



VIF Occasional Paper

June - 2012

Amarnath Yatra: Occasion to Revisit the Indian Institution of *Tirtha*



Anirban Ganguly

About The Author



Anirban Ganguly is an Associate Fellow with the Vivekananda International Foundation. His areas of expertise include Civilisational and Cultural Studies, Indian Political Thought, Contemporary Indian Political History, Philosophy of Education.

Amarnath Yatra: Occasion to Revisit the Indian Institution of *Tirtha*

I. Perennial Religiosity of Kashmir

Kalhana, the legendary chronicler of Kashmir is known to have boasted that ‘in his native land there was not the space which a grain of sesame would cover that had not its *tirtha*.’ He mentions about a dozen *tirthas* (pilgrim spots, *kshetras*) in the region. The intrepid Al Beruni (C.E. 973-1048) in his record of travels in India mentions Hindus as visiting their holy places in Kashmir. Akbar’s vizier Abul Fazl (1551-1602) in his celebrated *Ain-i-Akbari* did not fail to mention that the ‘Hindus regard all Kashmir as holy land’ and that in it ‘forty-five places are dedicated to Mahadeo, sixty-four to Bishen, three to Brahma and twenty-two to Durga.’ Fazl also noted that there were seven-hundred places that had ‘carved figures of snakes’ [*Nāgas*] that Hindus worship. A look at a number of past chronicles and works on Kashmir proves beyond doubt that the region had a certain centrality in the spiritual and religious imagination of the Hindus. For our discussion here, it is not necessary to enter into a detailed survey of these ancient references, much of it has been studied and expounded upon in the past, but it would suffice to mention that Kashmir as the sacred land of the Hindus finds mention in the *Puranas* too. One of these, the *Nilamata Purana*, refers to ‘the holy region of Kas’mira’ that is ‘possessed of all the sacred places. There are sacred lakes of the Nagas and the holy mountains; there are holy rivers and also the holy lakes; there are highly sacred temples and also the hermitages attached to them.’ Strange as it may seem today, the political climate of the

last two decades has battered away at all symbols that depict Kashmir's vibrant spiritual past. Ironically, a land that has always been central to and integrated with the Indian spiritual heartland has been projected - *ad infinitum* – as a victim of neglect and alienation. The recent announcement of reducing the legendary Amarnath Yatra to a mere 39 days from 60 in the past is the latest episode in this long and ceaseless process of deconstructing Kashmir's Hindu civilisational ethos and identity. Why such a move has been initiated in the first place remains unclear, there appears to have been no definite communication by those concerned and the Sri Amarnath Shrine Board (SASB), the nodal body given to organising and monitoring the entire pilgrimage does not seem to have taken into confidence community and religious leaders, the people at large and the country as a whole over the entire proposal.

II. Amarnath Yatra: the current issue

The issue was raised by a concerned group of Members of Parliament in the Upper House (Rajya Sabha) and attention of the government was drawn to a 'systematic pattern in the last few years to reduce the duration of the Amarnath Yatra.' It was pointed out that over the years the number of pilgrims to the spot has increased with the figures touching eight lakh in 2011. Besides being a great religious event, the entire period saw an enhanced economic activity in the Valley that vastly benefited the local people. The concerned group in



(Shiva)

Parliament brought to light the fact that in the 1950s, the entire period of the Yatra lasted

around four months and the number of people visiting the shrine then was about 35 to 40 every day. The SASB once constituted streamlined the period to 60 days which continued up to 2009. Since then a regular scaling down has taken place with the duration being curtailed to 55 days in 2010, to 45 days in 2011 and in 2012 to 39 days. It was argued that such a curtailing would not only reduce the economic benefits from it for the people of the state but impose a greater pressure on the route and on the entire support infrastructure of the pilgrimage itself. The 1996 Nitish Sengupta Committee on the Amarnath Yatra which was set up after 250 *yatris* died due to inclement weather had made a number of recommendations for bringing about greater efficiency and safety in managing the entire pilgrimage. Among its recommendations were the formation of the SASB with the mandate to make all arrangements for the Yatra and the need to regulate the volume of pilgrims to the shrine to not more than 20,000 people per day. Thus, a reduction of the period will make the daily pilgrim volume exceed the prescribed limit, causing severe congestion and perhaps fatal bottlenecks that would be difficult to manage. The curtailing of the duration would be seen as a sort of caving in to the separatists demand in the region for stopping the pilgrimage altogether.

