

MATA VAISHNODEVI JI AND SRI AMARNATH JI THEIR INTANGIBLE VALUES Chauddhary POONAM*, Inde / India

India has since ancient times been a home of various religious beliefs, be it Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Islam, etc. and each of these in turn has, over the centuries, contributed to enriching the cultural, tangible and intangible heritage of India. Their contribution in enriching the tangible heritage has been in the form of temples/ holy shrines (belonging to various religious sect), studded throughout the length and breadth of the country. A large majority of these are, however, Hindu Temples (which is the religion followed by the Hindus of India who also form a vast majority of the people of India). The temples in India act as the connecting points in bringing together the people of the country, differing in culture and customs, on the same platform¹. India's National consciousness has, for millennia, found fulfilment in religious activity of one sort or another. Temples are thus a place for collective worship and the main link connecting the "Religious thought" of the Hindus.

In this context it needs to be emphasized that the strength and resilience of India lies in its intangible heritage which among other things is the '*belief in a single Divinity or supreme God that is present in everything, belief in other gods who are aspects of that supreme God, belief that the soul repeatedly goes through a cycle of being born into a body, dying and taking rebirth till it attains MOKSHA (freedom from the cycle of Birth - Life - Death and Rebirth), belief in Karma, a force that determines the quality of each life, depending on how well one behaved in a past life.*'

In order to seek union with God, the Hindus also undertake pilgrimages to the Holy Shrines which are scattered all over the Indian Sub-Continent. Indeed, the Hindus have been visiting such places since times immemorial. The credit for enhancing the popularity of the concept of pilgrimage goes to the great Indian saint ShankraCharya, who in the 8th century AD traveled throughout the great expanse of India, at a time when means of communication were almost non-existent², and demonstrated to the Hindus that it was not only possible but also spiritually uplifting to do this. The four pilgrimage centers he especially popularized viz. Kedar Nath - Badri Nath, in the Himalayas in the North, Jagan Nath Puri on the Eastern Sea Coast, Dwarka on the Western sea coast and Rameswaram on the Southern extremity of India, caught the imagination of the people and were elevated to the level of TIRTH or the abodes of God. Since then his example has been emulated by a countless number of people over the centuries thereby enriching the intangible heritage of India. The pilgrimages to the Holy shrines are termed as '*Tirth Yatras*' in Indian dialect and "*OM*" is the one syllable mantra, which the devotees chant to be one with GOD.

In pursuance of his belief in performing pilgrimage a Hindu will often travel hundreds of miles on foot to make or renew vows, to offer penance for altered fortunes, or simply as an act of devotion to the holy shrines.

After the great TIRTHS, two other holy spots on which the Hindus have unflinching faith and which they visit again and again, in spite of their location on the difficult mountainous terrains of the Himalayas, are the shrines of Mata *Vaishno Devi Ji* and *Shri Amarnath Ji*.

The shrine of Mata VaishnoDevi Ji is a manifestation of the Mother Goddess and it lies nestled in a natural cave located in the Trikuta Mountains towering above Katra, in the Jammu province, the winter capital of the state of Jammu and Kashmir. It is a unique shrine as Mata Vaishnavi is said to have manifested Herself in all her three forms of *MahaKali*, *MahaLakshmi* and *Maha Saraswati in this shrine*³. It is believed that the Goddess in her manifestation of *Mata Mahakali* blesses her devotees by giving them strength to never lose heart and constantly battle the forces of darkness till they prevail upon them. As *Mata Mahalakshmi*, She blesses her devotees with wealth and prosperity. As *Mata Maha Saraswati* She blesses her devotees with pure thoughts and a high intellect. The three manifestations of the Goddess are believed to stand for the following attributes in humans:

**MAHAKALI (TAM GUNA) STRENGTH
MAHALAKSHMI (RAJ GUNA) WEALTH
MAHASARASWATI (SATVA GUNA) INTELLECT**

It is seen that each person on earth contains the attributes of *Tam Guna*, *Raj Guna*, and *Satva Guna* in some degree or the other⁴. His or Her behaviour is, therefore, conditioned by which attribute is predominant. However, to lead a full and meaningful life a balance has to be struck amongst the three. This balance is extremely difficult to achieve. It needs divine blessing and the belief is that it is only at VaishnoDevi Ji that such blessings are possible simultaneously from a single source of *SHAKTI (Energy)*. This is what makes the holy shrine of Mata VaishnoDevi ji unique in the world. The Hindus believe in *TRETA YUG* [(One of the aeons of Hindu Cosmology). These are four in number during one cycle of the existence of the Universe. The others are *SAT YUGA*, *DWAPAR YUGA* and *KALI YUGA*. When *KALI YUGA* comes to an end there shall be *PRALAYA* or the great destruction and the Universe shall cease to exist], the Goddess metamorphosed Herself in to rock form in the cave and immersed Herself in contemplating upon the Supreme God.

