-People Exchanges was held on December 21, 2018 in Delhi; it was be co-chaired by the External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj and Wang Yi, State Councillor and Chinese Foreign Minister.

The decision to establish this new Mechanism arose after the post-Doklam encounter between Prime Minister Modi and President Xi Jinping in Wuhan in April 2018.

Both sides are now keen to build a greater synergy through people-to-people ties in order to enhance "exchanges in areas such as tourism, art, films, media, culture, sports and academic and youth exchanges."

#### **How to built trust**

Building strategic trust between India and China has been a long cherished dream of Indian leaders; in the 1950s, it translated into the *Hindi-Chini bhai-bhai* policy.

It is important to understand why, since the end of the 1950s, the Tibet issue has been an impediment to better relations between the two countries. There are many reasons but the most obvious one is simply because before the occupation of Tibet<sup>1</sup> by the People's Liberation Army in 1950/51, India had a special bond with Tibet which had different facets: one religious (the Baudha Dharma was born in India); one cultural (the Himalayan belt in India shares many values and affinities with the northern neighbours) or economic (for centuries India and Tibet traded across the passes).

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<sup>1</sup> Called 'the Liberation of Tibet' by China.

Pilgrimage also played an important role in this special relationship.

'Pilgrimage' has been a bridge between India and Tibet and it could become the best Confidence Building Measure (CBM) between China and India, if the present scope is extended.

### **The Panchsheel Agreement of 1954 between India and China**

The Tibet Agreement, also known as the Panchsheel Agreement for its preamble<sup>2</sup>, was signed in April 1954; both nations agreed to put the age-old relation in a legal framework. Unfortunately, the letter and spirit of the agreement was never respected and slowly the Indian presence in Tibet dwindled to nothing, bringing to an end to the age-old cultural and religious bonds.

On June 18, 1954, less than three months after the signature, a note was sent by the Indian Prime Minister to the Secretary General of the Ministry of External Affairs; it provides a view on the thinking of Jawaharlal Nehru at a time when the ink was still fresh on the Agreement.

The note answers some questions raised by BK Kapur<sup>3</sup>, the Political Officer in Sikkim; Nehru first notes that Kapur's letter and his notes are important "not only in themselves, but because they are concerned with much larger issues. Indeed, they are concerned with our wider policy towards China and our general world policy."

The first sentence can be considered as a *résumé* of the Indian government's policy vis-a-vis Tibet at that point in time: "Naturally, the Tibetans have our sympathy. But that sympathy does not take us far and cannot be allowed to interfere with a realistic understanding of the situation and of our policy."

Perhaps jealous of this 'sympathy', China soon started tightening the

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<sup>2</sup> Agreement (with exchange of notes) on trade and intercourse between Tibet Region of China and India signed on April 29, 1954 in Beijing.

<sup>3</sup> BK Kapur (b.1910) joined the Indian Political Service (IPS) in 1934; Liaison Officer in Lahore and Peshawar, 1947-48; Political Officer in Sikkim from March 1952 to March 1955.

screw on the old 'facilities' that India had enjoyed in Tibet.

Taking the example of the Western Atlantic Alliance, Nehru admitted that the Agreement may not function 'as it was intended'; he speculated that it was not inconceivable that China and the Soviet Union may not continue to remain friends forever: "Certainly it is conceivable that our relations with China might worsen", but quickly added "there is no immediate likelihood of that." He then wrote about Tibet: "If we come to an agreement with China in regard to Tibet that is not a permanent guarantee, but that itself is one major step to help us in the present and in the foreseeable future in various ways."

The Prime Minister cited a possible agreement at Geneva about Indo-China<sup>4</sup> and said that though there was no permanent guarantee, "it is certainly a big step forward to lessen tension which enables the countries concerned to think more objectively and peacefully and perhaps find a surer basis for peace."

Though the Tibet Agreement was a step forward, most of the issues which were agreed upon soon turned sour and eight years later, when the Agreement lapsed, it was not renewed. Today, it is a great pity that the bedrock of an 'eternal' friendship between the two nations is no more; indeed, the accord guaranteed that the nations would mutually respect each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty; would not aggress each other or interfere in each other's internal affairs. It also spoke of equality and mutual benefit in bilateral relations and peaceful co-existence.

