THE TEMPLES OF NORTH - EAST INDIA
A Fourteen Flower - Gangetic Bouquet

By
Prof. of English (Retd.) TIRUPATHI - 517 507.

Covers 14 Premier Temples situated in
Kedarnath, Badarinath, Pasupatinath, Gangotri & Yamunotri,
Rishikesh, Haridwar, Prayag, Gaya, Kasi, Ayodhya, Calcutta,
Bhubaneswar, Konark and Puri.

MESSAGE PUBLICATIONS
TIRUPATHI - 517 507

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K.K. Moorthy

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To imbibe thy glory ineffable and feast my senses with charisma inexplicable
Starting from Somanath, dipped and sipped en route in kshetras of great antiquity
Like Dwaraka, Mathura, Ambaji, Abu, Pushkar, Kurukshetra & Sar of Sikh divinity
Crossing Mata Vaishno Devi reached Amarnath, feel tired to the point of entirety

Caught now between the curiosity of seeing further and debility to descend!
Dangling my Lord! like Trisanku, denied of motion either to descend or ascend
Can't see sans graca, major places of Aryavartha, inclusive of Pasupatinath
Lead O kindly Light! lead me from high Badarinath to plane Puri Jagannath
INTRODUCTION

After scaling many a Himalayan peak and standing near the holy cave temple of Amarnath, if you just turn back and stretch your look, you indeed feel delighted at the enormity of distance covered and kshetras visited. World-renowned and centuries-old shrines, such as Somanath, Dwarka, Mathura, Ambaji, Pushkar, Mt. Abu, Kurukshetra, Amritsar and Vaishno Devi situated in the North-Western States of Gujarat, Rajasthan, Punjab, Haryana, Jammu & Kashmir parade before your mental eye and fill your whole being with joy inexplicable and sublimity indescribable, to speak the truth. For, they have a characteristic charisma of their own and enthrall you at the catholicy of spirit exuding from every grain of our Punya dharithri.

Religious sects such as Saivism, Vaishnavism and Sakteism though had their full sway — exercising their mighty unlimited powers at different periods of time, there prevailed religious tolerance to such a commendable degree, standing as a monumental proof of the spirit of assimilation of Hinduism. Inspite of those twin dispensable demons religious fantasm and egoistic imperialism descended straight into the innermost soul of Hinduism many a time and enriched themselves by tearing and searing, they did not and could not make a permanent dent anywhere, at any place. For, sooner than the ruthless iconoclast turned his back, Hinduism asserted itself and got installed with unprecedented fanfare, testifying to the fact that this land’s Sanathana Dharma is ajeya, apratihata and ajaramara. Filling your soul with the celestial sublimity, you desire more for taking in; for the spirit of Hindu Philosophy is such that more you realise, greater it remains untapped. Like the primordial pranava, it is inexhaustible and eternal. Hasn’t Adisankar highlighted it through his ejaculation at the glory of AUM — the core of Hinduism and significance?

He Says —
Om poorna mada poorna midam poornethi poornamudachyathe,
Poornaya, poorna, madavate, poornameva, vasistiyate -
'OM' that is full; this is full. From that full, this full has come, when this full is taken from that full, it always remains full."

Naturally you then feel aspiring for further visit to some other shrines of intercontinental reputation due to the fact of their enjoying interplanetary associations. But they are lying to the east of Badarinath. So when you turn head to the east and gaze, temple after temple like Kedarnath, Pasupatinath, Gangotri & Yamunotri, Rishikesh, Haridwar, Prayag, Kasi, Gaya, Ayodhya, Kali ma, Bhuvaneswar, Konark and Jagannath gleaming into sight exhilarate you with their mysterious past and glorious legends, infused with tantalising divine aroma due to their location amidst colourful scenery. You forthwith wish to take an instant flight on the viewless wings of poesy even, to visit and get emancipated by offering prayers at every ancient thirtha kshetra:-

The Abodes of Gods Series No. Two, comes in handy now to enlighten and delight you with all about those most holy places lying in the Gangetic plain from Kedarnath to Jagannath situated in the provinces of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Bengal and Utakal. The spiritual treasures they embody are inestimable, and solace they shower is inexplicable. Yet, I have essayed to catch an infinitesimal rain-bow glory of their past for imparting to the enthusiastic visitors. It helps. So, let us start from Kedarnath and move across the Aryavarta, visiting Pasupatinath also, situated in Nepal, as it is the reputed lone Hindu Kingdom with a glittering awe-some history, both ancient and modern in common with that of India.

Before leading, I have a duty to perform and a sacred one at it — acknowledging every kind of service received to serve you better. Of the sources, the one that sits atop is the T.T.D. Tirupati, instrumental for the publication of this volume. It breathed life into writing and later provided everything to sustain and propagate the desired – promotion of Santhana Dharma. The Editor of Saptagiri, Sri. K. Subba Rao, M.A. is to be remembered first. For, it is on account of him alone, the dormant power of writing suddenly emerged into lime-light and inaugurated a new chapter in my literary life, which is now lighting up the path to ancient shrines, scattered from Himagiri to Kumari and Krishna to Kali Ma across. Not only he allowed the printing of almost all the articles in the English periodical, but felt immensely happy at seeing them under covers. Whatever said by way of gratitude is infinitesimally little, for the indebtedness, strange to say is
scaling new peaks eluding the attempts at estimation. I bow to him for ever.

And to Mr V. Sreesan, who helped with suggestions and guidance. The
Expert Committee, vested with the powers of selection of books extended
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to see my typescript pass through their terminals, perfectly printworthy.
Their sincerity will be rewarded fittingly by the Lord of Seven Hills shortly.
I pray for them. The Printer - Suraj printers, Tilak road, Hyderabad though
mentioned now merits first place. Their sense of religiosity and love of
humanity together with commendable sobriety are beyond description. The
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obstacles threatening to stop the ve-
ture. To be frank with, his invisible
presence at every stage has eased the process and gave a pleasant shape
to the book. I owe my success to him. Hence my confession and expression
of gratitude. Though the artist is remembered at the end, his art strikes the
eye at the very sight of the title. Mr. Chandrasekhar the T.T.D. artist richly
merits hearty gratitude for the fine job done. His ready acceptance and neat
beautification are h.s assets and they subsisted me often. I thank him again
lavish y for his help. MOTHER Adiparasakthi, the in-dwelling power nudged
me further with her All-compassionate cool, soft hand. So my obeisance
runs faster than pen. Next comes Balaji, mathridayanivasi, and as usual
poured life into the work and made it reach the ardent readers. Indebted-
ness grew beyond redemption. So prostrations. My son Kiran, and daughter
Kalya did contribute their mite in the routine way. God will bless the chicks
to blossom into fitting citizens of Nava Bharat. That is my wish. Awaiting
your appreciation in writing, I remain.

Yours ever in service

(Sd) K. K. Moorthy
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Kedarnath temple, enshrining one of the twelve Jyotirlingas of our Punya Bharat Varsha is situated on the Himalayan slope in the Gharwal district of Uttar Pradesh. It has several unique features that have not been enjoyed by any other Saiva Kshetra, existing since Dwapara Yuga. Sacred Vedas and epics, itihisas and samhithas embody numerous references and bring out its glory in glowing terms, filling in hundreds of pages of every genre of our literature. They highlight justifiably its sanctity and prove its uniqueness from the stand point of its location in the snow clad peaks; habitation of Lord Maheswar Himself for six months a year, and visitation by celestials periodically.

The famous shrine located at an elevation of 11735 feet above sea-level, the highest point among the hill temples is visited by ardent pilgrim in millions every year. It is nestled in the Rudra Himalaya, an integral part of the Himalayas and this region is called by many different names, such as Gandhamadana parvatha, Sumera parvatha, Pancha parvatha etc. The last is due to the fact of its having five sacred peaks, namely Rudra Himalaya, Vishnupuri, Brahmapuri, Udayagiri-Kanha and Swargarohini. The celebrated Swargarohini trodden by the Pandava brothers and Droupadi to reach heaven is one among the five peaks mentioned in the Mahabharatha in detail. There lies in its vicinity the Mahapanth peak from which pious people used to throw themselves to give up life to attaining Swargapraapti instantly. Around this Kshetra lie several spots exuding divine aroma all but telling about Lord Maheswar’s sports and illustrious anecdotes relating to the life of His divine consort Uma. Amongst them that deserve mention are the Trijuginarayana – the venue of the Lord’s marriage with
Parvathi, Gourikund—the punya kasara, where Parvathi took bath after giving birth to Karthikeya; and Munda katta Ganesh Mandir— the place where Maheshwar blessed Vinayaka with elephant head.

It is the self-same region, where Arjuna did severe penance to please Maheswar for the boon of Pasupata, the most potent among all the astras; the very same place pervaded by the apurva sourabha of the flower Kalyana saugandhika, for procuring of which Bhima fought against Kubera; the very same place containing the samadhi of Jagadguru Sri Sankaracharya; the self same sacred point, where the Pandavas built the temple and consecrated in this yuga by Adi Sankara and enjoying the privilege of the head priest—Rawal appointed for the first time by himself, the practice of which is being carried on even to the present day. It is this mountainous terrain that gives birth to several holy rivers like Mandakini etc. It is here in this precincts Lord Maheswar abides and worshipped by the lesser ranks of gods for six months and the rest of the year by the humans, according to the wish of the sages. With many more of such celebrated spots this hoary region has become an eternal inspiration for devout people right from the Dwapara yuga to the present time.

**ANTIQUITY**

**NARA NARAYANA EPISODE**

Regarding its origin, Kotirudra Samhita gives an interesting account. It narrates that once, the two sages Nara and Narayana—the incarnations of Sri Mahavishnu did penance in Badarikasram, and they were worshipping an earthern Siva linga made by themselves with utmost devotion. Their inimitable piety and single-minded tenacity pleased the Lord most, and so he appeared before and asked them to name any boon that He would grant forthwith. The highly evolved humanist sages asked for the boon that the Lord must stay there eternally in the form of Jyothirlinga for blessing liberation to the pious, who worship Him at that place. Pleased with their desire for patitamanavoddharana, He said ‘Thadastu’ and
accordingly He is dwelling in the shrine in the form desired.

Siva Purana testifies to the account thus: “At Kedara, Lord Siva Himself has been worshipped from time immemorial by gods and the nationals of Bharata Khanda. Kedara Sambhu, the Lord of everything is undoubtedly the special presiding deity of this sacred Bharata Varsha and the yielder of all desires.” It is also mentioned that giving dana of a kankana-arm ring here has special merit. Offering of pindas to the ancestors after a dip in the river Mandakini brings forth enviable merit, and it liberates the entire kula. Sraddhas at any place in this region are efficacious and yield greater benefits. Devi Bagavata and Tirtha Kalpataru extol the divinity of this place through innumerable episodes. It is said that anyone who drinks the water from Retaskund here is freed from rebirth, and here Siva stays permanently and that place goes by the name Isana Sikara. Ardent devotees visit this shrine after their sojourn to Gangotri and Yamunotri, and from where they bring sacred waters for abhisheka to Kedara linga. It is the spiritual EL Dorado of the Saivites from the dawn of religion.

The Rudra Himalaya region is dotted with scores of spots associated with the sports of Lord Siva. Amongst them Gourikund deserves some space here. It has some hot springs and it is from this place trekking or riding to the shrine starts. Pilgrims invariably commence their yatra after a dip in this Kund. Apart from the sanctity the thrill of taking a bath in the steaming hot waters, nearing boiling point drives away all the chill sins sticking on to physical bodies and they feel lifting of their souls to be hurled at the holy feet of the Lord Mah- swar, the Omnicompassionate among the Trio. It is quite refreshing and this memorable experience gets locked up in their minds to be cherished for ever. Tradition records that Parvathi took bath here after delivering Karthikeya, the commander-in-chief of Deva Sena. Another place of interest is Trijuginarayana. Puranas credit it with the association of the Lord’s marriage with Parvathi and the fire enkindled during the wedding is still burning at this spot. Pilgrims offer prayers with elaborate rituals.
MUNDAKATTA GANES\H

On the way to this Kund, there is a small shrine called Mundakatta Ganesh—headless Ganesh and narrates a strange an\'ecdote. The legend recounts that Parvathi once created Ganesh out of Her perspiration and instructed him to stand at the entrance guarding, while She was taking bath. By accident Siva came in then and was refused admission by Ganesh. Siva in a fit of anger cut his head anon. When Parvathi implored Her Lord for giving him life on narrating the entire episode, Siva breathed life into him, attaching the head of an elephant, and named him as Vigneswara; so devotees prostrate before him for removing obstacles in their endeavours. ‘Aada\'pujyo Ganadhipati’ emerged thus, and all gods and humans adore him with great veneration since then.

THE EPIC EVIDENCE

The epic Mahabharata is fristled with many an awe-inspiring event, enacted on this Punya Kshetra, displaying the illustrious and exemplary prowess and spiritual glory of the Pandavas. Bharavi’s Kiratharjuneyam embodies the thrilling and exiting episodes of Arjuna’s peerless skill in the archery that won from Lord Maheswar, the much coveted Pasupatastra. The Lord it appears was more pleased with Arjuna’s unparalleled dauntlessness and sublime large-hearted manliness than the penance, he did on the Indrakila parvatha. Yudhisthira was initiated by Veda Vyasa on this punya bhoomi. To cap all as it were, when advised by the elderly wise men, the Pandavas came to this Kshetra to atone the sins of Kurukshetra war, but Lord Maheswar seeing them approaching at the time set apart for the gods only, assumed the form of bull and started running away. When the Pandavas tried to catch Him, He entered the Earth, so only the rump—the hind parts of His body remained at this place and He is worshipped as Kedareswar. The other parts of the Lord’s body like, limbs, face, navel and jata appeared at other places such as arms at Tunganath, face at Rudranath, belly at Madhameswar, jata at Kapaleswar and front
part at Nepal. The legend ends that Siva when entered thus became five fold; and all are held sacred. All these places are located in the Himalayas and they go by the name of Pancha Kedara. The Pandavas then built a shrine and worshipped Him with unequalled fervour. It is said that the very same temple is existing without alterations and the self-same Siva linga is worshipped by the devotees now.

THE TEMPLE

The temple thus came into existence is modest in dimensions; yet majestic in appearance with its gilded steeple piercing into azure sky and shining bright against the back drop of snow-capped mountains. It is built of dressed stone treasuring up sculptural wealth of rare kind. Though the exterior is bereft of either architectural excellences, or sculptural embellishments, the inside is adorned with marvellous images of supreme craftsmanship that wring veneration from the devotees. It has two parts - the mandap and the garbha griha. In the garbha griha, there is seen an irregularly shaped conical rock measuring about five feet by four feet and is worshipped as Lord Maheswar-Kedareswar. The local name for this is Siva Pinda. According to tradition, it is the rump of the bull, the form which the Lord assumed at the time of the Pandavas nearing Him. There are many beautiful idols on the walls representing the sports of the Lord. Nandi - the divine vehicle of the Lord arrests the attention of the on-lookers by its unusual size and sculptural beauty.

