

At The Feet Of Shiva At Amarnath

After having left Kashmir in 60s to study engineering at Banaras, and not knowing if I was returning back there to work, I was haunted by the lost opportunity to visit Amaranth. Most of the male members of my family and most of my friends had made the trip.

How circumstances had made me be deprived of the visit, I do not remember in detail, but I know my miss was circumstantial. But what is surprising is that I could have kept on harboring my desire to visit Amaranth even over so many decades. What was in it that kept me pulling toward it? Religious ardor? Hiking pleasure? Pull of the stunning natural scenery? I do not know what it was. Like the British mountaineer George Mallory's (1886-1924), (who had made three unsuccessful attempts to climb Mt. Everest), answer, "Because it is there," to the question, "Why do you want to climb Mt. Everest?," I did not have a good explanation for harboring my desire to visit Amarnath for so long, but only my strong feeling to do so.

When I decided to visit Kashmir this August, naturally the thought of visiting Amaranth occurred to me. But I reserved my decision to go there at a later point during the trip, so that I was absolutely certain that I could do so. The reason for doing that was because I had to consider my physical strength at my age to go on high mountains. When I reached Kashmir, within a day I decided that I will go to Amaranth.

On Aug. 10, I got up at 4:00 AM to prepare for the trip to Amarnath. By 5:00 AM I was on the road to Baltal, about 56 miles from Srinagar. It was an eerie feeling to drive at that hour, as the towns and villages were shutdown. In the absence of people places look different; their real personalities come out. How innocent do they look, ready to wear whatever garb humans put them in. Beyond the long strip of the town of Ganderbal, we started encountering the more mountainous terrain. Kangan is a lovely blend of hills, trees, and water, just 25 miles from

Srinagar. As we go further beyond this point we start feeling the almost continuous presence of the river Sind: scintillating, spirited, sonorous. What a grace and character it has. River Liddar, flowing in Pahalgam valley, is small and low-key in comparison. On the way we saw some people out of their homes in pre-dawn walks. The silence of the hour puts the walker in a meditative mode. What a good way to start a day in one's life. I could not but see how much simpler is life in villages and towns away from metropolises. Towns of Thajewas and Sonamarg followed.

Driving from Sonamarg, just about 3 to 4 miles from Baltal, the road suddenly turned very rough; it was as yet unpaved road. It was very annoying, as one was close to the significant destination of Baltal, during the yatra period, from where the helicopters ferry to Panchtarni, the base-camp of Amarnath. Why cannot the government choose its priorities right?

Baltal is a meadow-like place, with lovely mountainscape. On this sunny morning it looked a forlorn, dreamy place. Within the fenced area of the heliport two companies operate. We were several dozen passengers waiting for our turns to be ferried to Panchtarni. After an hour's wait beyond the schedule, we were carefully seated in the plane. I was accompanied by three ladies and a man in the rear compartment. As the helicopter lifted off, after a usual hiccup, the three ladies got visibly scared and some of them started praying. Within a minute we were smoothly flying. We flew through a mountain pass that seemed very adventurous, especially because the geography was new to me. After five minutes we landed at Panchtarni, the base-camp of the Amaranth cave, which is at an elevation of 12,729 ft.

Panchtarni is valley-like, contoured by dramatically rugged mountains. Like most high mountainscapes, it has the aura of otherworldliness, the mood of renunciation. I felt I could live here for a while: to meditate on a spirit higher than that is manifest to us through senses.

I decided to go on a horseback to the cave rather than walk, considering my aging frame.

Amnarnath cave is only about four miles from Panchtarni but the road is fraught with high steep. If that were not enough hardship, the road is just a few feet wide, wildly meandering at places, unpaved, and strewn quite often with huge rocks. And there are ravines thousands of feet below to scare you. In U.S. such a route would be impermissible for mass travel for safety reasons. Why would the government not make this heavily trafficked road safe? It would not need any foreign technology to do that, just rupees, planning, and effort.

