The Joys of Pilgrimage
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FEATURE

The Joys of Pilgrimage

Devotion, introspection, family bonding and vacation fun are all part of the modern Hindu's travels to the holy sites in India and now abroad

Lavina Melwani, New York

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It's the closest you can get to heaven while living on Earth: Haridwar, "Gateway to God's Abode," just a few hours drive north from Delhi. As dusk falls on Har ki Pauri, the stone steps of God leading down to the holy Ganga, the marble of the ghats is ice-cold beneath your feet, and if you dip a hand in the sacred waters, you can feel the swift current. From every temple surrounding the ghats comes the clanging of bells and the chanting of the evening arati. The multitudes of pilgrims place their offeringsÃplantain leaves laden with flowers, camphor and lighted earthen lampsÃinto the Ganga. As these tiny flames dance and bob on the dark waters of the river, you can feel the ardor, the devotion all around you like a living, palpable thing.

Growing up in India, I recall the yearly trips in our trusty green van from our hometown of Delhi to the neighboring holy spots of Mathura, Rishikesh, Brindavan and Haridwar. Pilgrimage was a regular feature for us, because to vacation in the hills of

Musoorie and Simla, one had to pass these holy cities. To drive through that area and not pay our respects to the Gods would have been unthinkable.

The van, which had the name of my father's jewelry store emblazoned on its sides, handily accommodated our family of parents and five children. Leaving Delhi at dawn, we were in Haridwar by evening. While the city was tumbledown and often dirty, we were assured of clean beds and delicious toast and home-churned butter at the guest rooms at the railway station. There were also intriguing soft drinks that had a marble stuck in the neck of the bottle in lieu of a cork.

Every day we would take our dip in the Holy Ganga and feast on Alphonso mangoes that had been tied in muslin and lowered into the river for chilling. In the evening, as coolness descended on the dying day and the temple bells rang out, we would head for a small mom-and-pop eatery where the elderly couple would have vegetarian meals ready paneer chunks in tomato gravy, piping hot chapattis and sweet yogurt served in clay containers.

Yes, the winding, narrow streets were crowded, the atmosphere hot and polluted, the Ganga water even then dirty with brittle bones, debris and sewage. Pilgrimage spots are known for their teeming crowds, their pickpockets and beggars, and the often spartan accommodations. Yet, even as a child, I could sense the holiness, the intensity and the beauty of the place and

the people. The beggars with their mutilated limbs and faces seemed to have a perfect right to be thereÃ if not in this, the holiest of spots, then where?

It's been many years since I visited Haridwar as a child, but I often return there in my mind's eye. Indeed, memories of a pilgrimage stay with you forever; for that is the time you meet up close with your Maker, without the trappings of the ever-frenetic world to distract you. In fact, pilgrimage is one of the fiveobligatory duties of a Hindu and is very much a part of every Hindu's life.

There are few towns in India which could not be considered pilgrimage destinations, but a few stand out above all othersÃBadrinath, Jagannath Puri, Vrindavan, Mathura, Rishikesh, Haridwar, Rameshwaram, Palani Hills, Varanasi, Amarnath, Madurai, Chidambaram, Vaishno Devi and Tirupati.

Over the centuries, billions of Hindus have traveled to the holy places in India. They draw newly betrothed couples, newborn babies and students about to sit for major examinations for

blessings. The elderly come to seek peace and pave their way to the next world.

"India is a land of pilgrimage, where every village and hilltop has its story and every story its location somewhere in the sacred geography of the land," says Diana Eck, professor of religion at Harvard. "Visiting these sacred places, called tirthas, literally, "crossing places," is one of the most dynamic forms of religious life in Hindu India. These tirthas are spiritual crossings where the river of this earthly life may be safely forded to the far shore of immortality."

For immigrants who have left their homeland, the "Non-Resident Indians" (NRIs), settled abroad, pilgrimage has become a means of renewal and a way of showing their foreign-born children their religion and culture. From across the diasporaÃthe UK, America, Canada, Africa, the Far East and the Middle EastÃHindu families journey back to the source. From Hong Kong, my sister-in-law and her family travel yearly to Vaishno Devi as a thank-you to the Goddess who has seen them through a health crisis. The faith

continues with their 30-year-old son, who recently took his own first-born son to Balaji, in Tirupati, South India, to have his mundan (head-shaving) ceremony.