The statement in Parliament was made in the presence of the Prime Minister and the Government was asked to ‘reconsider this fact’ and to restore the duration of the Yatra to what it was originally. At a time when some of the legendary pilgrim spots in the valley are seeing an increased footfall – the centuries old Khir Bhawani temple saw a congregation of over 20,000 pilgrims in May this year – it is hard to comprehend why the State Government and the Centre decided to interfere with the Amarnath Yatra, which has, over the years, achieved a certain degree of stability and renewed popularity. It

remains to be seen as to what the government eventually does, but this trend, if it does continue, will gradually shrink and decimate one of the most enduring symbols of Indian civilisation that has contributed – through its spiritual legacy and appeal – to the unity of the Indian people.

III. Amarnath Yatra: records of antiquity and sacredness

Contradicting some new fangled theories of its recent historicity Amarnath and the Yatra have in fact repeatedly found mention in past Indian history. Kalhana in his 12th century chronicle of the kings of Kashmir – *Rajatarangini* – mentions the ‘festival of Amareshvarayatra’.

King Sandhimati
worshipper of
number of temples
Kashmir and who
enjoy Kashmira
images of Shiva



(The Cave of Amarnath)

He also describes
Aryyaraaja, a great
Shiva, who raised a
and lingas all over
alone knew ‘to
purified with the
and holy places.’ In

summer the king would retire to a cool retreat in the woods in the upper reaches and would contemplate on the Shiva in the snows. Kalhana also talks of a popular queen of Kashmir, Suyyamati (Suryamati) who removed the poverty of ‘many Brahmanas by bestowing on them cows, horses, gold and jewels and by gifting villages and erecting temples [and who] while in Amareshvara showered her largess on the people and erected Trisula, Vanalingga and other images of Shiva.’

As argued earlier, it is not the intention here to go into hoary sources in order to support the centrality of Amarnath in the Indian religious mind. It would perhaps be useful, however, to refer to certain Western sources and records in order to buttress our argument that the Amarnath Yatra cannot be merely treated as a local issue requiring regional attention but must be rather looked upon as a national issue calling for national deliberations, since it retains a civilisational dimension. These western narratives seem to clearly point towards the existence of a well established tradition of pilgrimage at Amarnath which attracted pilgrims from all over the subcontinent and which seems to have been much older than the 150 years period usually referred to. The not yet decolonized Indian mind stands almost always in awe of Western sources and references to things Indian, especially when it comes to the civilisational and the historical areas of knowledge and research. Indology as a discipline still retains its imperial mould and the oriental curiosity and prism continues to overawe a section of the Indian academia.

François Bernier (1625-1688) traveller and physician at the court of Aurangzeb in his '*Narrative of an excursion made by the great mogul, Aureng-Zeb in the year 1616 from Delhi Capital of Hindostan, to the Kingdom of Kashmir , commonly called the Paradise of India*' refers to his efforts to reach a 'grotto full of wonderful congelations.' Bernier had to interrupt his journey as his 'navab' under whom he served in the Mughal court 'felt very impatient and uneasy on account of [his] long absence' from the base camp.

In their accounts of '*Travels in the Himalayan Provinces of Hindustan and the Panjab in Ladakh and Kashmir: In Peshawar, Kabul, Kunduz and Bokahara*' from 1819-

1825' William Moorcroft and George Trebeck describe the cave – ‘Amarnath, a reputed place of sanctity and pilgrimage’ – and the journey to it.

The road to this cave proceed from Bhuvan, along the valley of the Lidder to the Ganes Bal, so called, it is said, from a rude stone figure, which is supposed to represent the Hindu divinity, Ganeśa. It then continues to Pahalgam in Dakshinpara, and thence to the Pesh-bal pass; the latter part of the route is uninhabited. Beyond the pass is the lake of Sesh-nag, nine miles in circumference, and giving rise to a number of rivulets which form the Panch-tarang, or five stream rivers; another pass in the mountains, the Neza-bal, lies beyond this, from which rises the Bhagavati river, flowing in the Panch-tarang. Near this is situated the cave of Amarnath, of which the entrance is said to be one hundred yards broad, and thirty high; the depth of the cave is five hundred yards. There are no inscriptions in it, nor any sculpture; but in the most remote part of the cave, there is said to be the figure of a Gosein, seated on a pedestal, which figure increases and decrease in size with the increasing and waning moon...

