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Shri Amarnath Yatra:

Myths, Legends, Facts

Lalit Gupta

Pilgrimages have been part of our mystic tradition since hoary past. According to Holy Scriptures life is a journey and a pilgrimage is merely an external projection of an inward journey. Going on a pilgrimage is considered not only auspicious (for it is believed to cleanse one's sins) but it can also be reinvigorating to the mind. It lets us purge the monotony generated by our humdrum existence so we can begin life afresh.

Jammu and Kashmir abounds in such places of pilgrimages where a manifestation of divinity appeared for a particular purpose, where a sage performed austerities or meditated for a long period, or where someone got direct experience of God.

Associated with Lord Shiva, the holy cave of Amarnath is one such ancient pilgrimage, which has been drawing devotees since 5000 years. Surrounded by snowy mountains, the cave itself is covered with snow most time of the year except for a short period of time in summer when it is open for pilgrims. Situated at an altitude of 12,756 ft, the holy cave is about 360 km from Jammu and 141 km from Srinagar and reached through Pahalgam town.

Myths & Legends

According to Nilamata Purana and Amarnath Mahatmya, it was in holy cave of Amarnath that Lord Shiva narrated the tale of immortality to Parvati, which could grant immortality to any living being who heard it. Before revealing the truth about immortality, Lord Shiva as a preparation left his 'vahana'-vehicle Nandi, the bull, in Pahalgam (Bail Gaon), released the moon at Chandanwari (Jatam), the snake at Lake Sheshnag, Lord Ganesha at Mahagunas Parvat (Mahaganesh Hill), Panch Bhoot at Panjatarani (five elements of life Earth, Water, Air, Fire and Sky) which make a living being. Finally he created Rudra (Kalagni) and ordered him to set afire and eliminate every living thing in and around the holy cave.

Then Lord Shiva took Parvati Goddess inside the cave to tell her the 'Amar Katha'. But as a matter of chance one egg which was lying beneath the deer skin remained protected. The pair of pigeons which were born out of this egg became immortal having listened to the secret of immortality (Amar Katha). As Lord Shiva has revealed the secrets of immortality to his wife Parvati in the holy cave therefore the place has been named as Amarnath. Another legend says that sage Kashyapa, who drained the lake of Kashmir, had found the cave along with the lingam in it. Bhrgu Rishi, the Manasputra (son, born of a wish) of Brahma is also said to be responsible for the discovery of the Amarnath Cave and the Shivalinga.

Sanctum Sanctorum

The main attraction at Amarnath cave is the iced stalagmite formed inside the 40 m high Amarnath cave. This Ice Lingam gets formed due to freezing of water drops that fall from the roof of the cave on to the floor and grow up vertically from the cave floor. It waxes during May to August and gradually wanes thereafter. As per the religious beliefs, it has been claimed that the lingam grows and shrinks with the phases of the moon reaching its height during the summer months. This ice lingam reaches its full size on the full moon day and then begins to wane to disappear on the no moon day. By its side there are four to five ice formations resembling figures of various deities including that of Parvati and Ganesha. Lord Mrityunjay (Shi-

va) is considered to be the God of immortality. The renowned ice Shivalinga of Amarnath and the cave are a natural symbol of this form of Shiva.

Historical Sources

There are references to legendary king Aryaraja (circa 32 BCE-17 CE) who used to worship a lingam formed of ice in Kashmir. Pandit Kalhana's 11th century chronicle Rajatarangini refers to Amarnath or Amarnath. There is also mention of Queen Suryamati, the wife of King Ananta (1028-1063), granting under her husband's name agharhas at Amarnath, and arranged for the consecration of trishulas, banalingas and other sacred emblems. In his Chronicle of Kashmir, the 17th century Panjatarangini, Jonaraja relates that Sultan Zainul-abidin (1420-1470) paid a visit to the sacred tirtha of Amarnath while constructing a canal on the left bank of the river Lidder. Another Kashmiri chronicle 'Rajavali-pataka', begun by Prjyabhata and finished by Shuka, has detailed references to the pilgrimage to Amarnath Cave during Akbar's time. Pandit Jagannath in his 'Asaf Vilas' makes clear mention of Amarnath. Foreign travelers including Francois Bernier, the court physician of Aurangzeb, Vincent A Smith and Vigne have left records of their visit to the holy cave.

