

THE SPLENDOR THAT IS AMARNATH

CHANDER M. BHAT



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by

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Almost every part of India is known for many a sacred shrine, but the *Amarnath Cave* embossed in the snowy valley of Kashmir reveals the unique sight of natural Ice *Linga* of Lord Shiva perched on a glacial gorge which waxes and wanes with the movements of the moon. According to a common belief, it reaches the maximum height on *Purnima* in the month of *Shravan* (July-August), when Shiva is supposed to have divulged to *Parvati* the secret of salvation. On this day thousands of pilgrims negotiating the most difficult ridges arrive at the holy cave for *Dharshan* of the Lord. The pilgrimage of thousands of devotees to the far way cave of *Amarnath*, nestled in a glacial gorge of the western Himalayas, through some of the most charming scenery in the world, is fascinating in the extreme. One is stuck with wonder at the quiet and ordinary way in which a canvas town springs up with incredible rapidity of colours and of all shapes and sizes and broad streets running through the middle, and all vanishing as quickly at the break of dawn when the whole army of pilgrimages set out on the march again. The glow of countless cooking fires, the ashen smeared *Sadhus* under the canopy of discussing or meditating before the *Dhunis*, the *Sannyasins* of all orders in various garbs, the men and women with children, from all parts and their devote faces, the torches shimmering at nightfall, the blowing of conch-shells and horns, the singing of hymns and prayers in chorus..... all these are most impressive, and convey an idea of mastering passion of the race for religion.

Amarnath literally means the Immortal Lord. Lord Shiva stands for Deathlessness. He confers this boon on his devotees. Deathlessness is not trying to preserve the physical sheath forever but in growing so fearless as to look at death in its face! The truth of this will be evident to one who undertakes a pilgrimage to Amarnath.....the hallowed pilgrimage center of Kashmir.

The Present Kashmir valley was, according to the chronicler *Kalhana* a lake called *Satisar* that the sage Kashyapa converted into a beautiful valley. Kashmir as the name *Satisar* indicates is believed to be the body of *Parvati*. The whole valley is studded with holy places associated with Shiva and *Parvati*. It is the cradle of many philosophical systems such as the *Trika-Saivism* and the *Pratyabhijna* School. Even *Pancharatra* school, is supposed to have its origin here. Pippalada rescension of *Atharva Veda* is also known as Kashmirian rescension as the only manuscript available was found here. This was again the center of Sun Worship. Here was the famous *Sardapitha* which now lies in Pakistan occupied Kashmir. The great *Sankaracharya*, according to his biographers, came here and ascended, *Sarvajnapith*, the throne of omniscience after having been acknowledged the philosopher by the great scholars belonging to various schools here. Even today here is an ancient hill with a Shiva temple on the top named, *Sankaracharya*. Kashmir is full of history, legend, philosophy and religion apart from being described as a paradise on earth, the truth of which has to be experienced to be believed.

In olden days the route was via Rawalpindi (Pakistan) but now a direct train is there connecting rest of India to Jammu, the winter capital of the State. The best part of journey is between *Guru Purnima* and *Shravan Purnima*. The Government of Jammu and Kashmir makes all arrangements for the comfort of the pilgrims for undertaking the ritualistic journey for visiting the shrine on *Shravan Purnama*. But the highly unpredictable weather of the mountains should be more obliging before *Guru Purnima* as rains would not start. There is a bus service from Jammu to Pahalgam (7,500 ft.). At Pahalgam the pilgrims arrange for coolies or ponies to carry gear of food and clothes etc. Everybody remains busy making arrangements for the *Yatra*. The golden glow of, the sun falls on the turbulent river at Pahalgam. Pahalgam in Kashmiri means the land of shepherds.

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The journey from Pahalgam commences towards the first halting station Chandanwari (8,500 ft.) is ten miles away. With the bright sunlight reflected in silvery snow-clad peaks above, and gurgling river meandering through the valley below, the pilgrim already is in a different, world. The trekking undoubtedly is slow by not, boring as the scenery alongside is most picturesque.