In his well-known ‘*Travels in Kashmir, Ladak, Iskardo*’, (1842) G.T.Vigne discusses the ‘ceremony at the cave of Umur Nath’ and mentions that on the day before the journey to the holy cave ‘not only the Hindus of Kashmir, but those from Hindustan, of every rank and caste, may be seen collecting together, and travelling up the valley of the Lidur [Lidder] towards this celebrated cave’ which he surmises from its description ‘must have been the place that Bernier intended to visit, but was prevented.’ Vigne goes on to narrate the legend of ‘Umur Nath’ as he had it written for him by a ‘learned native of Kashmir’ and describes the yatra route that he followed with the pilgrims. ‘The last encamping-place of the pilgrims’ was an elevated plain, one day’s march from the lake of ‘Shisha

Nag' [Seshanag], after which another ridge is to be crossed and the descent to 'Umur Nath' began:

A vast multitude of men, women and children advance towards the cave, at an hour appointed by the attendant...The cave is of gypsum, (I am in possession of specimen brought thence), and shaped like a divided cone, facing to the south, and being (so I was informed) about 30 yards in height, and 15 or 20 in depth...when pilgrims arrive there they commence shouting, clapping their hands, and calling upon their Deity (Siva). Asra durshun payareh – "Show yourself to us" is the universal and simultaneous exclamation and prayer of prostrate thousands. The cave is much frequented by rock pigeons ...who are frightened by the noise, rush out tumultuously, and are the answer to the prayer. In the body of one or other of these resides the person and their divinity, and Shur or Siva, the destroyer, and the all-powerful, is considered to present and incarnate as the harmless dove.

The 1884 '*Gazetteer of Countries Adjacent to India on the North-West; including Sinde, Afghanistan, Beloochistan, the Punjab and the Neighbouring States*' compiled with material available with the Court of Directors of the East-India Company describes 'Amurnath' a 'cave amidst the mountains bounding Kashmir on the north-east.' Referring to Vigne's description of the cave the Gazetteer describes the cave as believed by the 'Hindoos to be the residence of the deity Siva, and ...visited by great crowds of both sexes and all ages.' W.W.Hunter in the first volume of his '*Imperial Gazetteer of India*' (1886) also refers to the Amarnath cave, to pilgrims and to the 'column, said to form the image of god...'

Walter Lawrence, sometime Settlement Commissioner, Kashmir and Jammu State, in his



Lake of Sesh Nag

'The Valley of Kashmir' (1895) describes Kashmir as the 'country of pilgrimages' and refers to Amarnath as among the 'most famous places' which 'attracts pilgrims from all parts of Kashmir and India' who swarm there in thousands.

Lawrence also observes that Kashmir being the country of pilgrimage 'every detail of the various journeys is laid down with great precision.' As one involved in the state administration, Lawrence's description of the yatra is interesting to read:

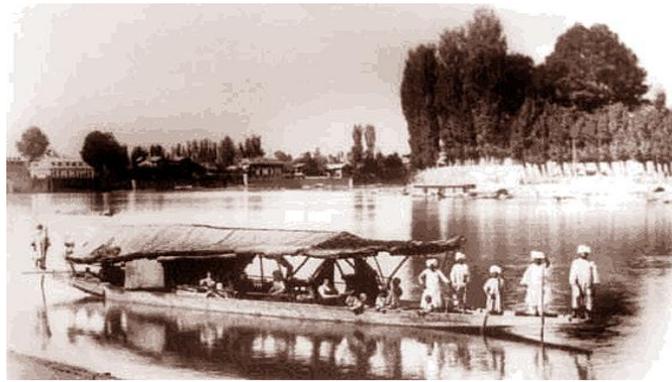
After a preliminary visit to Khir Bhawani of Tula Mula, and after enjoying the free rations given by the State, the army of Pilgrims musters in Srinagar and proceeds by appointed marches to Amarnath, which must be reached on the full moon of Sawun (beginning of August). They must bathe at appointed places and they pass through sacred Mach Bhawan, which ranks next after Khir Bhawani of Tula Mula in sanctity. ...When the pilgrims have bathed in the lake of Shisha Nag two marches have yet to be made before the sacred cave is reached. Then the pilgrims, covering their nakedness with strips of birch bark, call on Shiva to appear, and if the god is propitious pigeons flutter out from the cave...The [pilgrimage] satisfy the piety of the Hindus in being difficult and under certain circumstances dangerous, and I doubt whether they would like to have an easy road made to either place.'