The great Sikh Guru Arjan Dev is said to have granted land in Amritsar for the ceremonial departure of Chari, the holy mace of Lord Shiva which marks the beginning of the Yatra to the Holy Cave. In 1819, the year in which the Afghan rule came to an end in Kashmir, Pandit Hardas Tikku "founded the Chhawani Amarnath at Ram Bagh in Srinagar where the Sadhus from the plains assembled and where he gave them free rations for the journey, both ways from his own private resources".

Discovery of Holy Cave

It is believed that after the 10th-11th centuries, this cave was forgotten by people and it was once again discovered by a shepherd in the 15th century. According to one of the stories that once a Gujjar (Shepherd) named Buta Malik was given a bag full of coal by a holy man. When he reached home, he found that the bag contained not coal, but gold coins. Overjoyed, he ran back to the place where he had met the Holy man. However the holy man had disappeared and Buta Malik instead discovered the cave and the Lingam.

Yatra

Holy Cave temple of Amarnath has emerged as a popular pilgrimage destination in recent years. In 2011 it received about 634,000 persons, the highest recorded number for the site. The number was 622,000 in 2012. The beginning of the annual pilgrimage of Amarnath is marked by 'pratham puja' to invoke the blessings of Shri Amarnathji. A 55-day yatra to Amarnath shrine will begin from this year from June 28 and conclude on Raksha Bandhan on August 21, 2013.

Route

The Amarnath cave is situated a distance of 275 kms from Jammu and around 140 km from Srinagar and 42 km from Pahalgam. However, the distance from Srinagar to Pahalgam via Pampur and Tral is only 72 km. The popular route to Amarnath Cave, also favored by authorities is the Pahalgam route which passes through Chandanwari, Sheshnag, Panjatarani before reaching the holy cave.

On day one of the yatra, pilgrims reach Pahalgam and stay there overnight. On day two, pilgrims leave in groups for Chandanwari (16 kms drive, 9498 ft). From Chandanwari, pilgrims start on foot or on Ponies or by palakis to



reach, after steep ascent of Pishsooghat pass (13000 ft), to the first halt at Sheshnag Lake (12392 ft). The journey to Sheshnag follows steep inclines on the right bank of a cascading stream and wild scenery. The waters of this greenish blue lake are covered with ice till June. According to the Hindu mythology the sacred snake Sheshnag has seven heads and this is how the place having seven peaks derives its name Sheshnag.

On day three the track starts from Sheshnag towards Panjatarani and to Amarnath Cave. One has to climb steep height up across Mahagunas Pass (14000 ft) for 4.6 Km. This route to Mahagunas, full of rivulets, waterfalls and springs then descends to meadows land of Panjtarani which is situated at the foot of mount Bhairava. Five Rivers flow here. It is said that the five rivers originated from Lord Shiva's Hair (Jataon). After arriving at Panjtarani and resting for some time, the pilgrims again start trekking towards the Amarnath holy cave, bathe in ice cold water at Amarnath stream in front of the Cave, have 'darshan' of the ice lingam and return back to Panjtarani for overnight stay. On day 4 pilgrims return from Panjtarani to Chandanwari after tracking for approximate 12-15 hours journey and then travel to Pahalgam. On day five pilgrims either choose to go from Pahalgam to Jammu or to Srinagar.

Shorter Route

The shorter northern route to Amarnath Cave route is just about 14 km long, but has a very steep gradient and is quite difficult to climb. It starts from Baltal and passes through Domial, Barari, and Sangam to reach stream of Amaravati (It is more like a tributary of Chenab) which originates from Amarnath Glacier. Only the very fit can go and come back the same day after trekking 28 kms.

Safety Measures

Keeping in view the manifold increase in number of devotees visiting the Amarnath Cave, Govt. of J&K has taken adequate measures for smooth passage of the Yatra and minimum loss of life. For this purpose, registration for the Yatra has been made mandatory. The minimum and upper age limit for the Amarnath Yatra has been fixed at 13 years and 75 years.

