

A PILGRIMAGE TO AMARNATH THE HINDUS' SEARCH FOR IMMORTALITY

Barbara Nimri Aziz
New York

Amarnath. Place of the Immortal One and therefore the goal of mortals. This Himalayan Cave is regally set, a ritual beacon in the high rockface of an austere dark mountainside. Locked in an uninhabited valley high in the remotest corner of Kashmir in India, Amarnath is an abode of (lord) Shiva who, as Lord of Death, holds the secret of immortality.

Every year, on the day of the full moon (Purnamasi), in the summer month of Srawan, as many as 25,000 *yátri* gather here to worship Shiva. These Hindu pilgrims who arrive from throughout India know Srawan Purnamasi as that time when sight of the deity (*darshana*) is charged with the utmost power and can therefore bestow optimal benefits. This prospect of abundant personal gain generates a frenzy, almost a passion, among aspirants when they finally come upon the cave. They arrive after a long journey, having walked for several days through desolate country, following a long train or bus ride, and usually after years of hoping and planning for this occasion. In the last hours of the trek, because of difficult access to the mountainous shrine, pilgrims wait long hours for their turn to enter into the presence of their Lord Shiva. During all this time, their body and mind must be prepared in as pure a condition as possible for that instant of direct communion with the divine manifestation of Shiva.

The focus of the Amarnath pilgrim's attention is a pillar of ice recognized as Shiva's manifestation. This natural *Shivlinga*

is an ice column which grows to a height of 5 feet, reaching its maximum size only on this day. As the moon wanes so also does the power exuding from here, and the *linga* recedes until next summer when it reaches that height once again. This full moon is therefore the best time to approach the *linga*. In the few moments available to him, the supplicant must make his offering, and express his wish or his gratitude to Shiva. If he is prepared, the visitor will remember to look for the doves and will grasp some powder (Amarbuth) from the chalky wall around the *linga* or scoop out some liquid at its base. Any substance from this shrine along with offerings consecrated here is *prasād*, and gives whoever consumes it powerful blessings.

With their attention focused on this spot in anticipation of that precious moment, waiting devotees form an interminable line, each aspirant gripped by the same tension. The entire assembly surging against the mountain seems like a corporate ritual whose members' common devotion to Lord Shiva fuses them into one and they become equal and united before the divine. When we recall the authority of Hindu law and the strictures of Indian society, we expect pilgrimage here to be displays of singular devotion dictated by tradition and texts.

But the idea of corporate worship is only an appearance. It is a notion which comes from watching pilgrims from afar, from observing multitudes at the most popular shrines converging at high days. This impression is then reinforced by recalling old cliches about Indian community life and adherence to law. Now, as I look more closely at the journey, after several days travelling the path with pilgrims and having talked with many individuals, another deeper significance of the Amarnath Yatra becomes clear to me. These *yatri*, arriving here from Orissa or Punjab, or the South Indian states, do not talk about this journey as a community experience which blurs social differences and

obliterates caste and class disparities. No. Pilgrimage is a deeply personal and private experience to each participant within this crowded multitude. This is not unusual for the Hindu whose sense of private is very different from ours.

An important dimension of the pilgrimage, equally private, is its appeal and value as a personal adventure. Many pilgrimages, and especially the Amarnath Yātrā encourages individualism in this society, providing rich opportunity for exploration and enterprise, both spiritual and physical. These journeys offer a Hindu non-conformity and freedom, experiences not available in normal social conditions.

As I travel precipitous mountain trails with my Hindu companions and move towards our common goal of Amarnath, I find how each aspirant offers his or her distinctive interpretation of this journey, and also of Lord Shiva.

Mr. Pal, a sturdy, energetic man who walked with me for an hour one morning said, "Shiva is my friend. I come here to get authority from him." He went on to explain how, just as we derive different benefits from each of our friends, his friendship with Shiva has its own purpose. Shiva gives this pilgrim spiritual power. The school teacher then elaborated on why he comes here at this time. "This is the time of maximum power", he explained. "When you want to build a power house where do you place it? By a small stream, or at a lakeside? No. You will build it in the current of a mighty river. That's why I have come here. There is a flood of power pouring from Amarnath now, and I shall place myself in its path."

