



Pilgrimage across Borders: The Kailas-Manasarovar Yatra in the Context of India-China Relations 1947 – 2025

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Abstract:

This paper studies how the Kailas–Manasarovar pilgrimage, sacred to Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, and Bon traditions, has been shaped by India–China relations from 1947 to 2025. Once a free journey through the Himalayan trade routes, the Yatra is now a carefully managed process controlled by agreements, permits, and strict rules. Using government records, official statements, and archival sources, the paper examines key turning points—such as the 1962 war, the reopening in 1981, and later agreements in 2003 and 2015. It examines how political events, such as the Doklam standoff and the Galwan clash, have impacted transportation routes, and how new roads have enhanced access. While earlier research has primarily examined the religious significance of the Yatra, limited scholarly attention has been devoted to its transformation into a politically negotiated journey. This paper addresses that gap by demonstrating how the pilgrimage has evolved into a convergence of devotion, diplomacy, and border politics. However, despite these shifts, this pilgrimage continues to inspire thousands each year not only as an expression of faith but also as a marker of cultural resilience, national identity, and aspirations for peaceful cross-border engagement.



Keywords: Devotion, Diplomacy, India-China, Kailas-Manasarovar, Pilgrimage.

Introduction:

The Kailas–Manasarovar pilgrimage is one of the most sacred journeys in Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, and Bon¹ traditions. It involves travelling across high mountains to reach holy Mount Kailas and Lake Manasarovar in China's Tibet Autonomous Region. The journey is both a spiritual and physical challenge. However, research shows that pilgrimages are not only about faith but are often closely linked to politics. Kama Maclean's study of the Kumbh Mela shows how such events are tied to government policies and nationalism (Maclean, 2008). Alex McKay's work on Kailas–Manasarovar explains how colonial and modern states control routes and permits (McKay, 2015). Charlotte Whitby Coles, in *Black Mountain*, shows how sacred sites can become political spaces (Coles, 2008). Kailas–Manasarovar is, therefore, not only a place of worship but also a part of political negotiation between nations.

After India's independence in 1947, and China's takeover of Tibet in 1950–51, the traditional routes to Kailas–Manasarovar became part of India–China border politics. Under British rule, infrastructure and policies significantly influenced the pilgrimage; however, after 1947, diplomatic relations determined whether pilgrims could travel or not. The 1962 Sino-Indian War closed the routes for almost twenty years. Despite tensions, both governments have occasionally collaborated to facilitate the Yatra. The pilgrimage reopened in 1981, and subsequent agreements established routes, issued permits, provided medical facilities, and outlined other regulations. New developments, such as the opening of the Nathu La route in 2015 and the road to Lipulekh in 2020, have made travel easier. However, events such as the Doklam standoff (2017), the Galwan clash (2020), and the COVID-19 pandemic have again disrupted it. The pilgrimage finally reopened in June 2025 after almost five years of closure.

¹ Bon is the indigenous Tibetan religion that shares many similarities and influences with Tibetan Buddhism. It initially developed in the tenth and eleventh centuries but retains elements from earlier Tibetan religious traditions. Bon is a significant minority religion in Tibet, especially in the east, as well as in the surrounding Himalayan regions. For the Bon people, the mountain is the abode of sky goddess Sipaimen, and the mountain was the centre of the ancient Bon empire of Zhang Zhung.



This paper examines how India–China relations since 1947 have shaped the Kailas–Manasarovar Yatra. Drawing on government agreements, official statements, and policy changes, it demonstrates how a sacred journey has become integral to diplomacy and border management. The study also highlights how both countries use the Yatra as a form of soft power, where devotion and politics meet on the Himalayan frontier. It contributes to existing scholarship by moving beyond the religious and cultural meaning of the pilgrimage to analyse its transformation into a state-controlled, diplomatically negotiated journey shaped by India–China political relations.

Literature Review:

Studies on the Kailas–Manasarovar pilgrimage after 1947 show how the journey has been shaped by sacred tradition, changing borders, and India–China diplomacy. Kama Maclean’s *Pilgrimage and Power* (2008), although focused on the Kumbh Mela, explains how states control pilgrim movement to demonstrate their political authority. Her ideas help in understanding how India and China have managed access to Kailas. Alex McKay’s *Kailas Histories* (2015) explores Kailas as a sacred place constructed through ancient texts, rituals, and travelers’ accounts. His work links the spiritual image of Kailas to the political changes that followed China’s takeover of Tibet in the 1950s. Charlotte Whitby-Coles’ study examines how a pilgrimage site in western India became politicized, revealing patterns similar to those in the Himalayan context, where sacred spaces are tied to border politics. Jon Mathieu’s chapter (2023) places Mount Kailas in the world history of holy mountains since 1500, explaining why it holds global significance for different religions. Karam Tej Sarao (2014) provides a detailed account of the pilgrimage’s religious meaning, myths, and rituals, which helps in comparing traditional practices with their modern, state-regulated form.