Through various media the official agencies are continuously advising the pilgrims to take adequate precautions before embarking upon the Yatra which includes a proper medical check-up for heart and other ailments. Pilgrims should compulsorily carry woolen clothes, stockings and trousers, jacket, raincoat, umbrella, waterproof shoes, walking stick, cap and gloves. Other essentials are torch light, candle and match box.

Facilities

Officially, the Yatra is organized by Shree Amarnath Shrine Board (SASB) in collaboration with J&K State Government. The Government agencies provide necessary facilities all along the route during the Yatra period, which includes provision of ponies, supply of power, telecommunication facilities, firewood and setting up of fair price shops. The State Road Transport Corporation and Private Trans-

port Operators provide the regular services from Jammu to Pahalgam and Baltal. Also privately hired taxis are available from Jammu.

Jammu Base Camp

The base camp of Shri Amarnath Ji Yatra at Jammu is located in Yatri Niwas at Bhagwati Nagar, Jammu. Other places where the Amarnath yatis can seek free accommodation are Sanatan Dharma Sabha, Gita Bhawan, Parade, Aggarwal Sabha, Vivekanand Chowk, Shiv Mandir, Mini Market, Railway Station, Mahajan Sabha, Shalamar Road, Dogra Sadder Sabha, Dogra Hall and Brahma Sabha, Parade Ground. Langer facilities for Sadhus are available at Ram Mandir at Purani Mandi. Accommodation is also available in all Hotel/Lodges at discount in Jammu and Katra.

Langars

Right from Lakhapur onwards upto the holy cave, Amarnath yatis are served free food in langars-food kiosks, put up by individual devotees and NGOs registered with SASB. The pilgrim camp for first night at Nunwan Yatri Camp, 6 kms short of Pahalgam. Other than free food, there is also provision to provide resting tents called pandals. Near the shrine, hundreds of tents which are erected by locals can be hired for a night's stay.

Helicopter Services

To provide helicopter services for yatis from Baltal to Pancharani and Pahalgam to Pancharani, Shri Amarnath Ji Shrine Board has collaborated with three Helicopter Operators. For Baltal to Pancharani Route, the Helicopter Service will be provided for Global Vectra Pvt Ltd and Himalayan Heli Services Pvt Ltd, whereas for Pahalgam to Pancharani Route the Service will be provided for Pawan Hans Pvt Ltd. Yatis can book online tickets at the websites of the Helicopter Operators.

Disaster Management

The furry of recent flash floods at Uttar Kashi, which has left thousands of pilgrims dead and equal number stranded without food and water, has come as clarion call for checking in advance the preparedness of the Govt. Disaster Management Department of J&K State both in terms of trained men and materials to meet any such eventuality.

The holy cave of Amarnath like other such places is called tirtha-a point of crossing over. Let the pilgrimage of Amarnath be a point of crossing over, a transition to a higher level of thought, action and existence. But at the same time pilgrims should also uphold highest human value of compassion and care of fellow pilgrims as well as the environment.

RARE AND ENDANGERED

The Pashmina shawl of Kashmir is world famous for its softness and rarity. Produced from wool gathered from goats in the high mountains, untimely snowfall has killed thousands of them in the past months. Scientists are now trying to clone this rare breed to save the goats from calamities, reports Anju Munshi

Pashmina-, the name evokes warmth and a rare soft-

ness. Owing its name to pashm, softest of the wool, it is known to bring magic to our winter wardrobe, it stands for sophistication and connoisseurship. But its journey from wool to the snug shawl is a long and arduous one through craggy mountain passes starting at Changtang area in southeastern Ladakh inhabited by Changpa nomads.

But today this age-old route is facing hazards with

changes in the environ. This finest variety of wool comes from an area known for its harsh and arid climate with very little vegetation. This induces the animals to produce an undercoat in order to insulate themselves against the chilly conditions. This soft coating under their bellies is six times finer than human hair and is used for making the expensive Pashmina wool.