MODE AND PERIOD OF WORSHIP

Kedareswar is accessible for worship by mortals from April - the time when the sun enters Mesha, or Aries in Vaisakha to October, when he leaves for Scorpio. During the winter, Kedar Prabhu is worshipped by gods exclusively; and at that time a replica of the Lord is worshipped by humans at Ukimath, lying at a distance of 60 Km. from the shrine; hence for mortals Ukimath is the permanent seat of worship. When the temple is closed, the priests reside at
Guptasuki and Ukimath. The speciality of the priests is that they claim descent from the Rawals—the High Priests appointed by the Adi Sankara himself, choosing from amongst Kerala brahmins of pure Aryan origin. Thus, the Namboodri brahmins are still holding the holy post. As the temple was consecrated by Adi Sankara to making the holy shrine, holier and the holier image, holiest by worshipping the most compassionate at this unique place; it has acquired supreme significance thenceforth. Staunch Saivites offer very many types of poojas with great fervour. Normal kinds, of course are the morning and the evening ones. The morning pooja is called Nirvan Darsan and the evening one Shringar Darsan. The several poojas, like Subh prabhat, Balbhog, Mahabhishek, Rudrabhishek, Ashtoir, Siva Sahasranam, Siva Mahima Stotra and Ekanta Seva are offered everyday. The shrine attracts lakhs of pilgrims during Kumbha Mela at Haridwar, when Jupiter stays in Aquarius every twelve years. The Artha Kumbha Mela also brings the same number and the pilgrims normally visit this after their prayers at Haridwar.

OTHER SHRINES AROUND

Around this supreme spiritual citadel are situated many places—worth visiting both by the pilgrims and tourists. Places like Hanskund, Uday Kund, Retas Kund, Gandhi Sarovar, Bhairo Nath temple and the Samadhi of Jagadguru Sankara deserve first mention. All lie within a radius of 5 km. From Garurchatti lying at a distance 3 km on the way, the shrine set in rich grassy land against the towering white mountains, mantled with dazzling white show in the background beckons the devotees and blesses them with the much sought after solace.

HISTORICITY

It is quite astonishing to find that history is silent over its origin, renovation, modification etc. Neither travellers of repute, nor scholars of eminence have left any account about it. History stands like the Egyptian Sphinx, and the mystery can be the fittest
topic for research by the modern scholars, I opine. The multi-dimensional splendour of this spiritual treasure – trove must at any cost be brought under lime-light, and I feel that to be a great service to the religion itself. Except that association with the Pandavas, nothing is related about its growth in detail with dates and facts.

**CONVEYANCE**

Kedarnath Kshetra is accessible by roadways and railways. And airways too. Golly Grant is the nearest airport and lies at the distance of 17km from Rishikesh. It connects Delhi by Vayudoot daily flights. Rishikesh is the nearest railhead and it can be reached by every mode of transport from any part of India. From Rishikesh everyone has to perform the rest of the journey of about 232 kms by road alone. Government and private buses are available in plenty and can be pressed into service at any hour. Though there are more than one route, pilgrims prefer travelling by the most convenient and widely used road passing through Deoprayag, Srinagar, Rudraprayag, Agastyamunikund, Guptasaki, Patha Rampur, Sonaprayag and finally Gaurikund. Gaurikund is the last road head and from here one has to either trek, or ride by pony. As the road passes through innumerable sharp bends, over high plateaus and down valleys from Rishikesh to Gaurikund, a long distance of 232 km., it makes the journey unpleasant and tiring. Though the splendours of the Himalayan panorama and the auricular feast by the cuckoo and thrush birds are offered throughout the journey, one feels thoroughly deblitated when reaches the last point.

The distance between Gaurikund and the principal shrine is exactly 15 km. and it is the most tedious for any, of any age-group. Three types of conveyance is made available here. Of them, Kandi is of a special kind and the pilgrim seated in basket is carried by the porter tying him to his back. The charge starts from Rs. 250/- and
goes up to Rs. 350/- depending upon the weight of the pilgrim. Next is the Doli. It is a common kind seen in almost all hill temple towns. The charge is indeed very high, minimum being Rs. 400. The most common and easily available one is pony. The charge ranges from Rs. 150/- to Rs. 300/- though appears to be very high, one cannot but engage it for reaching the feet of the Kedareswar. The ascent being very difficult along the unmetalled narrow road, none prefers trekking, except under extra-ordinary conditions, for special reasons might be.

As the 15 – Kilometre long track is laid through the mountainous terrain over the ridge of the fast flowing Mandakini river, thousands of feet below, riding becomes extremely arduous. The countless ups and downs with intermittent sharp curves and dead ends all along the route instil diffidence, and a few even end their journey abruptly; but the pious deem it an ordeal deliberately set by the Almighty and reach the destination, falling and rising, shivering and shrinking all through the route. The mountain weather with its vagaries, like sudden drizzling and icy blasts intensify the fears of reaching the shrine, despite equipping oneself with warm clothing, such as thick pull over, monkey cap, woolen gloves and umbrellas. Above all the heavy traffic of thousands of ponies from start to finish along the narrow, snow drenched, uneven road add an additional quantum of fear to the weary, shrivelling pilgrims, for, everyone is a novice to riding; and particularly to cover a distance of 15 kms, at a stretch in the first instance itself is a Herculean task, but all perform with single minded devotion. There lies the strength of faith and wealth of the maturity of soul, mind and body.

If ever a slip occurs to any unfortunate over the ridge, sure he will either fall into the ever flowing Mandakini, thousands of feet below, or be caught up in the bushy growth of the tall trees from which extricating is neither possible nor ever attempted by any so
far. None so far, as the word goes round escaped the claws or death when fallen. Slip means, sure death; hence every pony is accompanied either by the owner, or his agent, yet accidents do take place now and then.

Inspite of innumerable and unbearable hardships arising out of the uncertainty of the weather, narrow slippery road and insufficient and unwholesome food, pilgrims reach the sacred feet of the Kedareswar and offer prayers closing their eyes, and feel fittingly rewarded when they embrace the Sivalinga smeared with ghee according to custom here. They return to this mundane world at the sounds of ‘Kedareswar ki jai.’ sent up into the high skies by the fellow pilgrims on completing the rituals.

Though ardeous, its raptures are unforgettable. A trial, although dangerous is preferable, due to holiness hovering over there. And it is discernable by sensory organs.
UNIQUENESS

Badarinath temple shares with Kedarnath shrine many aspects, like location, origin, history, divinity, traditions, pilgrim influx and the like. Similarities between the two permeate and analogies strike the eye of the pilgrim at every stage of journey, but only to differ in fundamentals at the destination. It is a Vaishnava Kshetra first and last, dedicated to Sri Maha Vishnu, the most powerful among the Trio. For the pure religionists, the difference is as wide as ocean, but for the ordinary devotees, whose knowledge dreads hearing the hair-splitting arguments, it is quite as important and good as that of Kedarnath. And lo! Such children of God are millions and they hasten to both of them with equal fervour and offer prayers with ardour that does not betray any difference, even if seen with a microscope.

Like Kedarnath, it is situated in Badarikasram, an integral part of Rudra Himalaya, but is separated by a huge high mountain range; else both would have been lying at a stone’s throw from each other. As they stand separated by a big mountain with two snow-capped tall peaks, the representative forms of Nara and Narayana lost in deep meditation, they appear to be in two different worlds altogether. As the high snow-covered mountain range does not allow easy passage to Badarinath from Kedarnath, pilgrims take a circuitous route, adding about 200 odd kilometres more. Among the special features that mark it out from the Kedarnath shrine, Bramha Kapal ranks first. It is a place of unique spiritual significance for offering Pindas to the manes, and it lies on the right bank of Alakananda, the principal tributary of the Ganges. Another feature that commands veneration is, although it is a Vaishnava
Kshetra, it houses in its sacred precincts, the famous Sankara-charya Pitha, one among the four established by Adi Sankara himself, and it is called Uttaramnaya Jyotirmath. Yet another, that declares its glorious catholicy is, that the Naivedya and prasad given here are to be accepted by all, regardless of one’s faith in the presiding Deity. If anyone refuses, either due to stupidity, or bigotry, he is deemed to be worse than a chandala - an untouchable, unfit to claim any religious rite. According to sastric injunctions, one who gives dana, be it as piece of silver or gold in this sacred Kshetra, will never be born poor in the next thousand births. Ah! what a merit! How pious is this Kshetra! There are many holy spots dear and sacred to both Hari and Hara in this land, though it is predominantly a Vaishnava Kshetra, and there lies its uniqueness in catholicy.

ANTiquity

From time immorial, Badarinath temple, situated amidst the towering snow-capped peaks and hot water springs in the Tehri-Garwal region of the Himalayas, known to mythology as Uttara Khand is casting an irresistible fascination on the religionists. It lies in a valley of 3 square miles with lofty mountains – Nara and Narayana to its East-West and the famous Alakananda flowing just in from of it. According to legends this entire area was once surrounded by trees bearing wild berries-badris, and hence it goes by the name Badarivan. And it was the abode of celestials and great saints, sages, ascetics and hermits of great spiritual eminence. Immortal works by poets, dramatists, commentators like Kalidas and Sri Sankara Bhagavatpada etc., have eulogised its glory and beauty in several places of their works. Moreover, holy scriptures like, the Bhagavata, Badari Mahatmya, Skanda bring out vividly its sanctity, acquired by the dwelling and frequenting of the superhuman personages, right from the days of the Aryan culture taking deep roots in this Bharat Khanda. As such there is a special procedure prescribed for pilgrimage to his holy kshetra; and it is quite elaborate. It has five sacred thirthas- Rishiganga, Kumaradhara, Prahladadhara, Taptakund and Naradakund, and their sanctity
along with history is adding glory to this place; for, a dip in them ensures emancipation, according to belief. In addition, there are Panchasilas embodying special powers and offering prayers to them with elaborate rituals certainly confers merit. They are Naradasila, Varahasila, Markandeyasila, Garudasila, and Narasimhasila. Naturally these factors are heightening the craze of the pilgrims to visit them. The two famous hot water springs Naradakund and Suryakund lying at a short distance from the temple are considered very holy, and hence one can find heavy crowds around them throughout the day for a dip; for, pilgrims invariably take bath before entering the sanctum sanctorum. Moreover, the pull of the chilly weather detains them in the steaming hot waters longer time than needed, because of the unending thrills passing in their bodies.

NARA & NARAYANA

Scriptural evidences found in abundance glorify every inch of this kshetra with interesting accounts and elevating experiences. Once, as the legend goes, Nara and Narayana, the fourth incarnation of Maha Vishnu did severe penance here for securing spiritual peace. Then the power-mad imbecile Indra, deeming the penance aimed at the Devendrapadavi, sent a battalion of ravishing beauties to foil it. Interrupted, Narayana flew into ungovernable anger and was about to curse Indra for his thoughtless action. Nara intervening, pacified him for the good of heaven. Pitying the repentant Indra, Narayana created Urvasi – an engrossing piece of beauty and presented him. But that unearthly damsel along with the heavenly companions implored Narayan to accept them as His spouses. Narayana, thereupon, promised them to fulfil their desire in His next incarnation as Krishna. The self-same Nara and Narayana were born in Dwaparayuga as Arjuna and Krishna and the latter fulfilled the desire of the damsels.

Narayana is identified as Krishna, and he is regarded as the Highest divinity, and the school that advocates worshipping of Him as the most High and is called the Bhagavata Sampradaya, or the Pancharatra Sampradaya. In the Santiparva of Mahabharata,
there is an abundant description with explanations about this Sampradaya. It sums up that God after creating the universe and filling it with plants and beasts, made man in His own form and endowed him with rationality. Finding man realising Brahmān with his atmic power, He was pleased beyond description and offered him a place next to Him—Nara by the side of Narayana. Mundakopanishad testifies to this with symbols that man and God sit as birds on the same branch, one enjoying the fruit and the other merely watching as sakshin. The immortal Vyasa was born in Badarikasram and therefore bears the Badarayana name. It is here he rearranged the holy scriptures, with Vinayaka as his scribe; and hence the name Vyasa, which became more popular than his name Krishnadvaipayana given by parents.

Matsya Purana traces an interesting account that Mitra and Varuna did penance in this holy place and achieved their object. King Pandu, father of Pancha Pandavas performed penance here to expiate the sin of killing a deer. Uddhava was advised by Sri Krishna to do penance in this place, when Dwaraka was about to be submerged in the ocean. It is on this sacred stage, many interesting and awe-inspiring episodes connected with the lives of heavenly personages were enacted and they are soaked in divinity. Convinced with such spectacular glorious history, devout Hindus evince keen interest to visit it at least once in their lives even at the cost of precious lives.

**HISTORICITY**

It is quite astonishing that history seems silent over the origin and expansion of the holy shrine. It is only the Vedas that enshrine certain references to the sanctity of this place, but they are not corroborated either by inscriptions or sculptural adornments. A passing reference is made to this place, being visited by people during the time of Asoka the great, but it was a Buddhist pilgrim centre then. Even though certain theist rulers made renovations from time to time, they are washed away by the devastating avalanches occurred several times since then. The present temple owes its existence to the efforts of Sri Sankaracharya, who on
securing the image of the Lord Badarinath from Naradkund arranged for the building of temple with donations, and installed it according to Sastric injunctions. His unparalleled adoration culminated in dedicating all his sixteen master-pieces to the Lord Badarinath. Credit goes to him for having appointed a Namboodri brahmin as the head-priest of the temple, and since then the practice is honoured and continued. Above all, he founded here one of his principal monasteries called Uttaramnaya Jyotirmath. Almost all the traditions and rites introduced by him are being carried on even to today, though formal tacit approval is to be accorded by the Maharaja of Theri Garwal.

THE TEMPLE

The holy shrine is built at a height of 45 feet, on the right bank of Alakananda; and it faces East. Its exterior is quite imposing with shining gold kalasas that lure the pilgrims with their ethereal beauty and grandeur. The temple has three distinct parts. As the devotees cross the portals, they enter the outer hall, called Sabha Mandap. It is the first part and herein they stand waiting to avail the darshan of the Lord Badarinath. The idol of Badarinath made of Saligram measuring about three feet is installed in Garbha Briha - the innermost part. It is in padmasana posture, with two hands in yoga mudra pose. The priests sit in here and offer prayers to the idols. There are nine idols in total in this Garbha Griha. Sri Mahalakshmi, His consort stands on His left, and next to Her, the stone images of Nara and Narayana in sitting posture are installed. The images of Garuda, Vinayaka and Kubera are seen to the right side of the Lord with those of Narada and Uddhava in the front. It is indeed a grand spectacle, and the Lord with His floral decoration feasts the eyes of the devotees in a wide variety of ways; for, some see in the idol Lord Brahma, yet some others Lord Vishnu, a few Hanuman, and others, Maheswar, or even Kali etc., according to the faith they have in the Almighty. Whatever from they wish, the All-pervading Lord reveals Himself in that august form and it is the prime cause of attraction for Saivates and Vaishnavates, who visit in their millions every year. Among the niches adorning the outer
walls, the carving of Kamadhenu at the back draws the devotees most and wrings veneration, since it is unique as a piece of sculpture, and an object of adoration, not found elsewhere in any temple. To the right side, the office of the Sanakracharya Math is housed and is busy always distributing prasadam packets to every ardent devotee on solicitation.