Like all NRIs, a visit to my hometown would be incomplete without a visit to the temples of my childhood. In Delhi, that is for our family the Lakshmi Narayan temple. It was within this magnificent red sandstone edifice that I first encountered the many Gods of the Hindu pantheon. Every visit back home to family is entwined with visits to pilgrimage spots or the local temples. Last year, when I visited relatives in several cities in India, my relatives took me as a matter of course to visit the Gods in their neighborhood temples.

Having left India generations ago, many Indo-Caribbean people who have settled in the Americas are now feeling the pull of their original homeland. Ramesh Kalicharran, a travel agent serving the Carribean Hindu community, organizes annual "Bharat Yatras," tours that promote the rediscovery of India and its spiritual

destinations. He says: "Taking these groups of people to India every year has helped many who have thirsted to understand their roots. They return to New York refreshed and revitalized." Similar groups go from Trindad, Guyana and Suriname each year.

Similarly, a handful of travel agencies with offices in America or UK, including SOTC, TCI and Cox and Kings, have discovered that US Indians love to travel together, either as extended families or as entire castes, such as the Patels. News of a planned trip will spread by word of mouth until ten to fifteen like-minded families are ready to go. SOTC is India's largest outbound tour operator, and this 50-year-old company was the first in India to introduce packaged tours for NRIs, including religious tours.

In countries with a lot of temples, such as the US and England, the tour bus pilgrimage, so popular in India, is easily possible. The Gujarati community in California and New York, for example, regularly organizes programs for their senior citizens that take them from temple to tem

ple in an area or even across several states.

Since the Hindus of the diaspora have built temples everywhere they settled, it is no longer a requirement to go to the ancient homelands of India, Nepal, Sri Lanka or Bali to find an appropriate pilgrimage destination. One can find powerful temples in many countries. For example, Diana Eck points out in her wonderful new book, A New Religious America, that Hindus have brought their sense of sacred geography to the US. She writes: "And so it is that Lord Rama resides in Chicago, Vishnu in Pittsburgh, the Goddess Meenakshi in Houston and the Goddess Lakshmi in Boston."

Pilgrims travel as far as the island of Kauai in Hawaii to see the San Marga Iraivan Temple (also the home of Hinduism Today), where a rare six-sided crystal Lingam weighing 700 pounds has been installed. The temple, the

first to be built in America entirely from stone, is taking shape with seven master stonemasons in residence.

Just as in India, pilgrims within America or Europe can time their visits to participate in the major religious events. Thousands of people participate in the grand Murugan festivals held in London, or the Ratha Yatra of Ganesh Chaturthi at the Ganesha Temple in New York, as devotees take the Lord of Auspicious Beginnings on his decorated chariot through the streets of New York.

Hindus in the West also just take vacations, but even these sightseeing trips are getting transformed. In the first evolution, tour operators such as Future Tours & Travel, one of the first to cater to NRIs going to India, realized there was an emerging niche market for NRI travel outside of India. They started packaging tours around America or Europe

just for Indians. Says Divya Shah, of Future Tours, "Tours are popular because our Indian culture is such that we prefer to be together with family and friends when we travel, and we saw that need."

She points out that the special dietary requirements of many Indians, especially Gujaratis, also showed the need for a special packaged tour geared to the community. Says Shah, "On our Australia and New Zealand tours, we even send an Indian chef along with the group who prepares ragda patties, upama, idlis and bhel puri. For cities in Russia and Scandinavia we prepare an itinerary that is customized to the needs of our Indian-American clients. Keeping in mind the importance of food, we try to locate Indian restaurants, and we carry dried snacks from New York. On our Alaska cruises, we serve vegetarian meals on board the ship seven days a week."

Raksha Pandya and her partner Dinesh Patel run Pack N Go, an affiliate of Cox and Kings which has been around for eight years. They offer five- to 20-day trips, with or without cruise, and offer Indian meals which include nonvegetarian, pure vegetarian and even Jain meals without any onion or garlic. They can also customize pilgrimage trips for groups.

The secret is in the kitchen cart which travels with the group, a step ahead, setting up shop at each destination and having hot meals ready for the group when it arrives. The chefs join in from Europe and travel with the party. Stops are also made at Indian restaurants. Tour operators speak Indian languages. Little wonder that these tours are very popular with Indian senior citizens.