In time, She attained and then began to radiate so much spiritual energy that any one that goes anywhere near the shrine gets blessed and those who enter the shrine and pay obeisance before HER believe that they have been able to wash off all their sins.

The three manifestations of the Goddesses are represented in '*Pindi (Rock)*' form and are located at the end of a 98 feet long cave. The worship of the Goddess is formalized through *Aarti* and chanting of various *Mantras* by the *Pujaris*. *Aarti* is performed twice a day, once at sunrise and again at sunset. People from all over come to the cave to seek the blessings of the Goddess, and crawl through the narrow cave to have *Darshans* of the holy *Pindis*.

The trek to the shrine is not easy. Pilgrims have to walk up the mountain for a distance of twelve kilometers to reach the holy shrine. Prior to the take over of the management of the shrine by Sri Mata Shrine Board in 1986, there were hardly any facilities at and enroute the shrine. Even then the shrine used to attract a considerable rush of pilgrims. Now more than five million pilgrims visit the shrine every year. Records show that the faith in the Goddess is so great that besides attracting the Indian nationals from within the country, the Indian Diaspora all over the world also visit the shrine and many come back again and again. *There are some people who visit the shrine every week and some others who visit the shrine every month.* Many among the Indian Diaspora visit the shrine at least twice a year. Records also show Handicapped people trekking up to the cave. There are many other pilgrims who crawl up and take days to reach the holy cave all the while chanting '*JAI MATA DI*'.

It is faith, which brings these people back to drink from the springs of Indian spirituality and feel rejuvenated.

Shri Amarnath Ji is another holy shrine on which Hindus have enormous faith. It is located in the high Himalayas girdling the Valley of Kashmir and is much more difficult to trek than Mata Vaishno Devi ji. It is situated at a height of 13,000 feet above mean sea level and pilgrims have to negotiate the Mahagunas pass (height more than 14,000 feet above mean sea level) to reach the shrine. It takes five days from the road head to make a round trip of the shrine. The shrine is very popular and the devotees in hundreds of thousands visit the shrine to have *Darshans* of Ice-Lingam i.e. Shivalingam, made of ice (which is a symbol of Shiva, the God). It is considered the most sacred symbol of worship for the Shaivites⁵ (those who are devout worshippers of Shiva). The cave is unique because the Shivalingam gets formed every year as a result of water dripping at a particular point. It is a belief that the Ice- Lingam is the God Shiva Himself⁶. (The word ShivaLingam is made up of two words SHIVA, the God and LINGAM, the Phallus. In a temple dedicated to Shiva, the ShivaLingam is made of stone. It is shown as being embedded in Parvati, Shiva's consort and thus is a representation of the act of creation).

Another ice mound, though much smaller, gets formed near the main altar and is believed to be that of the Goddess Parvati, the consort of Lord Shiva. Besides, two pigeons are always seen flying in and out of the cave.

These are said to be the two *ganas* (soldiers) of Lord Shiva. The cave of Amarnath is considered one of the holiest naturally occurring shrines of the Hindu faith. Every year, devotees from all over India and abroad throng to the shrine to worship this marvellous symbol of Lord Shiva. The abode is open only for one month in a year i.e. mid July to mid August.

The entire trek from the road head to the Lord's cave passes through landscapes of indescribable beauty. At some places nature also displays its awesome majesty. Gazing at the ineffable beauty of the ten feet high Ice Lingam and worshipping Lord Shiva in the midst of such stunning natural beauty, pilgrims not only feel blessed but also spiritually uplifted. Indeed the feeling of being spiritually uplifted is so great that till as recently as about forty years ago some of the Sadhus would leap from high precipices into the raging torrents of the Amarganga below and embrace death with a beatific smile on their face as they felt that there was nothing else left to see in this world after they had gazed at and worshipped Lord Shiva at Amarnath. Now the police remains alerted in order to foil such attempts.

Thousands of devotees of Lord Shiva from diverse ethnicities and cultures pour into Jammu, the city of temples everyday during the annual pilgrimage to the holy cave shrine of Amarnath Ji as it is the base camp for the pilgrimage. They come from the West, the East, the South as well as the Northern states of India. It takes one day to drive from Jammu to Chandanwari. From Chandanwari pilgrims have to trek up to Amarnath. Since there is a restriction on the number of pilgrims who can go for Darshan every day, as also the fact that the weather can play a spoil sport by turning foul and leading to the suspension of the pilgrimage, the pilgrims anxiously wait for their turn to pay obeisance to the Shivlinga.