**PUJAS AND TIMINGS**

The darsan of the Lord Badarinath is made available only during fixed hours in the season. The morning pujas, like Abhishek, Mahabhishek, Gitapat and Bhagavatpat are offered with chanting of Vedic hymns, accompanied by chiming of bells. Elaborate rituals are observed during the evening pujas; and Gitgovind and Arati consume a lot of time. The rituals are many and they are characteristic of the North Indian style. Though they differ from the south Indian type, the piety and ardour that break through them reveal the glory of the Lord and the sincerity of the adorer. The temple is opened for worship for six months a year, and the Lord is worshipped at Joshimath in the winter season. The opening and closing dates are fixed by the Chief Executive Officer of the Temple Committee in consultation with Rawal and astrologers. Normally, during the first week of April, it is opened with special puja called Akhand Jyoti Darsan, and likewise many ceremonies will be observed on the closing day. Generally it falls in the month of November. The temple staff then reside in Joshimath and carry on the rituals with promptitude due to them.

**CONVEYANCE**

Conveyance to Badarinath like Kedarnath poses many problems; and it is both risky and tedious. Rishikesh and Kotdwara are the two nearest railway stations. From any point, the long distance of nearly 300 kms journey by bus or taxi chills the pilgrims at the outset itself. As the road lays over the mountain terrain, through scarcely populated areas, under threatening weather conditions, the journey saps both enthusiasm and vital powers of
the pilgrims; yet millions do undertake yatras to these Himalayan pilgrim centres, every year with unbounded religious fervour. And that mirrors the infinite powers of the presiding Deities of the places and the irrepressible religious spirit of the pilgrims.

At Rishikesh, private and Government buses are available at all hours, but one has to make nearly one full day's journey to reach the feet of the Lord, provided misfortune does not stand in the form of landslides on the way. The bus route touches many holy places, claiming their association with celebrated personages, or possessing spiritual wealth in the form of temples, worthy of visitation. Normally pilgrims go via Rishikesh, Devprayag, Srinagar, Rudraprayag, Karnaprayag, Nandaprayag, Josimath, Vishnuprayag, Pandukeshwar, Hanuman Chatti and finally Badarinath.

**ACCOMMODATION**

Inspection Bungalows maintained by U.P. Government afford accommodation in every one of the places on the way. In addition, Dharmasalas built by Kali Kamliwala and other Charitable Institutions are available catering to the needs of all types of pilgrims. Temporary huts built by village banias also give shelter. In some places, choultries built by pandas also come to the rescue of the road weary devotees. In Badarinath, Pilgrims have enough number of lodges of the star-category type, besides Dharmasalas. The only thing, the pilgrims have to care most and provide themselves best is – warm clothing. Woolen outfit is a must and minus of it, life may fly out in some cases. Hence, every sheltering place supplies shawls called Razias, which act like armours to the shivering the shrinking pilgrims. On rent basis, of course.

**PLACES OF ITINERARY INTEREST**

The valley that enshrines this holy temple has several other spots equally important and mythologically sacred due to unique features they claim and embody. They are scattered around the shrine and no pilgrim leaves even a single one unvisited on narration of their glory by the guide. Among them the following
merit space here.

**VASUSHARA FALLS**

It lies at distance of 41/2 km from the temple. According to Puranas, Goddess Lakshmi meditated here and was blessed with the fulfilment of desire. The Ashta Vasus who did penance here were liberated. Hence the sanctity. Moreover, it is believed that the water falls straight on the devout and in a slanting manner on the sinful.

**NARADAKUND & TAPTAKUND**

They lie at a very short distance from the temple. Of the two, Taptakund is famous. It measures 161/2 feet by 141/2 feet, and lures all with its thermal springs of hot sulphurous water. A dip in it is highly efficacious. So, from dawn to dusk, huge crowds throng around it, and chant hymns as they bathe. It is a sight affording a feast both to ears and eyes. It is only after taking a bath in this, pilgrims visit the temple.

**HANUMAN CHATTI**

Bhima, the valiant of the five Pandava brothers met here Sri Hanumanji, the son of Vayu and his brother, while he was in quest of Sougandhika flowers. Later, other brothers too availed the darsan of this great Chiranjivi here. There is a temple built to perpetuate this episode. Pilgrims include this in their programme.

**VIRAJI SANGAM**

Here the river Viraj meets Alakananda. The legend recounts that Lord Siva performed penance after the death of Sati, during the Daksha yagna.

**GARUDA GANGA**

Almost all pilgrims with unbounded zeal visit this to collect pebbles supposed to have powers, counteracting the poisonous
effects of serpent bites.

**PANDUKESWAR**

King Pandu is said to have performed penance here to expiate the sin of killing a sage, while sporting with his wife in the form of deer. The dying sage cursed him to die while in consortium with his own wife. The death of Pandu while in union with Madri, his second wife testifies to this.

**VISHNU PRAYAG**

The word Prayag indicates the meeting of waters – confluence of two or more rivers, or rivers with seas. Here Alakananda meets Deval prayag. Narada did penance here to fulfil his desire. According to tradition, Ganga flowed from the leg of Sri Mahavishnu. The episode took place in this spot.

**JOSHPIMATH**

This is of supreme significance for several reasons. Adi Sankara lived in a cave very near to this, for five years. His Himalayan genius was blossomed only when he was here – founding of monasteries and erecting of temple together with the dedication of his works to the Lord. So, sacred to all. There is a temple dedicated to Narasimha in which Badarinath is worshipped during the Winter. It is on the way to Badari and no pilgrim worth the name misses this holy place.

**BRAHMA KAPAL**

Matsya Purana and Vishnu Dharma Sastra extol its importance in glowing terms. It is situated on the right bank of Alaka-
nanda and it is famous for offering sraddha to the dead ancestors and they are promised immediate liberation. If once, sraddha is offered to the dead, there is no occasion to offer any further in future, since they are liberated and merged in Brahma. Having gone to the highest abode of Vishnu om here, they earnestly await their descendants to meet them there. Nay they earnestly long for the birth of some illustrious one in their family to visit Badari and do sraddha. So, ardent theists perform sraddhas here soon after reaching Badari; and many visit on y for this purpose. Thousands of persons can be seen here doing this sacred ritual.

MANA

It is a small village with great spiritual significance. It lies in the valley of Alakananda and the Mata Murti temple here attracts pilgrims. In its neighbourhood lie many caves of spiritual importance. Vyasaguh, Ganeshguh, Bhimaguh and Muchikundaguh are among the best and worthy of visitation.

Showing and narrating the importance of many more places, the guide ushers the pilgrims into the inexhaustible treasures - house of spirit, leaving the rest upward movement, or downward fall to the choice of each individual.
INTRODUCTION

Beyond Bharatvarsha, but bordering on its bounds there lies Nepal, a tiny but mighty independent lone Hindu Kingdom, sharing many characteristic features of Aryan culture, although retains a distinct identity of its own. The people believe in the divine right of kingship, and the rulers embodying divine humanism are enjoying several privileges, which the democratic countries of modern times could neither dream, nor fulfil with any prop whatsoever. At any time. The royalty exercises its sovereign powers both over secular and spiritual domains and passes for the true representative of god. “Na vishnun Prithvirpatih” concept is not only claimed, but upheld and implemented in its full spirit. To the last letter, as a matter of fact. The king in the role of the deputy of God not only parades his supremacy, but gets it honoured with unbounded faith and unparalleled fervour. Lo! even in the twentieth century, when heads of the kings are rolled from the scaffold openly and daringly, and their liegemen are dipped in the streams of their own blood. Times changed, laws passed and regimes came and gone, but the royalty is still drawing sustenance from the divinity, and the commonality is yet paying obeisance to it seeing in it all good, even though its modern counterparts proclaim vociferously equality and justice, but never allow their blissful existence, nor respect their sanctity except on pulpits or on the floor of law-making bodies.

Among a few that are relying on the Divine Right theory of Kingship and still inhaling its sacrosanct aroma, Nepal occupies a much coveted place and merits all praise and obeisance. Decidedly, it is due to embodying that inexhaustible, invincible and immutable
spirit of Hinduism, which is second to none but to itself. It is accepted, adored, and advocated. Hence the existence of Hindu gods, Hindu traditions, Hindu ideals, Hindu ways of life etc. Tap at any source, or lift the curtain over anything, or probe a little deep anywhere, sure you can find Hinduism firmly and impregnably entrenched, and emitting thought waves and perpetually, becoming responsible for peace and progress in every segment of life.

Katmand, its capital, the repository of Nepalese culture and rallying point of every facet of its own distinct life – both ancient and modern reflects the tremendous impact of Hinduism and the astounding capacity of its power of assimilation of other cultures, however divergent or distinct they may be in content or spirit. As it is the principal city, pulsating with cultural, commercial, political and spiritual life in its multifarious dimensions, it stands as a replica of its past glory and present progress. Of the superb structures, the temples - the important land marks top the list and strike the eyes first and fill the souls next with sanctity by their gigantic shapes, artistic adornments, unusual dimensions and hoary traditions. They incidentally mirror the Napalese religio-social life and the spectacular achievements made over years, taking nourishment from its parent Hindu religion. The very names of shrines, like Swayambhunath, Bodhnath, Pasupathinath etc, or the names of presiding deities make the hearers feel that they are moving about in a big Indian city studded with shrines, dedicated to several gods of the Hindu pantheon, inspite of the fact of seeing huge Bouddha stupas and Chaityas at many places. Does this not register the inestimable influence, Hinduism has on Napalese life? They are Hindus first and last, in spirit and character, despite living away from Hindu India? Take for example the name of the capital – Katmandu and examine its origin. It is the vernacular version of Kashta Mandap, original sanskrit word. Katmand in ancient times was called Kantipur meaning thereby, a temple of wood. Once there was built a huge temple with a Dharmasala, out of the wood of a single tree. Sounds incredible, isn’t it? Some may even construe it as a figment of imagination too. But none as such did enter the arena, or operate here. It has a fantastic story, and in all probability, it is an acceptable fact too.
THE ORIGIN OF KATMAND

According to legend, during the reign of Narsimha Mall, a ruler of great fame and spiritual eminence, there used to be brisk religious activity throughout the year, like holding discourses, conducting periodical festivals to gods and goddesses and taking out processions with all fanfare. The king encouraged and patronised it, and the people enjoyed and participated in them. It happened - Kalpavriksha - the wish yielding tree of paradise took fancy to witness the grand spectacle of the Machchendra festival procession celebrated every year with great pomp and splendour in the capital, as the Machchendranath is the royal deity of Nepal. A short background is found expedient here. When Narendra Das ruled the country, there descended a severe famine and it lasted for 12 years. The kind monarch then went to Assam to invite a great Buddhist saint to ward off the disaster. In honour of that great saint, almost all the divinities came down to assist the king in making his effort successful-Brahma swept the roads reciting the Vedas. Vishnu blew conch, Siva sprinkled water on the road, Indra held the umbrella. Yama burnt incense sticks, Kubera rained Kanaka varsha, Agni carried the torch and Vayu held the flag. The reception thus given pleased the saint, and in consequence there was down pour instantly. There was joy in surfeit everywhere. So, in his memory a great temple for Machchendranath was built then.

And the annual festival used it be celebrated on a scale unprecedented. Disguised as man, the Kalpadruma descending then was found totally absorbed in watching the fun and frolic combined with religiosity, spilling at every step of the onward march of the procession. When went oblivious of this mundane world, he was caught unawares by BISET, a powerful personality there then. When the former pleaded to release him, Biset set a condition for it-he would be freed only on the condition that he should build a grand Mandap with a Dharmashala out of the wood of a single tree. He gleefully nodded; for it was not only a trivial thing for him, but he could materialise it by mere volition of hand. He did. It was named Kashta Mandap, and became the centre of attraction
of the whole city, nay for entire kingdom. That august Kashta Mandap heightened the glory of the city. And as it owed its existence to the divine tree, people decided to name it Kantipur which means the city containing the temple of wood. That same Kantipur became Katmand in vernacular and grew popular in course of time. The name of the capital is derived thus from that adorable celestial tree-Kalpadurma. This happened in the eighth century, but its vestige is still preserved. The very Kashta Mandap built by Kalpavriksha now lying in Durbar square, one of the important spots of the city is attracting huge crowds and is unfolding the glory of the country, king and people in a fantastic manner.

**KALA BHAIJAV**

As we move a little further off, leaving that hoary Kashta Mandap, we come across a gigantic figure of Kala Bhairav mounted on a 12-foot high stone plaque. By its unusual size and fearful facial gestures, it strikes terror into the minds of the beholders. It is nothing but a true representation of Kali, the dearest spouse of Lord Maheswar. It is quite dreadful with its six arms, holding potent weapons, making it more terrific with her neck adorned with a string of human skulls, artistically executed, and standing upon a naked demon, lying prostrate. It symbolises the universal truth of the inevitability of inexorable justice—evil never goes scot free, but it gets trampled upon and crushed to the last drop of blood at the right time. This again is the Hindu belief represented and emphasised through this marvellous statue.

**THE TELAJU TEMPLE**

Next object that lures the visitors' attention is the royal temple, and the deity adored here is called Telaju—a war-goddess. The goddess is held in high veneration by every Nepali. The temple is not what it was; it is changed owing to wilful destruction caused by the brahmin community. It has an interesting tale. According to the legend, one of the princes developed hopeless passion for a charming bhumji brahmin beauty. He married her without parents'
consent. The enraged brahmin community wreaked vengeance by bringing the grand temple to the ground level. Their irrepressible anger together with the royal highhandedness is thus exposed by this shrine now. There is a belief that the temple the treasuring a “pointed diamond transmuted from the frontal bone of a Himalayan yogi, and that the very same arrow which brought down Ravana, the king of Ceylon by Sri Rama has this pointed diamond at its tip”. So, Sri Rama’s arrow is here preserved and worshipped. What Hindu India could not get or retain, the alien Nepal gained it and is adoring as a relic. How grand! Let us stand and salute.

