

On the Road to Amarnath

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As a normal human being who prefers not to jog or climb unless compelled to, it was rather foolhardy to agree to my wife's persuasion to visit Amaranth. Once trapped, I did a bit of reading and panicked when I learnt that it is one of the most strenuous treks, with unnecessary exertions.

We reached Srinagar, which was unusually warm, and we were glad to escape its crowds the very next day. We travelled for endless miles over picturesque hills and dales, to reach cool, cool Sonmarg. It was almost midnight when we arrived at a cute wooden cottage, that an army establishment had kept ready for us, with thick blankets and fluffy Chinese quilts. We dug out the woollens, grabbed a few hours of sleep; woke up at the crack of dawn, had a hot water bath under minimal conditions, and were finally fit and ready for the Amarnath adventure.

It was a chilly morning: Friday the 13th of July, 2012. Nandita reminded me it was on this same day, way back in 1975, that I had joined the Indian Administrative Service and had inflicted myself on unsuspecting citizens of India. I recalled how I had left a lucrative management job in a reputed private company to join government, and here I was, 37 years later. Retired from government service a few months ago — with just a few square feet of living space and an embarrassingly low bank balance. It was incidental that I was given a post-retirement job as head of Prasar Bharati, but then, this job was, like many other hot seats, a highly overworked and underpaid assignment.

But let's move on: which is what we did, without reminiscing further, and soon reached Baltal — the base camp for the next point, Panchtarni, en route to Amarnath. A veritable ocean of coloured tents greeted us and these camps of pilgrims stretched as far as our eyes could take us. It was really an exciting and heart-warming sight. Pil-

grims, trekkers, adventure-seekers, sinners, sadhus, rogues, young, old and loud tourists: they all were here. The dry decennial population statistics of how India's numbers had grown were now 'fleshed out' in front of us. The thick impenetrable masses in front of us explained India's population growth rates most convincingly.

Most pilgrims would trek all the way (God bless them!) from here to Amaranth, while we chose a popular 'smart' option of taking a chopper to Panchatarni. This would take us to the foot of the mountain that hosted Lord Shiv's cave, way above. In Baltal, cars could not move beyond a point, and so we left them to snake our way through milling crowds. We reached the helipad and joined the queues there. As we waited for 'our turn', we were soon flooded with information, both necessary and otherwise, by many, helpful co-passengers. This flight, they said ever so enthusiastically, would take us just halfway and after that, we were to clamber along narrow, slushy mountainous paths. The thought was ever so unnerving, but Shiv's devotees all around us said that the Lord wanted his pious pilgrims to go through exertions. We were technically not in the latter category — though we did admire the deity for many of his Bohemian traits. We had decided in advance to hire mountain mules, to minimise unnecessary self-torture. The slick plan was to make a quick prayer to Shiv-ji at his mountain residence, goad our mules back to Panchtarni and take the quickest return copter flight to Baltal. We could then relax at our base, with a refreshing drink, dinner and rest. 'Spiritual' both ways, was how I had planned it.

The short, exciting copter ride took us over woods and vales, over bubbly rivers and glorious glaciers. It was scary, as we brushed dangerously past craggy cliffs and weaved through sharp gorges. When the chopper flew really low, we saw mountain streams in their pristine vigour. My innate love for them only added to the thrill. I have never ceased to be fascinated by these bursts of raw power of the juvenile that brooks no opposition. They go undaunted over aged boulders or rip through rocks and even challenge their glacier mothers to stop their impetuous energy and speed. They were loud reckless kids, who just couldn't wait to break free, to see the world for themselves.

We soon landed at the helipad at Panchtarni, surrounded by the glorious Himalayas. Everyone around us was charged with excitement. So contagious and visible was it, that for once, I almost conceded that Nandita may have been right in dragging me here. We took some refreshing tea and snacks at the free stalls, from where we could see another sea of pilgrim tents, with the brightly coloured poly-sheets.

After haggling for mules (or were they horses?), we hit the trail to the cave. Reality soon overtook enthusiasm as the pilgrims' path that we trudged along was simply terrible: alarmingly steep, too narrow and much too risky for any consolation. It was made of tricky mud and wet slush that covered slippery, wobbly rocks, some of which actually broke off and rolled down hundreds of feet. There were several couch potatoes and very old persons (we're old, not yet in the 'very' category), as also some pampered obese children, who were being carried along by heaving men on 'palki-chairs. We were on the mule track, but who could stop incorrigible trekkers and hyper-energetic pilgrims and palkis from encroaching and endangering our lives. We prayed to Shivji, explaining that we were really keen to say hello to him at his Amarnath cave — if ever we could ever get to him.