Early the next morning the caravan again proceeds further towards a straight two mile climb towards Pisutop (12,200 ft.). From Pisutop one has to cover seven miles to reach Seshnag (13,148 ft.) next halting station. Ascent is stiff and steep, climbs are difficult to negotiate. The path is clear but at some places the glaciers become slippery. It is here where a stick carried by a pilgrims become useful and in some cases savers ones life. Before entering the small pilgrim camp one gets the enchanting sight of blue still waters of Seshnag Lake. One has to walk a mile to take a refreshing bath. The lake is very deep and is fed by the melting snow of the glaciers above and water is bluish green below. It is believed that some one has seen *Adishesha*..... the many hooded serpent streaking through these waters. Whatever may be the explanation, it is true that one experiences an invisible presence of some super power near the lake. The mountains are fully covered with snow and its peaks resemble the seven heads of the mythical snake. The quiet place looks so thickly populated, then, that everybody, despite intense cold, appears in high spirits, probable feeling proximity to the diving. The roaring sound of gushing streams, the gigantic snow clad mountains, the moonlight beaming through foggy enclosure, the neighing horses and the dim tent-tops all around presents an indelible impression. One feels nearer to God and in such a blissful environment.

From Sheshnag one reaches Panchtarni, the valley cress-crossed by five rivulets. The journey is most difficult as one has to climb to a height of 14,500 ft. and then to descend. The highest point is *Mahagunus*, which means the great serpent. There is no vegetation at this height and one begins to feel lack of oxygen. It is said that the fragrance of the herbs in *Mahagunus* is so alluring that the pilgrims are warned not to have any rest at this place and *Ponywallas* are very careful not to allow their horses to graze here which otherwise, is fatal for these animals. The four miles descent from *Mahagunus* to *Panchtarni* is slippery especially after a rain, which is a common occurrence. The night is spent in great expectation so reaching the cave in the morning. The journey starts early in the morning. Again a steep ascent to *Sant Singh Top* (13,500 ft.) and a slippery descent until one reaches the low-lying glaciers over which are seen the pilgrims walking in a row. At last one reaches the *Amar Ganga* where one takes his bath in ice-cold water and climbs up the steep to the cave. This bath and steep climb are final tests of devotion.

The holy cave is approximately 50' long 25' wide and 15' high. When one reaches the cave, he becomes over struck at the sight of Ice *Linga* completely filling the right corner of the, cave, the top of the *Linga* touches the root of the cave. The base of the cave is also covered with ice, like a carpet. Here Shiva is worshipped by nature in the purest way. The cave is the nature's temple and is undefiled, by human touch. Shiva is snow-white and pure. *Linga* is formed by drops of water falling from the top of the cave and two other small ice *Lingas* are also formed, believed to be the symbols of Goddess *Parvati* and Lord *Ganesh*. On early morning a white pair of doves (believed to be *Shiva* and *Parvati*) appear at the cave corner. Austerity and strenuous mountain climbing with all its attendant risks are soon forgotten and one gets a sense of grand fulfillment here.

After having darshan one climbs down with a heavy heart casting "a longing lingering look behind" and slowly starts returning. The river Amar Ganga flows with a gentle murmur Shiva, Shiva and the tall peaks echoed it, to be heard by the Heavens. Himalayas around

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Kashmir have their special grandeur. Even a loud shout is sufficient to dislodge a huge boulder or rock precariously hanging on the tip of the mountain and bring it hurtling down leveling everything, pilgrims and all. Rarefied atmosphere again burns the exposed skin of the face with its ultra violet radiation. At every step death stares in the face! But who cares?

One can return through the same route or by a different route, which takes a short time but is very risky.

Despite innumerable difficulties and hindrances the pilgrimage to Amarnath provides not only adventure and spiritual solace, but also an ineffable experience that abides with one for ever.

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AMARNATH YATRA THROUGH PICTURES



[Pahalgam “the valley of shepherds” is surrounded by snowy mountains in the lap of dancing streams and deep forests.]



[Chandanwari, first halting station is famous for its snow bridge. Chandanwari literally means Orchard of Sandalwood..... the abode, of sweet fragrance. By fragrance we mean sound and light, which imparts attainment of self-realization.]

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[When one controls his senses, mind and hearing, he obtains light that is only possible when he travels different terrains, gorgy and steepy places en-route Amarnath. On reaching the *Barav Bal* one gets full glimpse of *Shiv Linga*.]