HANUMAN DHOKA

A beautiful image of Hanuman with a regal parasol above, installed on a four and a half high pedestal greets the visitors and wrings veneration. The statue of Lord Narasimha lies here and he acts as the kshetra palaka. There is a strange belief that the newly weds, when they visit this temple and worship the deity, they will be blessed with noble children. There are many idols, all but from the Hindu pantheon and are found adorning many niches. Amongst them, Bishwarup Bahartiava - tantric deity is worth-seeing. This temple is the most visit-worthy due to several accounts from hoary legends. And for Nepalis it is a miss not temple of great significance.

SWAYAMBHUNATH STUPA

Now comes Swayambhunath Mandir and it is one of the premier shrines of Katmandu. It is situated on a hill called Swayambhunath stupa. It is a grand temple maintained with great care and is attracting Buddhists and Hindus alike. Its glory is heralded, as it were, by a lofty gilded tower visible for miles around. It has a fascinating legend and is connected with Manusuri, a famous Bodhisattva, who came here from China. When he visited Nepal first, he was immensely pleased with the scenic grandeur of the hill, particularly that of the great lake of the valley—the abode of Karotaka-the king of snakes. He roamed round it with immense delight. Elated highly, he decided to enhance its
glory. Accordingly, he put his two wives one on each peak and himself standing between the two cut the connecting ridge with his mighty sword. The opening when formed, allowed the lake-water drain out soon in the form of river which is called the Vangamati or Bhagmatri river. Later a stupa was erected, and it went by the name of Swayambhunath; for the prime reason that the lake then had a single lotus bearing a swayambhu amidst its petals. It is visited by a steady stream of Buddhists, particularly those belonging to Mahayana school.

The Swayambhunatha – the stupa resembling a chaitya is a grand piece of masonicary work and measures about fifty feet. It symbolises the garbha or womb, standing for the creation of world. It has a square tower and is crowned by Charumani. A pair of penetrating eyes adoring each of the four sides appear like X-raying the minds of the on-lookers, seen from any side whatsoever. The awe-some eyes with long broad nose in the middle represent the eyes of Adi Buddha – the Primeval Purusha, out of whose consciousness, the whole world emerged, according the Buddhist chronicles. There is a large bronze bell supported by a circular stand and it adds grandeur to the whole structure. The mental circle lying adjoining this is called Dhatu mandal and it is inscribed with the symbols of the Buddhist twelve year circle. The image of Saraswati here goes by the name of Manjeswari; it is adored fittingly by all seeking after knowledge. Going round, and understanding the several symbols found here, one gets impressed that Hinduism and Buddhism co-existed here peacefully and flourished blissfully. Hasn’t Buddhism risen from Hinduism? Could it ever exist permanently without the support of its parent religion? This stupa illustrates that Buddhism did originate from Hinduism and like the old wine in new bottle with a tantalising label, it held its sway for some time in India and abroad.

THE BODHNATH STUPA

This famous stupa lies just opposite the Swayambhunath stupa. It resembles Swayambhunath in every aspect. Its garbha is raised on a series of rectangular terraces, but enclosed in an outer circular wall containing the prayer wheels and paintings of the
images of Buddha. It was built by Raja Manadeva. The origin of this is connected with an odd story that mirrors the King's matchless selflessness and peerless concern for the welfare of his subjects. As the story goes, once during the reign of Raja Manadeva, there visited drought and people experienced a hell of time no water to drink, as all the ponds, lakes, wells went dry. Then the astrologers advised the king to offer to the angry gods, human sacrifice of a pious man having 32 virtues. Enquiry revealed that there existed only one i.e. the king himself fulfilling the description of the astrologers. He decided to offer himself for public good. He restored to a strategeum to perform the ritual of Narabali to bring rain and avert the calamity holding the country in its tight grip. Accordingly, he informed his son to kill whoever the person he found out the next morning, near the fount—the prime source of water to the country. The son being loyal agreed. Disguised as a nomad, the king went first to the fount the next morning only to be butchered by his own son. Knowing the grave occurrence, the son reeled under heavy grief, and at last prayed to Manijogini, the powerful goddess for a way to expiate the patricide committed. The Goddess bade him build a great temple to be freed from that sin. He did anon. Thus came into existence this famous Bodhnath shrine and the stupa. It has also a great pull. Pilgrims and pious Buddhists visit and offer prayers.

THE PASUPATHINATH TEMPLE

It is the principal shrine and deemed as the holiest of holies for the entire Nepali nation. It binds the people living all over the globe on one silken bond and proclaims that Saivism is the only state religion, though there are many Buddha stupas in several places, and people in large numbers are adoring at them. This sacred shrine is one of the chief rallying points of Hinduism and has elevated the city to be on par with Varanasi - the all-time pilgrimage centre of mankind. Moreover, is it is the focal point of all religions activities; for, both the class and mass congregate here on every important days during the year. The royalty holds this in the highest esteem by visiting regularly and endowing munificently. No true
Nepali ever misses visiting to praying to this august Pasupatinath, enshrined in a grand imposing mandir. Every Hindu - living in or out of this kingdom, yearns to feast his eyes with this majestic Chaturmuka Pasupatinath—four faced Maheswar and gets blessed by that Omnicompassionate Lord. Thousands of Indians visit this sacred shrine during the year, and for the holy Mahasivaratri festival, devotees from four corners of the world throng and absorb themselves in several spiritual activities converting the temple complex into Bhukailas. And the very memory raises hands in devout prayers to the Lord Maheswar called here as Pasupatinath.

THE TEMPLE

It is built on the bank of Vangmati and is the haven of religious life of the entire nation. It is a two-storeyed shrine and resembles of a pagoda type in its external appearance. The roofs are gilded, and its silver plated facade attracts and detains the devotees with its architectural adornments for hours. The dwajastambha and the entrance are elegantly made and are maintained neatly. The courtyards are vast and the garba griha is built on a higher plane, and surrounded by spacious verandahs with flights of steps on four sides. Many mini-shrines and niches are adorned with several deities of the Hindu pantheon. Next to the temple lies a small pagoda for the Goddess Bachchla or Vatsala, where once human sacrifices were offered on the Sivaratri day. Another deity that attracts attention is Narayana which is housed in the first prakara. It is believed that the whole statue was sculptured in a single night, yet it is a beauty worth seeing. In the second prakara there are hundreds of lingas in rows in an enclosure with adequate space for movement and worship by the devotees.

THE VANGMATI

The river Vangmati flows through a small gorge between two hills called Mrigasthali and Kailas. The story goes that Lord Maheswar, swept off by the unearthly beauty of the thickly wooded hillock—Mrigasthali started roaming about in the form of a deer and enjoying, leaping, hopping, running and what not. Down below the
gorge there are flights of steps. They are made convenient for holy bath in the river Vangmati and the visitors use them for offering pindas to their manes here. In addition, there are several halls and rooms built on the bank for the convenience of the pious devotees; for, it is believed that if the dead are cremated on this sacred ghat, they are freed once for all from the vicious cycle of births and deaths. So not only the dead bodies are carried to this ghat, but people on the verge of death are also brought and kept waiting till they breathe their last. Some of the bodies are thrown into the flowing river also. Both high and low have full faith in this, and cremation there is deemed as a great privilege and honour to the dead are dying, as exemplified by bringing of king Mahendra’s body to this place for cremation from Switzerland after death here. And his last rites were observed here, odd it is to hear that they are two types of ghats - one for royalty and another for commonalty. In this it exceeded that renowned Manikamika ghat of Varanasi in orthodoxy. Well! If Kings will, any thing is possible!

ARCHAMURTHI

Lord Maheswar in the name of Pasupathinath is worshipped here in the form of linga. It is about three and half a feet in height and is installed on a high pedestal. The august linga has four faces sculptured on four sides. Each is a sculptural marvel, and its facial features are beautifully executed. All the four faces seem exuding compassion to the devotees, but to the wicked and vicious, they strike terror and send them to Mrthyuloka. Of the four, the one facing the south has a characteristic terrific aspect. The wicked are mortally afraid to look at it even for a split second. It is roudra that emanates from it for them when looked at it. The pitiless mood it represents caused death in some cases. There is a story current that Mukundsen, a remorseless invader, who raided and plundered Kathmandu, with a sword in one hand and fire in the another looked at this face, when came to destroy it. A straight look at it shook him to his foundation, as chill passed through his spine instantaneously. Unable to stand its fierceness, he mounted his horse and dashed off for home. Alas, his corpse alone reached home. Such is the terror the face strikes to the wicked, but for the virtuous, it emits rays of compassion and sends thrills of bliss. The priests offer several kinds of prayer services to the presiding deity as done to its counterparts in India. Hours spent in the campus seem like a fleeting moment and it leaves an indelible impression
on the minds. And the visitors lock it up in their minds to be cherished for ever. A visit lifts! A sight emancipates!! And the memory recreates the whole sublimity in a flash and plunges one in ecstatic raptures of blissful joy, if recalled.

**THE GUHNESWARI DEITY**

This Goddess is deemed as the eleventh of the eighteen Saktipeetas spread across the akhanda Bharat. She is the guardian deity of Nepal and is worshipped with utmost devotional fervour. The installation of this statue in the complex has a strange background. During the reign of King Pratap Malla of solar dynasty, there came to the court a religious minded Brahmin from Tirhut in Bihar. He won the appreciation of the King by his austerity, and was liked by all the courtiers. One day, he confided to the king that there was the image of an august Goddess hidden in the forest and she was very powerful. The king forthwith bade his assistants to make an intensive search for it. The quest bore instant fruit. The king built a fitting shrine in the Pasupathinath complex itself. After due ritualistic pujas, she was enshrined in an independent temple and with a special tantric yantra too. And since then she is adored by one and all with great zeal with different names such as kali or Mahamayi, though Guhneswari was the name given at the time installation due to the fact its concealment from the public gaze in the forest. And popularity is waking on account of her compassionate raining booms on the address.

**THE BALAJI TEMPLE**

There located amidst the springs of garden, at the foot of a small wooded hill, a beautiful little pond surrounded by green shrubs and flowery bushes. There is another artificial pond inside with fountains all around the image of Ananta Narayan with a hood of the great serpent over his head. It is a unique image. Splendid in every part. The craftsmanship of the sculpters indeed is superb. And according to tradition, it was found by a farmer while ploughing the land. Its enchantment and rarity drew appreciation of people and they started worshipping it with infinite devotion. Would not the recumbent posture of Vishnu image couched on bed of cobras cast enchantments on the theists? Though partly submerged in the pond, its attraction is great. Hence visitation by all.
The fascinating names Gangotri and Yamunotri sound like twins, and feast the ears with their resonant cadences, aren’t they? Their fantastic rhythmic combination tempts one to repeat it again and again to enjoy its melody. Their origin too has a characteristic divine aroma, very much to delight, elevate, and finally emancipate those who chant them, or enjoy its fruits. They are the heaven-dwelt, Himalayan-born daughters with quaint stories of their own, and a glorious past of character enviable. They are river Goddesses venerated from time immemorial, and much of India’s cultural wealth owes its proud past to these adorable river sisters.

These two sonorous words are but the names of the mystic sources of two sacred rivers – Ganga and Yamuna nestled high up in the lofty snowcapped peaks, rising in splendour to glorifying the world famous Himalayas, piercing, as it were, into high heaven to display its snow white beauty and melodious flow of its crystal clear rivers. since the blossoming of intellect, highly evolved souls, swept off by their inexplicable tranquility have sanctified these places by their habitation and meditation. And gods, drawn by the magnetic pull of these icy pinnacles; majestic meandering of giggling rivers; and lush green, ever blooming exotic colourful valleys chose these ice-bound mountains for eternal habitation. And at their holy feet, in the deep recesses, are found these two holy river sources, to making the ground hallowed, and fit for pilgrimage, and to drink in the ethereal beauty of Nature with mortal eyes. Though their exact origin is shrouded in the mysterious past, creative facility has lifted the veil to some extent over the gorgeous spectacles of sublime mountains, wherefrom these two have started flowing in streams first, glaciers next, with bumps and jumps over some area
later, and finally in violent torrents at several places, during the course of their forward journey. The story of the origin of these two is incidentally intertwined with the history of the two rivers.

It is these two – Gangothri and Yamunotri that are feeding the two major rivers, responsible for irrigating almost the entire ancient Aryavart, by their life-giving waters, besides of purging the sins of the bathers; it is on the banks of their off-springs—Ganga and Yamuna, the greatest civilisations sprouted and flourished; it is their holy waters that were used for anointing the maharajadhirajas at their coronation ceremonies; it is their gift that is creating divine tranquility, instrumental in Maharishis piling up inestimable and inexhaustible Bharatiya vignana; it is the names of these sisters that have become warp and woof of riverine fantasies embodying the glorious history of some illustrious pouranic and historical personages, who wooed and wedded; it is on the banks of these two that many divine persons incarnated from time to time; it is these two sisters who were worshipped by the celestials too; and it is these twins, who blessed emancipation to the wickedest species mankind by a mere bath. Well, such similarities and the terms of comparison are many; they essay but one thing – telling that they are adorable river sisters, worthy of yearning for a dip or sip.

Now begins the contrast. It proves the superiority one over the other, but it must be kept in mind that each is as great and pious as the other, and so none be degraded, or assigned inferior role, or consigned to unholy places. The greater glory, or the superiority of one is possible, and exists in comparative degree only, else each is as good as the other and as auspicious as the other. And in terms of utility too.

GANGOTRI

Gangotri, the source of the much venerated Ganga boasts of many a superior virtue, many plus points, a grandeur niche, and a wider canvas. The water gushing out from the Himalayas at the place, where Bhagiratha did penance is actually the very same water that flowed down from the Kamandal of Brahma, used to washing the feet of Srimannarayana, when he measured the world with his gargantuan feet during his Vamanavathar, incarncated to
send Balichakrarthi to nether world, and was let fall from the Maheswara’s jata. So, before descent to the mortal world, the water has pious association with the Trio. A deep peep is a necessity at this stage.

At the soulful prayers of Mrikandu Maharshi, Lord Srimannarayana gave to the sage, the darshan of the selfsame cosmic form, he assumed to measure the universes he got from Balichakrarthi as gift. So enchanting, and gigantic was the form that Brahma made abhishekam to His enormous feet with water from his Kamandal. The water that fell from his lotus feet became so sacred that it could drive the yamadutas at the very sight of those who sip them. A dip releases everyone from the cycle of births and deaths. Asthinimajana emancipates the dead, for they are the waters of Brahma, consecrated by the contact of Sri Maha Vishnu, and later released from the matted locks of Lord Maheswar.

When Sagara’s sons, sixty five thousand in number, were burnt with the atmic power of Kapila, Bhaghiratha wanted to emancipate them. Realising the efficacy of Ganga water, he did penance lasting for thousands of years, and when Sri Maha Vishnu appeared, he prayed for sending Ganga to marthyaloka. It was granted. But for curtailing the force of descent and violence of flow, he prayed to Maheswar, who on listening to his plight accepted to hold the turbulent Ganga in his matted Jatas, and then allow it flowing in normal way. And he did.