Can small steps be taken to return to these basics?

These basics were trade and pilgrimage in Tibet; we shall look at the latter, which, if developed further, could certainly be a way forward and a meaningful and powerful CBM.

A lot has recently been written in the Indian press about another example of a pilgrimage CBM, i.e. the Kartarpur corridor approved by India and

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<sup>4</sup> An agreement would be signed a month later. The Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai would pay his first visit to India at the end of June 1954.

Pakistan; it is a mutual gesture of goodwill achieved despite other tough reality and difficulties. Both governments agreed to the development of a corridor to enable smooth passage of pilgrims seeking to visit Guru Nanak's final resting place at Kartarpur in Pakistan and to facilitate unrestricted flow of devotees.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, pilgrimage could be encouraged and promoted between the Tibetan Autonomous Region and India.

### **The Importance of Pilgrimage**

The Tibet Agreement lapsed in April 1962 and 6 months later, India and China fought a bitter war<sup>6</sup> over Tibet, the main subject of the Agreement<sup>7</sup>. The objective of the agreement was to regulate trade and pilgrimage from India to Tibet and vice-versa.

Article III of the Agreement says: "The High Contracting Parties agree that pilgrimage by religious believers of the two countries shall be carried on in accordance with custom:

- (1) Pilgrims from India of Lamaist, Hindu and Buddhists faiths may visit Kang Rinpoche<sup>8</sup> and [Lake] Manasarovar in Tibet Region of China.
- (2) Pilgrims from Tibet Region of China of Lamaist and Buddhist faiths may visit Banaras, Sarnath, Gaya and Sanchi in India.
- (3) Pilgrims customarily visiting Lhasa may continue to do so.

The Agreement further specifies a few points of entry into Tibet: "Traders and pilgrims of both countries may travel by the following passes and route: Shipki-la pass, Mana pass, Niti pass, Kungri Bingri pass, Darma

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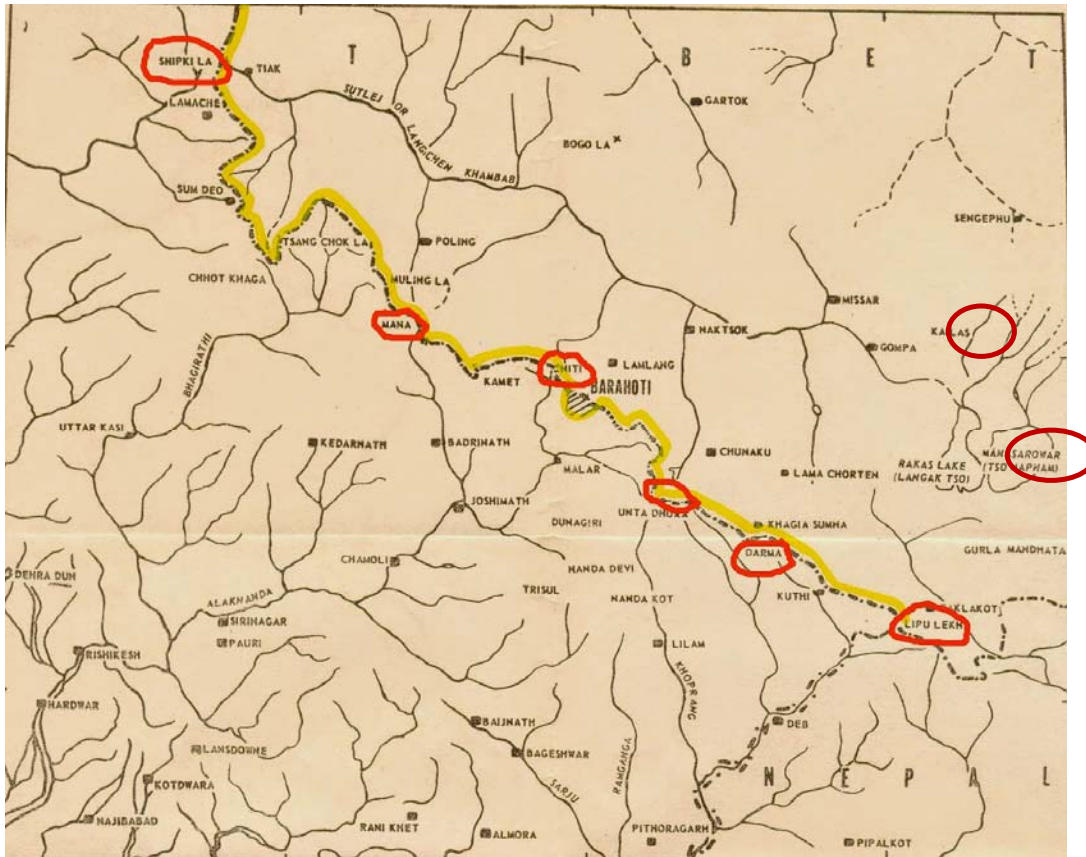
<sup>5</sup> The corridor on the Indian side will start from Dera Baba Nanak in Gurdaspur to go to the international border; the Gurdwara Darbar Sahib Kartarpur being is across the border on the banks of the Ravi.

