

A Forgotten Pilgrimage

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TO BRING BACK TO MEMORY a pilgrimage that took place fifty years ago is itself a tough task. Further, remembering the pilgrimage to Amarnath, Kedarnath, and Badrinath, where lakhs of people go every year, is not very entertaining. Nevertheless, when so many kind-hearted persons request me to write about these pilgrimage centres, I have no way to avoid it.

Pilgrimage to Amarnath

Now, to begin with the beginning. It was in early 1963 that I decided to go to these places. At that time, I was in Advaita Ashrama, Mayavati, in the Himalayan foothills of Kumaon, where an important centre of the Ramakrishna Order is situated that was visited by Swami Vivekananda in 1901.

I left Mayavati on 24 July 1963 and proceeded to Delhi en route to Pathankot. Incidentally, I may place a few facts about travelling to and from Mayavati. Till 1950, or so, one had to walk from Tanakpur to Mayavati, a distance of 40 or 50 miles. It took two and a half days. Now things have changed remarkably. The mud road from Lohaghat to Mayavati is now asphalted. Electricity arrived in 1970 or so. Telephone has also arrived. New buildings have also come up. This has resulted in a stream of visitors and pilgrims coming during the periods when guests are allowed to stay in the ashrama. Though all these are worthy of appreciation, the solitude of Mayavati has gone. Well, changes are bound to occur. What is important is to adjust to new situations.

From Delhi, I took the train of Pathankot. In

those days, the railway line was not extended to Jammu. From Pathankot, it was a long journey. Starting in the morning, we reached Kud at 9 p.m. It was raining and cold. I got down along with the companions, Swami Jyotirananda and a devotee from Bombay. But where to stay for the night? The tea-stall owner told us to go up to a gurudwara. We went up and the old lady managing the gurudwara gladly accommodated us there, but asked: '*Beedi-pidi to nahi pite ho*; hope you do not smoke beedis or the like?' I said, 'No, we don't even touch it.'

Early morning next day, we continued our journey to Srinagar. On the way we passed through beautiful scenery of Batote, Kud, and so on, leading to Patnitop at 6,500 feet. From there the descent begins towards Banihal, where the turbulent Chenab flows. Crossing the river one climbs upward towards Banihal tunnel at 7,500 feet, in the Pir Panjal range. From there you get a view of the Kashmir valley, beginning from Qazigund. Now another long tunnel has been built to accommodate the new railway to Jammu.

We reached Sri Narayan Ashram at Srinagar, at about 5 p.m. It was being run by one Swami Sukhananda from East Bengal. From there we left for Sri Amarnath darshan—first by bus to Pahalgam and thence our trekking began. We halted for the night at Pahalgam to make arrangements for the long trip. Passing the night there, next morning we started for Chandanwadi. After a night there, we climbed the steep Pishu Ghati and reached Wavjan, an open windy terrain. The Sheshnag Lake was sparkling in its



An Old Photo of Amarnath Cave Temple

clear waters. Glaciers were coming down into the lake and turning into water. After pitching our tents at Wavjan, I requested my companions to wait there till our ponies arrived. In the meantime, I went down to Sheshnag, nearly 1,500 feet below. I had a bath in the ice-cold waters of the lake. Of course, I felt restored.

Coming up, we bought some parathas from a hotel in tents run by a Sikh gentleman. Cooking was not easy, the dal will not get cooked! And then the water was ice-cold.

Next morning we started the climb to the Mahagunas Pass at 14,700 feet. It was partially snow-covered. By noon we reached Panchatarani. I had a bath in one of those fast-flowing currents. Next morning, when it was still dark, we proceeded to the Amarnath Cave. On our way, I had a bath in the Amar Ganga. It was, of course, terribly cold with snow lying all around.

At the huge cave, nearly 80 feet high, we had darshan of the ice-linga of Lord Shiva. Fortunately, the linga was full. At that early hour there were very few pilgrims. I sat in a corner and recited the *Shiva-Mahimna Stotra*. Some bael-leaves were also offered. It was Rakhi Purnima Day.

Now it was return journey. It is always

difficult! We spent the night at Panchatarani and next morning continued towards Chandanwadi, skipping Wavjan. We spent one more night in the tent. Next morning, we took the bus to Pahalgam. The bus took us also to Kokernag and Acchabal.

Returning to Srinagar, we stayed at Sri Narayan Ashram for two or three days. We were informed that the Centenary Memorial meeting of Swamiji will be observed by a public meeting. Dr Karan Singh, Sadr-e-Riyasat, Jammu and Kashmir, presided over the meeting. Other intellectuals from the city also spoke at the meeting. Swami Sambuddhananda, the secretary of the Vivekananda Birth Centenary Celebration Committee had come from Bombay to organise the celebrations. Here too, like my days with him in the Ramakrishna Mission, Bombay, immediately after meeting me he handed over a handwritten letter on a piece of paper and asked me to get it typed through Swami Sukhananda of Sri Narayan Ashram; also he gave me two mangoes bringing out those from his pocket!