**THE MANDIR**

The place where Ganga descended is called Gangotri. And now there lies a temple of modest size dedicated to Ganga. It was built on the exact place, where Bhagiratha did penance by Amar Singh Thapa, the Gurkha commander as early as in eighteenth century, and made it sacred with installation of the statue of Ganga in it. And it is visited by millions of pilgrims round the year, since then for offering fervent prayers. Though there was no big Mandir in the dim past, it was visited by several celebrities in the Tretah and Dwapara Yugas. The Pancha Pandavas made a pilgrimage to this sacred spot after the Kuru kshetra war to atoning the sin of killing
akshonhinis of innocent for the sake of one wicked Duryodhana.

It is a small town, and only a few, in thousands, of course, are dwelling here. There are facilities for food and staying. Yogis, Sadhus, old and highly evolved souls form the majority, who made this their permanent home, and are engaged in counting of beads, awaiting the final call from the heaven.

Though the ungovernable impetuous vehemence was tamed and lessened by Maheswar’s mighty matty hair, Ganga still contained some of her boisterous nature. It was only in the Himalayas, she was taught a lesson by Jahnu, a powerful sage. Unable to bear the tumultuous march near his asram and upsetting the tranquility, he swallowed the entire water in a single gulp. Seeing the disaster, Bhagiratha prayed to Jahnu to release her to fulfilling his desire. Taking pity on Bhagiratha, Jahnu released Ganga through his ear. So she is called Jahnavi. On the way again at Haridwar, Saptarishis confined her in their Kamandal for disturbing their meditation. When Bhagiratha propitiated them, she was released and divided into seven streams to touch each of their hermitages. She flowed again behind Bhagiratha till she reached Gangasari, where 60,000 sons of Sagara were burnt. By her touch they were emancipated. As she was brought to this world through the penance of Bhagiratha, she is called Bhagirathi. In the course of her flow, several other miracles happened, all but bring out her glory, due to purging off the sins of the people. This story thus started in Vaikunta, ended in her joining Ratnakara near Calcutta.

**ORIGIN OF YAMUNOTRI**

Now remains Yamunotri. Though her story is not so elaborate or fantastic, it is also associated with divinities, and so has celestial flavour. Though she descends to this world at some what higher altitude on the self - same Himalayas she hasn’t many hurdles. Nor is she brought down by penance by any king or sage, moreover, she joins Ganga at Prayaga, and with that she vanishes with an abrupt end. In brief, holy is the source, holier the course and the holiest is her abrupt disappearance – merging with other holy rivers.
In the legends too, she plays comparatively a minor role. She is the daughter of the Sun-God, born to Sanjana. She is born along with Yama, the God of Death, and was called Yami. They are twins. Later she is called Yamuna. Yamunotri, the birthplace of Yamuna stands on the western side of the great peak of Bandarpunch in Himalayas. This is slightly higher in altitude - 3322 metres MSL, than Gangotri - 3140 metres MSL. It is snow-bound like the Gangotri, and is separated by about 120 Km distance but both are located amidst highly enchanting snow-capped mountainous region.

THE TEMPLE

The present temple at Yamunotri was built in 1982 on the same site of the old one erected by Maharani Gulariar of Jaipur about hundred years back. The image of Yamuna is installed in the temple and it receives regular pujas with elaborate rituals. There are some hot water springs near the temple. Water always gushes out of the mountain cavities at boiling point and flows into pools down. Of them, Suryakund is the most important one. Almost all visitors enjoy their bath in the steaming water of this kund. The water is so hot that, a handful rice or potatoes tied loosely in cloth, dipped into it, they become completely cooked in a matter of few minutes. This cooked food is offered to the Goddess, and taken as prasadam too. Some highly orthodox, besides consuming there, take it home. A rock called Divya Sita is another object of veneration here. The yatris according to local practice worship it first and go to the Mandir for prayers.

SAGE ASIT'S EPISODE

This place also is inhabited by sages, and in the past many did penance and obtained salvation. For penance, it is the most suitable spot. There is a story current in this part, that once a great sage by name Asit lived here. He was taking bath both at Yamunotri and Gangotri daily, and this he continued till reaching his ripe old age. When he could not go to Gangotri, a long distance
for bath in his tattering age, Gangotri taking pity on him, emerged from a rock in a soft stream near Yamunotri for facilitating his daily bath. This place is held in high esteem since then. Besides this miracle, there occurred here another interesting episode, connected with Hanuman’s life. The place where Yamunotri descends to this world is called Bundar punch – monkey’s tail. According to local version, it was here in this ice cool waters of Yamuna, Hanuman dipped his tail to extinguish its fire after burning Lanka. so held in veneration by all.

TRANSPORT

These two thirtha kshetras can be reached from Rishikesh by bus. Air Travel is possible up to Jolly Grant that connects Delhi, Calcutta by Vayudut Service. From the airport one has to travel to Rishikesh, which incidentally is the easy railhead also. There are many buses run by U.P. Road ways, besides private Companies. For Yamunotri two approaches are available. The first one is from Dehra Dun en route Barkot and the other popular one is via Rishikesh. On the way, yatris witness the sight of Bhagirathi meeting Alakananda at Devaprayag, the meeting point of gods. A worth seeing place. Then via Dharasu, they go to Yamunotri. Trekking is a MUST and a distance of 15 km has to be covered by pony ride or walking.

For Gangotri, one has to come back to Dharasu from Yamunotri. On the way lies the famous pilgrimage town Uttarkasi, and it is an additional benefit to them. Dodital, another worth-seeing place lies very near, but it has to be reached by trekking only.

As this yatra is made to the most coldest places perched high up in the Himalayas, certain precautions are quite necessary for yatris. Exposure to extreme cold debilitates and subjects them to several ailments. So, the yatris must equip themselves with woolen clothing that affords warmth. Faith in the God nudges them to the destination with or without precautions. When Jivatma takes flight to merge in the Paramatma, does it require worlds accessories?

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Calm returns after storm. Does not tranquility emerge from boisterous turbulence? This law of Nature is applicable to the two most sacred places, Haridwar and Rishikesh, lying, say almost adjacent, with hardly 15 kilometres between them, but situated on the banks of the Ganga, and at the foot of the world famous mountains – the Himalayas. After witnessing the hectic religious activity at Haridwar, like bathing to the chants of pandas; making parikramanas to the temples; sipping of the holy thirtha amidst chiming of bells; listening to the legends of deities; ascending and descending of the hills consecrated by the adorable deities; performing several types of religious rites; boarding and alighting of the vehicles, transporting to shrines; standing in long queues; either for buying tickets for lunch, or travel, yatris experience the weight of tedious and fatigue, thriving as it were, with each other to exert their full sway, and when they seek means for respite to recuperate themselves for further onward progress, as if an answer to their ardent seeking, Rishikesh in a flash comes to their rescue and takes them to Rishikesh – quiet haunts of rishis, seers, sadhus, saints, whose yearing for spiritual solace and simplicity peep through their attires; sublimity exudes from their serene visages, and contentment gushes out of their hearts.

Rishikesh is really a veritable unearthly haven of rare bliss, a spiritual resort for vanaprasthasram, and a sure and safe seat of beatitude. There hovers over every inch of this sacred soil, divine tranquility and celestial harmony. It is here in the caves of Himalayan range, or in the pamasalas on the banks of Ganges, world famous saint-seers, sitting in motionless solitude meditated on the Highest
in all seasons, lasting for centuries, till gods blessed them with flashes of intuition—source of the entire Bharata Vignana that has surpassed all the lab-born modern science.

Some of their typical brood steeped in ancient insights are still seen in sequestered places on the bank side asrams of this revered city, causing an irrespressible wonder in the worldly men, indulged in counting of beads or chanting of God’s name in and out of the day, but finding no peace within or without. To this holy spot, bus or train transports the yatris in about half-an hour journey from Haridwar. After visiting the famous Satyanarayan temple on the way, the pilgrims reach this quiet town surrounded on three sides by the Himalayan range.

NAME & ITS DERIVATION

ANTiquity

According to the version of Sthalagna – local guide, once Raibhya, a powerful sage lived in a hermitage. He had a massive growth of locks that formed thick jatas, and he sported them on his little head. One day, while the sage was returning from the river after ablutions in the Brahmanamurt, when darkness was still holding its sway, his son, Paravasu, who was on his way to the Ganges for bath then, hit him, mistaking for a wild animal. Raibhya met with instant death.

For expiation of the sin of pithruhatya, Paravasu performed homas with such austerity and fervour that gods descended and questioned his purpose. He spelt that it was all for his father’s life, he performed homa. Pleased, they granted life to Raibhya. All were happy. The rishivatikas enjoyed beatitude again.

After coming back to the mortal world, Raibhya resolved to know the mystery of death, and means to the attainment of emancipation. Is it knowledge—Gnana or action – Karma that confers emancipation? With a view to getting illumination from Lord Vishnu – the repository of Brahmagnana, he did penance, and when HE appeared, he expressed his ambition. Vishnu then showed him His maya in several of its forms. Seeing its complexity

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and intricate diversity, he implored the Lord to free the humans from the bondage of maya. Pleased with his unparalleled humanism, Vishnu granting it said, "Whoever follows religious disciplines after bath in Mayakund, will be freed from worldly bondages."

Preferring the sanctity of the place of his illumination, he is still living in his ethereal form in the mountains. That is why the dense tangle of ever green vegetation grown on mountain tops bears semblance to his matted locks. So this entire region is imbued with spiritual wealth of that humanist sage. This place has come to be known as Rishikesh – the hair of Rishi, and became famous henceforth.

**THE KUBJAMRAKA EPISODE**

Another pouranic story refers this to another episode, wherein Lord Vishnu revealed Himself, when pleased with the penance of a reputed sage. The sage saw Mahavishnu as Kubja on a mango tree. Despite his short stature, He feasted the eyes of the sage with His bewitching charm. So this place went by the name Kubjamraka. There are some more legends similar to this in nature. So the asrams lying between the slopes of wooded Himalayas and the sacred Ganga hold in store unique spiritual wisdom, besides radiating sublimity of rare type. Hence attraction for solace seekers from all over the world.

Only after bathing in the holy Ganges, pilgrims start visiting several temples and asrams scattered all over the sprawling town of Rishikesh.

**TRIVENI GHAT**

This lies at the last corner of big bazaar. This place supposed to be the confluence of Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati is the main ghat preferred for ceremonial bath. It is always heavily crowded, and so the Pandas have roaring practice, as seen by groups of yatris thronging around them for guidance as in Haridwar. Much of the town's bustling religious activity goes around this place, studded with shrines of several types. There is an enormous banyan tree
with a board platform in front, used by the yatris for several purposes. And also a shrine dedicated to Hanumanji. Soon after bath, all visit this and offer prayers to Hanuman with rituals.

**BHARAT MANDIR**

This is situated in the heart of town, and for local population, it is the main shrine of worship. It owes importance and glory to a legend. It was the birth place of Sri Bharatji Maharaj, an avatar of Srimannarayana, who played a pivotal role in the spiritual progress of the country. This attracted several reputed pithadhipathis like Sankaracharya. The good old temple was renovated at his instance and he caused the installation of a grand statue and introduced regular pujas in accordance with scriptures. There is a belief current in this place that whoever makes a hundred and eight pradikshanas to this temple on auspicious days, will become the recipient of the blessings of Badarinarayan, even without visiting his Himalayan abode, lying some 300 kilometres away. It is a much hallowed place visited by ardent devotees, both locals and distant pilgrims.

**LAKSHMAN JHULA**

It is about 5 kilometres away from the bus stand. Lakshman, the loyal young brother of Sri Rama, the 7th incarnation performed tapas here. To perpetuate his memory, a temple was built long ago. It is a beautiful spot commanding an excellent view of Himalayan mountains on three sides. The beautiful image of Lakshman decorated in gorgeous dress and floral wreaths bends the heads of visitors and recalls to minds Lakshman’s great fraternal piety shown during Rama’s exile that lasted for fourteen years. It is on the right bank of Ganga, and is connecting the left bank by the suspension bridge, the walking over which is an experience worth cherishing. On the other side of this holy shrine there are many temples dedicated to several deities, and some of them are built inside asrams and guesthouses. They are efficiently managed by charitable institutions. They cater to the comfort of visiting pilgrims. These institutions and temples starting from here extend to the outskirts
of town about 5 kilometres away.

KANVA ASRAM

This famous asram lying at a distance of six kilometres enacts the entire drama of Sakuntala’s early life at its very mention. It lies on the bank of river Malini – a-tributary of Ganga. Kanva’s hermitage exudes sublimity and acquaints the yatris with several objects – trees, bushes and rivulets held dear to that beautiful munikanya, Sakuntala, the darling adopted daughter of Kanva, but the cast away child of Viswamitra. The place, has an unearthly charm and delights the mind with many grand scenes from Kalidas’ master piece. It is accessible by bus or autos.

SRI BALAJI TEMPLE

This imposing shrine depicting the South Indian architectural design in sculpture is the benefaction of the world famous Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams, Tirupati. The temple enshrines the life size idol of Balaji, and exactly resembles in all aspects the Moolavigraham of Balaji installed in the sacred temple atop the seven Hills. Though the poojas offered to the Lord are according Vaishnava Sampradaya only, they evoke admiration and appear novel to the Northers and foreigners. The T.T.D., Guest House adjoining to it provides accommodation at cheap rates and extends other facilities, like halls, vessels for conducting marriages etc., if required. It is in the heart of town and so very near to bus-stand and railway station.

PARAMARTA NIKETAN

It is built on the left bank of the Ganges and can be reached by boats, or by the suspension bridge added recently, beginning right in front of the Sivananda Asram. As this is built at the foot of hills, it enjoys cool mountain breeze. It enthrals the pilgrims with scores of little shrines and niches adorned with almost all Gods adorning Hindu Pantheon. Most of them are made of white
marble, and their huge sizes, pompous dress and enticing decoration transport the viewers for a while to other world. Their enchantment detains them for long. This also provides accommodation at very cheap rates. It feeds several hundreds of Sadhus every day.

**GITA BHAVAN**

This temple is located on the left bank, and is adjacent to Swarga Asram. It can be reached either by boats or bridge. It is run by a Board of Trustees, and is affiliated to the Gorkapur press, striving for spiritual regeneration through literature and charitable institutions. It has also feeding programme, sadhus and anchorites are getting sumptuous food daily. It has a wide variety of activities covering many fields, but all aiming at moral uplift of people.