Last year Pack N Go took a group of 136 senior citizensÃ three full busloads from New Jersey around the East Coast. The seniors

enjoy them because they are with their peers, with a common language and mindset. Recalls Pandya: "The youngest person was 55, the oldest was 86 years old, there were four people in wheelchairs and the way they traveledÃ it was as if they were born yesterday! Their stamina was terrific in dealing with new things, and in their enthusiasm to see everything."

In a second level of evolution, secular cruises or land tours in the West are being turned into pilgrimages. Visitors to Europe, for example, can find Hindu temples in every major city. Some of these, such as the Swaminarayan Temple in Naesden, rank among the worldÃs most spectacular. There are major festival celebrations involving tens of thousands of Hindus in France, Germany, and other countries every year. One day we may even have Hindus from India pilgrimaging to the West!

While pilgrimages to holy spots in the US

and Europe are state of the art in comfort, the same cannot always be said for pilgrimages in India. Although one associates hardship and sacrifice with pilgrimage, such as trekking up mountain paths, poor accommodations and indifferent food, things are rapidly changing, as India becomes a major hub for tourism. The powers that be are introducing more frequent air routes, better trains and hotels, motels and guest houses to accommodate NRIs and their foreign-born children. Major hotel chains are coming into these holy cities and proving that the path to heaven doesnÃt have to be uncomfortable or dusty.

Yes, you can now enjoy spiritual encounters in the comfort of air-conditioned hotels and cars, even chartered flights! It will probably be only a matter of time before the big hotel chains organize private bathing ghats and pilgrimage tours in air-conditioned buses, along with one-on-one encounters with priests and holy men.

Some luxury steps already seem to be underway. India Today reported that some

pilgrims are turning into settlers, and elderly people are investing in property in the Haridwar-Rishikesh area. Developers have constructed over 200 upscale apartment blocks, and many more are under construction. Many of these apartment complexes are right next to the holy Ganga so that one can actually witness all the teeming activity on the ghats from the balcony of oneÃ s own home. Shivalik Ganga Estates in Haridwar uses the tag line: ÃPeace Unlimited. Plots Limited.Ã Prices are upward boundÃan apartment on the riverfront, which sold for us$25,500 four years ago, now fetches $53,200. These luxury apartments may cost a bundle, but certainly the path to finding God was never easier!

AuthorLavina Melwani, a popular free-lance correspondent, was born in Sindh, grew up in New Delhi and has lived in Hong Kong and Africa. She currently resides in New York with

her husband and two children.

VOICES

A Family Delight

Grandparents, parents and children all bonded on out trek to Kedarrrnath

By Choodie Shivaram, Bangalore

When we travel as a family, we look for some-thing more than a pleasure trip, something educative, not just for the kids, but for us tooÃcultural, religious, spiritual, academic and environmental. We want our children

to learn about the diversity, the greatness, the rich cultural heritage and the common thread that bound the country of our sages who traversed on foot, without any of the facilities of the kind we enjoy today. It's wonderful to explore for yourself the unity in diversity that India is known for, the land and her people. When we travel, we try to squeeze in as many places of interestÃ historic or religious that surround the destination. Each is bound in mythology or history, and sometimes brings you closer to the legends you've heard. We research a lot on these places, speak to people, try to get some contacts living there. Travel brings with it a number of interesting people, experiences and encounters, at times not so pleasant, but even

those become part of your sweet memories.

We made two trips to the Himalayas during the last two Dasara vacations (in October). We yearn to go there time and again. The first trip was made thanks to a good friend who invited us to Shimla, where he stayed. Little had we imagined we would head to the Himalayas. I was delighted that my parents agreed to join us. The children love traveling with their grandparents; there is a special bonding that takes place.

My parents were apprehensive about our plans to go to Badrinath and

Kedarnath; they thought they would not be able to take the arduous journey. We, living down in the south of India carry an impression that the Himalayas are very, very far (far they are, but not unreachable) and difficult to scale. You realize later how mistaken you were. Once you've been there, there's no stopping!

My mother had nurtured a hidden ambition to visit the Holy shrines of Badrinath and Kedarnath. She had never expressed her wishÃ caught in the responsibilities of a huge joint family she never thought of herself. As a child, I thought that the snow-clad mountains of the Himalayas were visible from Delhi and imagined that

my uncle who lived there was a very lucky man.