Pilgrims from all over the world throng to these shrines as they touch a deep chord in the Indian psyche. Devout Hindus gather at these shrines in large numbers for prayers as well as for making votive offerings and return back elated and spiritually fulfilled. These are not one-time visits. People come back again and again to experience spiritual bliss.

Just as there are numerous pilgrims who go to Vaishno Devi again and again, similarly there are many pilgrims who go to Amarnath every year. "*A blind man has been visiting the holy cave of Amarnath Ji for the third consecutive year⁷. A couple has been visiting the holy cave of Amarnath every year for the last eight years.*" *There are many other such instances.* Another thing worth noticing is that *Amarnath yatra is regarded as a symbol of Indian brotherhood as this is one Hindu pilgrimage which is run and managed to a large extent by Muslims in the sensitive state of Jammu and Kashmir.*

In spite of the fact that many pilgrims die, many fall ill on their way especially to the Amarnath cave, there has been no decline in the pilgrimage. Even the militant attacks have failed to dampen the spirit of the pilgrims visiting the shrines. This becomes amply clear from the headlines, which are splashed across newspapers. Some of these are reproduced below:

*"Four pilgrims die on their way to the holy cave"⁸
"Threat or no threat, pilgrims throng to Amarnath."⁹
"Rush to Amarnath, Vaishno Devi, heading for record number."¹⁰
"Heavy rush of pilgrims continues."¹¹
"14 pilgrims die of cardiac arrest"¹²*

Some pilgrims were interviewed after a militant attack at Sheshnag enroute the Amarnath shrine. They said that though the attacks by the terrorists had created some fear in their mind but the craving for offering prayers at the cave was so great that despite all odds, their unflinching faith had kept them moving.

It is the intense faith in these holy places, which has been the intangible strength of India. This faith is unshakable. It brings people closer to each other and over the centuries has strengthened the unity of the country. Some times these pilgrimages are hazardous. This does not deter the people. In fact, people believe that if they die while they are on a pilgrimage they will go straight to heaven.

It must be remembered that it is faith that attracts pilgrims to these shrines from all over the world. There is, therefore, a need to do much more in order to preserve this intangible heritage of India. The Government has become aware that pilgrim tourism is the strength of the country and has been trying to provide better facilities to the pilgrims. These include:

- Helicopter service has been introduced to Vaishno Devi Ji and Amarnath Ji.
- Security has been increased.

The High court has directed the Government to set up boards like the VaishnoDevi Shrine Board for managing prominent religious places to ensure orderliness, cleanliness, etc.

- 1 India is a vast country with diverse cultures and religious beliefs. In Hindu Pantheon there are three hundred million Gods and Goddesses and they are worshipped in different parts of India differently.
- 2 The Classical Age, Bharati Vidya Bhawan Series, Bombay, 1988.
- 3 Goswami Anil, Vaishno Devi - The Shrine, Ved Pushpa Publishers , 2001, Jammu.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Worshippers of Lord Shiva are called Shavites .
- 6 Lord Shiva is the third member of the triumvirate and is designated as the destroyer as well as the creator of the universe. He is an ascetic, a fertility God, a divine hermit delighting in solitary meditation high in the Himalayas, so on and so forth.
- 7 Daily Excelsior, July 20, 2003, Jammu, Local Daily of the State if Jammu & Kashmir.
- 8 Ibid, July 21, 2003.
- 9 Ibid, July 23, 2003.
- 10 Kashmir Times, July 24, 2003, Jammu, Local Daily of the State in Jammu & Kashmir.
- 11 Daily Excelsior, July19, 2003, Jammu, Local Daily of the State if Jammu & Kashmir.
- 12 Kashmir Times, July 22, Jammu.

ABSTRACT

India, the holy land, has innumerable temples and shrines spread all over the country. As per Hindu mythology, there are 33 Crore (3.3 Billion) Gods and Goddesses associated to Hindu Pantheon and each has a shrine dedicated to it. The Jammu and Kashmir State, the most Northern state of India, has three distinct regions namely Jammu, Ladakh and Kashmir and can be called a 'Religious Paradise'. It is famous for its cave shrines, which are natural rock formations that represent the living intangible heritage of India. These Gods and Goddesses are sources to be spiritually uplifted for the people of India. They provide spiritual solace to thousands of worshippers visiting these shrines. Apart from spiritual attainment they provide mental satisfaction and great ecstasy that sustain and stimulate the life pattern of thousands of strife torn people, who have intrinsic faith in these deities. The most significant cave shrine, however, are those of Mata Vaishno Devi and Amarnath located in Jammu and Kashmir regions respectively.