Diplomatic writings by C.V. Ranganathan (1998) examine key issues in India–China relations, including instances where access to pilgrimage sites was used as a sign of friendship or tension. Sumit Ganguly (1989) describes the 1980s border talks and the political climate that led



to the 1981 protocol, which allowed for controlled pilgrim visits. These works demonstrate how diplomacy significantly influenced the pilgrimage route.

Primary sources give further context. The 1954 Agreement on Trade and Intercourse between the Tibet Region of China and India gave pilgrims official rights alongside trade rules. The White Paper I (1959) records letters and notes from 1954 to 1959, revealing early disputes and growing Chinese restrictions. A.K. Bakshi's Annual Report on the Tour of Western Tibet (1960) is a rare first-hand official account, noting weather hardships, road conditions, and Chinese checks on pilgrims. Later records show changing priorities: the 1999 Department of Telecommunications press note promised modern communication for yatris; the 2000 Lok Sabha unstarred question discussed pilgrim arrangements and bilateral agreements; the 2003 Prime Minister's statement linked the pilgrimage to high-level visits to China; and the 2006 Joint Declaration marked a period of improved exchanges.

This paper also draws on newspaper reports to track how the pilgrimage has been portrayed in public discourse, as well as on ancient Indian texts such as the Skanda Purana, Shiva Purana, and Valmiki Ramayana, which describe Kailas as the home of Lord Shiva and a site of cosmic significance. These older sources provide a rich historical context to the study, revealing that the sacred image of Kailas predates modern diplomacy by a long time. Taken together, these works and records demonstrate that after 1947, the Kailas–Manasarovar pilgrimage evolved into more than just a religious journey; it was reshaped by political agreements, border controls, infrastructure projects, and international relations.

Research Methodology:

This study employs a qualitative historical approach to examine the Kailas–Manasarovar pilgrimage within the context of India–China relations from 1947 to the present, primarily relying on government-generated records and bilateral agreements. Primary sources include official treaties, parliamentary debates, ministerial statements, press releases, and policy notes from Indian ministries, as well as statements from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. These were collected from the MEA archives, parliamentary digital repositories, Press



Information Bureau releases, and Chinese embassy websites, with cross-verification through contemporary newspaper reports. Secondary scholarly works provide contextual and historiographical framing. Several travel accounts were also examined to gain a deeper understanding of the pilgrims' experiences. The research acknowledges limitations due to restricted access to certain Chinese and classified Indian records, relying instead on verified public documents and archival materials.

Historical and Religious Significance of Kailas-Manasarovar:

The Kailas–Manasarovar region, located in southwestern Tibet near the sources of the Indus, Sutlej, Brahmaputra, and Karnali rivers, occupies a unique position in the spiritual imagination of South Asia. The sacredness of this landscape is not a recent construction but is deeply rooted in Indian textual traditions. The Shiva Purana's Rudra Samhita (Shastri, 1950, p. 269) describes Kailas as Shiva's excellent abode, a divine seat of asceticism and cosmic power. The Skanda Purana (Skanda Purana, n.d., pp. 136, 243) recounts the Andhakasura episode, narrating Shiva's journey to Kailasa and lauding it as his most beloved dwelling, a site where even Kubera, the lord of wealth, offers him worship. In the Valmiki Ramayana (Bala Kanda), the creation of Lake Manasarovar is mentioned alongside the sacred nature of Kailas, affirming the antiquity of its spiritual status (Sharma, 2000, p. 180). These references, spread across major Puranic and epic sources, demonstrate that the mountain lake complex has been revered for millennia across multiple Indic traditions.