After our two trips to the mountains I realized one thing, no matter who says what, plan your destination according to your dreams. Do take advice and suggestions that come your way, but don't let anything dampen your spirits. Some of the most beautiful things in life would be missed if we were to decide based on other people's perceptions and experiences. We human beings have a great tendency to take the negative aspects seriously. People who have been to the Himalayas will tell you how they were obstructed by landslides, the narrow escapes they had, the chilling cold or

the lack of oxygen that could make one feel that he's dying, or how their mule decided to throw them offÃ!

At Gangotri, 10,300 feet above sea level, where the divine Bhagirathi flows, you go into the space and time of Sage Bhagiratha. Soon your thoughts come back to harsh reality, how we lesser mortals have polluted the Ganga. You feel personally guilty for it. The water here is crystal clear. The pristine surroundings vibrate with your superconsciousness and elevate your soulÃthe thought that you're standing on the very earth on which Bhagiratha did penance to bring Bhagirathi. Surrounded by the virgin mountains, the view of snow-clad

Sudarshan peak, the sound of the gentle and yet powerful Bhagirathi River rustling down, you wish time could freeze.

At Gangotri you begin to worship the River Goddess deeply within yourself. My parents had a dip in the freezing waters of the Bhagirathi, while we shuddered even to dip our fingers. Even at the slightest drop in temperature in Bangalore my mother is the first one to pull out her shawls and cap. That was the strength of devotion and willpower, the magic of the divine place. I was happy my children could see this for themselves, or how else will they understand? They would regard such stories as

exaggerations.

Unlike South Indian temples, temples in the Himalayas are not so much of an architectural marvel. But, they carry millennium-old history with them; they bring myth closer to reality. I feel every Saivite should see the Neelkant peak in BadrinathÃ it gives you a feeling of having seen the Lord Himself, closing His eyes in perfect meditation. The mountain stands out majestically, turning luminous by night. As the first rays of sunlight arrive, they turn the snow-clad peaks into shimmering molten gold- those few moments are divinely breathtaking.

"A dip in the Ganga absolves you of all your sins" is an adage often mocked at. Whether it absolves you of your sins or not, the tricky ride on the mountains certainly strengthens your belief in the superior force above you, and it makes you reflect on your deeds, good or bad. To encounter landslides in these ranges is very common, that means one is stuck for hours or days, when you may have to return without going to the place you wish to. Risk of accidents is high, seeing the deep gorges inches beside you on the road as the driver makes a steep turn sets you calling out to your dearest God. But the hills and greenery around, the snow peaks that play hide-and-seek mesmerizes you to sublime oneness with Mother Nature, reassuring you. When you are scared

within, you are immediately put to shame by the calm, determined progress of other pilgrims who are aged and less able.

The mountain journey is at times hazardous, despite all the amenities available today. The holy shrines of Badrinath, Kedarnath, Gangotri and Yamunotri are closed for six months a year due to inclement weather and extreme cold. Yet, thousands of devotee wait for the temples to open, only to be back on the mountains again and again. Never mind the difficulties you are with God Himself.

VOICES

Chances for Pilgrimage

We seek out ways to visit God, despite constraints of time and resources

By Rajiv Malik, Delhi

Whenever I have the opportunity, I try to combine my business travel or vacation with pilgrimage. As for most middle-class Indians, it is an essential compromise given the

limited resources of time and money. For example, around seven years back I and my cousin, along with our families, went to Dalhousie, a hill station in Himanchal Pradesh. It's just 60 miles from Vaishno Devi Temple, one of the premier pilgrimage destinations of India [see next article]. I was accompanied by my wife and our two children, Palak and Pulkit. The kids were small, but it was good to expose them to the hardship of the journey of Vaishno Devi, especially after a comfortable stay at the hill

station, and also to give them a first-hand experience of what a trip like this means in one's life in spiritual and religious terms. While we were coming back on foot downhill from the Vaishno Devi Shrine, a 12-kilometer trek on open trail, a sudden change in the weather brought a thunderstorm accompanied with heavy rain. For a while we were really worried about the safety of our children, some of whom had independently gone by pony. Our whole group carried on the journey chanting "Jai Mata di," until we finally all

assembled without mishap at the trail's end. At that time, the shelters on the roads were not good and the street lights not functioning properly. The path on which we were walking had become extremely slippery in the rain, and all this made this part of the journey rather dangerous. Our kids also realized that adverse situations in life can be faced in a much better manner if we have deep faith in God. Chanting "Jai Mata di" was a big morale booster for all of us. And it made us realize that nothing can go wrong if

Mata's blessings are with us.