Although this aspirant has visited many of the sacred crossings scattered all over India, only this *tīrtha* provides Pal with the closeness to the divine which he seeks. This is his 15th trek to Amarnath and although he must travel all the way from

distant Jaipur, Pal plans to return here annually as long as he is able.

For all pilgrims who have been here and for those who will visit Amarnath in future years, this *tirtha* is one of many they visit in a lifetime; nevertheless when a pilgrim's destination is Amarnath, every stage of her journey here is an all-consuming experience. I first saw this in Janakrani, a round-faced, jovial Kashmiri villager who I met on the first day of the trek. She was resting on a roadside boulder; so I joined her for a moment's respite and then we walked on together. I learned from her that this was the first great *tirtha* she was visiting. Living in Kashmir itself, Janakrani said that she had heard about the Amarnath Yatra from childhood and resolved long ago to take *darshana* here first. She claimed to be uneducated and she had not yet travelled to Kashi (Benares) or other holy places of India; nevertheless Janakrani conceived of Shiva in his most abstract form: Brahman, spirit of the universe. "I shall become Brahman", she concluded as she stopped on the path and looked at me directly, confidently. There were others seated around us as we talked and no one could say this woman's aim was impossible. They did not expect the same for themselves however, since they were part of Janakrani's family whom she had invited to accompany her on an expedition too big to manage alone. They co-operated in many ways during the journey and no one told another what they should expect from their encounter inside the holy cave.

Another pilgrim, a village merchant from Gwallore in Central India did not talk to me of Shiva either as a friend or as the Universal Spirit. He focused instead on a vision of the doves, a pair of white birds living in the cave who are said to be immortal creatures who, eons ago, overheard Shiva reveal the secret of immortality to his slumbering partner, Parvati. I had heard the legend from several other pilgrims, but I listened with renewed interest while the excited, joyful man, his eyes dancing

on the edge of full, rosy cheeks, told me his individual interpretation. In the course of the story he raised his hands and clapped loudly, twice, the way Shiva did when he transformed the evesdroppers into these winged custodians. Last year, on Ram's visit here in search of help for his ailing Mother, he himself had witnessed the birds, and he knew it was a sign that he enjoyed direct communion with the divine. His Mother now recovered, Ram was returning to make his offering. "Remember to look for the birds", he urged me as I walked on towards the cave leaving him to bathe in the river nearby and smear his body with chalk.

Pilgrims were bathing at points all along the boulder strewn river they call Amarganga flowing down the valley from the cave. Rather than immerse themselves as Ram did, many splashed water on their head as they recited a brief *mantra*. There seemed to be no specific rules for *yātri* here, and those *pandas* who are employed to instruct and advise aspirants arriving at other holy sites in India, are absent here on the approach to Amarnath. Pilgrims could not expect guidance from the scores of *sannyāsī*, those unsympathetic Shivite holy men who bothered little with lay pilgrims. As professional pilgrims who have really abandoned worldly life, these *sannyāsī* remain very unsociable and mock these amateurs for their halfhearted endeavour. Most pilgrims approaching Amarnath therefore are left to decide for themselves what they ought to do.

Janakrani and her sister bathed once, here in the Amarganga, within sight of the Holy Cave. She of course thought this was the most efficacious place while her son and his wife, along with many others, were satisfied that their immersion the day before at Panchtarni had purified them completely. When I asked a woman *sannyāsī* about this, she told me that my companions were wrong because, she claimed, the texts named 18 other *tīrthas* along this route where every pilgrim must bathe (in order to

attain the proper degree of purity to meet Shiva), but that too was disputed by yet another pilgrim, and in the end no rule could be agreed upon. It was yet a further indication of the individual responsibility given each pilgrim, a feature of the sacred journey which may in fact be closer to the original, archaic meaning of pilgrimage in India and throughout Asia before human quest was ritualized and absorbed within orthodox philosophy and law.