As a hands-on administrator, Lawrence also refers to the periodic breaking out of epidemics along the pilgrimage route pointing to a problem that remained unresolved till

the 1990s. The current design of eco-toilets and ‘bio-remediation technologies’ used during the yatra period has turned the Amarnath Yatra into one of the most eco-friendly pilgrimages in India.

Beyond the matter of fact geographical descriptions of colonial travellers and administrators, is the description of another journey to Amarnath undertaken by another personality who perhaps continues to

best symbolise eternal India. If not for anything else the very fact that Swami Vivekananda had undertaken the yatra to the Amarnath cave and had one of his decisive spiritual



(Swami Vivekananda in Kashmir, 1898)

experiences there, calls for looking at this entire pilgrimage in the light of the message of India’s spiritual unity that he embodied and radiated throughout his life. It would be worthwhile to read this journey in some detail. Vagaries of a secularised system of education have effectively ensured that records such as these remain out of bounds for the majority today.

Vivekananda’s Indianised Irish disciple, Sister Nivedita’s (1867-1911) ‘*Notes on some Wanderings with the Swami Vivekananda*’ (1913) which describes the journey that the Swami and some of his western disciples undertook in 1898 perhaps remains one of the best maintained records of the event. It appears from the record that sometime in early July 1898, Vivekananda tried to reach Amarnath ‘by the Sonamarg route’ and did not succeed because the summer that year had been ‘unusually hot and certain glaciers had

given way, rendering the Sonamarg route to Amarnath impracticable.’ The Swami returned after his first attempt failed and towards the end of July of 1898 once again undertook the journey. Describing the rigorous preparation that Vivekananda underwent for the pilgrimage Nivedita recalled that they saw very little of the Swami during this phase, ‘He was full of enthusiasm about the pilgrimage and lived mostly on one meal a day, seeking no company much, save that of *sādhus*. Sometimes he would come to a camping ground, beads in hand.’ Nivedita describes the march up to the ‘Lidar’ and the pine covered mountains and the ‘Pantajharni – the place of the five streams’ in which it was the ‘duty of the pilgrims to bathe, walking from one to the other in wet garments.’ The Swami, she noted, ‘contriving to elude observation completely...nevertheless fulfilled the law to the last letter in this respect.’

‘The great day of Amarnath’ was Tuesday, August 2nd when ‘having at least reached the bottom of the farther slope’ the party had to toil along the glacier, mile after mile, to the Cave:

About a mile before our destination, the ice ceased, and in the flowing water the pilgrims had to bathe. Even when we seemed to have arrived there, there was still quite a stiff ascent over the rocks to be made. The Swami, exhausted, had by this time fallen behind, but I, not remembering that he might be ill, waited, below the banks of gravel for his appearance. He came at last, and, with a word, sent me on, he was going to bathe. Half an hour later he entered the cave. With a smile he knelt, first at one end of the semi-circle, then at the other. The place was vast, large enough to hold a cathedral, and the great ice-Siva, in a niche of deepest shadow, seemed as if throned on its own base. A few minutes passed, and then he turned to leave the cave.

He had undergone one of his decisive spiritual experiences. Nivedita described it with touching poignancy:

To him, the heavens had opened. He had touched the feet of Siva. He had to hold himself tight, he said afterwards, lest he 'should swoon away.' "I have enjoyed it so much!" he said half an hour afterwards..."I thought the ice-lingam was Siva Himself. ...*I never enjoyed any religious place so much!*"...Afterwards he would often tell of the overwhelming vision that had seemed to draw him almost into its vertex. He would talk of the poetry of the white ice-pillar...He always said too that the grace of Amarnath had been granted to him there, not to die till he himself should give consent. And to me he said "You do not now understand. But you have made the pilgrimage, and it will go on working. Causes must bring their effects. You will understand better afterwards. The effects will come."

Amarnath and its pilgrimage had captured the imagination of one of the greatest minds of modern India who could not but exclaim that he had not enjoyed any religious place so much. A short shrift therefore to the sensitivity and sacredness associated with the place and the entire journey is reflective of a myopic attitude when dealing with the sacred traditions of India.