It's not uncommon for my Hinduism Today assignments to take me to or through a sacred place. For example, when photographer Amit Kumar and I covered the Kumbha Mela in AllahabadÃitself a spectacular experience of pilgrimage, we took the opportunity to visit the famous Panki Hanuman Temple in Kanpur upon our return to Delhi. On another occasion, in 1996, I was assigned to report on the Omkarananda

Institutions in Rishikesh. I wanted to take my family along, but did not know whether it would be possible or not. Luckily the swamis of Omkarananda insisted that I visit with the family. This was a wonderful God-sent opportunity, and my wife and both children can never forget this trip. My children, then six and nine, visited around one dozen different temples in Rishikesh, many of which were managed by our host. The children also got the opportunity to interact with the sannyasins and sadhvis

of Omkarananda Ashram, which was a spiritually uplifting experience for them. My children established a special bond of love with them that persists to this day.

Even when we plan an outing in Delhi where we live, we try to visit some holy place as well so that the children get to be in a spiritually charged atmosphere for some time at least. I believe it helps them evolve into better human beings and equips them to counter the challenges of

today's material temptations more effectively. In retrospect, I think it would be wrong to say we plan to combine our vacations with pilgrimage, rather it is more appropriate to say that He creates the opportunities, and whenever such happenings take place, we enjoy every moment.

PILGRIMAGE

Vaishno Devi in Jammu

This hillside cave temple of the Goddess is among Hinduism's most popular destinations

By Prabha Prabhakar Bhardwaj, Delhi

In my early life, my father was posted as a medical officer at Katra, the base for the 12-kilometer pilgrimage

route to Vaishno Devi Shrine. I remember the single pathway going up the mountain. It was a very circuitous route. Pilgrims went during Navaratri and other holy occasions. In those days, the pilgrims were mostly from undivided Punjab. Later, those Hindus from the Pakistan side who settled in all parts of India after partition would still come. Over the years, I have seen the growth in the

area and the increase in the popularity of Mata, as the Goddess is called. In 1999, I went to Alaska and was surprised to meet someone there who was a devotee. Thus my inquisitiveness and interest was kindled to find out more about this powerful shrine.

I had always gone to Mata as a child in a playful mood.

Mostly people climb chanting, "Jai Mata di." I used to ask, "Why not say 'Jai Pita di'?"Ã"Hail Father," instead of "Hail Mother." As I grew up I always felt the desire to visit. Many times when I would get off the train in Katra to visit our home in nearby Jammu, I would meet some friend or relative on their way to Vaishno Devi and spontaneously join them on

their pilgrimage. I would call my parents to inform them that I had arrived, but was first going for Mata's darshan [sacred sight or presence], and after a day or so would return and come home to them. They somehow understood.

In the early eighties, after having moved to Kenya, I came on a visit and the

same thing happened. A chance encounter with friends uponarrival again took me up to the mountain. For some reason, while at Mata's feet, I prayed and requested her to not summon me again. I forgot all about it, but the chance to visit again did not come my way.

Since 1999, I had been trying to go, especially as I had proposed an article on the shrine for Hinduism Today, but one or another obstacle stopped me from going, Then, a couple of weeks ago, suddenly I remembered my request to Mata. So I again prayed and begged Her to allow me to come. Soon after, the trip materialized. This episode speaks by itself,

and my experience during my visit was out of this world.

There are many stories about the origin of Vaishno Devi. One of the temple priests, Pandit Amir Chan, told us that his ancestor, Shridhar, found this cave about one thousand years ago and that Shridhar's

descendants continue to serve as the priests. According to the story, the Goddess Vaishno Devi appeared to Shridhar as a small girl. She led him to the cave shrine and explained the significance of the natural rock formations there. The story narrates many miracles attributed to this little girl.

In the Vaishno Devi cave there are three pindhis, natural stone "heads," which are said to be the manifestations of Goddess Kali, Lakshmi and Saraswati. By worshipping them, we humans can achieve success in acquiring shakti [strength], prosperity and education, respectively. In recent years Mata has been bestowed with some

specialist roles. Thus newly-wed couples, new parents and students after exams come to offer their thanks. In olden days, Mata's ornaments were all made of silver, but recently everything has been recast out of 172 pounds of gold donated by pilgrims.