We started on our return journey to Pathankot. After our arrival there, we left for Kangra and Jwalamukhi to have darshan of the Devi. Both Bajreshwari in Kangra and Jwalamukhi are shakti-pithas. At Jwalamukhi, the flame represents the Devi. The flame has been burning for centuries. The Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) tried to find out whether there was plenty of oil, but it failed. The quantity of oil found there was not commercially viable. So the Devi continues to be there, giving darshan to devotees.

From there we left for Amritsar, where we had darshan of the Golden Temple of the Sikhs and also Durgiana, a big Durga temple. From Amritsar, we left for Chandigarh where we stayed for two or three days, and then proceeded to Haridwar by bus. Thus, the first part of the pilgrimage was over.

Pilgrimage to Kedarnath and Badrinath

It was later part of September 1963. There was continuous rain, this being the rainy season. So the senior swamis advised me not to go now as there will be landslides and I might get stuck up somewhere. This proved correct later on!

There were five of us—Swamis Jyotirananda, Nirgunananda, myself, a devotee from Bombay, and another from Allahabad.

I said that I cannot find time later on. Anyways, I had to go and face the music. We were prepared to walk wherever necessary. Two Nepali porters were engaged. When we started for Rishikesh, it was raining heavily. After staying overnight there, we started by a bus as far as it went and from there began walking. We stopped for food at a *chatti*, a resting place for pilgrims providing them with food and shelter.

Next morning, we left for Rudraprayag. We had hardly gone fifteen or twenty miles, and there was a landslide. The driver of the bus said they can't go further. But the undaunted passengers joined together and removed the obstructions. We went a little further, may be twenty or so miles. Again there was a landslide. This time too all the passengers joined together and cleared the landslide. So by evening we reached Rudraprayag. We decided to stay at the resthouse named Kali Kamli Dharamshala. We had some food at a hotel and went to bed, though it was fully in the control of bedbugs!

We had breakfast in the morning and started walking in the right earnest. A walk of five or six miles brought us to Chandrapuri, where we stayed in a *chatti* and started our experiments with cooking. Before the roads were built, pilgrims used to travel by foot and stay in some *chattis*, which were usually shops in two-storied mud-houses and the pilgrims were accommodated upstairs. No charges, only you have to buy your provisions from the shops below. We

had carried rice, dal, some vegetables, and ghee, packed in tin containers. I went to fetch some water in a nearby fast-flowing stream. But, alas, as soon as I put my mug in the ice-cold water, it was wrenched out of my hands and the mug disappeared into the waters of the stream. A good way to receive my first lesson!

We had no time to cook, so we proceeded to Agastyamuni, our next halt. We had our lunch in a hotel, but we could not proceed further, as there was a big landslide! So we had to climb the mountain and go to the other side. From there, we proceeded to Guptakashi via Ona *chatti*. It is a nice place. We bathed in the *kund* or water-tank there and ate some puris and halwa.

From Guptakashi we proceeded to Fata *chatti* where we stayed the night. River Mandakini was roaring. The next day, we started for Gaurikund via Swarnaprayag and reached by the evening. As usual, we cooked our food and stayed overnight. With Mandakini's fierce roar we could hardly sleep. From Swarnaprayag, our priest Maheshwar Prasad accompanied us. The water, almost boiling, was coming out of a spring at Gaurikund, most probably a sulphur spring. The next morning, we started our journey to Kedarnath, our destination. After crossing Rambara and Jungle *chatti*, we viewed for the first time the Kedarnath temple with the Kedar peaks in the background. I was thrilled!

We reached by noon. It was pretty cold. Moreover, Prasad had kept a few big rooms for pilgrims to stay. We occupied a room above. We attended the *arati* in the temple in the evening. Next morning, Monday, we finished our morning ablutions and got ready to go to the temple. I had a bath in the ice-cold water of the Mandakini. I sat on the Ghat and took the water in a mug and poured over my body! I recited the *Shiva Mahimna Stotra* sitting in a corner of the temple. For the puja, I had brought bael-leaves from Kankhal



An Old Photo of Kedarnath Temple

Sevashrama and Prasad brought a basketful of **brahma-kamal**, *Saussurea obvallata*. This flower, bluish at the centre, grows in the upper ridges, like Vasuki Tal. Prasad wanted to take me there, but for some practical reasons, I could not go.

Kedar is 12,700 feet above sea level. **The Vasuki Tal may be at 14,000 feet.** [In the recent flood at Kedarnath, in June 2013, which was totally unexpected, water came rushing, perhaps from the lake above. Many people died and extensive damage was done by Nature. It was a surprise how such an amount of water could come down from that height.] After our worship at the temple, we went to a tea shop and prepared *upma*, a South Indian delicacy, with the help of the shopkeeper.