**BABA KALI KAMLIWALA INSTITUTION**

It is the Head Quarters of one of the very old institutions founded by Sri Baba Vishnu Deva Nandji. It has scores of Dharmasalas built in almost all pilgrimage towns. Its benefactions cover all segments of spiritual life. It arranges for lodging, boarding, besides conducting tours to important religious places in India. Free lodging facilities are extended to the spiritual aspirants. There is no place worthy of spiritual importance, without the branches of this famous service-oriented institution.

**SIVANANDA ASRAM**

It is founded by Swami Sivananda, a great spiritual leader of modern times, whose propagation of Hindu Dharma has few equals in India and abroad. It is built on the top of a hillock, beside the Trunk Road, on the right bank of Ganga. It contains the Samadhi of His Holiness, and down below on the bank, there are several offices functioning for the benefit of public and comfort of pilgrims. A hospital run by it, gives free medicines and extends all help to the sick. It has a big printing press and is releasing an
unending series of religious books in English, Hindi and Sanskrit, and sells them at cheap rates in several of its branches spread all over India. Its missionary activities won world wide appreciation. Many aged persons opting for quiet life and total detachment live here in cottages maintained by the institution. Religious discourses are given in the Prayer Hall every day, and they are largely attended by both Indians and foreigners.

As this place—Rishikesh serves, as it were, the base for going to the Himalayan abodes of Gods, like Badarinath, Kedarnath, Gangotri & Yamunotri etc., it is transformed itself into a commercial centre, catering to all the needs of people. As it is the only town at the foot of Himalayas doing wholesale business in food grains and other essential commodities, it is striving and helping the people living in the mountainous regions of Tehri and Garhwal districts. Rishikesh boasts of a world famous Yoga Centre, and in fact it has raised its reputation to an enviable degree. This centre offers specialised teaching in yoga, and hence foreigners are vying with Indian students in joining and mastering yoga. It also imparts lessons on meditation along with yoga.

TRANSPORT

Jolly Grant is the nearest Airport, and it is connecting Delhi and other places by Vayudoot service. The Uttar Pradesh Tourism Department runs several Delux buses to the temples of Gangotri Uttarkashi Kedarnath, Badarinath etc. Government Transport plys buses to many visit-worthy holy places in the Himalayas, besides Hill stations like Dehra Dun, Mussori etc.

ACCOMMODATION

There are about dozen famous Dharmasalas with hundreds of rooms providing accommodation to tourists and pilgrims. And lodges too with mod amenities, but visiting public prefers the former only.

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Utter Haridwar and shut your eyes, there opens before your mind’s eye then, an exalted world of gods and godmen, the very remembrance of those august personages conjures up an unending progression of spectacular and awe-some ventures undertaken by a galaxy of might mortals, sometimes independently, and at times at the behest of divine personalities, who when gratified by the soulful prayers, or hair-raising acts of self-torture – tapa, japa, homa, yaga etc., crowned them with monumental achievements, as exemplified by the river Goddess Ganga flowing down in the footsteps of Bhagiratha; Mother Chandi assuming the most fiercest form to killing Sumbha Nisumbha – the remorseless lokakantakas; Lord Maheswar scurrying down to wreak vengeance on the arrogant Dakshaprajapati for wanton humiliation meted out to mother Sati; Lord Brahma complying with the hearty entreaty of King Swetu to stay here permanently; Ulipi, the enchanting buxom beauty of Nagaloka carrying off the navamohananga Arjun to the nether world; Lord Mahavishnu meditating here tempted by the serenity of this place; pacified Sankara reinstating Dhakha as king by pouring life into his corpse; Mother Sati taking her seat on the pretty hillock under the name of Manasadevi after Dhaksha yagna; Saptarishis making the Himalayan born Ganga to dissect herself into seven streams to flow beside their hermitages; Sanatkuranar turning into siddha at his request by the benign boon of Mahavishnu; Devaguru Brihaspati willfully dropping a few drops of amrit, the divine elixir for making the land sacred; Bhimasena’s horse carving out a lake with a mere kick against a boulder of unusual dimensions; Bhishma’s grandfather Pratipa making Ganga his daughter-in-law, on spuming her choice of becoming his spouse; Vikramaditya, the renowned king causing the construction of
flights of stairs at the very site, where his brother, the philosopher- Poet Bhatrihari gave up his body; Kunti, the Pandava matriarch and the sagacious premier Vidura along with the good old blind Kuru King Dhritarastra with his consort Gandhari, spent their lives after Kuruksheethra war to breathe their last etc., etc., etc., and unable to contain the cup of joy overflowing at the long parade of gala affairs—mirthful or sorrowful, if you open your eyes hurriedly to see for yourself all those grand spectacles, you find yourself standing right infront of that lovely Mitriyunjaya statue, installed at the cross roads—one road taking to Kankhal, the then capital of Dakshaprajapati, and the other straight to Har-ki-Pairi, the prime centre of pilgrim attraction; the grand scene of every divinised episode; the star enticement of tourists and finally the hub of socio-religious activity.

No pilgrim centre of our akanda Bharatha kanda, from Amarnath to Kumari, and Dwaraka to Kamkshipur boasts of such glorious place, or capable of unfolding such wide range of varied spectacles, or delighting the eyes with colourful fantasies, or regaling the soul with sublime memories, or feasting the ears with sonorous sankirthanas, or elevating the mind with intellectual discourses as this sublimest spot that recreates magnificently sublime, ostentatiously awe-inspiring scenes of the Vedic age, presided over by a Maharajadhiraja performing a horse-sacrifice, or mahayaga. Pious men of every faith, sanyasins of ten divisions, theists of all denominations, god-intoxicated men of every land, and aesthetes of every category in their characteristic out-fit, with respective religious marks on foreheads, mumbling the names of gods in their own languages greet our eyes throughtout the road to this divine spot.

As you walk on the Canal Centenary Bridge, commanding a beautiful view of ghats, connecting the oval-shaped-Clock Tower Annexe, around which the giggling Ganga, flows in majestic hurry, you observe to your hearts’ content the enchanting sight of Siwalik range of mountains on either side, adored with the imposing shrines of the Goddess Chandi on the left summit, Manasadevi on the right, and just down below at the foot of hills the much-hallowed Har-Ki-Pairi temple, enshrining God Hari’s foot prints, and several
other small, yet sublime ones dedicated to other highly adorable deities. Standing near the Clock Tower, if you turn your head any side, nothing but huge concourses of people fully immersed in devotional acts, like small groups of people singing with frenzied devotions in front, dancing to the accompaniment of percussion instruments; congregations of the devout pilgrims sitting before pandas guided in performing innumerable types of religious rites; clusters of energetic youngsters battling against turbulent waves in the middle of the river; knots of tiny tots cajoling the parents to buy colourful toys; scores of newly-weds sanding in knee-deep waters offering prayers to the Ganges; assemblages of sadhus, busy decorating their foreheads with intricate designs of caste marks; groups of orthodox grey-haired sitting infront of the images of household dieties mumbling; countless peddlers moving about swiftly, selling their wares; teen-aged girls assistance their mothers, making ready puja articles, and the like, keep you agape, though gradually lifting your soul, and preparing for a ceremonial bath under the guidance omnipresent pandas, awaiting to meet your eyes with theirs, of course, for fattening their purses under the pretext of releasing you from the cycle of births and deaths with a holy dip, made at their will, and to the muttering of incoherent hymns. Elated by such innumerable sights you join the bathers, with a view to sharing the heavenly bliss and obey the commands of jackal pandas. After the envigorating and sin-washing ceremonial bath, you emerge fit to direct your steps to the shrines, and normally you go to Har-Ki-Pairi first, of course, the first in importance and spiritual merit.

**HAR-KI-PAIRI**

This is the most sacred of the bathing ghats, with a small but impressive temple at the head of stairs, considered to be the most auspicious spot for bathing, when this holy thirtha kshetra plays host to the world's largest religious fair—Kumbh Mela held once in every twelve years. And also to Ardha Kumbha Mela, conducted once in six years. This temple enshrines the same sacred slab consecrated by the imprints of Lord Maha Vishnu. Legends says, according to sthalagna — the local guide that Lord Vishnu visited
this place to advise Dakshaprajapati, the son of Brahma ruling the
country from here then to carry on the activities of creation uninter-
terrupted. On his disappearance, the spot where He set his feet
bore the imprints of His feet, and they have been worshipped
since then with utmost ardour. And Mother Ganga adores His holy
feet day and night by touching the walls of this shrine; for, it was
from Lord Sri Maha Vishnu’s foot she was born. The grateful theists
and temple authorities have been offering elaborate regular prayers
to this Ganga Mai every evening with ardour that has neither
parallels nor similarities did exist elsewhere in the past. Though it
is a regular ritual, lacs of persons witness this rare spectacle and
enjoy the sights of little lamps with flowers floating fast moving on
the crystal clear waters of Ganga. To enabling the huge crowds
witnessing this soul-lifting ritual; this sacred ghat was augmented
in size and shape by flights of stairs by government which to some
extent is helping the bathers during the propitious moments –
regular or festival. So this place is fittingly called Hari-Ki-Pairi, and
the town, Hardwar henceforth.

**BRAHMA KUND**

Another place lying next to it is called Brahma Kund. Once
a famous king called Swetu performed a great yagna here. Satisfied
with his austere life and the nature of performing yagna, Brahma
descending, bestowed on him several boons, besides granting his
pious request of liberating people by remaining here permanently.
A temple built on its bank commemorates this event, and as such
this place went by the name Brahma Puri for a long time. At a little
distance to this lies a ghat, ear-marked, as it were, for casting away
the mortal remains of the dead – Asthivisarjana. Devout Hindus
bring the ashes of the departed and immerse them in the water with
due ceremonies. This is always crowded, and testifies to the fact of
its spiritual significance.

**PRATIPA’S DHARMANIRATI**

A few hundred metres away from this, down at the foot of
Shiwalik hills once Pratipa–Bhishma’s grand father performed
ghora tapas for the welfare of mankind and the world. In the course of this penance lasted for years, Ganga flowing beside placidly with ripples dancing on surface watched him closely. Captivated by his regal bearing and unusual bright halo heightening his charismatic personality, she fell in love. So, walking straight up to him, sat on his right thigh. Exasperated, he questioned her andacity. Expressing her love, she implored him to marry her. Pat came the reply, "I'm a monogamist and faithful to my wife. Further, you sat on the right thigh reserved for children and daughter-in-law, and so you are like a membos, of my family, and if you so desire, I will make you my daughter-in-law." Pleased with his dharmikachintana, she nodded; so she was wedded to Santhanu then.

**ULIPI'S EPISODE**

It is in the vicinity of this place Arjuna in Dwapara yuga met with a great problem. During his pilgrimage for one year thrust on him for breaking the rule of entering the apartment, where Dharmaja and Droupadi were together, he visited this place. While he was enjoying a bath here, on hearing the glory of thirtha, he was dragged away by Ulipi, the enchanting teen-age beauty of a Nagaloka all on a sudden. Said she then, that his navamohankar roused love in her and she decided to be his wife. Arjuna narrating the whole episode preceding his yatra, pleaded that his vow of austerity for one year was standing in the way of fulfilling her desire. Thereupon she added, that she would die, if rejected, and he would have to incur the sin of Srijatya thereby. A greater predicament. Fearing that her hopeless infatuation might end in her untimely death, he preferred the violation of his vrata to saving her life. He married her, and their union, though lasted for a short period, blessed them with a son. He was called Iravat. Later, emerging from the same point, he proceeded further to completing the rest of pilgrimage.

**KUSHAVRATA GHAT**

Going further a little distance of half a kilometre down south, you reach Kushavrat Ghat. It is here Dattatreya did penance for thousand years, standing on one leg. On one unfortunate day,
Ganga flowed with unusual force, and by accident the Kusa preserved for rituals by him was washed away. Knowing the damage done to his sacred object of worship, he grew wild and was about to burn Ganga on the spot itself, beside stopping her further flow. Releasing the disastrous consequences of her absence to crops and humanity, Brahma descended along with other gods and pacified him. Pleased with boons, and the entreaties made by gods, he forgave the offence, but requested them to stay in his hermitage for ever. They agreed, and since then it is called Kushavratha Ghat. This is preferred for pitri-sraddha, and confers merit thousand fold, if offered with due rituals. For astivisarajan also this ghat is very famous, for the primary fact that all gods are present here at one place.

**GAU GHAT**

This sacred ghat is located between Hari-Ki-Pairi and Kushavratha ghat. A bath here relieves one of the sin of killing cow. A bridge over this takes the pilgrims to other ghats. This is famous for several religious discourses given by learned pandits every evening. Evenings have hectic religious activities here. A boon for seekers of mental peace.

**RAMA GHAT**

There lies at the head of stairs, of this sacred ghat the famous temple of Mahaprabhuji of Vallabha sampradaya. It is heavily crowded during evenings.

**VISHNU GHAT**

To the south of Ramghat lies Vishnu Ghat. Legend has that Vishnu meditated here for long attracted by the tranquility of this place. Dharmadhvaj, a king of solar dynasty came here with his wife for penance, but unfortunately was turned into a snake by the curse of Durvasa. It is believed, that the self-same snake is still alive and comes here on Krishna Chaturdasi of Bhadrapada month every year. So theists await and avail its darsan.
MANSINGH-KI-CHATRI

As you proceed along the ghats, you come across a muslim type of architecture - with a dome atop and a gallery around. It is here the famous Emperor Akbar arranged for the immersion Raja Mansingh’s mortal remains. It occupies a coveted place in the Brahma Kund area. This incidentally brings out Akbar’s religious tolerance. But There are some shrines in the heart of town bearing the marks of Muslim bigotry too.

After praying to several deities enshrined in little, yet beautiful shrines studded to stairs of the ghats, you proceed towards the temples embodying rich spiritual wealth and glorious past. Among the countless that beckons your attention and draws your soul most, the temples of Manasa devi, Durga, Chandi, Anjanadevi Hanuman, Shravannah, Bhologiri, Bhairava-Akhara, Neeleswara Mahadev, merit a reverent mention, and visit to them is a MUST. No pilgrim misses them, nor his visit becomes fruitful, if he bypasses any, for whatever the reason may be. They start with Shravannah shrine situated in subzi-Mandi, the busy locality of the town.

SHRAVANNATH TEMPLE

It is dedicated to Pasupathji. The statue with its unusual magnificence and spiritual sanctity lifts the soul. The Nandi along with Pasupathinath receive daily prayers with elaborate rituals. Another shrine adjacent to it is called Pataleswar Mahadev. This temple complex is the seat of Shravannah Math, striving to uplift the community through philanthropic activities, like running schools and maintaining Public Reading Rooms etc., and has carved out a name for selfless service, since its inception, some 150 years ago.