<sup>6</sup> It has always remained a scar in the Indian psyche.

<sup>7</sup> 'On Trade and Intercourse between Tibet Region of China and India'

<sup>8</sup> 'Kang Rinpoche' is the Tibetan name for 'Mt. Kailash'.

pass, and Lipulekh pass." Apart from the first one located in Himachal Pradesh, the other passes lie in today's Uttarakhand (refer Map below).



In April 1954, it was also agreed that "diplomatic personnel, officials and nationals of the two countries shall hold passports issued by their own respective countries and visaed by the other party".

The Agreement mentioned that for an Indian pilgrim to go on the Kailash pilgrimage (*yatra*), he just needed a valid passport and a visa from China. At the same time, "inhabitants of the border districts of the two countries who cross the border to carry on petty trade or to visit friends and relatives may proceed to the border districts of the other party as they have customarily done heretofore and need not be restricted to the passes and route specified [mentioned] above and shall not be required to hold passports, visas or permits."

It is how the relations between the Himalayan region and Tibet had worked for centuries and no passport was required for pilgrims till 1954; India and Tibet were neighbours and friends. However, after the Chinese

take-over of the plateau, the number of pilgrims started to shrink, the leadership in Beijing was probably unable to grasp the importance of pilgrimage for Indians.

Today the situation cannot be said to be as pre-1954, though in recent years efforts have been made to find solutions to these vexed issues.

### **The Kailash-Manasarowar Yatra (Refer Map Below)**

It is probably during the visit of Indian Foreign Minister AB Vajpayee that the reopening of the *yatra* was discussed for the first time after 1962. In his report to the Lok Sabha, the future Prime Minister said: "I also invited the attention of the Foreign Minister of China to the fact that millions of Indians looked upon Kailash and Manasarovar as sacred and that the devout have for centuries visited the places on Pilgrimage. No one from India has been able to go to Kailash and Manasarovar for nearly two decades."

Vajpayee continued: "It is true that the Agreement between India and China pertaining to Trade and Intercourse with the Tibet Region expired in 1962 and has not since been renewed. Nevertheless, it was our hope that the Chinese Government would consider facilitating pilgrimages to these holy places. Should such facilities be granted, I have no doubt that the people in India would look upon it as symbolic of the improved relations between the two countries. We, on our part, are ready to consider similar facilities for pilgrimage to India."

A few years later, the Chinese Government officially agreed to reopen the Kailash Manasarowar Yatra (KMY); since then, it has been organized by the Ministry of External Affairs every year.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> On Jun 28, 1981, the Chinese Vice Premier and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Huang Hua told a Press Conference in New Delhi: "The Chinese side has informed the Indian side that it will make temporary arrangements for a certain number of Indian pilgrims to go on pilgrimage to what the Indians call the Kailash Mountain and Mansarovar Lake. As for long term arrangements, we will discuss them with the Indian side through diplomatic channels.