However, it is essential to note that while Kailas is mentioned in multiple ancient texts, the Puranas do not present a unified or geographically fixed understanding of the site. In many narratives, Kailas appears as a heavenly or cosmic mountain situated in a divine realm, inaccessible to mortals, functioning more as a metaphysical than a physical Himalayan peak. The historical identification of the Tibetan mountain with the mythic Kailas is therefore a product of both textual interpretation and evolving pilgrimage traditions, bridging symbolic cosmology with geographical reality. Mount Kailas is thus venerated in Hinduism as the abode of Lord Shiva, in Tibetan Buddhism as the cosmic axis, in Jainism as the sacred peak of Mount Ashtapada, and in



the Bon tradition as a heavenly seat of spiritual power. Its proximity to Lake Manasarovar, believed in Hindu cosmology to have been formed by the mind of Brahma, further elevates its sanctity, making it one of the world's most sacred yet geographically inaccessible pilgrimage destinations.

Historically, the pilgrimage to Kailas–Manasarovar was never a purely religious affair. It was deeply enmeshed in networks of trans-Himalayan trade, pastoralism, and diplomacy, particularly before the 20th century. For Indian pilgrims, the Lipulekh Pass and Niti Pass in the Himalayas were among the key access routes to Tibet. These trails were also vital to Bhotia² communities, whose economic life and spiritual world were intertwined with this sacred geography. In his historical account, Badri Dutt Pandey records that the Manaskhand section of the Skanda Purana mentions explicitly the pilgrimage route to Manasarovar through the Vyans and Chaudans valleys, underscoring the continuity of these access corridors from ancient textual memory to modern usage (Pande, 1993, p. 136).

The colonial period witnessed a growing interest in this region from British surveyors, administrators, and missionaries, although their objectives often combined cartographic ambitions with cultural documentation. The writings of Charles A. Sherring, Henry Strachey, and Sven Hedin helped render Kailas–Manasarovar visible to the British public and scholars, while also providing logistical and geographical information that later influenced policy decisions regarding the region. It was not until the mid-20th century, however, that the pilgrimage's fate became explicitly dependent on nation-state diplomacy, particularly between newly independent India and the emerging power of the People's Republic of China. After 1950, China's annexation of Tibet fundamentally altered the nature of cross-border interactions. The spiritual terrain of Kailas–Manasarovar was now subject to sovereignty claims, border management policies, and diplomatic negotiations, making religious mobility contingent upon international political considerations.

² In Uttarakhand, the Bhotia inhabit seven river valleys—three in the Garhwal division (Jadh, Mana, and Niti) and four in the Kumaon division (Johar, Darma, Byans, and Chaudans). Traditional routes to Kailas–Manasarovar often pass through these valleys.



Thus, by 1947, the pilgrimage stood at a historic crossroads. While its sanctity remained intact, its accessibility and administration were increasingly tied to modern political arrangements. This transition from a culturally fluid sacred journey to a diplomatically regulated border crossing forms the crux of the post-1947 transformation.

Political Shifts Post–1947: The 1962 War, and the Closure of Pilgrimage Routes:

The geopolitical environment of the Himalayas underwent a profound transformation after the end of British colonial rule in India in 1947. One of the earliest and most significant shifts occurred in Tibet, which had long functioned as a buffer zone between British India and Qing/Republican China. In 1950, China launched a military campaign into eastern Tibet, culminating in the Seventeen-Point Agreement in May 1951, which formalized China's control over Tibet while promising to protect its autonomy and religious traditions.

For India, this development introduced a significant complication. The Indian government, under Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, had maintained a policy of cordial relations with China rooted in Pan-Asian solidarity and anti-colonial camaraderie. India's formal recognition of Tibet as part of China in 1954, through the Agreement on Trade and Intercourse between the Tibet Region of China and India, popularly known as the Panchsheel Agreement, was framed as an act of diplomatic pragmatism. The agreement's preamble explicitly stated that both governments were desirous of promoting trade and facilitating pilgrimage.

Article 3 granted Indian pilgrims' permission to visit Mount Kailas and Lake Manasarovar, while Article 4 listed six specific passes to be used for both pilgrimage and trade.³ Under Article 5, traders from border communities were exempt from the requirement for certification or passports. However, pilgrims, diplomatic personnel, officials, and nationals of both countries were required to possess passports issued by their own respective countries and visas from the other party. The agreement also recorded that China would construct rest houses for pilgrims and traders, and that pilgrims would have the right to hire means of transportation at reasonable rates (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 1954).

³ These passes were Shipki La, Mana, Niti, Kungri Bingri, Darma, and Lipu Lekh.