Of all the *tīrthas* of India, today Amarnath remains one of the most primordial. It requires a minimum of 4 days' walk through barren wilderness. The stark, exposed cave, echoing with wild animal sounds, remains in its craggy aboriginal form, an archaic shrine with its translucent, self-generating icon. Although this place is undisputed as a powerful *tīrtha*, Hindus are not obliged to come here for *darshana* as they must at Kashi. Amarnath is widely known but it is not defined by Puranic sources (texts) as one of the 4 main *dham* defining the Indian borders with the Hindu cosmos. It is not the source of the Ganga nor is it one of the major river confluences or one of the 12 *pītha* where Shiva's partner Pāravatī, dropped from the heavens.

The appeal of Amarnath seems to be its primordial qualities which call for real hardships, for independence of mind, and require personal determination. Janakrani agrees that she will eventually go to Kashi because she is obliged to. Her pilgrimage to Benares is her duty whereas this undertaking at Amarnath is her own free choice.

Amarnath Cave is so far away from anything in India that it is overlooked in the early histories and the story of Shiva and the doves does not appear in the Puranic texts. Of all Himalayan *tīrtha* this cave is the most remote, more inaccessible and inhospitable than Mt. Kailash in Tibet. Once pilgrims

enter these barren hills on their way to the shrine, they cannot help but reflect on what is real and what is illusion in this world. This is a pilgrimage which literally takes a householder to the periphery of the world, far away from the preoccupations and supports of everyday society where a Hindu is besieged by obligations, constantly threatened by loss and fearful of social censure. At the same time he is told that those social ties are impermanent and illusory, that he must break social and material attachments so that now on the trail toward Amarnath, he can consider these things and weigh their reality.

The journey to *tirthas* is one of a number of rituals and practices proposed by Hinduism to assist a person in overcoming the distractions of everyday life. Although priests warn that pilgrimage is a substitute for the others, the harrassed Hindu finds it very appealing and sacred journeys has become highly popular in recent times. The trek to a distant place like Amarnath provides all the adventure and isolation, the trials and the deprivations that must be overcome in the search for self-realization. Caves like this one were the abodes of the most accomplished beings, and Shiva himself lived in such a retreat.

One's decision to depart for Amarnath is the first independent act for a pilgrim; it requires determination and courage because it is often at odds with his immediate obligations and because it calls for him to strike out into the unknown. He may not dare to shun his family or to abandon the comforts of home, whereas he can more easily escape, at least temporarily into this socially sanctioned retreat. What might otherwise be anti-social becomes not only acceptable but also laudatory since pilgrimage is a good religious practice. This applies especially to Asian women who are otherwise confined to home and family, forbidden to travel alone or visit distant places. On her

pilgrimage to Amarnath and other *tīrthas*, a Hindu woman enjoys liberty and wins respect.

For many of the women I met at Amarnath, this journey is like a secret wish realized before they die. It is as much an act of self-assertion as it is a pious duty and if their prospects for achieving this goal are threatened, there is a final surge of determination. For the 70 year old Usha Kharki last year, it was the hard spectre of cancer that provided the final impetus for this long cherished dream. Her initial response to the illness was: "Ah, now I shall never visit Amarnath", but with the help of her son, this woman resolved to accomplish this journey. We shared the same tent over three successive nights en route to Amarnath during which I saw her become rejuvenated by the sight of mountain flowers and the sounds of *sannyāsī*'s hymns.

Direct personal experience is an important element in any pilgrimage, but the experience of Amarnath provides for this in an unusual abundance of ways. Each person who enters the shrine expects to gaze directly upon the ice *linga*, and to touch it. It is up to each person to search for a glimpse of the doves, and they can themselves flake away bits of the chalky wall.