BHOLAGIRI TEMPLE

This was built on the banks of Ganges by His Holiness Mandaleswara Swami Bolanandagiri. Big statues of Sankaracharya, Mahavir along with Bolanandagiri receive daily Pujas here. Saints and sadhus throng these temples round the clock.
BHAIRON AKHARA

It lies in the centre of city, behind the bus stand. The images of Bhairava, Lord Siva and Durga with three heads are worshipped everyday by the locals mostly. It was once a famous shrine with countless wealth in jewels etc., but fell to the fury of Muslim invaders, who looted it and left the statues mutilated.

MAYA DEVI TEMPLE

Adjacent to Bhairon shrine lies this ancient temple. Its easy accessibility to the locals made this a very popular shrine. And according to one version, the town was called once Mayapuri on account of the glory of this temple.

MANASA DEVI MANDIR

It is one of the prime attractions to the tourists and pilgrims as well. Built atop the Siwalik Hills, it commands a grand eyeful sight throughout day and night, from any point of the town, and also for miles around. It can be reached by flights of stairs, or cable cars. The rope way with its brightly coloured cars affords a thrilling and unforgettable experience, and it lands the devotees right at the feet of Devi, one of the forms of Sakti Goddess. The presiding deity Manasa Devi is looking upon the city from this vantage point to raining her benignity round the clock. The gongs tolling sonorously during mornings and evenings seem like peals of divine bells of the Mother, reminding people to remember and worship her for salvation. The white marble statue of the mother wrings veneration. The restaurants and shops catering snacks etc., detain the visiting public for hours enjoying the beautiful sights of Haridwar and its surroundings. She is very popular for her compassion, as evidenced by the fulfilment of desires of every adorer.

CHANDA DEVI TEMPLE

This is another powerful Goddess, who after killing subha Nisumbha took her seat here at the soulful prayers of the people. It is built on the eastern summit of Siwalik hills, and as such it also
provides an excellent view of whole Haridwar. Next to it lies, Arjuna Devi Temple. They have to be climbed only, and at the foot this hill there are two shrines dedicated to Gawri Shankar and Neeleswara Mahadev.

**KANKHAL & ITS HISTORY**

Descending after darsan of the gods and goddesses, pilgrims normally go to the town of Kankhal about a mile away from this, for offering prayers to Mother Sati and Dhakshaneswar Mahadev. This fantastic name means much, and connotation bewilders any hearer. It is interpreted from its root words - Ko Khala - signifying thereby, 'Who is the sinner, who cannot go to heaven, if he treads on this sacred spot? The interrogative sentence, if changed into assertive, implies that every one goes to heaven, if he visits it. Hence the attraction.

It was the capital of Dhaksha Prajapathi, who from this seat assisted his father Brahma in acts of creation. He married his beautiful daughter Sati to Lord Maheswar. Once his son-in-law - Maheswar incurred his wrath in not extending due respect in Brahmalok, when others did in the assembly. To take revenge upon him, he performed a great yagna and invited the Mukkoti devatas except Maheswar. Though Maheswar swallowed the intentional insolence like halahalam, Sati, his wife insisted on attending the yagna despite no formal invitation. She went only to be humiliated in the most despicable manner. Unable to stand it, she burnt herself in yogagni, hurling curses on her father. Knowing, Lord Maheswar sent Virabhadra to raze the alter beyond recognition and punish all. Not satisfied, he descended in his Rudra rupa and mercilessly severed the head of Daksh, before carryng away the corspe of Sati. When Gods along with Sri Maha Vishnu and Brahma prayed for restoring peace, he gave life to Dhaksha by attaching the head of Aja. Later, at the ardent prayers of all, he dwelt in this sacred place exercising sovereignty over the region, under new names Dhakshaswar Mahadev and Neeleswara Mahadev. This place was called then Shiva Puri or Hardwar after him.

There is yet another legend that accounts for the burning of Sati at this place. The stroy goes that once God Maheswar bowed
to Sri Rama, the mortal in the presence of Sati. Confounded, Sati questioned the propriety. Maheswar then explained that Rama was the incarnation of Sri Mahavishnu and so he was justified. Frivolously, Sati disguising herself as Sita went to Sri Rama to test him. Identifying as Sati, Sri Rama at once bowed to her. So Sati returned home crest fallen. Lord Maheswar realising all that went by then, developed dislike for Sati. It was during that mahayagyna performed by his father, she went regardless of the objection raised by Maheswar, hoping for some comfort at least from parents. Alas! her estimation went wrong. She was humiliated before all. When that wounded her heart, she burnt herself. Later, she was born as the daughter of Himavan and married Maheswar. This incident took place here, and there are some evidences of this.

At present there are many temples dedicated to Sati, Maheswar, Hanumanji, besides a Gurudwara and some asrams, all inviting reverent attention.

**DAKSHINESWARA MAHADEV**

It is an old temple dedicated to Lord Maheswar, built on the banks of Ganges. This, according to Puranas was erected in commemoration of that great event of Maheswar's descent to punish the arrogance Daksha and to carry the corpse of Sati. It enshrines the images of many Gods. Mahasivaratri is celebrated on a grand scale and devotees then make Gangabhisekam to the images with elaborate rituals.

**SATI KUNDA**

This is the exact site on which Sati burnt herself at the humiliation meted out to her. There is a ghat nearby, which goes by the name Sakti Ghat. It attracts pilgrims for bath and offering prayers.

**HARIHARASRAM**

Just at the entrance of Kankhal lies this artistically built temple, with a huge Nandi in front of Lord Maheswar. Its majestic shape and size are its chief attractions. A visit worthy place. There are many others like Avadhoot Mandal and Nirmala Santpura.
gurudwara that lure the devout pilgrims for a visit.

As if ‘finale’ to the holy yatra, one has to go Saptarishi Asram and Sapta Sarovar. Before visiting, it is quite appropriate, rather expedient to know about the flowing of Ganges here in seven streams. This indeed take us to the origin of descent of Mother Ganga on this mortal world.

**GANGAVATARANA**

It begins with the performance of Aswamedha yagna by the emperor Sagara, a descendent of Ikshvaku dynasty. When the sacrificial horse was going round, Indra bitten by the demon jealousy of Sagar’s superiority, stealthily led it and concealed in Kapila Maharshi’s hermitage. The intense search for the horse by the sons of Sagara numbering sixty thousands, at long last brought them to Kapila’s hermitage, and they found it here. They demanded explanation of the sage, lost in deep meditation. When he could not reveal it, they insulted and were about do harm. Enraged sage burnt them to ashes at once. Hearing the calamity, Sagara sought the advice of learned men. They ended that the sacred waters of Ganga alone liberate the dead sons. The good old king unable to accomplish it, directed his successors to fulfill that just and pious wish. Many tried but failed.

It was Bhagirath, who after dirgha tapas pleased Sri Maha Vishnu and prayed for the boon of sending Ganga to mortal world to liberate his ancestors. Though the Lord granted it, he directed him to see it tamed and settled down suitably before reaching the marthyaloka. Thereupon, he prayed to Lord Maheswar, who agreed to hold her in his matted locks of hair. As promised, when Ganga descended with unbearable violence and incredible speed, Lord Maheswar held it in his jata. Later, she flowed down behind Bhagiratha to reach the area, where his ancestors were burnt. As she was coming gurgling behind, suddenly the sound ceased. Bhagiratha turned behind and searched, but could not trace her. There he heard then, the muffled voice of Ganga from the Kamandal of the Saptarishis, meditating at the foot of hills. And she prayed for instant release. When Bhagiratha appealed to the rishis, they directed her to split her self into seven streams and flow beside each asram for lessening her turbulence. She did. Not only they continued their tapas unhindered, but they had perennial supply of crystal clear water for all purposes. The Ganges then flowed on to the site of burning, when the unfortunate were liberated and went to heaven. As Ganga followed from heaven and
accomplished his wish, she is called Bhagirathi since then. And the town Kapilasthan, perhaps, for the reason of bringing Ganga to earth.

This place lies at about six kilometres from Har-Ki-Pairi. Seven parnasalas of vedic types are built recently to represent the hermitages of Saptarishis and are dedicated to Saptarishis. This holy place is sanctified by the installation of Siva linga and Maheswar’s images. It also houses a sanskrit school run by Sanathana Dharma Sabha. Just a little further above the Ganges flows touching the Sivalik range of hills, which, it seems cut themselves apart and made a mile wide pass for Ganga to flow calm and steady. But for this, the holy city of Hardwar would have been a vast jungle of desolate land unfit for habitation. The Siwalik range running parallel to the snowclad Himalayas thus had done incalculable service to mankind in fact.

There are other countless worth-seeing places here, and it takes at least a week to cover all, and know all about all. Patience and purse enrich the mind, and fill the soul. Of the many, Paramartha, Manav Kalyana, Sadhubella, Aryavana prastha asrams enshrining the images of many deities deserve attention. And these sublime places have been visited by innumerable luminaries and valorous rulers, globe-trotters and mendicants of both east and west, since ages. The names like Hieun-Tsang, Guru Nanak, Amar Das, Sankara charya, Dayananda Saraswati, Lord Aukland, Dalhousie, Hardwick and Rappiers, besides a host of celebrities of all nationalities adom the list of visitors who paid glowing tributes to the deities in prose and verse deserve reverent study.

**SOURCES**

There is no dearth of information about this holiest place. Sacred scriptures abound in innumerable accounts tracing its glorious antiquity right from the Vedic age. Elaborate references are found in Mahabharat, Skanda Purana, Thirtha Prakasa etc. In addition to travel accounts of many illustrious foreigners. And this Haridwar—gateway to heaven was variously called, like Haridwar, Maya Puri, Kapilasthan, Brahmapuri, Gangadwar, etc., according to the importance it commanded from time to time. All these names find a place in the literature cited. For a true Hindu, this terrasternal city far surpasses the unsurpassable celestial city sanctity, variety, majesty and spirituality. A visit to it, is a visit to Heaven in fact!

**...**
UNIQUENESS

The word ‘Prayag’ is a compound of two words-Pra and Yag. This blend of two distinct words admits two different meanings; one-a great sacrifice-Pra=great+yaga=sacrifice; two-Pra also means Prajapathi, and yaga stands for sacrifice, so Prajapathi’s sacrifice. Its connotation thus refers to a place, where Prajapathi performed once a great sacrifice. It was originally called ‘Prayag-Raj’, the prefix and suffix here denote its superiority over other sacred thirthas, consecrating our Punya Bharat. Puranas mention it as Thirtharaj, and an integral part of the Panchavedis-Kurukshetra, Gayashiras, Prayag Raj, Viraja and Pushkar. Due to its position, ‘middle in the series, it is aptly called Madhyavedi. As the Ganga, the Yamuna and the invisible Saraswati, the holy river merge at this place, it is called Sangam. It has yet another name -Triveni; for, the Ganges takes a turn here and bends like the veni-braided hair of woman. It is a Prajapathi Kshetra and a thitha Kshetra at it. And it is the choicest abode of Sri Mahavishnu, in addition to being dear to Maheswar and Brahma, who are dwelling in it. Its modern name is Allahabad. And it is given by Akbar the great. Needless to emphasise that all these publish its unusual glory, and unique position among the holy places of our sacred Bharat.

According to legends, Sri Mahavishnu holds this sacred spot in such high esteem, that he abides here permanently in the form of Yoga murthi. Hence, its very pronouncement, or a mere sight, why even the application of its soil on forehead, or smearing its clay all over the body, relieves one of sins of every description. It is this unique kshetra that remains unaffected by Maha Pralaya-great deluge, when every animate and inanimate falls victim to the fury of the flood that submerges the whole world. And it is here alone
stay then, the Trio-Vishnu, in the form of a babe on the Vatapatra, Brahma at Pratishthana, and Siva as Akshaya Vatavriksha-Primeval Banyan tree. It is on this soil Brihaspathi dropped a few drops of divine nectar, when carried the precious pitcher filled with amrit for distribution among gods. It is here at the confluence of the three rivers, kumbhamela is held once every twelve years that attracts millions and millions of devout theists, living all over the globe for a ritual dip, believing it to cleanse all types of sins, committed from birth onwards. And it is the holy waters of this place that releases one from the cycle of births and deaths. It is at this place, where the Parliament of Religions is conducted during the Mela periods, which is represented by all the religions of mankind, and a spectacular procession of sadhus of all denominations that feasts the eyes of devout religionists. It is the divinity of this place that grants remissions of sins, like homicide and suicide with a mere bath in Triveni during the Kumbha-mela. It is in this holy place, the reputed poet-saint Sri Ramananda was born.

Moreover, it is this place that played a prominent role during the Indian war of Independence, as the mandates emanated from Ananda Bhavan, the strong hold of Indian National Congress and the ancestral home of legendary Nehrus were honoured by all. It is this place that exhibited and exceptional political awareness and literary eminence during the pre-Independent days that made it almost synonymous with India’s freedom struggle. It is in this place Lord Canning read out Victoria’s proclamation of new administration to Indians, when the first war of Independence shook the British throne to foundations. It is this place that was and is reverberating with the chiming temple bells and reciting of scriptures by the saffron robed sadhus for the liberation of pious pilgrims visiting in lakhs round the clock.

SOURCES

Hoary scriptures abound in evidence of every kind that glorifies this thirtha kshetra, held dear to the Trio. Starting from Rig Veda right upto government records, several reference are found testifying to its sanctity. The Ramayana, Mahabharata, Bhagavatha, Mastya Purna and Raghuvamsa recount many accounts of gods.
and godmen responsible for heightening its importance and making it thirtharaja. Moreover, several foreign travellers and eminent historians too have enriched its divinity with their dispassionate accounts.

**ANTIQUITY**

From time immemorial, Prayag is a much-venerated holy place, sanctified by the association of Vedic seers and incarnated celebrities. Rig Veda says "Those who bathe at the confluence of the white and black rivers—the Ganga and Yamuna go to heaven; those of firm mind who give up their bodies here, attain immortality." Another!Pulastya’s description, besides bringing out the traditional importance of this land, fixes its bounds too. He says—"The land between the Ganga and Yamuna is called the waist, the middle part of the earth; and Prayag which is the most sacred, luxuriant and prosperous place is the fertile part of the Mother Earth." Hence Prajapati’s selection for performing a great sacrifice on this punya dharthri.

During the Tretayuga, it was but a thick forest, except for a small extent of two miles, where the sage Bharadwaja lived in his hermitage. In the vicinity of which lived Guha, the Nishada king with whose help Rama crossed the Ganges and entered the Prayaga region. Poet Valmiki gives a picturesque account of this Episode and refers to Rama and Guha, as two immortal sailor-captains, one helping people cross the Ganges, and the other for crossing the ocean of births. After taking blessings of Bharadwaj, Rama moves further to Chitrakuta, and later to the asrams of several reputed sages like Agasthya.

