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HERITAGE VILLAGE MANTALAI !

Ayodhya Nath Kerni

Mantalai is located at a distance of 128 km from Jammu and 8 km east of famous Sudhmahadev Shiva shrine on Chenani-Dudu road Lat 33.04 long 75.27 elev 1620 M. It is a small heritage village of sheer scenic beauty, blessed with the natural bounties, dwelt on a panoramic location. The village is bound by young fold Shivgarh mountain ranges to its North East and river Tawi down below in the South. The tops of mountains remain snow capped in winters and misty in monsoons. The Sudhmahadev shrine is barely visible in the West.

There exists a Shiva-Parvati temple popularly known as Aparneshwar Mahadev. There are two stone engraved images in the temple, Parvati alone and other Parvati-Mahadev (combine). Dharamarth Trust has also installed two more black stone idols of Shiva-Parvati few years back. There is big holy pond full of water provided with cement flooring tiles and designed protective fencing located at the western part of the temple. The devotees visit the temple through out the year but heavy rush is noticed during Malmas Sundays. The devotees receive holy bath in pond. A big hall with roofing of Corrugated Galvanized Iron sheets have been recently constructed by the locals for stay of devotees and organizing Bhandaras.

During the early years of 8th century AD, Chandervanshi king Harihar Chand of Chanderi (MP) belonging to Shishupal dynasty, along with his four sons and some soldiers visited Jwalamukhi to pay obeisance to Jawalamata. He had to face a coupe with Kangra king. Harihar Chand and Kangra king were killed in action. His four sons captured Bilaspur, Nalagarh, Sarhind and surroundings. Gambhir Chand known for bravery and fighting skills became the ruler of Bilaspur. Mantalai was then the capital of a small principality ruled by a Megh king who was attacked and tortured frequently by Ranas. Brave acts and justice delivered by Prince Gambhir Chand was gaining fame in the region. Mantalai king sought his help against Ranas. Gambhir Chand defeated the Ranas and forced them to leave the area. He established his capital at Mantalai and later on shifted to Chenani when his territory was expanded.

A legend having Puranic support states that Goddess Parvati in her previous life was the daughter of Dakshaprajapati and was married with lord Shiva. She was immensely annoyed for not inviting lord Shiva in a Yajna performed by her father. Goddess entered the spot where the Yajna was being held (According to scriptures the place of yajna is believed to be at Namisharnya in Sitapur District of Uttar Pradesh). She committed Sati by jumping into the burning fire of Havankund. Sati's reincarnation



commenced by taking birth as a daughter of Mountain king and queen Maina at Mantalai. Goddess is also known by the names Parvati, Gouri, Uma, Aparna etc. They were three sisters namely Aparna (eldest), Ekaparna, and Ekapatala (Lingum Mahapuram 101/6-7). Parvati worshipped Lord Shiva so as to receive the blessings of Lord to fulfill her desire to marry with Shiva. Her marriage with Lord Shiva was solemnized at Mantalai. The Havankund at a later stage turned to be a small pond named after her mother Maina. It is believed that long back when there was no rain for a long time, locals gathered to start cleaning of small pond (Talai), they found ashes also alongwith mud. The spring water came out and took the shape of a big pond. Thus, the Maina Talai happened to be called Mantalai in later days. The unique thing about Mantalai of archeological interest is that there existed a hillock of red earthen-

ware and terra cotta. There were numerous layers of earthen pots. If any pot found by the locals at site, was preserved in houses assuming it a symbol of prosperity. Presently only broken pots are found since the site was excavated with machinery for land leveling.

The pleasant climatic conditions, deodar trees, natural water springs, baulis inspired the distinguished personality Swami Dharendra Bhrmachari to establish a Yogashram on his first visit to Mantalai on 22 August 1971. At the first instance he procured 7 kanals of land from a local Jagat Ram and afterwards 1002 kanals of land was procured from other locals. A multi storeyed building was constructed and named as Aparnashram. The other multi storeyed buildings were constructed for the hostel of yoga students. He has also constructed a round shaped building for own residence with underground meditation hall. All the buildings constructed in the complex are encircled with sky

touching deodars. Mango shaped swimming pool is among the other attractions of the complex. Small temple of Bawa Pardwar, a local deity also exists near the swimming pool. Initially constructed helipad was further modified by extending as air strip for the convenient landing of his planes like Moul, Cessonia and Bonier etc. The hanger and other requisites were also made available on air strip. Yoga classes were run successfully till 1990, wherein students from all over country and abroad participated. He had also planned to start a university conforming to international standards. It is understood that a gazette notification was also issued to this effect but no further progress was made. He assured locals that he was working for the over all development of Mantalai to make it as mini Singapore. After 1990 Swami started working for making Mantalai a tourist hub. He wanted to generate more avenues for employment of locals. He had created the infrastructure like cinema hall

building, tools and machinery, light and heavy vehicles, petrol pump and many more. Construction of 7 km road to Naina Devi and a helipad at that location for the convenience of devotees visiting the shrine. The road to Naina Devi is eroded with rains and badly damaged and not usable for vehicular traffic presently. He wished to convert a seven storeyed building to a five star hotel. He had also constructed a cold store for preservation of fruit and vegetables, a Gashala was also functioning till 1994 where large number of good breed cows were kept. The sufficient cow sheds were constructed for the upkeep of cows. The fruit trees were planted in large numbers in the orchard. A zoo was also provided with considerable number of various varieties of peacocks, deer etc.,