However, by the late 1950s, these provisions began to erode in practice. In an informal note given by the Government of India to the Chinese Counsellor in India on 8 July 1959, it was recorded that at China's request, the Indian trade agent at Gartok had been diverted via the Lipulekh Pass. The note further complained that Indian trade agents in Tibet were facing restrictions on their mobility, and that there was no cooperation from Chinese counterparts in building the offices and residences required for Indian trade agents stationed in Tibet. More worryingly, the note stated that pilgrims to Kailas were being harassed by Chinese authorities. One recorded instance involved an Indian pilgrim being detained and searched for carrying a few medicines (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 1959).

The Indian Trade Agent at Gartok's 1960 report confirmed that only 25 pilgrims visited Kailas that year, a dramatic decline from earlier decades. The report also noted delays in issuing permits, incomplete or non-existent rest houses promised under the 1954 agreement, high transportation costs, a shortage of pack animals, and a lack of cooperation from local Chinese officials in arranging travel. Some pilgrims were subjected to repeated baggage checks, adding to the sense of intimidation (Bakshi, 1960).

These developments revealed the limits of the 1954 agreement's safeguards when strained by shifting political currents. The vision of unfettered sacred travel and mutually beneficial commerce outlined in the Panchsheel framework was increasingly replaced by bureaucratic control, surveillance, and selective obstruction, foreshadowing the complete suspension of the pilgrimage after the 1962 war. The war had a profound impact on religious access: the Kailas–Manasarovar Yatra was suspended, and traditional passes such as Lipulekh and Niti were closed. For nearly two decades, the pilgrimage remained discontinued, cutting off both physical and spiritual ties between Indian devotees and this sacred geography. It was only in the late 1970s and early 1980s, as relations began to improve under the leadership of Indira Gandhi in India and Deng Xiaoping in China, that space was created for renewed dialogue, including discussions on reviving the Yatra, which would eventually be restored in 1981.

India–China Agreements and the Resumption of the Yatra (1981–2015):



The prolonged suspension of the Kailas–Manasarovar pilgrimage following the 1962 war persisted until relations gradually improved in the late 1970s. In February 1979, during his visit to China as India’s Minister for External Affairs, Atal Bihari Vajpayee conveyed India’s eagerness to revive the Kailas–Manasarovar Yatra, underlining the pilgrimage’s deep cultural and spiritual significance to the Indian public (Ranganathan, 1998). However, Vajpayee’s visit was soon overshadowed by the dramatic events surrounding the China–Vietnam conflict, which limited its immediate diplomatic outcomes.

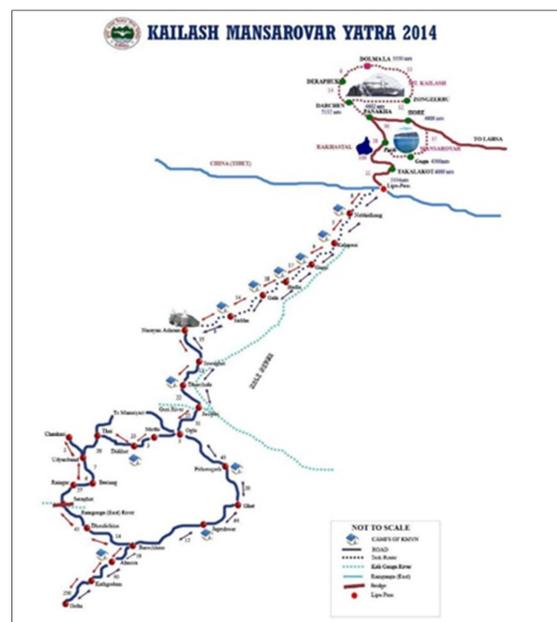


Figure 1: Kailas-Manasarovar Yatra Route through Lipulekh Pass.

Source: kmy.gov.in/images/kmy-route-map.pdf

Following political changes in India, Indira Gandhi’s re-election ushered in a phase of more structured bilateral engagement, with annual dialogues between India and China becoming a fixture of the diplomatic calendar. Against this backdrop, on June 29, 1981, Chinese Foreign Minister Huang Hua, visiting New Delhi, announced, with an eye towards influencing Indian public opinion, that China would allow Indian pilgrims to visit Mount Kailas and Lake Manasarovar once again (Rangan, 1981). As Sumit Ganguly has observed, such initiatives created the impression that Chinese leaders were more flexible and willing to settle the long-