When I first saw the devotees converging for the last stage of the *yātrā* at the town of Pahalgam I never supposed that each participant would be able to experience the march and interpret the same route as their own unique adventure. My first sight of the gathering assembly at the outset of the march showed a strong spirit of co-operation. New arrivals help each other unload provisions from racks atop the buses that keep crowding into this normally quiet hill town. People need help finding accommodation and arranging porters for the trek. By Ekadeshi, the field seems full to capacity with tents, but as evening welcomes still more newcomers, room for additional tents is made. Under this Kashmiri sky, people became neighbours who at home would

insist on a separation. City dwellers and villagers alike lay in cramped tents and behind the canvas forms, caste structures were obscured and for the moment, were almost ignored.

The eve of the trek also involved a good share of variety and competition which turned the single street of Pahalgam into a colourful annual bazaar even more varied than one would find in a normal Indian town or city. People were not quite themselves, now chilled by cool mountain air and unprepared for the predicted rains. This sent many scurrying to buy an assortment of woolen supplements and any plastic garment available. Bedecked with these purely functional accouterments and clutching their tall wooden staff, also purchased in the market, a certain pilgrim image emerged, a sort of *yātrā* costume in which the wearers could play unwonted roles. Still, under these costumes, I could distinguish the various textures and colours of saris, pantaloons or *dhoti* wraps which quietly bespeak the regional origins of each visitor.

Pilgrims converge here from every region of India as well as from Nepal, and they enter a still different society, that of Kashmir, whose Moslem entrepreneurs, while they have no religious interests in Amarnath, crowd into Pahalgam this week. Many are here to sell merchandise to the visitors, but most of them are villagers from the hills surrounding who come in search of work carrying pilgrims and their supplies into the mountains. Their swarthy faces and burly stride recall the Pathan ancestry of these hardy hill people. Their anxious faces search out patrons in the crowds while bright-eyed Kashmiri women, gayly dressed in long Kashmiri coats rimmed with delicate bars of bright colour, their hair braided artfully under distinctive box hats, peer with fascination at the Hindus. After a few hours these sightseers, their costumed children in hand, disappear homeward into the hills leaving their husbands and brothers to the serious business of finding work.

The marketplace is empty by nightfall, but long into the night, buses from Srinagar city sound their horns as they pull into town to deposit yet another load of pilgrims.

It is well past midnight when I stroll back to my tent. The near-full moon is high, and as I pass, trangular forms of canvas covering the meadow, I see more people sorting out their belongings, and I can hear those already settled chattering and laughing while they fry bread and vegetables for tomorrow's picnic. Two Kashmiri youths walk through the moonlit camp lifting tent flaps to offer their ponies for hire, adding a warning that their rates will rise in the morning.

I awake while it is still dark. The moon has just disappeared behind the southern hills so that its light still silhouettes the soft undulating horizon. It is not yet 4 am but the camp is moving and I sense that during the last hour a strange shift has occurred and a new momentum is in place. Imperceptibly the assembly that formed a camp yesterday has now broken up into individuals, each one folding his belongings and abandoning Pahalgam. The last stage of the Amarnath Yatra has begun without an announcement or a signal from a leader. That homogeneous camp which had hours before been growing with a spirit of common fellowship was now disintegrating. There was no community where a field of tents had appeared and the strangely silent exodus of people making their way northwards in the dark is a blunt reminder that these travellers have not come to Pahalgam to be together. They are only resting here temporarily until they can resume their individual pilgrimages. People do not belong here and there is nothing to hold them since each has quite separate, private goals. It becomes evident that while people come together for practical purposes and co-operate along the way, each person travels an independent course. From the mement their journey begins, all the way to the Holy Cave, each has to make his or her way alone.

As I leave the town and move along what must be the only route into the mountains, I continue to look around me wondering where the pilgrimage is, unable to decide whether the main group of *yātri* is ahead of me, or if they remain sleeping in their tents on the fields. A starting time had once been announced and since I had expected we would be drawn up into a procession, I could only conclude regretably that I had missed the event.