Riding was never my cup of tea and I had barely managed to pass my horse riding test at the IAS Training Academy, after several falls from these unnecessarily-tall beasts. But that was more than three decades ago, and I was half my weight and volume then. Anyway, I have never understood how horse riding could ever be pleasurable — it is, after all, a dialectical contradiction between two spines, the horse's and the rider's, meeting at a right angle on a hard saddle. The stout mule who bore me reminded me of this theory: but thankfully he was quite docile. He was steady for most of the ride up and down over treacherous paths: but at some ledges, he did show signs of revolt and panic, forcing me to book lightning calls to the Almighty.

The longish ride also brought out, in vivid detail, all my back aches and knee pains: gifts bequeathed to me by both my good God-fearing parents. I had compounded them by tearing the cartilages on both my knees. This journey made it clear that the few minutes of stretches and knee and back exercises that one did quite regularly in the mornings were all right for the sedentary life of an urban pen-pusher. But they now proved to be woefully inadequate for tackling real life situations. I decided, rather firmly, that all such daring adventures in future would be on television screen, via 'Discovery' or 'Doordarshan'. My only consolation was that that the promise my wife extracted was far less painful than what Kaikeyi had extracted from Dashrath.

Meanwhile, our mules were literally being pushed along by hordes of genuine devotees and adventure-seekers, shouting "Har Har Mahadev" and "Jai Bholenath" at the top of their voices. I guess we did not hear high-decibel "Jai Shri Rams" or "Jai Mata Di-s" as Shiv, Vishnu

(including Ram and Krishna) and the Devi rule over separate empires, as the scriptures say.

Nandita has the knack of making friends and had become the 'aunty' for some very young army chaps, who were trekking along the path with us, helping us at difficult spots. They were actually hopping all around and above us on the high ledges, like mountain goats. Youth is such a wonderful gift — but it is a real pity to be wasted on the young! I was also amazed at the determination that I saw in the pilgrims all around: fed by what appeared to be completely irrational holy fervour.

The long mule ride was tiring and frustrating, and hurt both knees and back. It seemed to continue without any end in sight, but the mule that bore my weight did not grudge. He negotiated such tricky surfaces and absolutely non-existent paths that we developed new respect for the battered city roads that we left behind. Many a step that the creature took sent sharp jabs up my spine, especially when the metal of the horseshoe slipped over wet rocks. I realised that it was just the roll of a dice that I, and countless others, were depending on as we manoeuvred past narrow ledges. The gap between life and death appeared so perilously thin. At some points I felt too giddy to even look down the sharp cliffs. As far as I was concerned, heaven was now not up there, but lay thousands of feet beneath us. It was in the green Alpine forests and gushing mountain streams.

We finally reached a spot that was said to be the foot of the cave. This is where the real walking and climbing (or clambering) starts. We dismounted and our tired animals snorted with relief. It was a relief for us as well, but what lay ahead was sheer masochistic torture: especially for physically unfit city jerks. I was reminded of my son's advice that after 60, I was not supposed to pretend I was young — but to just take it easy. More so, as my life had been dedicated to the pursuit of strong epicurean cravings, and in partaking of large overdoses of every prohibited or discouraged thing. Life was now screaming aloud that it was payback time.

We were lucky to be invited for some hot tea at an army tent by the youngsters who had pranced all the way up and made friends with us. Then began the final assault: which was devised to disabuse me of any pretensions of youth that I had nursed so fondly and assiduously, by wearing flashy T-shirts and jeans. The air was thin and after every few steps along this steep climb, I had to gasp for breath, as penance

for enjoying 33 years as a chain smoker. Although I had chucked this pleasure a decade ago, I remembered that the doctor had said that my lungs will bear the devastation for ever. As I climbed up (and later, down) the final slippery wet steps to meet the presiding deity of Amarnath, I was helped along by a cheerful young helpful army Captain. I have never figured out how I made it somehow to the much-hyped caves. I protested and swore all along (within God's earshot) that I had never committed so many sins in my long life, to go through this ordeal.

But once we were before the huge ice lingam at Amarnath, it suddenly became quite a rewarding climb. Here I was: in front of a massive frozen bluish white waterfall that surely looked quite phallic. Nandita, who was often overcome by incorrigible bouts of piety, prayed hard with her eyes shut. When she opened her eyes, the purohit pointed to strange shapes on the ice: saying that this was Parvati and that was Ganesh. He even pointed to Nandi, the bull, and my wife nodded ever so enthusiastically. She was really excited and started pointing out to me the horns of Nandi and to other members of the divine family. But, however much I strained my eyes, all I could see were only irregular blobs of ice. I guess I just did not have the minimum qualifying piety of belief and behaviour, to behold such holy sights. That is why I was deprived of these visions of the divine! The only question that crossed my mind was if Shiv-ji could manage to get his entire family over to Amarnath, why does the Army declare it as an inhospitable non-family posting.