My trek started smoothly, fuelled as it was with high motivation. But as I climbed higher into the folds of the mountains, my leg bones started to pain. But I am not an easy quitter. I have many times ruined my projects by not quitting early enough; I am a prisoner of my will. As I moved on with the caravan of yatris, I started thinking of how people undertake this arduous and expensive journey. Many of the yatris I saw were old, much older than I am, and also seemed to be of modest financial means. What gave them the strength to first embark on this journey ? It was not much difficult for me to understand that it was their faith in God that propelled them.

As we climbed higher into the mountain my legs became sore and I started thinking of what to do. I could walk, perhaps relieving pressure on my legs, or I could tell my horseman to look into the saddle straps and stirrups, as their faulty set up might be the culprit. But I did not convert these ideas into actions, for reasons unknown to me. Insane that it was, I just kept on going like the soldiers in the poem The Charge Of The Light Brigade, whose mission was dictated by the order: Theirs is not to reason why/Theirs is but to do and die. Sometimes I looked at the very old woman in our group, whose back was doubled up; I wondered how she was coping with the journey. But because she was ahead of me and so I was unable to see her face, I could not tell. There were other yatris, who were older than I am, but none appeared to be in pain. I knew, with the utmost confidence of my being, that the cancellation of the trip was not an option I had. Remembering

that in other similar situations, when I was under intense pressure to continue on a path because I was in utter discomfort, I had kept on. This faith in myself propelled me ahead in my present calamity.

The scenery on the way is mystic and tranquilizing; you feel you are far away from the world. You are solely focused on the journey and its destination. Those who are religious must be thinking of God, those who believe in the mystery and power of nature think of it. They are two different ways for humans to live in harmony with themselves and the outside world. Such journeys as we were undertaking unconsciously detach you from yourself and make you think of some reality higher than that. Living in the survival struggle, unfairness, and coldness of the world, compels most of the people to find the security in one's self. That leads to the creation of ego, which then becomes a vicious black-hole, from where the escape becomes an extraordinarily difficult task. If the world were different, as it has been at times in the history of mankind, human beings would live more peacefully than they do now. Today's maya jaal is a tough prison, braced as it is with heavy materialism and its inhuman sister, technology.

The thinker in me could not avoid, although I tried my utmost not to think on the subject, thinking about why people undertake an arduous and an expensive journey to Amaranth. There were many very old men and women, physically decrepit, for whom the journey was hazardous. What is this force, this compulsion, which pulled them to Amarnath? Since the birth of man in cosmos he has been seeking the ultimate reality; as if his very birth involved the separation from it, so that he was compelled to reunite with it. This eternal longing of man to be with God is the very fabric of life, the essence of human existence, the driving force of the propagation of human soul. Man wants to be reunited with the flame that in the first place propelled him into the journey through the world. Why did gods create this puzzling game? We do not know, but in the absence of our understanding of it, we have to assume that they had a good reason for it.

The horses we were riding on were of small build but were tough. They knew their job very well. In many situations, when there was more than one path

available to negotiate, from a human intelligence point of view, all horse would follow the same path. They were very dexterous in negotiating complex maneuvers; for example, when climbing up and down a rock. When a horse appeared to be slackening in his efforts, the horseman would admonish it with a particular noise, *frrah*, and the horse would react with the expected improvement in its performance.

The cave is on the other side of the mountain from which one starts at Panchtarni. So, when you turn the side of the mountain, the emotion to have Shiva's darshan rises. Also, the trek on the other side is milder. The closer you get to the cave, the lower does the altitude of the road gets. For those who are on a maiden journey, the emotions for darshan are accompanied with curiosity and the possibilities of surprises. Reaching the last mile to the destination the crescendo of emotions rises perceptibly. Finally, you reach Amarnath, but are crestfallen to learn that you have still some more journeying to do to reach the cave. There are about 70 steps on a steep incline to climb to get into the Amarnath cave. My leg pain seemed to vanish, except that its shadow reverberated in the memory. I thought I needed a moment of respite before the final push to darshan. I went into a tented daaba and slaked my thirst and hunger by devouring some snacks. While still eating I learnt that the place was a charity operation. I could not but feel admiration for those contributing money and efforts for it; the world was not, after all, completely insensitive.