Proceeding up the road nevertheless, I eventually make out a figure walking slowly in the dark ahead. I recognize a Bangalore print under a new Kashmiri blanket, that I had seen yesterday. Since this woman is also walking alone I think she might welcome my company but she pays no attention as I approach her and she lets me pass without a sideways glance. Minutes later I overtake a man, scantily clad in shorts and ragged shirts, bent over a crutch on which he pulls himself forward, step by step. He also allows me to pass, unconcerned, and I continue on alone with silence all around. After some time the clip of a walking stick hitting stones gets louder as it approaches from behind, and then two figures go by as if occupied with very serious business. Leading them is a young man, a shopkeeper, briskly tapping his stick and followed by a stooped Kashmiri porter scuffling along in grass shoes, bent under a large basket in which a child is perched looking out at the darkness.

I have no knowledge of where this path will lead us, and of what we will find along the way today but I am reassured by the calm of these people walking by. Two hours later when the sky is beginning to lighten so that trees and distant hills are discernable, I reach a sharp bend in the road as it turns to avoid a rushing river. A tea stall has been set up here and men stand on either side of the path holding out fried bread to the walkers as they pass. It is a welcome surprise and when I pause to accept the gift I am drawn aside and offered a seat on a large log while a tumbler of hot sweet tea is also provided. I am

touched by this unexpected generosity even though I had heard about this Hindu practice of wealthy patrons offering *prasād* (consecrated food) to pilgrims all along the route to the holy cave.

The 9 mile walk from Pahalgam to the next camp, Tsandenwari, took a leisurely 5 hours, ascending steadily into the mountains through sparse pine and oak forests. The walkers proceed confidently, sometimes in small parties but more often individually; with the slower members of a group being left to make their way at a comfortable pace. On the morning of the first day and daily until we reached the cave, I saw an unforgettable couple, a man and a woman who were both elderly and white-haired, obviously city people, walking hand and hand, never apart. When one rested, the other stopped and waited, silently. They smile as I walk beside them and reply that they are from Orissa when I ask their place of origin. I stop on the side to rest and let them proceed, only to pass them some time later while they sit on a boulder side by side, their hands clasped. It must have taken great effort for both of them to set out on this pilgrimage and to traverse such a difficult route, but I could see no sign of strain and instead they seemed to exude an air of complete confidence and self-containment. I could see that it was no burden, but rather a fulfillment for them to be here.

This pair is very different from another couple I encountered when the woman stopped ahead of me and waited until I reached her to ask me for a draught from my water bottle. Although that was during the first, earliest and easiest part of the trek, this woman and her son, standing there, hands limp in a stance of helplessness, already looked weary and pained. Even when the path was flat and clear, she held on tightly to the boy with one hand and clutched her staff with the other, showing that their visit to Lord Shiva was a sorrowful duty. The offering they carry to Amarnath are ashes of the boy's father who had requested

that his remains be deposited at the head of the Amarganga which he himself had failed to visit.

The solitude of the day's walk came to an abrupt end at the mountain camp of Tsandanwari, the first of 3 outposts set up for pilgrims on their way to the cave. The entrance to the encampment is crowded with arriving pilgrims who stop for *prasād*, this time a more substantial meal of *parātha* bread with a leaf bowl of curried potatoes. It is a good place to rest and wait for your companions; in any case those with their own tents can do nothing until their porter and the horses arrive. As evening approaches the pilgrims are once again bustling together and making room for new neighbours. The cold air that descends with the night is an abrupt announcement to all that they are now deep into the inhospitable hills. The narrow end of the valley through which we must pass tomorrow is blocked by a glacier which spans the valley and is thus referred to as an ice bridge. Although it is negotiable, it lays across the valley as a sign of the perilous route that still lies between an aspirant and Lord Shiva. Beyond the glacier we can see where the route continues, narrowing as it ascends steeply up through a forest to the end of the treeline after which it passes on through barren, rocky valleys.