But something was happening. As I kept staring at the very cold aniconic Shiv, ignoring the occasional pushes and shoves, I was really amazed. For a while, I was oblivious of the milling crowds and other distractions, and transfixed my attention, looking deep and as devotionally as possible at the ice form. I actually managed to do this for a couple of minutes, without any other thought in my mind. I started feeling so enraptured and did seem to be overwhelmed by a strange shiver of 'piety'. No, it was not the cold! I was struck by some unmistakable bolts of 'faith', as I stood somewhat bedazzled, despite all the jostles that I received. It was then that I felt there may be some acceptable reason why millions of devotees risk their lives for a glimpse of this Mahadev. After all the complaints, I must confess that I did witness a strange sense of joy, satisfaction and accomplishment: having finally made it! It would be unfair if I do not admit that I did have this short visit of 'religion', lasting maybe a couple of minutes: but it gave me quite an un-

usual 'kick'. It was bizarre and as a confirmed rationalist, I told myself I must analyse it coolly later.

My studies in history and civilisation tumbled out, as I looked intently at the very spot that has been sanctified by the piety of millions of souls who had come here to pray. I visualised them, as they struggled up here, century after century, millennia after millennia, in their search for salvation. There must be some magnetic power that must have pulled them to this very spot, over miles and miles of similar-looking scraggy hills and mountains. Yes, that mattered more to me than the mumbo jumbo that the busy priest was mumbling to us, for negotiable user charges. Large numbers of his brethren were also tending to the never-ending queues of hapless seekers, pining for divine benediction, through such religiously-approved outsourcing to purohits. I also stumbled on another fact at Amaranth: the power of our crowds to swarm forward and jostle with fierce energies. Other nations normally reserve such animal spirits for winning Olympic medals.

After this short, strange experience, I hobbled down amidst the persistent drizzle, slipping occasionally on the wet stone steps. But I was invariably caught by this intrepid Captain. May Shiv-ji make him the Commander-in-Chief! We partook of a refreshing hot meal at the army officer's mess (surprise: they have a proper one, at some thirteen and a half thousand feet), and started the trek down. There was nasty rain and sleet coming down, and we had to put on crude polythene covers. I coaxed my horse-mule to push forward as much as I could, as I was desperate to catch the helicopter back. The slow pace of unmanageable crowds, however, made our descent even more difficult, as intermittent rain and mist completed the picture of the unforgettable trail.

Notwithstanding my continuous frets, rising blood pressure and tension all along the journey down to the helipad, we missed our copter back to camp. The last flight from Panchtarni flew away, much to our annoyance, just as we reached. The helicopter company told us at that the skies to Baltal were completely fogged out. "Please look for a place for the night in the pilgrims' tents: but it will be cold. We'll try to fly you out tomorrow: no promise, will try." How positively encouraging!

We began a very frustrating hunt, with no one to help. Mobiles were acting very difficult, when all of a sudden, a "Hello-Sir-How-are-you" call came through, from my office in Srinagar. We related our plight and they promised to help. We sat on some rocks and watched other hapless left-out passengers bemoan their fate. The cold breeze

was getting in through our clothing and as we were giving up hope, the Srinagar office rang back. We were told to walk to a small army post about a kilometre away. They would put us up for the night. It was on a low hill and our trudge there was over fields where we had to be careful not to step on the morning stuff that pious campers had left behind.

A really cheerful Sardar, a Major, greeted us very warmly and gave us a really warm tent: with a decent makeshift clean toilet. God has countless mercies! He was from Kolkata and mother goose Nandita decided to bring him under her zone of free maternal advice: which the homesick lad seemed to enjoy. A good young army doctor was also there, who assured us that we had much residual battery power left. We enjoyed a good, simple but hot, army-style food and a reasonably smooth and chill-free night, deep inside regulation sleeping bags.

The morning was clear and the birds were chirping. But helicopter flights were a little haphazard and delayed, because of the large number of stranded passengers. With Mahadev's infinite blessings (and the unstinted help we received from those in uniform, who go into battle screaming his name), we were finally air-borne. We made it back to Baltal and Sonemarg, without any incident, through the wonderful unforgettable valleys and bubbly streams. Jai Baba Bholenath!

I will, however, never forget this last pilgrimage, or whatever one may call it. I swear this is the last one, even if the good lady divorces me. Which, of course, is just a pleasant fantasy! No: I shall not go for such mad trips ever: even if half a dozen Miss Worlds plead with me!

Oh, to top it all: as I can swear on oath — I have never committed so many sins to warrant this torment. I am, therefore, absolutely sure that I now have enough surplus piety-points in my 'sin card' account, to last me the rest of my days. All I now need are interesting ideas on how to use these extra points, on 'sinful' activities, just to balance the sheet.