standing border disputes, even though the underlying issues remained unresolved (Ganguly, 1989). The arrangements for resuming the pilgrimage in 1981 established distinct roles for each side: India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) managed the selection, medical clearances, and logistics of pilgrims, while China's Tibet Tourism Bureau handled group visas, accommodation, and in-Tibet arrangements. The first officially sanctioned batch of Indian pilgrims entered Tibet via Lipulekh Pass in September 1981, marking the resumption of the Kailas–Manasarovar Yatra after nearly two decades of suspension. In the following years, the pilgrimage was formalized into an annual state-mediated process. Indian agencies, such as the Kumaon Mandal Vikas Nigam (KMVN) and the Indo–Tibetan Border Police (ITBP), became integral to managing logistics, safety, and medical support. A major tragedy struck in August 1998 when a massive landslide at Malpa, on the yatra route in Pithoragarh district, buried an entire settlement and caused the deaths of over 200 people, including 40 of Kailas–Manasarovar pilgrims (India Today, 1998). The disaster drew national attention to the risks inherent in the pilgrimage and prompted calls for improved safety measures, enhanced route monitoring, and improved emergency communication facilities.

In response to these concerns, the Department of Telecommunications (DoT) decided to provide modern telecommunication facilities through satellite during the Kailas–Manasarovar Yatra beginning in the first week of June 1999. INMARSAT terminals were installed at Public Call Offices (PCOs) in four base stations on Indian territory — Gala (2,375 m), Budhi (2,740 m), Gunji (3,500 m), and Nabidhang (3,987 m) — enabling yatris to make STD/ISD calls from these locations at normal rates for the entire pilgrimage season (Government of India, Department of Telecommunications, 1999). The decision, taken at the behest of the Minister of Communications, Shri Jagmohan, followed repeated representations from individuals and organisations about the lack of communication facilities during the pilgrimage, which caused significant difficulties for participants. Recognising the hostile climatic conditions and risks to life along the hazardous track, the Minister directed the Department to install adequate communication facilities en route to Kailas–Manasarovar. This step can be seen as part of a broader effort to strengthen infrastructure and ease travel in the wake of the Malpa tragedy.



Year	Total Number of Pilgrims	Total Expenditure
1997	516	Rs.25,78,000
1998	487	Rs.14,61,000
1999	459	Rs.42,09,688

Table 1 shows the number of pilgrims and total expenditure incurred by the Government of India.

Source: Unstarred Question No. 2032, Lok Sabha, 8 March 2000. Answered by Shri Ajit Kumar Panja.

Further official insight into the impact of this period on the pilgrimage is provided by Unstarred Question No. 2032 in the Lok Sabha, answered on March 8, 2000, by the Minister of State for External Affairs, Shri Ajit Kumar Panja. The reply provided statistics on the number of pilgrims and the government's expenditure for the years 1997, 1998, and 1999. The data show a noticeable decrease in the number of pilgrims after 1998, a trend that may be attributed to the lingering impact of the Malpa tragedy, combined with other political and logistical factors.

A significant milestone occurred in June 2003, when Prime Minister Vajpayee's state visit led to a Memorandum of Understanding on Expanding Border Trade, designating Changgu (Sikkim) and Renqinggang (Tibet) as new market points and authorizing the use of Nathu La Pass for border trade. Alongside this, a Joint Declaration was signed, in which India implicitly recognized Tibet as part of China, helping ease tensions and advance cross-border initiatives. While this represented an important step in India–China cooperation, the agreements focused on trade and general cultural engagement, rather than explicitly facilitating pilgrimages to Kailas–Manasarovar. The Indian side, however, noted that China had agreed to “consider” opening additional pilgrimage routes, a non-binding commitment that laid the groundwork for later developments (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2003).

An important development also occurred in the Tibet region of China, when the Chinese government proposed constructing a road along the circumambulation route of Mount Kailas to ease the physically demanding journey for pilgrims. This proposal was strongly opposed by



Tibetans living abroad, who warned against the risk of abusing the holy mountain as a tourist destination. The Tibet Initiative Germany condemned the plan as a colonial act serving primarily the Chinese government's commercial interests, arguing that it trampled on the religious sensibilities of Tibetans and of over 800 million Hindus in India. In the broader context of India–China relations, this event highlights how the development of pilgrimage facilities can become entangled in politics. China presented the road as a way to make travel easier and more modern, but critics saw it as a way to strengthen control over Tibet's holy sites. This, they argued, also touched on the religious interests of Indians and added tension to the friendly tone created by earlier agreements.

The importance of religious tourism in the bilateral relationship was reiterated in the Joint Declaration between China and India on 21 November 2006, which explicitly stated that “China will provide greater convenience for Indian pilgrims to visit Mount Kailas and Lake Manasarovar” and that both sides would explore the possibility of opening an additional pilgrimage route (Joint Declaration between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of India, 2006). This 2006 commitment planted the seed for future route expansion, embedding the idea within a broader vision of transforming the border into a “bridge for cooperation”.