The previous morning's exodus is repeated when, once again, tents empty, one by one, and figures wrapped in blankets and coats and shawls make their way gradually over the heap of ice, and disappear into the forest to begin a rugged climb. It is daylight by the time we have reached the crest. Pilgrims emerge from the forest onto a rock plateau and as we walk onwards, I recognize faces from the previous day. I pass a woman as she rests by the roadside, and later while I take my respite further on, she proceeds past me, and we continue like this all day. There is recognition and acknowledgement but no intimacy. It is a surprisingly quiet walk for most.

Today we will reach Sheshnag and when I stop for tea at a Kashmiri's roadside stall, I hear pilgrims talking about the stillness and purity of that emerald green lake, and they tell me that I also must look for the serpent who dwells in the magic lake because the sight of it will bring me additional blessings.

The single trail is now hardly more than 3 feet wide, an indiscernable line along the sheer wall of a mountain whose side continues downwards without interruption. I remembered the story I had heard in Srinagar about bad landslides here in 1967 when 30 people perished en route to Amarnath. Because of the narrow trail here, pilgrims must continue singly, one behind another, so that as they proceed along the mountain, the walkers stretch out into a long continuous line. We move steadily deeper, through scant, close valleys, unnoticed by the sheep grazing far above. Below us the river is broken into ribbons of small streams which flow carelessly over the valley floor suggesting that these rivulets are indeed like the locks of Shiva's long hair from which the Ganga flows. A walker now and then detaches herself from the line to bathe where they have access to the water. It hardly matters where they go since every stream and pebble along this route is said to be equally efficacious.

When we reach Sheshnag Lake at midday the rain that has begun does not deter some individuals from descending the crater-like pit to the radiant expanse of water. I continue to walk with others towards the camp which is now in sight a mile beyond and as we proceed around the rim of the crater, we can see now diminutive figures bathing at the lakeshore far below. Undisturbed, the even green surface of the lake reflects the rocky mountain rising behind it so that where rock and water touch is invisible. The visual merging of rock and water is so overwhelming an image that I stop alone and rest on a grassy knoll to feast on the quietude of the colours. All the while others pass behind me, eager to reach the shelter of the camp ahead.

When Mr. Pal appears I am happy to see him and I wait, thinking he will join me and we will walk on into the camp together. However, before he reaches me, he simply waves a friendly greeting and then descends the slope towards Lake Sheshnag.

It is obvious that the pilgrims are growing increasingly more detached. As the difficulties of the trek mount and the Holy Cave looms nearer, individuals seem to become more self-absorbed. The common experience of their march through inhospitable wilderness does not bond members of the *yātrā* together. On the contrary, as they proceed towards their destination, people seem more private and less concerned with others. Caste barriers are not crossed and new friendships do not evolve among strangers even though they share tents and sacred *prasād*. By the third day, those youths who joined the *yātrā* for its sheer physical adventure or who were coerced into accompanying an elder now become serious. As their companions withdraw into themselves, the youths find they are more alone, and, now moved by their surroundings, they are no longer able to restrain a growing concern about how they might themselves react to the sight of the ice *linga*.

With only a day between them and the fullmoon of Srawan, their successful arrival at the Holy Cave seems possible. Thus pilgrims reach Sheshnag with a keen sense of anticipation even though they are tired and drenched by the rain. It has been a long march, and the deluge continues, turning the camp into a field of mud. I later learned that 7 ponies died from the rain and exposure that night, but there were no serious mishaps among the pilgrims who, despite an uncomfortable night in Sheshnag, are eager to move on next morning.

Once again, without waiting for the darkness of the new day to lift, the lake completely obscured under a heavy mist, the visitors break camp and wander deeper into the hilly terrain. There is a high pass to be traversed today and although the

rocky approach to it is steep and slippery, one after another, everyone in the pilgrimage arrives at the top. It is inconceivable now to turn back, so without hesitation each moves forward choosing his own pace. Among the pilgrims I watch scamper up the rocky ascent are Janakrani and her sister who I had not seen at Sheshnag yesterday. They called to me to wait and we reunited to walk together the remainder of the route to the final camp at Panchatarni. Janakrani gleefully reported that she saw the serpent at Sheshnag, and for an instant I envied her. Neither I nor the others with her had caught sight of the auspicious creature but that did not lessen the lucky woman's joy.