To give an idea, in 2011, 761 yatris travelled to Tibet in 16 batches; in 2012, 774 in 16 batches but the next year, only 53 in 1 batch (the pilgrimage had to be cancelled due to bad weather).

On February 12, 2014, Preneet Kaur, the Minister of State in the Ministry of External Affairs announced in the Lok Sabha that her Ministry had fixed the dates and modalities of the Kailash Manasarovar Yatra 2014. From 8 June to 9 September, some 18 batches, each with a maximum of 60 *yatris*, would leave for the Holy Mountain. Though it seemed a rather small number of '*yatris*' allowed to cross over to Tibet, one has to remember that the Lipulekh pass, near the trijunction between India, Tibet and Nepal, is one of the most treacherous Himalayan routes. Further, it was a true CBM between the two countries, demonstrating how trust could slowly be rebuilt.

A year later, a second route via Nathu-la opened.

The change of mindset in Beijing was visible; Xinhua published a piece on the holy mountain: "There is an old Tibetan saying that Buddhists should take a ritual walk around lake in the year of goat, while around mountain in the year of horse. According to legend, Sakyamuni was born in the Year of Horse, therefore, taking one round of ritual walk around the mountain in the horse year is equivalent to 13 rounds, which is highly efficacious and meritorious."

Starting to promote the ritual walk around Kang Rinpoche "as one of the holy mountains in Ngari Prefecture of Tibet", the Chinese news agency observed: "It is firmly believed as the center of the whole world by Hinduism, Tibetan Buddhism, native Bonism and ancient Jainism. Every year, believers from India, Nepal and other countries travel thousands of miles to Ngari for praying in the Mt. Kang Rinpoche."

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I am deeply convinced that through such friendly contacts and exchanges the traditional friendship between our two people will certainly grow in strength, and the contents of our relationship will be enriched and consolidated. This will also create a good atmosphere for reducing our differences so that the boundary question can be settled."

Xinhua further added: "the 2014 Horse Year will be a grand festival for the Buddhist, whose long-cherished wish of the whole life is nothing but a pilgrimage to the Mt. Kang Rinpoche. They believe that one circle around the mountain could wash away all the sins of the life, ten circles will save themselves from the pain of hell, while one hundred circles will make them go to heaven and become Buddha."

Though small steps have been done to accommodate more *yatris* on the Kailash pilgrimage, another important *yatra* could be revived; providing more people-to-people contacts, while building deeper trust; it is the Tsari pilgrimage in Southern Tibet, as well as reopening the Demchok road in Ladakh.

### **The Case of Demchok (Refer Map below)**

Another area of possible contact is between Ladakh and Western Tibet. In 1953-1954, during the long negotiations held in Beijing between Zhang Hanfu, China's Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs and N. Raghavan, the Indian Ambassador to China, the issue of Demchok could not be solved though for centuries, the village had been part of the Kingdom of Ladakh. On April 22, 1954, after more than four months of talks, Raghavan cabled to RK Nehru, the Foreign Secretary that Zhang Hanfu vigorously objected to inclusion of the Demchok-Tashigang route in the Agreement.

After these infructuous exchanges, Zhang conceded that the traders who customarily use this route, could continue to do so, adding that an oral understanding to that effect between two delegations would suffice.

Zhang conceded that "[China] would not like in writing, even by implication, to have any reference to Ladakh."

It means that China considered Ladakh a 'disputed area'.

Raghavan argued for the inclusion of the route in the Agreement; China refused to concede this point.

For centuries, the trade and pilgrimage route for the Kailash-Manasarovar region followed the course of the Indus, passed Demchok the last Ladakhi



village, and then crossed the border to reach the first Tibetan settlement, Tashigang, some 15 miles inside Tibet.

The Chinese eventually refused to mention Demchok in the Agreement, and bargained for nearly five months before accepting to cite the Tashigong route.

This has greatly curtailed the relations between the local populations and hampered the smooth conduct of the Kailash Yatra, which has to take longer and more difficult routes.

### **Reopening Demchok**

A way forward could be to do what could not be done in 1954 and reopen this route for the pilgrims visiting Kailash-Manasarovar in a first step; the next one being to reopen the border for trade.