This intention was strengthened in the Joint Statement between China and India on 20 May 2013, which reiterated the 2006 pledge and linked it directly to the Nathu La Pass. Both sides agreed to “promote cross-border trade, personnel exchanges, and connectivity” and to consider strengthening border trade through Nathu La (Joint Statement between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of India, 2013). The statement once again reaffirmed that “China will provide greater convenience for Indian pilgrims to make the pilgrimage to the sacred mountains and lakes of Kailas in China's Tibet Autonomous Region”, noting that India expressed appreciation for China's efforts to improve pilgrimage facilities.

The culmination of this steady diplomatic progression came in the Joint Statement between China and India on May 15, 2015, which explicitly linked previous commitments to concrete action. It affirmed that strengthening cooperation in border areas through trade,



pilgrimages, and other exchanges was an effective way to enhance mutual trust, and committed to expanding cooperation at Nathu La, Changla/Lipulekh Pass, and Shibuchi Pass. Notably, it recorded India's gratitude to the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Government of the Tibet Autonomous Region for their support of the annual Yatra, and formally announced that China would open a pilgrimage route through the Nathu La Pass in 2015 to promote religious exchanges further and facilitate Indian pilgrims (Joint Statement between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of India, 2015).

As promised, in 2015, the pilgrimage gained a second route through the Nathu La Pass in Sikkim, offering a motorable option that significantly reduced travel time and physical strain. This new pathway was the tangible outcome of nearly a decade of incremental commitments made in 2006, reinforced in 2013, and finalised in 2015. However, the route proved vulnerable to diplomatic tensions: it was suspended in 2017 during the Doklam standoff. Throughout this period, the Yatra remained closely tied to the overall state of India–China relations. Its operation depended on formal agreements and the prevailing diplomatic climate, making it a striking example of how cultural and religious exchanges can serve as instruments of soft power in bilateral relations.

Recent Developments in the Kailas–Manasarovar Yatra (2015–Present):

The opening of the Nathu La Pass route in 2015 marked the culmination of nearly a decade of bilateral pledges. It symbolized a new phase in the Kailas–Manasarovar Yatra, offering a motorable, high-altitude route that spared pilgrims the more arduous trekking over the Lipulekh pass. For the Indian government, the new pathway was a religious facilitation measure and a diplomatic achievement, demonstrating that sustained dialogue could yield tangible benefits even in a contested border environment. However, the operational reality soon underscored the fragility of these arrangements. In mid-2017, during the Doklam standoff, China suspended the Nathu La pilgrimage route (Krishnan, 2017). The suspension, which lasted for the Yatra season, illustrated how swiftly diplomatic tensions could disrupt religious exchanges, and



how vulnerable the pilgrimage remained to wider strategic disputes. Even as the Nathu La route remained sensitive to diplomatic tensions, India invested significantly in improving alternative access via the Lipulekh Pass. On 8 May 2020, the Border Roads Organisation (BRO) completed and inaugurated an 80-kilometer road link from Dharchula (Uttarakhand) to Lipulekh (China border)—a “Kailas-Manasarovar Yatra Route” inaugurated by Defence Minister Rajnath Singh via video conference. This strategic road connects the rugged terrain from Ghatiabagarh through Tawaghat to Lipulekh Pass, located at an altitude of over 17,000 feet. According to government statements, the new connectivity reduces what was once a 2- 3-week high-altitude trek into a much swifter 1-week vehicular journey (Ministry of Road Transport & Highways, Government of India, 2020).

