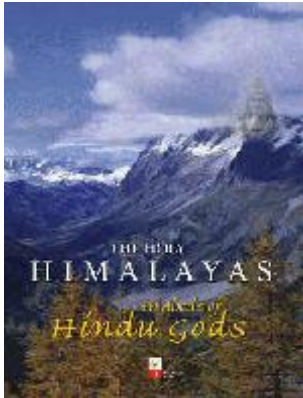




The Holy Himalayas



Author: Dr.(mrs) Shantha N. Nair

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Himalayas - the abode of snow, Giri Raj - the monarch of all mountains, is the mightiest, youngest, highest, most inspiring, amazing, and incredible fold mountain chain in the world.

This book deals with the location, description, and significance of the places of religious and spiritual importance, like Rishikesh, Haridwar, Panch Prayag, the Char Dhams namely, Kedarnath, Badrinath, Gangotri and Yamunotri, the Hemkund Saheb, the Valley of Flowers, Mata Vaishno Devi Temple, Amarnath, Kailash and Mansarovar.

The Himalayas have lured people to this region since ancient times. References about the Himalayas are found even in the Rig Veda, the oldest scripture in the world. The Himalayas mean different things to different people. For sages, saints and seekers, it is a spiritual centre beyond comparison. Since time immemorial, ascetics have climbed the great heights in search of peace and wisdom.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. (Mrs) Shantha N. Nair, M.A. Ph.D, is a retired Reader and Head of the Department of Economics, S.P.W. College, Tirupathi, Andhra Pradesh.

She has written several articles in subject journals, published Learners' Dictionary of Economics, translated a few religious books from Tamil to English for the Tirumala Tirupathi Devasthanams (TTD), co-authored a book entitled a Garland of Gems of Wisdom for a Happy and Successful Life and authored books entitled Stories from Srimad Bhagavatham, Sri Rama - The Lord Incarnate and Sri Krishna - The Poornavatar.

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AN EXCERPT FROM THE BOOK

AMARNATH

The Amarnath Cave is situated on the narrow openings between the mountains of Lidder Valley.

It is said that Shiva made the gods immortal by providing them with nectar and upon their request resided here. The boon of immortality lent the name Amarnath.

According to legend, this is the cave where Shiva narrated the secret of immortality and the creation of universe to Goddess Parvati on Shravan Poonima - the full moon day in the month of August.

It is also believed that Kashyap Maharshi, the grandson of Brahma, destroyed the demons here and drained a big lake, Sati-Saras, named after Goddess Parvati. Bhrigu Maharshi was the first to have darshan of this holy cave.

Location

It is 13,700 feet above sea level in Jammu and Kashmir, 86 miles northeast of Srinagar. Surrounded by snow-clad mountains, the holy cave is 130 feet high. Shiva is worshipped here in the form of a Shivalinga-shaped ice block made by drops of water oozing naturally inside the cave. Behind an iron fence with an open gate, an under-ground trickle of water emerges 10 feet up from a small cleft in the sedimentary rock and freezes as it drops to form a tall, smooth cone of ice.

The Lingams

Most of the year, the cave is covered with snow. It is only accessible for a short period during summer. Thousands of Hindu pilgrims visit this cave, especially on the full moon day in August. At this time, the ice lingam reaches its largest size. During July-August, a pure white lingam forms in this cave. Water droplets trickle slowly from the top of the cave and freeze into ice when they fall. First, a solid base is formed and then the lingam gets formed from an ice stalagmite that waxes and wanes with the moon's cycle. By its side are two more ice lingams considered to be that of Goddess Parvati, the consort of Shiva, and their son Ganesha. The cave faces the south. Inside the Amarnath Cave, there is a small cave on the left of the image from which a chalk-like substance is given to pilgrims as vibhuti.

The Legend of Lord Shiva

Once the goddess asked her husband Shiva why and when he began wearing beads of skulls. Shiva told her that whenever she was reborn he would add one more skull to his beads. Thereupon, Parvati asked why she went through birth and death while he was immortal. She then wanted to know the secret of immortality. Shiva disclosed that his immortality was due to Amarkatha. But Parvati insisted on knowing the real reason.