Due to sudden death of Dharendra Brahmachari in a plane crash on 09 June 1994 all his plans and development tasks undertaken were left halfway. The assets created at Mantalai remained under the control of Shri Mata Vaishanoo Devi Shrine Board till 2002 and afterwards under state Revenue Department till 2012. The complete complex was handed over to Patnitop Development Authority in 2012. The above rolling arrangement could not bring any progress further in the matter of development nor could it maintain 1994 status of the complex. Machinery like bulldozers, cranes, vehicles, road rollers lying unused for a long time have turned into scrap, the multi storeyed buildings lying unused for a long time are at the state of ruin.

The place is so attractive that during the year 1979 late Shri Rajiv Gandhi spent one month holidays along with his family at Mantalai, when he was a pilot and later on became Prime Minister of India.

The place is very beautiful, sacred and possesses tremendous potential for the attraction of tourists. The repair and maintenance of existing roads and buildings is needed which are in the process of disintegration. The hill resort which was already developed till 1994 has fallen in the prey of mismanagement; the ravages of time and lack of attention have spoiled the already created infrastructure. A detailed survey by some expertise agency should be conducted to explore the possibilities of not only to attract pilgrim tourists visiting Sudhmahadev and Gourikund shrines, but also other tourists visiting Patnitop etc. In case Hotel and Restaurant facilities including tourist cottages are constructed at Mantalai, it may invite the attention of more than 1 crore pilgrims visiting Mata Vaishnoo Devi. The place could be further highlighted when basic amenities are provided so that tourists may like to visit Mantalai, a health resort as well.

Surviving in the Dark Age

Yousuf Jameel

When visiting rural areas becomes an adventurous activity in a country identified by its villages, the threat to its existence can be easily sensed. Standing by the side of the destitute villagers with picturesque landscapes in the backdrop, getting photographs clicked and then uploading them on social networking websites has emerged as a trend across the country. But while getting those photographs clicked, seldom does one think of how that person survives in isolation away from the development ambit of the country. More so, in the border areas of the country where, on the one hand they are marred by the continuous conflict and on the other, no one pays heed to their voiceless issues.

Several hundred kilometers from the swift metropolitan life of Jammu, located in the Peer Panjal range is a village called Mohar Ban where life seems as old as a black and white picture. Bright only during the day, as night falls, the entire village is submerged in sheer darkness. Electricity hasn't reached till date in this village that lies in Mandi Tehsil, located twenty kilometers from Poonch Town. The dismal picture of the village inhabited by three hundred and fifty destitute lives brings shame to a nation that is celebrating its 67th year of Independence this year.

Eight years ago, with the objectives of electrifying all villages and habitations, providing access to electricity to all rural households and providing electricity connection to Below Poverty Line (BPL) families free of charge, the Ministry of Power launched the ambitious Rajiv Gandhi Grameen Vidyutikaran Yojana (RGVY). According to a report, the State of Jammu and Kashmir received a total of eight hundred and twenty two crores under RGVY, sixty percent of which has already been spent.



A hamlet without electricity

A total of thirty lakh houses were supposed to be illuminated with this huge budget but so far, electricity has reached only twenty nine thousand seven hundred and forty two houses.

"In 2008, the electricity department erected

electricity poles in our village but nothing has happened thereafter. We are dependent on candles and seldom get kerosene oil to light our lamps," said twenty-eight year old Farooque Ahmad, a local who further explains how

absence of roads adds to the nuisance - "We have to embark on a three hour journey on foot to reach the road that takes us to the shop from where we get kerosene oil at a subsidized rate. But by the time we reach our destination, the oil

stock is exhausted."

The worst is during extreme weather conditions - storm, heavy rain and snowfall - when it becomes even more difficult for the villagers to survive. In such conditions, even villages with access to electricity are not spared. Earlier this year, besides facing heavy snowfall, the entire district of Poonch was suffering huge losses at the financial and social front. The situation was so bad that the entire region was cut off from the rest of the country for several days. Twenty towers of 132 KV malfunctioned due to heavy snowfall. Along with its border villages, Poonch district remained in the dark for many days. The Administration claimed that they have spent crores of rupees on erecting these electricity poles. It is evident that before the commencement of such a huge project, the geographical situation of the area must have been taken into account by the electricity department. The question is, if so much money was spent on erecting these towers to provide electricity in a snowbound region, then why did they turn out to be a complete failure in testing times?

Absence of electricity has affected life of the Mohar Ban villagers in every aspect. Most of the villagers, due to no power facility, have quit farming and have migrated to other places like Jammu and Punjab, to take menial jobs. In absence of employment opportunities, they have chosen to work as laborers. Education and health are other severely affected issues waiting their respective turn to be addressed.

"Last year, electricity finally reached our adjoining village, Bhara. We are hopeful that our Government will not leave us alone in the process of ongoing development in the region. Else, we will continue surviving in the Dark Age," feared twenty-seven year old Abdul Majeed.

(Writer is currently pursuing graduation from Government Degree College, Poonch.)
Charkha Features