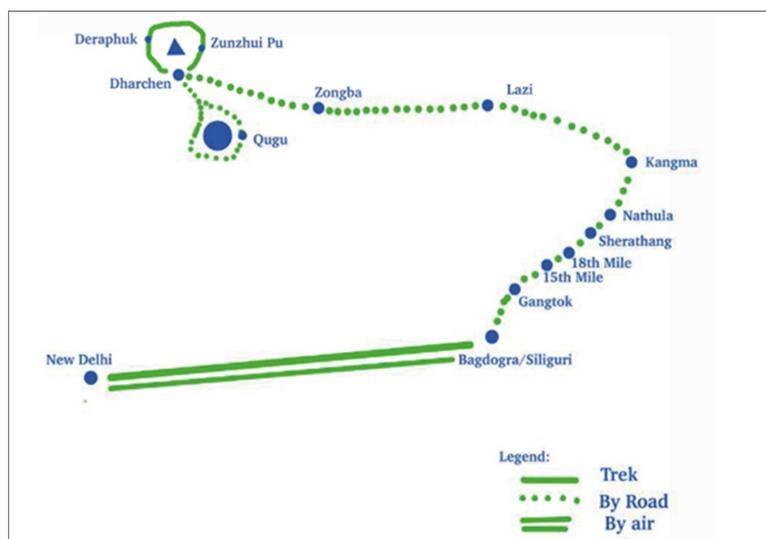


Figure 2 Kailas- Manasarovar Yatra Route through Nathu La Pass.
Source: kmy.gov.in/resources/images/drawimages/nathula-map.jpg

The same year saw an even more serious blow to India–China relations: the Galwan Valley clash in June 2020, which left soldiers dead on both sides and plunged bilateral ties into one of their lowest points since 1962. In the aftermath, all routes for the Yatra were suspended, not only due to heightened military tensions but also because of the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. Public health restrictions, combined with security concerns, meant that the pilgrimage was effectively halted from 2020 onward.



While limited talks on resuming the Yatra appeared in official statements between 2021 and 2024, reopening remained contingent on both pandemic management and improved diplomatic climate. After nearly five years of closure, the Kailas–Manasarovar Yatra finally resumed in June 2025 (Banerjee, 2025), with both governments framing the reopening as a gesture of goodwill and a sign of cautious optimism in bilateral relations (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2025). The 2025 reopening, thus, is the latest reminder that this sacred journey is as much a function of high diplomacy as spiritual devotion.

Pilgrims’ Experiences

The experiences of Indian pilgrims on the Kailas–Manasarovar Yatra reveal a long trajectory of change in facilities, state control, and the overall atmosphere of the journey. When the pilgrimage route was reopened in 1981 after a two-decade closure, early travelers, such as Subramanian Swamy and Rahul Bedi, recorded their impressions in their travelogues. Traveling in September 1981, they described the Chinese as “hospitable and gracious, even polite,” noting how their stay in Taklakot was made comfortable by local arrangements (Bedi & Swamy, 1984). Their account reflected a moment of cautious goodwill as China sought to project a cooperative image in reopening the route.

Nevertheless, subsequent experiences suggest that this initial hospitality soon gave way to a more tightly regulated pilgrimage. The narrative provided by K.T.S. Sarao, who traveled in 2002, illustrates how devotion was often overshadowed by inadequate facilities, bureaucratic hurdles, and the heavy presence of state authority. Accommodation at Dharchen was described as by far “the worst of the entire journey,” with “heaps of human excreta lying everywhere outside the mud barracks” and “filthy blankets and bed-sheets gave out an unbearable stench” (Sarao, 2009, p. 63) Only after repeated complaints did pilgrims receive slightly better rooms, which still housed up to six persons each. Pilgrims also faced intrusive state controls. At Taklakot, groups were confined to guesthouses until Chinese officials completed passport and visa checks. One account recalls that the official “sat with his feet on the table, drinking Lhasa



beer and smoking cheap quality cigarettes,” while pilgrims were summoned one by one. Those with documentation issues faced harassment; one pilgrim described how an officer, upon noticing a Taiwanese visa, “grew quite furious, threw my passport in a corner, and started shouting abuse in Chinese (Sarao, 2009, p. 58). Such moments reveal the extent to which a sacred journey was mediated by political authority and humiliation.

The spiritual dimension was further eroded by the hurried pace of the state-managed itinerary. Pilgrims were “rushed through the various spots” and often denied opportunities for meditation or reflection. As Sarao notes, they were “neither allowed to trek around Manasarovar nor permitted to visit all the shrines,” with important sites such as the Simbiling Gompa, Tirthapuri, and at times Khojarnath excluded altogether (Sarao, 2009, p. 74). In contrast to the pre-1959 pilgrimage, when pilgrims could linger at monasteries and holy sites, the post-1981 Yatra was reduced to a perfunctory schedule dictated by political considerations.

Even as Chinese infrastructure expansion in Ngari, including roads, bridges, and telecommunication lines, made the region more accessible, pilgrims still confronted arbitrary permit regimes and rising costs. Sarao observed that “at those sites where they allow a limited number of pilgrims, they make them cough up huge amounts of money,” underscoring the commercialization of access. The irony of this arrangement was not lost on pilgrims, who remarked on the irony of obtaining permission “from the worst enemies of religion to pay a visit to the most sacred place of four religions” (Sarao, 2009, p. 80).