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Five senses that work on the behest of mind is the confluence stretched and symbolized with *Panchtarni*. Mind is the whole object which if controlled beats one to eternal peace. Five rivers meet in this beautiful valley surrounded by five mountains, which resemble the same mythical guard of Lord Shiva.....five-headed serpent.

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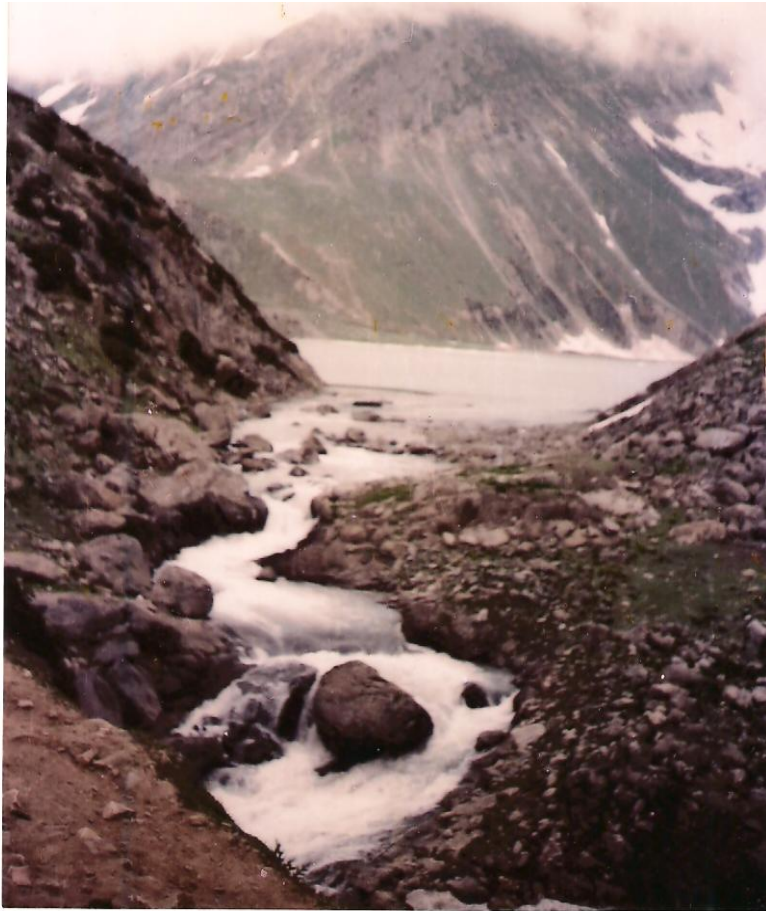
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Sheshnag Lake is an emerald lake surrounded by mountains from all its sides. The true nature which indicates life and which revolves on two wheels '*Shivas*' and '*Prashivas*', emanates eternal peace which is symbolized with a stream whose origin is a big lake having fresh and beautiful waters of *Ananda*. This is supreme factor in attaining the true nature.

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[Holy Cave]



[The Original, Eternal Power of the Whole Universe]

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Chander M. Bhat

Born on 20th March, 1960 in Murran a village in North Kashmir, Chander M. Bhat is presently working as an Assistant Supdt. Posts, in Department of Posts, Govt. of India. His articles regarding Posts and of non-political nature stand widely published in various papers and magazines of the country. A booklet "How to Collect Stamps" published by the Department of Posts, has earned him genuine accolades. He worked on the project of tracing the roots of his co-villagers and of the village Murran, resulting into the culmination of a widely acclaimed book "Murran ...My Village. Man with depth, Chander M. Bhat has also another book, "Ocean by Drops" (collection of poems) in his vase having colorful poems. His book "Ancient History of Jammu and Kashmir", confirms his researching capability. Various research papers like "The Splendor that is Amarnath" and "Vitasta...The Sacred River of Kashmir" are valuable additions to his works that has proved very fruitful and guiding force in the exile period of Kashmiri Pandits community of which the author is also a member.

Presently the author is working on "OOL...THE NEST" - a six volume project [each volume of about 2500 pages] on all the 595 Kashmiri Pandit villages of Kashmir.

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