Our luggage had been sent to Gaurikund in the morning. After our breakfast, we resumed our journey. I wished I could come again to this holy place. But, alas, it could not happen, even though there is transport and other facilities. By noon we were at Gaurikund. We cooked our lunch and had a good rest, after which we arrived in the evening at Fata *chatti*. Spending the night there, next day we started for Guptakashi on our way to Ukhimath on the other bank of the river. It was a steep descent followed by an equally steep ascent to Ukhimath at an altitude of 4,000 feet. The night was spent there.

Ukhimath is the winter residence of Lord Kedarnath, who enjoys the snow, but we compell him to come down to our heights. After spending a night at Ukhimath, we left for Tunganath some fifteen miles from Ukhimath, at a height of 13,000 feet. Since it was late September and snowing had begun, people in this small hamlet had already started going down. We had tea in a shop, which had a *dhuni*, sacred fire lighted by Hindu monks, which kept us warm for the night, of course, we took care to keep at least a window open to prevent our being a victim of carbon monoxide emanating from the charcoal fire. Then we attended the *arati* at **Tunganath temple**, which is one of the Pancha-Kedars, five Kedar peaks. A grand view of the Himalayas can be had from here. We five huddled ourselves around the fire for the night. Still it was bitter cold!

Next morning, we had a frugal breakfast and started going down to Mandil *chatti*, at a height of 2,500 to 3,000 feet. After giving instructions to the two Nepali porters to cook our noon meal, I had a bath in the fast-flowing stream with ice-cold water. After lunch we were about to start our journey again towards Chamoli via Gopeshwar Mahadev. But, lo, a very heavy downpour started. In the blinding rain, it was not possible to walk all the way. So we decided to stay on at Mandil *chatti* for the night.

Next morning, it was a clear sky and so after breakfast, we started for **Gopeshwar**. It is an ancient Shiva temple. Another five-mile walk brought us to Chamoli, a subdivisional town. From Chamoli, buses were running only up to Pipalkoti. From there, we proceeded to Joshimath on foot.

'Joshimath' is the colloquial name for 'Jyotirmath' in North India, which is one of the four monasteries established by Acharya Shankara, who brought back the Vedic Dharma that was in decay. The other three monasteries are: Govardhana Matha at Puri, Odisha, in the East; Sharada

Matha at Shringeri, Karnataka, in the South; and Kalika Matha at Dwarka, Gujarat, in the West.

We were wondering as to whether we can get a permit to go to Vasudhara and Satopanth, which are twenty-one miles away from Badrinath. In those days, one had to take a written permission from the Subdivisional Magistrate (SDM) to go beyond Mana village, a little away from Badrinath. So we went to the SDM's house. It was already late in the evening. However, the gentleman was so kind and obliged us with permits.

Next day, it was raining, rather pouring heavily. It was pretty cold too. Anyway, we decided to push on. We reached Pandukeshwar by noon, had a light lunch and left for Lambagar and occupied an empty room. But around 10 p.m., some military personnel came and knocked our door and asked us to vacate. But we refused to do so. Anyway we shared the big room with them. It was still raining.

Early morning, we started walking towards Badrinath. No breakfast! But in a small village, under a plastic shed, an old lady was selling hot *pyaji*, an onion preparation fried in oil. In such a weather, it was really wonderful. We consumed a good lot! No fear of stomach upset, for so much climbing digested everything! We reached Badrinath by noon. I bought some vessels from the Temple Trust and set the two Nepali porters to cook.

We had decided to stay there for three days. Fortunately, we got a good accommodation at the Andhra Dharmashala. Of course, we went to the temple and had darshan, but the rain and cold confined us to our beds and blankets most of the time. On the third day of our stay in Badrinath, the sun came out in all its glory and we decided to visit Vasudhara waterfalls, descending a 1,000 feet to join the Alakananda. On the way we have to cross Mana village and Bhim Pul, a formation of rocks that looks like a bridge. One of the routes to Tibet lies through Mana village and thence to Mana Pass at 17,000 feet.



Badrinath Temple

On the fourth day, we began our journey back. After walking twenty-one miles, more than thirty kilometres, we reached Joshimath. Due to landslide, no buses were running to Pipalkoti. So we decided to stay on in Joshimath. We got accommodation at the Birla Guest House. We had some stock of vegetables, ghee, and so on left. We cooked and had nice breakfast and lunch for two or three days!

From Joshimath, we had to cover the distance to Chamoli partially by walk and partially by bus. After two or three days we reached Srinagar and then we were told that no buses were running to Rishikesh. So either we had to wait at Srinagar or go to Pauri and spend the night there. The snow-view from Pauri is marvelous! After a little argument, we decided to go to Pauri. But the temple committee Dharmashala was awfully dirty. First of all, we had to get it thoroughly cleaned. The Nepali porters were dismissed with baksheesh, tips, and we had our supper in a hotel at Pauri. From Pauri, we went to Kotdwar by bus and thence to Najibabad. From there by train we came to Haridwar and then to our Kankhal Sevashrama.

Thus, our journey came to an end. But, alas, a second visit to these wonderful places was not possible. The passing of years put a stop to such a pilgrimage.

Jai Kedarnath! Jai Badrivishal!