Management: Dr. Karan Singh, son of the last Maharaja of Kashmir, laid the foundation of what Vaishno Mata is today. This shrine, along with a hundred other temples in Jammu and Kashmir, had been under his royal ancestors' control for centuries.

In 1970 Dr. Singh decided to improve access to the shrine by drilling a tunnel through the back of the cave, which had only one small access route. There was opposition to the idea. But his position as sole trustee of the trust which administered Vaishno Devi, coupled with his royal origins and

personal popularity, allowed him to push through the plan. He saw to it that a seven-year feasibility study was done by the Geological Survey of India, which then endorsed the idea. Throughout, Dr. Singh remained firm on his decision and felt that if Mata had any objections to the opening of the

passage, She would have given him some sign. As it was, the project was completed without a hitch and the tunnel opened to the public on March 9, 1977, which was also Dr. Singh's birthday.

The next major change for the shrine came in

1986 when the then governor of Jammu and Kashmir, Jagmohan, formed the Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Board and took over management of the entire complex by legislative action. Prior to this, the shrine was largely overseen by the thousand or so priest families allowed to perform ceremonies

there by virtue of their descent from Sridhar, who discovered the temple a thousand years ago. They had a system whereby each family would receive the donations of the shrine for one day. At the time of the takeover, the entire complex had become greatly run down, and the

pilgrimage a difficult undertaking. Following the takeover, massive improvements were made, the entire twelve-kilometer route widened and repaved, lights fixed and scores of new facilities added.

Initially, Dr. Singh was unhappy with the abrupt

takeover, saying he felt, when I spoke with him, that the matter could have been handled in a less drastic fashion. However, he is today content with the Board management and happy that large numbers of devotees can make the pilgrimage with relative ease. Under the new management, the

number of pilgrims increased from 400,000 per year to 4.5 million in 1998, a rate of 12,328 per day. The maximum capacity of the temple is 25,000 per day. If the flow of pilgrims increases beyond this, those at the base camp are held until the way above clears.

I did not find official figures, but some reckon this temple the second richest in India, after Tirupati. All offerings are collected in a systematic manner by a salaried staff. Apart from the ongoing upkeep of the complex, the Board has started schools in the area and has plans to start a University at

Painthal in Udhampur District in the near future.

I met with Mr. M. K. Dwivedi, the Indian Administrative Service Officer who took over the management of the shrine on August 28, 2000. His own story is very enlightening. When

he received the orders to join the Board at Katra, he was posted in Delhi. He was sick with fever, despite four months of treatment. The cause could not be diagnosed. Under the circumstances he was reluctant to take over this hectic assignment. He was a worried man. He could not even climb four

steps. How would he manage a distance of 12 kilometers? Some devotees convinced him to join and to start taking charna amrit, the water which naturally flows from under the feet of Mata in the shrine. He told me that within two monthshis fever miraculously vanished. Since then, he considers

that Mata chose him to serve Her. "I serve with full devotion, I am now a sevak, a religious worker, at the shrine." Dwivedi told me, "We have been busy in providing basic needs, but after that has been achieved, we intend to devote energy towards spiritual growth by organizing discourses

and establishing academies and other spiritual and intellectual facilities." A thorough overview of the Board's activities and plans can be found at www.maavaishnodevi.org.

Pilgrimage: The shrine is located 12 kilometers

from the nearest motorable road. The path to the shrine can be covered on foot, by pony or palanquin or, these days, weather permitting, by helicopter. My husband and I opted for ponies and in three hours, with one refreshment stop at Adh Kawari, reached the pilgrims' complex called

Bhawan. Bhawan contains all necessary facilities. We stayed at Bhawan for two days and nights and were amazed at the number of pilgrims, the diversity in their origins and the sharing of a common faith among all who come there.

The whole route after Katra is under the management of the Board and is very well maintained. At the Bhawan, we met O. P. Gupta, the Shrine's chief of security. In light of the attacks upon pilgrims going to Amarnath Cave, there were proposals to increase security here. But Gupta said,

"Ninety-nine percent are devotees, so why inconvenience everybody for that rare chance?" Still, nobody is allowed to take in anything, especially not the traditional coconut. Only a piece of decorative cloth is allowed.

