

## **KEDARNATH : THE ABODE OF SHIV**

By

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The trek to Kedarnath begins at Gaurikund. Ahead lie 14 km over a steadily rising mountain terrain. I look forward to the next five-seven hours. There are other people too on the train. Many are on foot, some on ponies and a few – infants, the old and the infirm – are being carried in *kandi* (a cut basket – as backpack) and *daandi* (a sort of palanquin).

I'm not in any particular hurry, and walk with slow, measured steps. I know how easy it can be to break into a brisk walk at the beginning of the journey, or after short rests. But walking in the mountains is best done in a slow, rhythmic, almost monotonous motion. I have to last out fourteen kilometres and do not wish to unnecessary over-exert and tire myself.

“Kedarnath ki Jai”, “Jai Kedar”, “Kedr Baba ki Jai” – these variations of salutation are what one keeps hearing, and even find yourself exchanging with one and sundry en route – words as a form of greeting, words one urges oneself and others with when the going gets tough and the spirits begin to fail, words we utter in happy exultation at the sight of a cataract, a pretty bird, the glide of a vulture, a happy countenance. It also helps me get my breath back when I feel fatigued.

The path lies entirely along the right bank of the river Mandakini, never too far from the river or its sound. The region forms part of the Kedarnath Wildlife Sanctuary, but this side being a pilgrim trail, one hardly encounters any animal. The birds, however, are aplenty. Can you keep a count of how many you have seen? Is the sky as blue in the city back home? The trees as grand? And the air? That old man resting by the path and panting for breath – do you know his determination comes from a lifetime's dream (and a lifetime's savings)? This person now walking beside you comes from over a thousand miles away, a place you may never visit. You have not met before nor may ever meet again; but this moment in time, you are here together and exchanging greetings and small talk, and sharing a water bottle!

Steadily the milestones pass, and about a kilometre short of the temple, around a bend, the temple complex suddenly looms in to view. “Kedarnath ki jai”, we exclaim, with hands folded, in happy, thankful exultation. It is at once, a moment of relief and

achievement, which comes from having laboured to reach. As the sweat evaporates and body heat subsides, I begin to feel a chill.

Being snowbound through the winter and spring, the temple of Kedarnath opens for only six months of summer and autumn. Even then, through the *yatra* season, the majority of pilgrims come during the two months of May and June. So, this is also the most heavily rushed pilgrim season. Which is why I have found mid or late monsoon periods the best times for traveling. The onset of rain sees an immediate curtailing of the pilgrim traffic, which briefly picks up again in September-October.

Also, with the rains, the air is cleansed and the mountains are at their greenest. The weather is cool, the sights exhilarating, the mists romantic and the alpine flowers at their most prolific. True, there are also occasional roadblocks, an upset stomach or a leech clinging on to your veins. These are by minor inconveniences and against which you can be suitably equipped. A must in your medical kit is medicine for an upset stomach (fogs and mists tend to loosen up the bowels), glucose, skin and lip ointment, and salt to pick the leeches off your skin.

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Hemmed in by mountains on the three sides, Kedarnath, at 11,750 ft (3584 mts) above MSL, is situated at the confluences of five streams – Mandakini and its tributaries Kshirganga, Madhuganga, Saraswati and Swarnndwari. Immediately behind the temple, as if, rise the snowy ramparts of the Kedarnath (22,044 ft), Bharathkunth (22,844 ft) and Kharchkund (21,695 ft) peaks. The Katyuri architecture of the temple is a modified version of the Nagar style found aplenty in Garhwal and Kumaon. The Kedarnath temple is said to be about 1200 years old, though the site finds mention in the *purana*, and certainly existed in the Mahabharat era. The Pandav brothers are believed to have been the first worshippers here.

Facing the temple is the familiar Nandi bull, the Bringi and Shringi, the two keepers at the gate. In the hallway is the *sanbha mandap* with life size images of the Pandavs in clay. At the doorway to the sanctum sanctorum are some shaivite statues and, inside, the main object of worship is a large pyramidal granite rock, believed to be the hind portion of the bull that Bhim had held back.

Today, Kedarnath is visited as part of *Char Dham* (Yamunotri, Gangotri, Kedarnath and Badrinath, in that order) in Garhwal, but it is essentially the nucleus of a complex known as *Panch Kedar*. The legend of *Panch Kedar* is referred to in the *Shiv Puraan* and, briefly stated, is as follows.

At the end of the fratricidal war of Mahabharat, the victorious yet despondent Pandav brothers visited sage Vyas to seek his advice on tiding over their sense of guilt of having killed their kin. Vyas advised them to meet Lord Shiv for “only He can forgive - without Kedareshwar, salvation and deliverance are impossible.” And so the Pandav seek out Mahadev. The emotionally sensitive Shiv is in no mood to forgive them, but since he also cannot say ‘No’, he finds his best option in simply running away and not giving them audience.

But seek him, the Pandav must, and so they followed, close on his trail. At Kashi (Varanasi), the Lord vanished into thin air and reappeared at Guptkashi or “the secret Kashi”. But it was only a matter of time that the Pandav smelled him out here as well. And lo, the great chase restarted!

Then Shiv reached the Kedar valley, which tactically may have not been such a clever option because that was, so to say, the end of the road, with only the snowbound peaks ahead. Or perhaps, He wanted it that way! For why should the snow ranges have proved to be any hurdle to Him, unless He had decided that he had tested the Pandav enough.

The Kedar valley had only one passage for both entrance and exit. The Pandav realized that the Lord was now within reach. But they could not locate him. All they could see were cattle grazing in the pastures. Shiv had already turned himself into a bull and mingled with the rest of the cattle to become unrecognizable.

But, having come this far, the Pandav were not exactly ready to give it all away. They quickly put into action a plan to trap Shiv. Bhim turned his body into a gigantic form and straddled the valley at the entrance (or exit). The other brothers began driving the cattle to the exit. The idea was that while the rest of the cattle would pass from under the spread-eagled legs of Bhim, Shiv being the Lord will not.

Bhagwan Shiv saw through the trap and, in a last ditch attempt, He the bull began to sink head first into the earth. Bhim, the gigantic, was able to espy Him and immediately rushed to the spot. By then, the bull had sunk up to waist, with just its two hind legs and tail showing above the ground. Bhim caught hold of the tail and did not let go.

At that moment, Bhagwan Shiv relented. He appeared before the Pandav in his original form, and absolved them of *gotra hatya*, the sin of fratricide. He also enjoined them to worship at the spot the hind portion of the bull that had remained above ground.

The portion of the bull that had already sunk into the earth, then reappeared at different places – the Pashupatinath in Nepal, and four other locations in Garhwal – the hair at Kalpeshwar (or Kalpnath), the face at Rudranath, the chest and arms at Tungnath and

the midriff or navel area at Madh Maheshwar. And so it is that these are the only six locations where the *Ling* as the symbol of Lord Shiv is not worshipped, but these different parts of His body.

In Garhwal, the five locations are known as the *Panch Kedar*.

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As I retrace my steps to Gaurikund, I tell myself, I want to return here again – I will return again to this abode of Lord Shiv. I don't know, if this is my resolve or merely an attempt to console myself at having come to the end of an experience or of something remaining unfulfilled; playing sweet deception against one's humdrum realities. Soon I will return to city existence and one's daily routine, and Kedarnath will become a memory and a yearning, that's all!

But, still, it is better to hope and wish, no? Who knows, if we wish hard enough, the hope may actually turn out to be true!

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