Remember the skirmishes at the end of the 1960s in Sikkim!

When the Nathu-la pass was officially reopened to trade in July 2006, it had the effect of 'fixing' the border, drastically reducing the tensions in the area.

Considering the 'Nathu-la' effect; reopening Demchok route could be an excellent CBM between India and China.

For years, the people of Ladakh have also asked for the reopening of the ancient route. Why is Beijing so reluctant to let people and goods flow again over the Himalaya? Why can't China allow the devotees wanting to visit Kailash-Manasarovar to use the easiest route via Demchok?

There would an additional benefit; it would stop the smuggling between China and Ladakh, which poses serious security risks of infiltration for India.

### **The Monkey Year and the Pure Crystal Mountain Pilgrimage (Refer Map Below)**

In the Tibetan psyche, Tsari has always been synonymous of 'sacred place'. With the Mt. Kailash and the Amye Machen in eastern Tibet, the

pilgrimage around the Dakpa Shelri, the 'Pure Crystal Mountain' has, for centuries, been one of the holiest of the Roof of the World.

The 'Pure Crystal Mountain' lies at 5,735 meters above the sea in the Tsari county of southern Tibet. The Tsari Yatra took place every Monkey-Fire Year.<sup>10</sup> Monkey-Fire years have often been special years. Take 1956, the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama honoured India with their visit on the occasion of the 2500th anniversary of the birthday of the Buddha, but it also witnessed another significant event, the last circumambulation around the Dakpa Shelri.

Toni Huber, one of the foremost scholars on the subject, wrote a great deal about the site of the pilgrimage, located between Tsari and the Upper Subansiri district of Arunachal Pradesh: "The large-scale, 12-yearly circumambulation of Tibetan Buddhist pilgrims around the mountain known as the *Rongkor Chenmo*<sup>11</sup>, had the character of a state ritual for the Ganden Phodrang<sup>12</sup>. Pilgrims in this huge procession crossed the McMahon Line below the frontier village of Migyitun in Tsari district," writes Huber.

A Buddhist website describes thus the pilgrimage; "The Immaculate Crystal Mountain of Tsari provides the definitive Tibetan pilgrimage. It is the palace of the Buddha-deity Demchok, Supreme Bliss, and his mandala

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<sup>10</sup> The Tibetan calendar is based on a sixty-year cycle using a combination of the twelve animal signs (Mouse, Ox, Tiger, Rabbit, Dragon, Snake, Horse, Sheep, Monkey, Bird, Dog and Pig) with the five elements (Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal, Water).

<sup>11</sup> There was a shorter pilgrimage, the *Kingkor* organized every year. We shall not deal with it, as it did not cross the Indian border. Capt Frederick Bailey described thus the *Kingkor*: "There was also a Small Pilgrimage which was performed annually between the 19th day of the third month and the 15th of the eighth. After that date it was closed. ...the route crossed the Drolma [Dolma] pass, which was taboo for women. Some of them however would go as far as the pass and then return, acquiring thereby what little merit the taboo allowed them. ...We visited the temples. The largest was Pagmo Lhakang, down in the valley. It had a golden roof, and the principal image, that of Dorje Pagmo was studded with precious stones. A golden butter lamp was set before it."

<sup>12</sup> The Tibetan Government.

of deities. And it is also a principal abode of the sky dancers<sup>13</sup>, amongst whom Khandroma Dorje Phagmo is supreme. More than Kang Rinpoche and Lapchi<sup>14</sup>, it is the tantric power place par excellence, a testing place for yogis where the sky dancers dwell. It is a place of breath-taking beauty, the snow mountain rising out of verdant pastures and forests, while in the valleys below is thick jungle.”

After crossing the Tibet-India border, the pilgrimage would proceed southwards along the Tsari Chu<sup>15</sup> and then suddenly turned westwards to follow the Subansiri, to finally cross back into Tibet to reach the first frontier village in Chame county.

The southern leg of the *Rongkor* procession crosses the tribal areas of Upper Subansiri; this was the territory of the Mara clan of the Tagin tribe who lived downstream the Tsari Chu valley and around its confluence with the Subansiri at Gelensiniak.