IV. Dimensions and Concept of the *Tirtha* in Indian Civilisation

This episode of interfering with the Amarnath pilgrimage actually calls for an urgent deliberation and a re-examination of the entire concept and vision of the pilgrim and pilgrimage within the Indian civilisational contour. And for such a re-evaluation it would do well to accept the fundamental reality that the institution of pilgrimage has always

aided in evolving, Indian multitudes, nationhood, a cultural and land. It not only geographical sense united various simply because the – acquired a special



(*Tirtha-Yātris*, photo courtesy: RCAHMS, Scotland)

among the vast a sense of realisation of the spiritual unity of the brought about a of unity but also sections of people pilgrim - *tirtha-yātri* status during his

period of pilgrimage and was allowed a wide liberty – within a prescribed framework – of travel, intermingling and interaction. Today, in an age of excess communication and information overload, it is indeed difficult to fully fathom the actual relevance and utility of the Indian concept of the *tirthas*. It is this unifying aspect or result of the *tirthas* that needs to be restated and a concerted and inspired effort made to reinstate and re-position this institution within the framework of the present day polity and of an increasingly materialised collective existence.

A number of scholars of Indian civilisation have repeatedly referred to this uniting aspect of the Indian *tirthas*. In his masterly introduction to the *Tirthavivecana-kānda*

[discussion on the tirthas and their undertakings] the eighth part of Bhatta Lakshmidhara's *Krytakalpataru*, K.V. Rangaswami Aiyangar, for example, states that:

Where political ambitions united or divided the country, pilgrimage wrought a unity based on religion, and a faith in certain eternal verities. Long before wise statesmanship attempted or accomplished Indian unification, Akhand Hindusthān had sprung from the wandering of pilgrims.

Pilgrimages did contribute to the unification of Indian culture by a constant circulation of the multitudes of the Indian continent as well as of the 'moral elite'. 'Kāśī was the lodestone which drew South Indians to Hindusthan' and the '*Śetu* near Rāmeśvaram drew pilgrims from the north to the dike that Rama had built.' Otherwise how does one explain the phenomenon of a *patachitra* artist of Kalighat in the Calcutta of 1850s making it a point to inscribe his art ware with Tamil words for the benefit of visiting south Indian pilgrims with the hope of attracting them to his creations on their way out of temple? The recently displayed (May 2012) collection of Kalighat Paintings of the Victoria & Albert Museum, London amply demonstrated this point of the cultural unity of India and a sense of sacred geographical space that evolved through this institution of the *tirtha*. In fact, 'four of the most important and holy *tirthas*' have been 'located in four corners of the country, namely, Badrinath in the north, Puri in the east, Rameshvaram in the south, and Dwarka in the west' to nurture and cement, over eons, this sense of unity.

Referring to this unifying capacity, another keen observer of Indian traditions has looked upon the institution of pilgrimage as a 'most powerful instrument for developing the geographical sense in the people which enables them to think and feel that India is not a mere congeries of geographical fragments, but a single though immense, organism

filled with the tide of one strong pulsating life from end on end.’ Thus Radha Kumud Mookerjee in his classic ‘*The Fundamental Unity of India*’ (1914), written in the days when an organised attempt at evolving a nationalist viewpoint to the reading of India was being made, argues that the visit to holy places ‘as an imperative religious duty’ made travelling ‘a national habit in India in all ages of life, with young and old alike.’ This wide circumambulation in an age preceding the era of mechanical transport ‘could not but promote a deep knowledge of the tracts traversed’, a knowledge which easily escapes the modern jet-set globe trotters. Mookerji observes that *tirtha* was a supremely Indian institution which:

served in the past in place of the modern railway and facilities for travel to promote popular movements from place to place and intercommunication between parts producing a perception of the whole. It allowed no parochial, provincial sense to grow up which might interfere with the growth of the idea of geographical unity of the mighty motherland; allowed no sense of physical comforts to stand in the way of the sacred duty of intimately knowing one’s mother country;

The idea of the pilgrimage among the Hindu translated into the worship of the relics among the Buddhist, ‘the former realised itself in the planting of holy places, the latter in the erection of monuments beautifying the land.’ In another of his seminal work, ‘*Nationalism in Hindu Culture*’ (1921) Mookerji again examines the institution and makes the same points of the integrative capacity of the *tirthas* for the millions:

The contemplation of the numerous holy places scattered throughout the vast continent has the inevitable effect of extending the geographical horizon of the unlettered millions ...they are thus naturally and automatically led to expand the limits of their original narrow home or the land of their birth, and learn to identify it with a gradually widening

area over which they are forced to traverse by religious necessities in search of the holy places scattered throughout it. The institution is thus a most effective agency of popular education in geographical consciousness.