Mata Vaishno Devi cave shrine is dedicated to Goddess Vaishno, which is a manifestation of Maha Kali, Maha Lakshmi and Maha Sarasvati. The three manifestations of the Goddess stand for the following:

- (Maha Kali, Tam) ---- Strength
- (Maha Lakshmi, Raj) ---- Wealth
- (Maha Sarasvati, Satva) ---- Intellect

Each person on earth contains the attributes of Tam Guna, Raj Guna, Satva Guna, in some degree. His/ Her behaviour is conditioned by which attribute is predominant. However to lead a full and meaningful life a balance has to be struck between the three. This balance is extremely difficult to achieve. It needs divine blessings. It is only at Vaishno Devi that such blessings are possible. Similarly the holy cave shrine of Amarnath is dedicated to Lord Siva. The place is revered by the Hindu pilgrims because every year the Shivlinga of snow is formed. The Shivlinga seems to possess incredible and miraculous powers. Therefore, people from all over India visit the shrine to seek blessings of the God.

Mata Vaishno Devi and Amarnath are the only cave shrines in the world where pilgrims in huge numbers willingly and happily climb vertical heights of almost 3500 ft and 12000 ft respectively covering a distance of 24 kms and 40 kms respectively. Large number of these pilgrims are repeaters who come every year. The unflinching faith of these devotees is wondrous to watch and what seems to motivate them to the very core of their heart are the three words, JAI MATA DI and JAI BABA BHOLENATH.

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EDUCATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS

- 1990- Master of Philosophy in History. Topic: History & Architecture of the Fort of Akhnur.
- 1994- Doctorate of Philosophy in History (Phd) Topic of Thesis: "History & Architecture of the forts of Jammu region".
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PAPERS PRESENTED & PUBLISHED

- “Archeology of Akhnur” published in the Jammu University Review, August 1990
- “The Dockyard of Akhnur Fort”, Summary published in the Journal of Indian History Congress, Mysore, 1994.
- “Historical Geography of Jammu Region”, presented in the Seminar of History & Culture of Jammu Region, 1999.
- Abstract entitled “Strategic and Economic importance of the Forts of Jammu Region” published in the souvenir for National Seminar on “The North – West frontier of India”, February 25 -27 1999, organized by the Department of History, University of Jammu and center for History & Culture of the Jammu and Ladakh regions, University of Jammu.
- “Economy of Akhnur” presented in the Indian History Congress, Calicut, 1999.
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- “Religious Terrorism – The Latest Threat” (Juxtaposition of Jammu’s Heritage – Living and Vibrant versus Dead and decaying) presented and published in the proceedings of ICOMOS – XIII General Assembly and Scientific Symposium, December 1-5, 2002, Madrid, Spain.
- “Ambaran and Buddhism” presented during the Annual Conference of the Indian History and Culture Society (IHCS) XXVI and the abstract of the paper published in the proceedings published by the State Institute of Archaeology, Art History, Conservation & Museology, Hill Palace, Thripunithura, Kerala.
- “Museums – Important Source of History (A study of National Museums, Janpath, New Delhi & Dogra Art Museum, Jammu)” presented during the Punjab History Conference under the auspices of the Department of Punjab Historical Studies, Punjabi University, Patiala, March 6-8, 2003, Patiala, Punjab, India.
- “Accessibility – An Integral Part of a Museum (with a special reference to the Dogra Art Museum)” presented during the National Seminar on Arts and Museums for Persons with Disability, National Museum, Janpath, New Delhi, March 22-24, 2003.

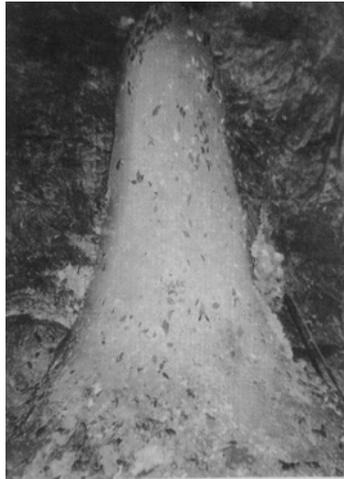
OTHER PROFESSIONAL PURSUITS

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LANGUAGES KNOWN:

English, Hindi, Punjabi, Dogri & Sanskrit.

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View of the Ice - Linga Amarnath Ji



View of the holy cave of Amarnath Ji



View of the Pindis of Mata Vaishno Devi ji