Pashmina has been an important symbol of Kashmiri handicraft identity. It is a matter of status and well being to possess these shawls. Often they are passed on as family heirlooms. In olden times the bridal attire consisted of a Pashmina sari with fine embroidery. Even today a couple of them make an important part of a bride's trousseau.

"Pashmina goat is not a specific breed; all the local white coloured goats of Ladakh region produce the undercoat if exposed to severe cold conditions," informs Razza Abassi, district chief husbandry officer, Kargil. Around 22,000 Pashmina goats reportedly died due to scarcity of fodder owing to unprecedented snowfall in Changtang area of Leh in the past months. The villages affected were Nyoma, Tsagha, Nider, Muth, Chumathang, Kordzoq, Manmirak, Chhusul, Phobrang and Kargyam. Abassi clarifies that Ladakh has two districts - Leh and Kargil, and the livestock deaths occurred in Leh district and not Kargil.

Unexpected cold weather and inability to transport fodder from Srinagar (Jo-jila Pass remains closed for six months) dry pastures and severe winter have made a difference to the production of wool even though the Pashmina goat is quite resilient. Says Tsewan Morup from the department of sheep husbandry, Leh: "Changtang is a huge area 42000 sq kms, and the temp varies between -43 to -45 degrees. The enormity of the problem is clear only if one visits this place. The pregnant goats have been having miscarriages and the young ones, up to one-year-old, have been dying because of the cold."

The Leh district of Greater Ladakh produces around 30 000 kg of Pashmina fibre every year which is harvested from about 0.15 million of Changthang goats. With the numbers going down fast, the production stands at the crossroads. Naturally, the artisans and the middlemen who are involved in the trade are affected. "I may have to relocate to Srinagar or Jammu to find a job for myself as I have incurred huge losses and the future seems to be dismal unless strong steps are taken by the state government," rues Ghulam Rasool Dar, a trader in Pashmina shawls. Fida Hussain, DC, Kargil area, says that they are plan-

ning to get goats from Leh district under the task force programme. "It is a centrally sponsored scheme and we want to establish individual units in different villages so that Pashmina is made in Kargil too." He says that since the Pashmina goats require a minus zero temperature places like Drass and Zaskar in the Kargil region would be suitable. "We want to have a uniform distribution of goats so that it doesn't become Leh-centric," he says.

Another programme of the state government is arranging fodder free of cost as part of feeding intervention schemes.

To preserve and propagate this soft fur species, a team of scientists at Sher-e-Kashmir University of Agricultural Sciences and Technology of Kashmir (SKUAST-K) cloned a Pashmina goat named "Noori" for the first time in the world by a simplified hand-guided cloning technique. "It is an advanced assisted reproduction technique that does not manipulate or alter the animal's DNA," claims Riyaz Ahmed Shah, principal scientist in the cloning project. This project is funded by ICAR under National Agricultural Innovative Project (NAIP). It is a two pronged approach to infuse new life to Pashmina -first, by cloning of the goats and second, by enhancing the productivity and profitability of the fibre.

Besides the shortage of the wool due to environmental reasons, a man-made one has been threatening the famous woollen shawl for some time now. Many fake and semi Pashmina outlets have found their way into the markets. There are many competitors who also claim to manufacture Pashmina shawls at less than half the price but the experts warn against such a buy for with time the softness and the warmth both wear off. Some of the shawls and scarves being marketed as Indian Pashmina abroad are likely to be inferior as they are made from acrylics, regular wool and even cotton. The fakes are equally soft and it is difficult to differentiate without an expert eye. Some even have a tag of being made in China.

For this reason, pure Pashmina has been given the GI (Geographical Indication) mark like, for example, the Muga silk of Assam, so that a buyer can check and get an authentic material.

Today Pashmina has also evolved into stoles, scarves, waistcoats, wraps and ponchos and are highly in demand at home and abroad. But the scene is grim till appropriate action is taken to preserve it from extinction, feel experts.

Nature endowed the Pashmina goats with the art of growing a fleece during winter months to cope with adverse weather. How well efforts to preserve this rare wool succeed time will tell. At the moment, however, this soft fleece is surely going through a hard time. (TWF)