It was a mode for enabling the 'finite minds' to realise the 'transcendental sanctity' and unity of the motherland.

Regarding the transcendence of the parochial and the provincial mindset the *tirthas* have, over the ages, been a liberating mechanism and have succeeded in generating a 'circulation mechanism' in which 'all social strata of Hinduism participate.' There seems to have been a method in the 'liberal distribution of sacred places throughout India', it created 'an essentially religious space' in which the land's great cultural diversity mingled. The large number of pilgrim centres is a unique characteristic of Indian civilisation; it practically makes the entire Indian civilisational space a sacred space. This integrative aspect of pilgrimages is often overlooked or deliberately ignored when formulating religious and cultural policies in the Indian context. Scholars 'who emphasise the linguistic, regional and social diversity of India', in short, those who propagate a diffused and deconstructed idea of India, 'often tend to minimize the integrative role of institutions such as sacred places.' Among the western observers who have been exceptions to this reading is David G.Mandelbaum (1911-1987), who in his study of Indian society has referred to the entity of India as evolved through the cultural integration engendered by the religious institution of the pilgrimage. 'There is a traditional basis for the larger national identification,' writes Mandelbaum, 'it is the idea, mainly engendered by Hindu religion ...that there is an entity of India to which all its inhabitants belong.'

The occasion of pilgrimage was a time of great civil liberties as well; ‘neither sex, nor social condition ...nor status in family or in society, nor poverty’ was a bar to a pilgrimage. The pilgrim on his way to the abode of his *iṣṭa* (chosen one) could enter any territory unfettered, there was no distinction of the area he could enter or avoid (*gamyāgamyadesani*). A pilgrim could not be molested and no toll or ferry could be collected from him. Kings were duty bound to protect the pilgrims who entered their jurisdiction. The belief that ‘he who helps a pilgrim shares in the accruing spiritual merit (*punya*)’ also witnessed the participation and the galvanization of the entire community or region of the area through which the pilgrims passed. It was this belief that drove kings, rich men and community leaders to vie with one another to fill ‘the highways with rest houses and free feeding places and the *tirthas* themselves with shelters for temporary or permanent occupation, and *ghats* on the sacred rivers and tanks.’ The pilgrim was tax-free and the ‘fiscal advantage’ to the kingdom was therefore indirect and mainly came from the ‘dues paid by traders attracted to *tirtha*.’ The economic benefit to the kingdom came from the ‘expenditure of the pilgrim-tourist and the gifts which he made at the *tirthas* to local residents as part of the ritual of the pilgrimage.’ The institution of pilgrimage thus was a compact model of national, regional and social interaction and exchange and integration.

Another aspect *vis-à-vis* the *tirthas* which needs emphasis in the present discussion is that the institution allowed the commoner, the underprivileged – to use a more contemporary terminology – to equally participate and earn religious merit (*tirtha-phala*). The common man who could not undertake the at times expensive performance of a sacrifice (*yajña*) could undertake instead a *tirtha-yatra* which in its result was equal

to the *yajña* and sometime transcended it. It is said that he ‘who completes a pilgrimage in accordance with its rules, obtains a result superior to that arising from the performance of the *agnistoma* sacrifice.’ The institution helped to keep alive and vibrant the spiritual sense of the Indian masses, a sense that even caught the attention of a hard-boiled colonial strategist and game-planner such as Herbert Risely who wrote regarding the spread of Hindu ideas and ideals, that ‘if you talk to a fairly intelligent Hindu peasant about Paramātmā, Karma, Maya, Mukti, and so forth, you will find as soon as he has got over his surprise at your interest in such matters that the terms are familiar to him, and that he has formed a rough working theory of their bearing of his own future.’ Interestingly even the Indian Census report of 1911 noted this sense when it recorded that the general result of the inquiries were that ‘the great majority of Hindus have a firm belief in one supreme God, Bhagavān, Parameśvara, Ísvara, or Nārāyana.’ It was this sense that the *tirthas* kept awake and nurtured. Present day policymakers must take into account the entire esoteric super-structure of the Indian institution of pilgrimages before venturing to tinker with its physical and external manifestations.

