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# HIMAL AL

HIMALAYAN MAGAZINE

## *Angry Hills*



## Uttarakhand State of Mind

Gorkhali Dukha • Nepali Musalman

# HIMAL

Vol 7 No 6 Nov/Dec 1994

अस्त्युत्तरस्यां विशि देवतात्मा  
हिमालयो नाम नगाधिराजः  
पूर्वापरौ तोयनिधी बगाव्य  
स्थितः पृथिव्या इव मानवण्डः

*The Abode of Gods, King of  
Mountains, Himalaya  
You bound the oceans from  
east to west*

*A northern yardstick  
To measure the Earth*

— Kalidasa (Kumara Sambhava)

|                  |                      |
|------------------|----------------------|
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by Manisha Aryal



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**Cover:** Angry demonstrator makes a point in Dehradun, early November, walking ahead of a banner that proclaims "Uttarakhand Samyukta Sangharsha Samiti". **Picture:** Manisha Aryal.

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# Thick but Incomplete

Victor Chan's *Tibet Handbook*, a 1100 page tome 11 years in making, is by far the most comprehensive English guidebook on Tibet. It details the geography, monasteries, history and lore of many a corner of Tibet. It is, however, important to note that the book does not include descriptions of Kham and Amdo in eastern Tibet. Neither is *Tibet Handbook* an always harmonious blend of the traditional pilgrimage guide and modern travel guide. At times, it seems an odd mixture between traditional and contemporary approaches to understanding Tibet. Its comprehensiveness is both the book's vice and virtue. The vast amount of data presented is not always accurate.

*Tibet Handbook* is divided into seven parts. In the first part, the sections on the concepts of pilgrimage and the short history of Tibet are valuable, these topics being often glossed over in the regular guide book format. However, many sections are rehashes of much that has already been written. Part Two describes more than three dozen sacred sites and monasteries in and around Lhasa. From this part of the book, the reader will get an excellent overview of the culture-landscape of Tibet's capital. The chapter on the Jokhang is wonderfully detailed and lucid on this, Tibet's first and foremost Buddhist monument, while the one on the Potala is more difficult to follow because, unlike the Jokhang, the Potala is not laid out symmetrically. The two diagrams accompanying the Potala chapter are hard to decipher.

The initial chapters of Part Three deal with some of the major pilgrimages in Tibet in some good detail. The description of the Mount Kailash circumambulation is the most definitive published in a language other than Tibetan, although information on page 280, providing a way to cut across the sacred circuit, seems out

of tune with the spirit of pilgrimage that the book attempts to embody. The section on Tsari with its 19 possible routes will confuse all but the most dedicated of Tibetan geographers. In fact, the exhaustive coverage given Tsari by Chan may be more a liability than an asset.

Part Four will enhance one's regard for Tibet's cultural legacy. By combining practical route and geographical information with an insightful treatment of art history, this book transcends the tone and content of most guidebooks. Travellers will have their journeys

## Tibet Handbook

Victor Chan  
Moon Publications Inc., 1994  
Chico, California  
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by John V. Bellezza

immeasurably enriched by visiting a few of the places written about here. The Tibetan scholar, Robert Vitali, was instrumental in giving shape and substance to this part of Chan's book, and his contributions should have been better acknowledged.

The fifth part of *Tibet Handbook* covers a large number of places scattered across inner Tibet. The chapters on the major Bonpo monasteries, Menri and Yungdrungling, are woefully incomplete and must have been compiled before the restorations of the last five years. Herein lies one of the book's major weaknesses—information is often out of date. Chan has not visited Tibet since 1988, and the intervening period has seen significant changes.

Another critical shortcoming—inevitable in a guidebook of this scope—is that Chan commonly relies on others for information on places he himself has



BIKAS RAJANAR

not visited. The reliability and veracity of the data obtained therefore fluctuates wildly. For example, the chapters on Namtso (pg 657-671) and Lake Dangra and Mount Tago are extremely scanty, replete with inaccuracies and wayward guesses. The authoritative undercurrent in the text should never have continued into such areas. As a result of such shortcomings, a certain pall hangs over the work as a whole. In his preoccupation with being comprehensive, Chan makes compromises.

Part Six reviews vital concerns such as language, health and travel arrangements. These subjects are covered in a concise fashion, but may leave readers wanting to know more in order to organise trips to Tibet as individual travellers. Unwieldy transliterations are employed in the chapter on spoken Tibetan. There is conspicuous absence of material on environmental protection and cultural ethics. No attempt is made to orient readers to the ethos and ecology of Tibet.

For those wanting initiation into travel in Tibet, Victor Chan's *Tibet Handbook* is perhaps not the best place to begin. Others may be alienated by its dry, impersonal style. However, for those with a little more experience and knowledge, this book is a valuable addition to the library.

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