Gupta told us, "In olden times, the mountain was covered with shrubs and ethnic plants, which over the centuries have been lost due to developmental activities. We are trying to restore the natural resource base by establishing Vatikas, green areas, with the help of the horticulture

department."

The most popular time to visit is November to March, even though at 5,600 feet, the area may be under snow. The picturesque route is completely lit. There are several clean drinking-water spots and well-maintained toilets.

The shrine itself is open day and night, except for two hours each at sunrise and sunset when special worship is performed privately by the priests. There is little feeling of day or night at the Bhawan, the crowds are the same all the time and activities are going on ceaselessly.

When the pilgrim flow peaks at 25,000, only three seconds each is allotted for seeing the Goddess in the cave. Many expressed their concern about this. I do agree with the devotees that after all the effort made to get there, the inside experience could be more peaceful. Especially, the staff on

duty could be trained to be more polite and considerate. There are devotees carrying newborn babies, for example, who cannot move quickly. A compromise has to be found and a system devised by which people feel a sense of satisfaction and achievement. Maybe

instead of the present single file, the queue could be two deep. Or, as has been proposed for Tirupati temple, which has the same crush of pilgrims, a moving platform could be installed to bring pilgrims past the sanctum without pushing or shoving.

We spoke with the priests and pilgrims to get a sense of their experience of this divine place. Pandit Amir Chand, a priest, told me that Mata appears regularly in his dreams. "My whole life is a miracle, Mata blesses and protects my family in all respects. My experience is of total

peace and bliss while at this holy place." There are numerous shrines along the way up the path, and at one, my husband had an extraordinary experience, a vision of Mata in the form of a sublime light. My own experience at that same moment was one of extreme peace and

tranquility.

We met Chandr Mehra, a devotee of Mata from his childhood. He attributed the birth of his son to the blessings of Mata, and walked barefoot to the shrine in thanks. This modern young man has implicit faith in God. He said, "There is some

power in this place. In spite of all the bureaucracy, one experiences a special peace of mind." A jeweler by profession, he's designed a gold pendant of Mata [left] which is blessed at the shrine itself. The inspiration for it was his mother, Lata Rani Mehra, who believes all

Goddesses are different shapes of the same Mata. She gave her own example, "I am the same Lata, but wife of my husband and mother of my son and daughter of my parents and so on; but I am one and only one; similarly there is only one Mata, all are different manifestations, each has a specific

purpose." I asked her if she had ever had a vision of Mata, "When I am in trouble and go to sleep, Mata comes to me, I wake up, She whispers solutions and gives me good tidings. I find myself fully awake, but I have no memory of Her face or form. I often feel Her presence."

We met a group of students I first took to be casual tourists. Actually, all had appeared from Mata's blessings on their final exams. For one, Jasbir Singh, it was his twenty-first visit. He said, "All my requests have been fulfilled. I pray that I can look after my parents, and that their wishes are

granted."

I noticed a number of Sikh families among the pilgrims and decided to approach them. I spoke at length with Gurdev Singh from Ranchi, Bihar. He explained to me that the Sikh guru, Gobind Singh, had paid homage to Mata at this

place, so it remained popular with his community. He said, "My younger brother has come here every year since 1984. All his wishes have been granted. He has a flourishing business, good marriage and has been blessed with two sons."

Every pilgrim we met had a divine story to tell. A young lady from Katra told us, "I was saved from a marriage to a wrong person because of Mata's intervention. I got some inner feelings and refused to get married. Later on it was revealed that the marriage would have been disastrous." Corporal Chandeshwar

Kumar and Rumi of Bihar were carrying their baby daughter. Rumi's second child had miscarried, and they attributed their daughter's birth to Mata's grace. It was Chandeshwar's seventh visit and Rumi's third. Many were like Sudama, 70, and Sushma, 55, from Ujjain, who said, "We have no request,

just faith. We have come out of devotion to this great pilgrimage destination."

Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Board, Katra, Jammu and Kashmir, India. e-mail: helpdesk@maavaishnodevi.org.

Prabha Prabhakar Bhardwajis a free-lance journalist now living with her husband in Delhi after many years in Kenya. She grew up in Jammu, India. She earned a bachelor's degree in journalism in Hyderabad, then moved to Kenya to teach at Nairobi University. She

specializes in environment and gender issues and has published many books, among them, Body and Mind, Women and Environment.