At the metaphysical and ideational levels the concept of the *tirtha* was even loftier. A detailed treatment of the subject is beyond the scope of the present paper; however it would be relevant to mention that a great mental preparation had to be undergone by the prospective *yātri* and it was not sufficient to mechanically undertake the journey. Mere ritualism was discouraged during the trip, which had to begin with a clear resolution (*sankalpa*) and had to be one-pointed. The rigors of the journey – avoidance of vehicles, fasting and austerities etc. – which the pilgrim willingly underwent were some of the ‘outward manifestations’ that acted as constant reminders to the higher

purposes of his entire effort. The pilgrim had to be unfailingly engrossed in hearing ‘the praise of his tirtha’ (*śravana*), he was expected ‘to chant its name and praise (*sankirtana*)’ and his mind had to be centered on ‘one tirtha at a time to the exclusion of all others, and one form of the deity at the tirtha (*ananyamanas*)’. To achieve ‘full spiritual advantage’ the pilgrimage had to be started ‘with a definite purpose and in the full faith that the journey, when completed in the proper frame of mind and without any lapse from the austerities prescribed, will yield the highest unworldly advantage.’

The discipline of pilgrimage was seen as a unique opportunity in life to ‘ascent to spiritual perfection’ and the true discipline of the pilgrimage lay not so much in asceticism or the pilgrims’ ‘willing surrender of accustomed comfort’ but more in the ‘exalted frame of mind in which the *yātrā* is commenced, conducted and completed.’ Transcending to another dimension, the Indian mind never hesitated to provide an alternate vision of the *tirtha*; it provided a plethora of frameworks, within the institution, through which could be attained spiritual exaltation in quotidian life itself. For a daily spiritual quest and effort there was the concept of the ‘*mental tirthas*’ which were considered even more effective than the physical. This framework saw ‘Truth as one of the tirthas, forgiveness as another; control of the sense as a third, compassion to all living things as a fourth’ and considered the pure heart to be the ‘best of all *tirthas*’. The Indian civilisational approach to the institution of the *tirtha* was thus multi-dimensional – encompassing the material as well as the spiritual. It is this multi-dimensionality that has been rarely taken into account while formulating current policies and laws – especially those relating to Hindu religious traditions and sentiments.

V. Preserving the Institution of *Tirtha*: need for an integrated vision and effort

It would be a national service if there is a wide official as well as academic recognition of the fact that the practice of pilgrimage, ‘with its ancient and diverse origins continues to



be popular among the Hindus’ and that the number of pilgrims ‘visiting well-known Hindu tirthas [today] is to be reckoned in several millions.’ Modern means of mass transportations have only facilitated this swell; it is certainly not a dying institution and continues to function as a unifying national force amidst much talk of fragmentation and falling-apart. There is a need, therefore,

to develop at the national level an imaginative approach to the concept of the *tirtha*; an approach that shall work towards preserving, promoting and nurturing this unique Indian spiritual institution.

Certain dynamic initiatives have been taken on this count by some state governments in the country. In April 2012 Madhya Pradesh, for example, inaugurated a scheme that would aid a minimum of one lakh citizens per year to undertake *tirtha yātrās*. The scheme is expected to cover 15 centres of pilgrimages including Badrinath, Kedarnath, Puri, Dwarka, Hardiwar, Amarnath and Rameswaram. Following suit Tamil Nadu has also announced (May 2012) pilgrimage schemes that would offer an annual partial subsidy to 500 Hindu families for visiting designated Hindu pilgrims spots. The state’s tourism revenue saw a 30% hike in 2010 because of an increased pilgrim inflow. Gujarat, on the other hand, has constituted the flagship *Gujarat Pavitra Dham Yatra*

Vikas Board which has, over the years, generated greater efficiency in pilgrimage management in the state and has emerged as a front ranking agency in facilitating and popularizing pilgrimages. Plans have also been drawn up to develop greater and affordable air connectivity linking all pilgrim centres in the state. The Hindu pilgrim till date has hardly ever received any support worth the name while undertaking his peregrinations across the sub-continent, these innovative steps and regional efforts point towards the need for initiating a national effort at re-evaluating this institution and calls for a certain degree of out of the box thinking in the matter.