A harsh, strong wind blows through Panchtarni camp at mid-day but it was sunny and we felt at ease. While her sister went to the river with another woman, Janakrani and I sat on a grassy meadow well beyond the main encampment where, after eating our buns, we turned to listen to a small party of minstrels quietly singing hymns in praise of the Amarnath Swami. These bards are *sannyāsī* who travel here with the *yātri* to recite these distinctive songs, played only on this occasion.

One could feel a deep sense of satisfaction in the camp as the afternoon sun passed westward to make way for the now regal moon. Each *yātri* knows she has traversed the most difficult pathway to a sacred shrine and she has the right to feel a personal pride and pleasure. Many interpret the clear sunny day as an auspicious sign, a blessing to augment their encounter with Shiva tomorrow.

I look out across the wide valley, over ribbons of glistening streams where, on the near side Hindu pilgrims bathe leisurely, alone. In the distance, Kashmiri boys race their unharnessed ponies across the bands of silver and rock to graze undisturbed up on the grassy slopes above. The sun descends behind them, and before the moon appears, the camp continues to swell, and more tents sprout where it has seemed not a square

foot was left. Finally Janakrani's brother arrives leading their loaded pony and we abandon our place so they can pitch the tent here. Around us the field is bustling with activity and people come and go on their way to and from their chilly bath. After washing, many pilgrims sit on the grass or a rock nearby their tent, self-absorbed, reciting mantras in the dark in preparation for tomorrow when a great personal honour would be granted to them. They want to be in the best mental state possible to take their *darshana* of Shiva. Nothing is more important now than for each *yātri* to prepare himself; he does this privately without the assistance of his son, or his wife, or a priest.

These pilgrims sitting under the fullmoon at Panchatarni have come a long way on their journey. Each has shown the determination to undertake this visit, and each alone left his family and walked alone through these desolate mountains in a foreign place. In the context of Hindu society, this requires great fortitude and independence. Ultimately however, individuality in this culture is measured in spiritual strength which requires that a person separate herself from others, both physically and emotionally. Self-realization, the recognition of the divine within oneself, is only possible after one achieves complete detachment from everyday life.

This pilgrimage to Amarnath moves a traveller in that direction, providing physical experiences of separation and isolation from society. The *sannyāsi*, having already passed through a social death and adopted the ascetic life of a forest dweller and mendicant are the most advanced along this path, and as such are model pilgrims, forever moving to *tirthas*. Perhaps by comparison to the *sannyāsi*, the other pilgrims to Amarnath are amateurs, but they approach the shrine of Shiva nevertheless sincerely and as prepared as they can manage, each with her or his own goal. There is no outside judge who can decide who is more worthy, better prepared or more likely to succeed. Each receives *darshan*

individually, each is their own witness, and each receives their personal store of karmic reward.

Caught in the great crush at the cave's entrance and swept by the surging mass of devotees, each pilgrim has hardly a moment inside the cave in the presence of the radiant manifestation of Shiva, before he finds himself thrust out. The pilgrimage is over.

As each leaves the holy cave, pilgrims encounter *sannyāsi* seated at the exit, perpetual pilgrims who mock these departing visitors for their amateurism. Many of the *yātri* leave the valley in an ambiguous state of euphoria and confusion, shocked that they must now return to the old realities of this life, to the bonds of this body. Theoretically the sacred journey ends at the cave itself, when the suppliant and Shiva become one. In the absolutely successful pilgrimage, there is no return, not even through rebirth since self-realization involves escape from successive rebirths as well as departure from this life. The visitors at Amarnath today may not achieve the ultimate goal, but they can grasp traces of the divine in their brief encounter there with Shiva in the cave. They descend the mountain with vague feelings of completion. The journey is indeed a metaphor, only a step, but for the humble householder from a Punjab village or a Kathmandu suburb, it is an advance. Each returns with his dream only partially realized but with testimony of his or her increased nearness to the final union.