


Chapter 13

Protection and Challenges of Mount Kailash as a Sacred Pilgrimage Site in the Context of Geopolitics and Conflict

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ABSTRACT

Mount Kailash, venerated by Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, and Bon traditions, is among Asia's most sacred pilgrimage sites. Located in China's Tibet Autonomous Region, the mountain holds deep spiritual importance while simultaneously occupying

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a geopolitically sensitive border zone shared by China, India, and Nepal. This research critically investigates Mount Kailash's cultural heritage value and the complex challenges related to its protection, accessibility, and governance. Using frameworks from cultural geography, heritage studies, and political ecology, the study explores how border disputes, militarization, and restricted pilgrim access have rendered Kailash a contested spiritual and political landscape. Through policy analysis, archival research, and documented ethnographic accounts, the research identifies how state-led narratives and infrastructure projects reshape heritage practices and ritual ecologies. Emphasizing conflict-sensitive approaches, the study proposes frameworks that integrate religious rights, ecological sustainability, and regional diplomacy.

1. INTRODUCTION

Overview of Mount Kailash: Location, Spiritual Legacy, and Contemporary Significance

Mount Kailash, situated in the remote western reaches of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) of China, rises to an altitude of 6,638 meters (21,778 feet) in the Gangdise range of the Transhimalaya. The mountain is considered one of the most sacred natural sites in Asia, revered by four major religious traditions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and the ancient Bon religion (Sarao, 2014). Despite its relatively modest height compared to Himalayan peaks like Everest, Kailash commands unparalleled spiritual authority. According to Hindu belief, it is the abode of Lord Shiva and the cosmic center of the universe. Tibetan Buddhists regard it as the home of the tantric deity Demchok (Chakrasamvara), representing supreme bliss. For Jains, it is the site where their first Tirthankara, Rishabhanatha, attained liberation. The Bon tradition venerates Kailash as the sacred seat of the sky goddess Sipaimen (Callewaert, 2013).

Surrounding the mountain is a 52-kilometer circumambulation route known as the “kora,” which pilgrims from multiple faiths undertake to gain spiritual merit. Unlike many pilgrimage sites, no one is permitted to climb Mount Kailash out of respect for its sacred status, a rare example of a peak that remains unclimbed due to religious and ethical reasons (Joldan et al., 2022).

Contemporarily, Mount Kailash has emerged not only as a religious epicenter but also as a geopolitical touchpoint due to its proximity to the borders of India, Nepal, and China (Raza, 2021). Pilgrimage access, particularly for Indian citizens, is subject to bilateral agreements between India and China and has been periodically disrupted due to diplomatic tensions (Deepak, 2025). Moreover, China's

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