Attention to pilgrimage centres cannot have an effective and long lasting impact if given in a piece-meal manner or simply in deference to commemorative demands. There must be a concerted, nationwide deliberation on the entire institution and its present plight and challenges. The Central government may well consider setting up a national commission for pilgrimages and initiate a dialogue across all sections with stakeholders who are involved in organising and monitoring major and minor pilgrimages across India – including state governments which have implemented innovative schemes – and work towards developing an integrated approach and outlook towards the institution. The commission could eventually lead to the establishment of an independent authority for the promotion of pilgrimage-tourism in India with the mandate of developing models for sustaining ancient pilgrimage-circuits in the country. Religion-spirituality-culture-heritage-history all integrated fields could be activated to develop such a model. India and the Indian pilgrimages have the capacity to attract the world while the ancient economic and civil principles of pilgrimages continue to be relevant in present times. And above all stands the integrative and the cohesive capacities of the institution of the

tirtha; its nurturing may eventually mean a constant renewal of and faith in Indian unity and nationhood transcending political and ideological divides.

Our policymakers could pay heed to this deeper dimension; the occasion of the Amarnath Yatra amply provides that opportunity.

*

Select Bibliography

- Aiyangar K.V., Rangaswami, edited, *Krytakalpataru of Bhatta Lakshmidhara*, Baroda: Baroda Oriental Institute, 1941.
- Bernier François, *Travels in the Mogul Empire*, vol.2 (translated by Irving Brook), London: William Pickering, 1826.
- Bhardwaj Surinder Mohan, *Hindu Places of Pilgrimage in India: a Study in Cultural Geography*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983.
- Dutta Jogesh Chandra translated, *Kings of Kashmira: Rajatarangini of Kahlana Pandita*, Calcutta: Trubner & Co., 1879.
- Hunter W.W., *The Imperial Gazetteer of India* vol.1, London: Trubner & Co., 2nd edition, 1886.
- Kumari Ved, *The Nilamata Purana*, Srinagar: Jammu & Kashmir Academy of Art, Culture and Languages accessed at:

http://www.philosophy.ru/library/asiatica/indica/purana/nilamata_purana.html (9.6.2012)

- Lawrence R. Walter, *The Valley of Kashmir*, London: Henry Frowde, 1895.
- Mookerji Radhakumud, *Nationalism in Hindu Culture*, London: Theosophical Publishing House, 1921.
- Mookerji Radhakumud, *The Fundamental Unity of India*, London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1914.
- Moorcroft William & Trebeck George, *Travels in the Himalayan Provinces of Hindustan and the Panjab in Ladakh and Kashmir from 1819-1825* (prepared by Horace Hayman Wilson) vol.2, London: John Murray.
- Nivedita Sister, *Notes on some Wanderings with the Swami Vivekananda*, (edited by Swami Saradananda) Calcutta: Udbodhan Office, 1913.
- Radhakrishnan S., *The Hindu View of Life*, London: George Allen & Unwin, 9th impression, 1954.
- 'Reduction in Duration of Amarnath Yatra Resulting in Outrage amongst Pilgrims across India' Statement by Leader of Opposition: Rajya Sabha Debates of 16.5.2012.
- Sachau Edward edited, *Alberuni's India* vol.2, London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1910.

- Saraswati Baidyanath, *The Spectrum of the Sacred: essays on the religious traditions of India*, Ranchi: University of Ranchi, 1984.
- *State of India's Environment: a citizen's report*, vol.1, New Delhi: Centre for Science and Environment, 2012.
- Thornton Edward, *A Gazetteer of the Countries Adjacent to India on the North-west; including Sindh, Afghanistan, Beloochistan, The Punjab and the Neighbouring States*, vol.1 London: W.M.H.Allen & Co., 1884.
- Vigne G.T., *Travels in Kashmir, Ladak, Iskardo*, vol.2, London: Henry Colburn Publishers, 1842.



Vivekananda International Foundation is a recently established multidisciplinary 'Think- Tank' and has within a few months of its being set up, established itself as an important institution, with special interest in Civilisational and Security Studies as well as Foreign Policy related issues. It is an independent, non-partisan institution that promotes quality research on key national and international issues to help improve governance, strengthen national security and integrate India's foreign policy towards the objective of nation building. India's leading security experts, diplomats, scholars and philanthropists under the aegis of Vivekananda Kendra Kanyakumari, collaborate towards the functioning of this foundation.

Details of VIF and its activities are available on its website www.vifindia.org

Vivekananda International Foundation

3, San Martin Marg, Chanakyapuri, New Delhi - 110021

Ph:+91-(0)11-2412-1764, Fax: +91-(0)11-4311-5450

Email : info@vifindia.org Web : www.vifindia.org