By 2018, however, the Yatra reflected yet another phase of change, with improved facilities at key halts. Rishab Bharawa, a pilgrim in that year, recounted how his stay in Taklakot and Darchen was “very comfortable,” with hotels “laden with modern facilities,” a striking contrast to the conditions described in earlier accounts (Bharawa, 2020). His narrative indicates how state-driven modernization, combined with the growing commercialization of the Yatra, gradually reshaped the pilgrim experience—making the journey physically easier but simultaneously distancing it from the simplicity and spiritual depth that earlier travelers associated with Kailas and Manasarovar.



Taken together, these travelogues demonstrate that the Kailas–Manasarovar pilgrimage was never merely a spiritual journey; it was consistently shaped by the shifting dynamics of India–China diplomacy, oscillating between hospitality, restriction, and modernization in response to the two states' evolving political relations.

Discussion:

While rooted in centuries-old religious traditions, the Kailas-Manasarovar pilgrimage has been profoundly shaped by political developments in the post-1947 period. Access to the sacred site has depended on the broader climate of India–China relations, with periods of tension leading to interruptions, and phases of rapprochement enabling renewed travel. This dependence highlights how a spiritual journey can serve as a reflection of political relations.

Government policies have played a decisive role in shaping the nature of the pilgrimage. Border regulations, travel quotas, and route approvals have determined who can participate, when the journey can take place, and under what conditions. These administrative decisions have, in turn, influenced pilgrims' experiences, sometimes making the journey more accessible, and at other times restricting it entirely.

The pilgrimage has also functioned as a subtle instrument of soft diplomacy. By facilitating access during times of cooperation, both countries have signalled goodwill, using the yatra as a cultural bridge amid unresolved political differences. Infrastructure improvements along the route, such as better transportation and communication facilities, often followed such diplomatic openings, further linking the material conditions of the journey to the state of bilateral relations.

Yet, beyond its political and administrative context, the pilgrimage retains an unbroken spiritual significance that connects contemporary travellers with ancient traditions. Pilgrims continue to view Kailas as a timeless abode of divinity, even as their ability to reach it is mediated by modern political realities. This dual nature, spiritually constant but politically



contingent, underscores the yatra's unique place at the intersection of faith and international relations.

Key Findings:

- Access since 1947 has hinged on formal India–China agreements, with disruptions and resumptions reflecting changes in bilateral relations.
- Border controls, visa regulations, and travel quotas directly affect the yatra's operation.
- The pilgrimage is regularly invoked in joint statements as a goodwill gesture despite ongoing disputes.
- Spiritually constant, yet materially and experientially shaped by political and administrative contexts.
- Combining government records, ancient texts, media reports, and pilgrim testimonies yields a better understanding than single-focus studies.

Conclusion

Since 1947, the Kailas–Manasarovar pilgrimage has evolved from a free journey through ancient Himalayan trade routes to a carefully managed process shaped by India–China relations. The closure after the 1962 war, the reopening in 1981, and later steps, such as the 2003 agreement and the opening of the Nathu La route in 2015, all demonstrate how the Yatra rises and falls with political moods.

Today, the Yatra is both a journey of faith and a product of diplomacy. Group visas, Chinese-approved guides, and strict checks show how closely states control it. Events such as the Doklam standoff in 2017 and the Galwan clash in 2020 proved that border tensions can stop the Yatra overnight. At the same time, new roads like the Lipulekh route serve both pilgrims and strategic aims.

The Yatra is also shaped by the wider world. For India, it is part of cultural outreach and soft power; for China, it is managed as state-approved religious tourism. However, global



politics also matter. The August 2025 decision by India and China to reopen border trade, resume direct flights, and expand pilgrimage routes came at a time when India's ties with the United States were under strain, following Washington's imposition of tariffs on Indian exports in response to India's purchase of Russian crude oil. This illustrates how decisions on pilgrimage access are not made in isolation: the choices of global powers, such as the U.S., China, or Russia, influence how and when Indian pilgrims can reach Kailas–Manasarovar.

Looking ahead, the future of the Yatra depends less on the devotion of pilgrims and more on the diplomatic negotiations. Sacred desire alone cannot open borders; access will continue to rely on how India and China manage their disputes and how wider global rivalries shape their cooperation. The Yatra's survival is therefore not only a testament to faith but also a reminder that in the modern world, even sacred journeys move at the pace of diplomacy.

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