According to Huber, there was an elaborate system of ‘compensations’ or ‘taxes’ depending from which side one experienced the holy pilgrimage. Payments in kind were regularly made to both the Mara and Na tribes by the Tibetan Government to allow the passage of tens of thousands of pilgrims via the tribal areas. The ‘assistance’ to the local population was compulsory for the sacred journey to proceed smoothly, south of what is now the Line of Actual Control.

During the 1914 Simla Conference, Capt Frederick Bailey, an intelligence officer who had mapped the area with his colleague Capt Henry Morshead, informed Sir Henry McMahon about the sensitivity of the issue and it is probably on their recommendation that a condition was inserted in the border agreement to reassure the Tibetans.

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<sup>13</sup> Dakinis.

<sup>14</sup> The Lapchi pilgrimage to a hermitage of Milarepa's is situated to the southwest of Tingri and east of Nyalam, not far from the Nepal border. Milarepa was the famous Tibetan yogi and poet who lived and died in the area. The cave became one of the most sacred destinations in the Himalaya after Kailash and Tsari.

<sup>15</sup> ‘Chu’ means ‘river’ in Tibetan.

Despite the fact that it was crossing into India's territory, Delhi has always facilitated the smooth continuation of the Tsari pilgrimage on the Indian side of the border, at least till 1956.

Bailey and Morshead had visited the place in 1913 during their journey 'beyond the snowline'. The young captain later recalled: "The great pilgrimage took place every twelve years, in the Monkey Year. 100,000 [probably less] pilgrims usually made the pilgrimage, many of them coming from Pome<sup>16</sup>. The Pobas<sup>17</sup> sent a hundred soldiers; fifty were sent from Trasum in Kongpo and thirty from the frontier village of Tron on the Chayul river. These were to protect the pilgrims from attack by the tribals, through whose territory the pilgrims had to travel when making the Great Pilgrimage."

The pilgrims used to embark on their circumambulation from Migyitün which was the acknowledged border-post. The line drawn a few months later only reiterated this fact; then, there was a several-day journey into Indian territory before returning to Tibet.

There was a clear racial distinction between the Tibetans and the Indian tribes, known as Lopas by the Tibetans; as Bailey put it: "The Lopas were not allowed to travel up the Tsari valley beyond the frontier village of Migyitün because the Tibetans feared they would damage their shrines. They were induced to give the pilgrims unmolested [sic] passage through their own country with the Tibetan government lavishing on them presents of woolen cloth, *tsampa* (barley flour) and swords."

When they scouted this most inaccessible area in 1913, the two Britishers probably heard about the clash which occurred during the previous Rongkor, in 1906, between some border tribes and the Tibetans. Indian tribals were enticed to abandon their traditional trade with the village of Tron located not far from the Cristal Mountain, in Chayul Dzong<sup>18</sup>. Highly

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<sup>16</sup> Bome or Poyul, in today's Nyingtri City.

<sup>17</sup> The Tibetans.

<sup>18</sup> 'Dzong' means 'county' in Tibetan. Chayul Dzong should not to be mixed with Zhayul, in the Lohit Valley, north of the McMahon Line.

disturbed by this loss of trading revenues, the villagers of Tron killed more than a hundred tribals in a cold-blooded revenge. The Tibetan government had to send five hundred troops to punish the Indian tribal 'attackers', making the relations between Tibet and the tribal population south of the LAC tense.

To come back to the pilgrimage, Alex McKay, in a review of Huber's work explained: "In terms of logistics, the event resembled a military exercise. Around 20,000 pilgrims from all parts of the Tibetan cultural world took part in this circuit with direct support from the Central Government<sup>19</sup>, whose agents negotiated safe passage from the various tribal groups through whose territory the pilgrims passed."

In some ways, it was a clash of civilization. The tribes of the NEFA did not belong to the Tibetan world, but it was for them an occasion to interact and eventually extract their dues for the passage of the pilgrims on their territory.