Finally, Shiva agreed to disclose the amar rahasya or eternal truth about the secret of immortality. To impart this knowledge, he searched for a lonely place where no living creature could hear him. He then chose the Amarnath Cave. Shiva left his bull Nandi at Pahalgam. He released the moon from his hair at Chandanwari. The snakes around his neck were released on the banks of the lake Sheshnag. He left his son Ganesha at Mahagunas Parbat, also called Maha Ganesh Hill. The five elements - earth, water, air, fire and sky - controlled by Shiva, were left behind at Panchatarni.

Thereafter, Shiva and Parvati entered the cave. Lord Shiva sat on a deerskin and began to meditate. So that no living being could hear the tale, he created Rudra, named him Kalagni and ordered him to spread fire to ensure there was no living being in and around the holy cave. Then Lord Shiva began to narrate the secret of immortality to Parvati. But as a matter of chance, two pigeon eggs lying beneath the deerskin, on which Lord Shiva was seated, remained protected. Eggs were believed to be non-living and they were protected by Shiva's Asana. Due to the heat, the eggs hatched and the two pigeons listened to Shiva's narration quietly. Shiva had asked Parvati to be fully awake throughout the narration. But Parvati fell asleep midway.



At the end of his discourse, Parvati revealed that she had not listened to him fully since she fell asleep. The pigeons - which had heard the entire story of creation - now flew out of the cave.

The pair of pigeons which were born out of the eggs had listened to the secret of immortality (Amar Katha) so they became immortal.

Even today, pilgrims see pigeons inside the cave although the surroundings are full of ice and devoid of any creatures or vegetation.

The Legend of Buta Malik

According to another legend, a shepherd named Buta Malik discovered this holy cave. A saint gave Buta Malik a bagful of coal. When he reached home, he was surprised to find that the bag was full of gold coins. With great joy he went to the saint to thank him. But instead of the saint, he saw the holy cave and a Shivalinga. At once, he informed all the villagers.

Since then, this cave has become a sacred pilgrim spot. Even today, the descendants of Malik are given a percentage of the donations and the rest goes to the shrine's management.

The Pilgrimage

The yatra to Amarnath begins from either Srinagar (141 kms) or Pahalgam (44.8 kms). The confluence of the rivers Sheshnag and Lidder is located at Pahalgam, which is near the banks of Lidder River and 96 kms from Srinagar. From Pahalgam, the 45 km trek is covered in four days on an ancient route. The first major stop is at Chandanwari, where the rivers Asthanmarg and Sheshnag meet. The next stop is Sheshnag, a mountain that derives its name from its seven peaks resembling the seven heads of Adishesha. From here, one climbs to Pissu Top, where the gods are believed to have crushed demons. Further up is Sheshnag Lake at a height of about 12,000 feet and 12 kms from Chandanwari. Sheshnag River flows out of this lake. Then one reaches Wavjan, before the steep climb to Mahagunas Pass at 14,000 feet. The route to Mahagunas is full of rivulets, waterfalls, and springs. From here there is a downward slope leading to Panchatarni, a meadow at a height of 12,000 feet.

Finally, one reaches Amarnath. Taxis and jeeps go up till Chandanwari 16 kms from Pahalgam, from where it is a trekking route. Ponies and dandies are also available for pilgrims. Alongside the Lidder stream the trek is through a narrow lane. But from the top of Pissu Hill, the ascending trek is comparatively smooth till Sheshnag. The Mahagunas Pass after Sheshnag is the highest point on the trek at 4,276 metres. From here, it is a downward slope till Panchatarni and thereafter is a 6 km ascent to Amarnath Cave. After crossing a curve, one can see Amarnath Cave. This is the traditional route.

The new route via Baltal is only 15 kms long. But the road here is narrow and kuchcha, compared to the traditional route. There are also steep rises and falls. This route can be covered in one day. The two routes meet at a place called Sangam 4 kms short of the holy cave. Due to terrorist activities and for security reasons, the Amarnath Yatra was suspended from 1991. It has now been resumed.

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