After nourishing and resting the beaten body a little, I strode on toward the steps. Right before going over the first of them I took a look at the cave. It seemed larger than it had appeared in the pictures; maybe, because of the three-dimensionality of the view. The largeness of the mouth of the cave portended that it might be very deep as well, an abbreviated cosmos of spirituality. At this point in my journey the mystery of Amaranth burned scintillatingly in my mind, the prospect of being in the cave shortly quickened my breath. I was very surprised to see that I too wanted to have a darshan. I realized that aren't we all human beings searchers of something larger than our existences, something more beautiful than our environments.

The fierce ruggedness of Mt. Amarnath and its companion mountains seemed to be in sharp contrast with the spiritual light enshrined there. Were the mountains protecting something sensitive and inestimable? The legend that Lord Shiva revealed to his consort Parvati the secrets of life and eternity in the cave flashed across my mind. I felt that was an awesome place he had chosen for such an awesome revelation.

But the climbing of the steps became painful, because of their steepness and because of the accumulated tiredness of the journey already made. Even young people, some of whom looked less than half my age, were taking breathers every ten steps climbed. This observation made me feel less critical of my self-control.

Finally, I entered the cave, in a line of yatris. The first impression was that its depth was shallow, about 20 ft., compared to its outside width and height of about 45 and 150 ft. There was plenty of time to be inside the cave as at this time of close to the end of the yatra there were only a few hundred yatris. There was no darshan, which was not unexpected for this time of the year. I was told that in June there was a full 16 ft. darshan. There is a popular theory floating around that the military helicopter traffic near the cave had raised the temperatures in the cave, resulting in the early disappearance of the darshan. But I was not disappointed by the lack of darshan, as it was not its physical presence that was necessary for my mind to appreciate its significance. For me it is the legend of Amarnath that is so captivating, not its scientific authenticity, because it signifies to me the eternal human thirst for truth, beauty, and knowledge. I spent fifteen minutes looking at the wall in the cave where Shiva's, Parvati's, and their son Ganesha's lingums usually stand. I imagined the millions of people, who over centuries have visited the cave to find their salvation. I was moved by this human yearning to find the release from the bondages of the flesh and the shackles of the world. I could not help thinking the great irony of man's life: though one of the supreme creations in the universe, he is in pain throughout his stay in the world, the release from which he so ardently seeks.

After having darshan the mood of satisfaction invisibly penetrated me. I was no longer thinking but felt to be in a benign daze; as if submerged in a deep lake, from which I did not want to be disturbed for awhile.

After taking prasad and resting a little the return trip to Panchtarni started. A mood of bathos slowly descended. The return journey was easier but yet strenuous, as the same elements of the narrowness of the road, punctuated with huge rocks, and extreme steepness existed as in the other direction. Slowly and surely we trekked to Panchtarni, a dreamy valley, laced with beautifully rugged mountains, reminding one of eternity.

From Panchtarni we travelled back to Baltal by a helicopter. From there on I boarded my waiting taxi. We stopped at the town of Sonamarg: a place of almost absolute tranquility, pregnant with a mystic mood, transporting one to a different cosmos.

After following the dancing rhythms of the whitewater river Sind for quite a while, we reentered the civilization. Passing through the hamlets, villages, and little towns once again impressed on me the superiority of living close to nature.

Reaching my hotel in Srinagar, I felt that I had still not been able to lift the corner of the veil of mystery over my lifelong urge to visit Amaranth.

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