With the recurrence of these clashes, the Tibetan government in Lhasa decided to take control of the entire religious exercise. In 1920, Tibet's strong man, Tsarong Dazang Dromdul was sent to Tsari to overlook the preparations for that year's *Rongkor*. The religious pilgrimage thus became a State affair, with all the implications for the future relations between India and Tibet ...and today China.

As mentioned earlier, the last *Rongkor* was performed in 1956; by that time, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) occupied most of the strategic axis in Tibet and had reached north of the Indian border.

The 1956 *Rongkor* passed off peacefully with only a few noticeable incidents; according to Huber: "the Lhasa government had given a satisfactory tribute payment, made them all swear the oath successfully, and performed the appropriate rituals," he added: "However, it is almost certainly the fact that a vigorous decade of Indian administrative contacts had already either broken the spirit of the Upper Subansiri tribes or made

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<sup>19</sup> The Lhasa Government.

conditions too inconclusive for them to attempt any aggravation of their northern neighbors and risk a political incident during this increasingly critical period of Tibetan, Indian, and Chinese relations.”

During the last *yatra*, the PLA camped in the Mandala Plain of Tsari region from where the pilgrimage assembled; the Chinese however kept their participation rather discreet, merely providing medicines for the pilgrims. Only three years after the last pilgrimage, hostilities started on the Sino-Indian border. New actors had occupied the border areas: it was no longer the Tibetans vs. the local tribals of the Upper Subansiri, but the Indian State vs the Chinese State.

Till August 1959, the customary border was rather peaceful in this area; this however did not prevent the first serious clash between India and China in August of that year. It occurred in a small hamlet called Longju, a few hundred meters south of Migyitün, the first Tibetan village north of the McMahon Line. This clash took place a few months after the escape of the Dalai Lama to India which followed the aborted Tibetan revolt in Lhasa. After India granted asylum to the Tibetan leader, the relations between Beijing and Delhi became tenser by the day. One should remember that traditionally the Himalayan range was never an ‘impenetrable’ barrier; on the contrary, it was a realm of exchange between people who were socially, ethnically and culturally different. Due to the geography, the contacts between the Tibetans and the tribals had not always been smooth, but the *Rongkor* pilgrimage institutionalized regular and business-like contacts.

With the arrival of the PLA, the situation changed dramatically. Though previously, every 12 years the Upper Subansiri area was a point of contact between the Tibetan world and the subcontinent, it is no longer the case.

Why wait for another Fire-Monkey Year, in some 55 years, to see this stunningly luxuriant area become again a bridge between two worlds? Today, no solution is in view to solve the border dispute between China and India, but a small gesture like the reopening of the *Rongkor*

pilgrimage could be a great CBM between India, China ...and the Buddhist population from both sides of the border.

Unfortunately, who thinks of reviving the Great Pilgrimage?

## **Map – Kailash Mansarovar Yatra & Pure Crystal Mountain**

### **Pilgrimage**



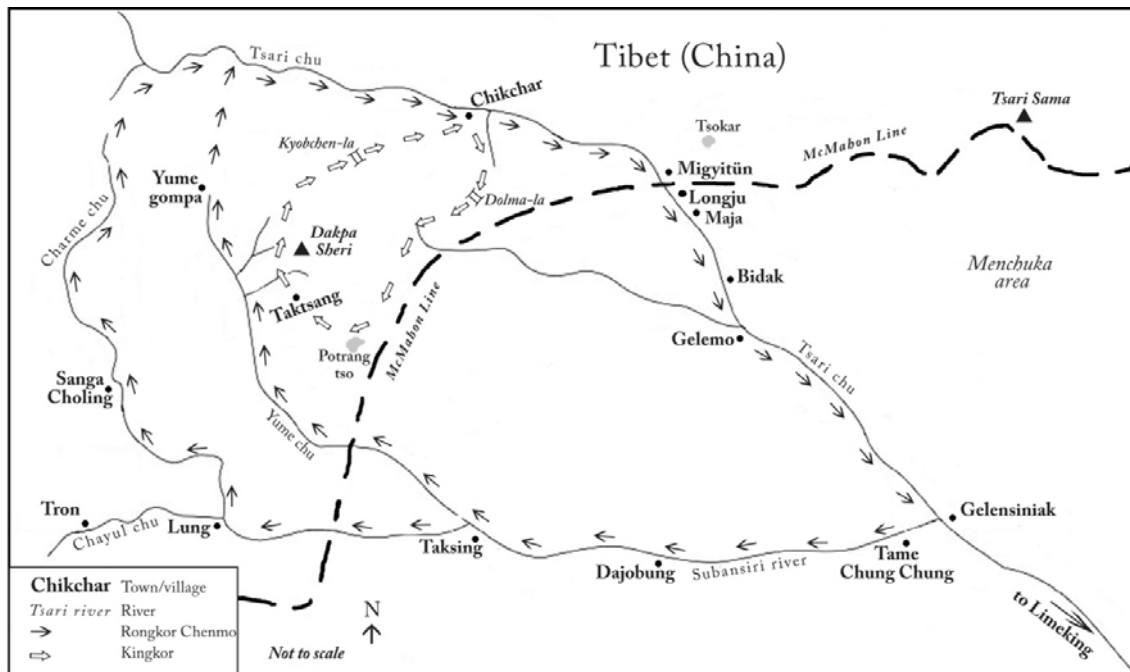
### **The Logistics**

Regarding the logistics it should be much easier since India has been working on the infrastructure in the area. The Chinese side has repeatedly publicized the development undertaken on its side of the border, particularly in Yume region.

On the India side, on November 20, 2018, Lt Gen Harpal Singh, Director General Border Roads (DGBR), responsible for the roads in border areas, reviewed the progress of works of the roads under Project Arunank, particularly the road from Tame Chung Manas Chung (TCC) to Takshing along the Subansiri river and from TCC to Bidak, along the Tsari river. During his inspection of the sector, the General officer expressed general satisfaction towards the works. The DGBR travelled from Taksing to Gelensiniak and later to Bidak, before returning to Limeking. According to

the Ministry of Defence press release, he checked on Bailey Bridges<sup>20</sup> on various *nallahs*<sup>21</sup> and rivers for fair weather connectivity to Taksing and Bidak; though “convinced about the difficulty of terrain, unpredictable weather and the constraints of local resources in the region which posed huge challenge to BRO in timely completion of the roads,” the work is progressing smoothly (refer Map below).

This development could facilitate the *yatra*, if the concept is accepted by the two governments.



## Conclusion

Would India and China agree to reopen Demchok route and envisage the possibility to jointly organize the Tsari *Yatra*, it would be one of the greatest steps forward in creating trust to one day solve the vexed border issue.

Another CMB could be to open the Tawang monastery in Arunachal Pradesh to Buddhist pilgrims from Tibet.

<sup>20</sup> Bailey bridge is a type of portable, pre-fabricated, truss bridge

<sup>21</sup> Streams or rivulets



Tibet is indeed the main hurdle in better bilateral relations between India and China, but at the same time, it can be the stepping stone to build a new relation between the two Asian nations.

We are aware of the difficulties of reopening the old pilgrimage routes will encounter, but it has to be started one day.

Incidentally, when National Security Advisor Ajit Doval and Chinese State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi met in Chengdu for the 21st round of Special Representatives' talks on November 24, they "agreed to gradually expand border trade and personnel exchanges, enhance the public opinion base of friendly cooperation between the two countries in the border areas, and create a good atmosphere for border negotiations and the development of bilateral relations."

The reopening of the border pilgrimage should fit in this.

To conclude, it is necessary to mention a few other possibilities to 'soften' the border. Another pilgrimage route which should be reopened to the Kailash is the Mana-la route in Chamoli district of Uttarakhand. It is a rather easy route.

In a later stage, one should think of reopening a few other land-ports<sup>22</sup>, for example Mana-la to Western Tibet, Bumla in Tawnag District and Kibithu in Anjaw district both in Arunachal Pradesh to Southern Tibet to Lhoka and Nyingchi prefectures, which could be a separate project.

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<sup>22</sup> Three are presently opened: Lipilekh-la in Pithoragarh district of Uttarakhand, Shipki-la in Himachal Pradesh and Nathu-la in Sikkim.