The Picture was different in the Dwaparayuga. By the time the Kurukshetra war was over, it was a well-developed place, teeming with millions, and thriving as a popular thirtha kshetra. Though Yudhishthira won the war and was installed as emperor of Akhanda Bharat, with Hastinapur as capital, he was in the tight grip of grief, for destroying all his cousins, along with kith and kin. When the sense of guilt and frustration exercised their full sway, he was growing sceptre thin, despite the best advice given by such divine personage as Sri Krishna himself. Knowing his pre-
dicament, Markandeya Maharshi, living then at Varanasi visited and consoled him with many discourses, ending with the advice of visiting Prayaga to attain mental peace and to be freed from the sin of killing akshouhinis of people for the sake of throne. He left emphasising that every step taken in Prayaga by the devout is as rewarding as the performance of Aswamedhayaga. Dharmaraja did as bid and returned to normalcy.

Several puranic accounts also bring out the importance of this place through the association of illustrious rules and sages. The soil is said to have produced numerous types of miracles in the lives of many kings. One such legend refers to King Sudyumna, son of the famous king Vaivaswata. It happened that he strayed once into Kumaravarna-a prohibited area of this region then. And lo! he was changed into a pretty woman anon. And passed for lathence onwards. Another miracle! this engrossing piece attracted Budha, the son of Chandra, and they were wedded. A son was born to them and was christened Pururvas. Fed up with womanly chores and elusive charms, he worshipped Siva for changing him to original form. Expressing his limitations, he granted him the boon of becoming man for one month, and woman, the following month. And this process goes on forever unhindered. Unable to compromise with the change alternating in quick succession, he left to forest to lead an ascetic life handing over the kingdom to his son Pururvas, who ruled ably with his capital at Pratisthana and was succeeded by Ayu, the grand father of the famous king Yayati.

Another legend accounts for the unusual glory of this place brought about by Brihaspati, the preceptor of Gods. And incidentally, it sheds light on the origin of Kumbha mela. This begins with the emerging of Amrit Bhand from the Kshirasagara, churned by both suras and asuras. As soon as he sighted it, he took and ran away for distribution among gods only. Seeing it asuras gave a chase. In the heat of chase, the Kumbha got tilted and a few drops fell at four places. Prayaga is one of them, and since then it has become a craze for every man to pay a visit and bathe at this sacred place. A dip in the Sangam, especially during the month of Magha confers great merit and it is coveted even by the celestials too. This bath, if taken with due rituals on the day, when the Sun enters into
Capricorn confers beatitude. Besides, bath in Triveni becomes very efficacious, if taken on Ratasaptami, Makara Sankranti, new-moon and full-moon days. Once in twelve years, Kumbha Mela India's biggest bathing festival and Magha Mela, a month-long annual festival are celebrated with such religious fervour that it attracts, lakhs of people. Theists of every denomination lustily participate, and during then the Parliament of Religions is conducted in a grand manner.

**HISTORICITY**

According to itihisas, this Prayaga Mandala with Pratishthana as capital was ruled by many renowned kings like Ayu, Nahusha, Yayati etc. Sanctified by Brahma's sacrifice, its spiritual glory never declined, rather with the passage of time it grew in importance. History records it passing from the imperial Guptas to Harsha and later to Gangeyadeva, a Kalachuri king of great valour, who assumed the title of Vikramaditya on conquering Prayaga and Kasi. It fell into the hands of Ghory dynasty in 1194 A.D. when Moghuls ascended Delhi throne, it underwent many changes. In the reign of Akbar, many renovation programmes were undertaken in addition to building of additional edifices. Akbar changed the entire landscape with forts, mosques etc., including changing the name from Prayaga to Allahabad. With the advent of Britishers, its fortune witnessed many vicissitudes, like passing from ruler to ruler at their behest, starting from Moghuls to Marathas first and then back to Muslims-Nawabs of Oud and finally to the crown.

Let us now visit one by one, after bath in the Sangam.

**THE SANGAM**

It is the hub of spiritual life and prime attraction for every visitor, whether hedonist or religious man. Indeed, Allahabad owes its greatness to the ceremonial bath with chants at the exact place, where the three holy rivers meet. It is an exhilarating experience, apart from the spiritual bliss it holds in store. This confluence resembles more or less an island and brings to its heart all types people in boats for a dip. If once they reach the spot, and dip their bodies, they enjoy the thrilling sensation of cool waters and become
oblivious of environs. It lasts longer. A memorable experience which they cherish throughout life. When they come to the bank, they are greeted by innumerable groups of people sitting before pandas - priests, absorbed either in celebrating marriages to the married with all fanfare due, or guiding in offering pindas.

For Pinda Pradhan this is as famous as Gaya. Sraddha performed at the Sangam is valued most highly by the departed. Further, godan jiff of cow preferably tawny, decorated with flowers, clothes, ornaments, turmeric etc., showers many merits. Celebration of arsha type of marriage here is recommended by the scriptures, and it fetches immortal bliss to the parents. Further it is enunciated in the scriptures that one can fulfil desires of any kind, if he stays for one month at Prayag and prays to deities after bath everyday in Triveni. Tonsure at Prayag has special a merit. Sastras say, rather vociferously that one has to necessarily shave at Prayaga, offer Pindas at Gaya, make offerings at Kurukshetra and leave mortal body at Kasi. If one offers hair at Prayaga, he is exempted from giving the same at other places of religious importance like, Gaya, Kurukshetra or Kasi. Men are shaved completely - beard and moustaches, and in the case of women, cutting of tresses about two finger breadths has the same merit. After performing several religious rites, the pilgrims walk straight to the fort over-looking the scenic confluence of Triveni. It was built by emperor Akbar during his heyday. It is an architectural marvel, unrivalled in its craftsmanship, elegance and designs.

THE FORT

The Fort at Allahabad has been the centre of attraction for all classes of people. It is a spiritual haven and a treasure house of innumerable Hindu relics. It is here the far-famed Akshaya Vata is situated. Devout pilgrims worship it with great ardour, performing several rituals. This is also the place, where religious frenzy manifests like committing religious suicide, though sastras specifically condemn this practice in well-defined terms. As some scriptures advocate this atmahan - suicide, as prayaschitta for the guilt of maha pataka, many take recourse to this evil practice. Old and
invalid desperate and perverted fall from its high branches to end the mselves, hoping to be released from the cycle of births and deaths once for all. Next to it lies Siva linga in a beautiful small shrine. After completing circumambulation pious people take vows to give up for the rest of their lives, the pleasure of eating one particular type of food, which till then held very dear to them. So, it marks the beginning of a new phase of spiritual upgradation. The Asoka Pillar a single tapering shaft of polished sand stone of 11 metres high is another attraction here. It bears on its polished surface 6 edicts of Asoka and poet Harisena’s eulogy on king Samudra Gupta. Next to it lies a large pillared hall with exquisite paintings on walls and ceilings. Another visit-worthy place within the ramparts of the fort is the Patalpuri temple. It is considered to be the oldest and said to have been visited by Rama during his visit to Bharadwaja Asram.

Chandrasekhar Azad Park Amidst the imposing modern sky-high buildings, this lovely park appears like an oasis of greenery. Its original name was prince Alfred Park, built to commemorate his visit. The patriotic citizens, later named it Chandrasekhar Azad Park, as a tribute to a great son of India, who gave up his life for the freedom of land. This Park also houses the far-famed Allahabad Museum, boasting of possessing innumerable art treasures, including the paintings of Nicholas Roerich. It also displays many of the gifts received by Premier Jawaharlal, the indubitable peace-lover of the world.

**ANAND BHAVAN**

It is the proud ancestral home of Nehrus that has carved out a niche in every congress man’s bosom. It is here many monumental events took their final shape and hence evokes several ever-
green memories of India’s freedom struggle. It is now a museum possessing many relics of Nehru family. Swaraj Bhavan gifted by Mothilal Nehru to the nation lies next to it.

**Bharadwaj Asram**

This is another sacred place of great spiritual significance, supposed to be the oldest one of its kind. There is an impressive shrine built on the very site of Bharadwaja’s hermitage. Lord Rama visited this on his way to South. Later it became a reputed gurukula, with thousands of students on its rolls. The present Allahabad University auspiciously built around this shrine is exuding spiritual aroma and making commendable strides in the field of education.

**Nehru Planetarium**

It is one of the recent additions to this sacred city, enabling the visitors to feast their eyes with the panorama of stars and plants. It is a beautiful building nestled in the quiet locality of the busy city. Among the itinerary list, one can include proudly, the Hanuman Mandir, the Cathedral, High Court and another famous South Indian temple dedicated Lord Maheswar and Kamakshi. It is a three-tier temple, built recently, whose sculptural beauty detains pilgrims for hours. A visit to this is a must, and experience of sublimity will be life long.
Gaya is one of the renowned Tristhali-Kasi, Gaya and Prayaga, the three indispensable centres of pilgrimage for pious Hindus, and occupies a pre-eminent place among them for reasons more than one. The first and foremost is, its importance as the cradle of Buddhism, besides being a holy thirtha kshetra for Hindus. Next comes Brahma’s choice once as the fittest and holiest spot on earth for performing a sacrifice for the progress of mankind. Then follows its uniqueness as the only place where all gods in all denominations, i.e., mukkoti devathas are dwelling, and being worshipped by the devotees in accordance with the ardent wish of Gaya, granted by Brahma Himself. It is the only place where Lord Mahavishnu is adored as Adi Gadadhara, for having used His mighty Mace for a mightier cause at the instance of the mightiest creating power Brahma. And it is here the river Vaitarani descended to liberate the manes, when pindas are offered. It is the only place in our punya Bharat, where one can offer pinda to one’s own self, while alive. Moreover, it is the only place where sanyasins are granted the privilege of offering pindas to themselves by mere raising danda. It is the only place where Sri Mahavishnu is flowing in liquid form for utilisation to Tarpana during sraddhas and pindas performed by the devout Hindus. Moreover, it is the selfsame place where Vamana measured with His foot the cosmos at the time of receiving dana from Bali, according to a certain version. Above all, it is in this divya thirtha kshetra, where Sri Mahavishnu is worshipped in His three forms – Vyakta, Avyakta and Vyaktavyakta i.e., in His manifest, non-manifest, and manifest, non-manifest forms, as ex-
emphatically by his being adored to his Adi Gadadhara image, standing for Vyakta form Vishnu pada standing for avyakta form and to the holy water of Phalguna representing His vyakta form. To cap it all, it is the unique pitru kshetra enshrining several adorabel virtues that have not fallen to the lot of similar ones.

**SOURCES**

Legends, puranas, epics, sthalamahatyams, philosophical works and travel books offer inexhaustible fund of information about the glory of this kshetra right from the Satya yuga onwards. And particular reverent mention goes to the Mahabharat, Naradiya, Padma, Varaha, Garuda, Vayu and Gaya puranas, Tristhali Sethu and Chinese Travelogues.

**ANTiquity**

Definite history begins with Gayasura of the Satya yuga days; Gaya was a demon king with a difference. He was unlike Hiranyakasipu, though equally powerful and obtained many unattainable boons from Sri Mahavishnu, but was like Prahlad, the paramabaghavathothama in acquiring several exemplary virtues. He ruled over a vast kingdom of the same name, with Gaya as capital, measuring about 5 krosas in size. His personality was awful; and stature, uncommon in dimensions - he was 125 yojanas high and 60 yojanas wide. Incredible it sounds, but he was a demon as such. When he did severe penance on the Kolhalai Mount, it caused nightmares to celestials. Frightened, they went to Vaikunta, on the advice of Lord Siva for solution. Assuring them abhayam, He went to the spot to reveal Himself to Gaya. Being pure in mind, body, heart and soul, he prayed that whoever chanced to touch, tread or meet him should go to Vaikunta; and it was granted anon. It is said that he is abiding in his entire kingdom thenceforward in his ethereal form and emancipating every one, who chanced to step on his soil either by choice, or under pressure. As people visited this place and worshipped in temples, they turned sinless in due course. In consequence, Yama, the God of Death found himself jobless and
his personnel without routine duties – hell was deserted and absolute silence substituted the soul searing and ear-splitting cries of the sinners, during the process of torturous punishments. It was now for Brahma to restore the world to the old order; for, there should not be light always; nor life without grief be worthy of ambition? Would not life find itself corroding, if there is righteousness in surfeit. Man would vegetate, if ambitions are realised at mere volition.

Deciding to maintain equilibrium, Brahma embarked upon performing a great sacrifice. When searched for the place fittest, Gaya Kshetra was found to be ideal and suitable in all respects. The humanist Gaya readily consented, when broached the topic by Brahma. Soon Gaya’s body was laid out with his head pointing towards the North and feet to the South. Towards the end of sacrifice, Gaya’s head began rising and shaking, might be due to the heat of the sacrificial fire. To make it steady, Brahma bade the weightiest Dharmasila to be placed on his head, but to no effect. He asked the gods to stand on the sila, the result eluded the grasp. Then Sri Mahavishnu’s image was placed; the target missed to the discomfort of all. Realising, Sri Mahavishnu Himself stood and pressed the raising head with his weightiest mace - Kaumodaki. Rising came to a gridding halt and the performance achieved its goal. Soon after completion, pious Gaya prayed to Sri Mahavishnu that all the gods including Sri Mahavishnu should stand on his head permanently and the place, since then is called by the name of Gayashiras. And also Vishnupada for the reason, it is on the head of Gaya, the Lord was standing and the Lord’s foot prints are visible testifying to the occurrence of the event. In conformity with the prayer and to perpetuate the memory of this episode, the image of the Lord Adi Gadadhara was installed and is being worshipped with due veneration since then.

**Dharmasila’s History**

What then is the story of Dharmasila placed on the head of Gaya during that sacrifice and how did it acquire such mighty weight and the capacity to bear all gods. It needs elaboration now. Its story starts with Dharmavartha, the pious daughter of Dharma, a holy
sage. Desiring to be coupled with the most fittest spouse of her liking, she did penance. It so chanced, Marichi, the son of Brahma happened to pass that way and asked the reason of her tapas. On revelation, he offered himself, if she had no objection. She objected; parents sealed it, and they were wedded on an auspicious occasion. The match being ideal and all was done on perfect mutual understanding, they had a carefree married life, but one tragic event changed the smooth flow of bliss and turned one into stone and the other into ashes.

One day when Dharmavartha was shampooing her husband’s tired feet on request, Brahma paid a casual visit. Stopping the shampooing for a while, she got up to extend hospitality due to her father-in-law. In the meanwhile, Marichi woke up, seeing her absent and deeming that as wilful abandonment, he flew into ungovernable rage and cursed her to become a stone. Though docile and chaste, considering his anger unjustifiable, she retaliated in a fit of anger, uttering that he would be burnt to ashes with Mahadeva’s third eye. Thereupon, she sat in deep meditation to get remission and obtained the boon that she would be sanctified by the presence of all gods on that accursed silica at a particular moment when used to steady the rising head of Gaya. Further, due to presence of gods on it, it would liberate ancestors if pindas are placed on it. This pious wish was also granted and since then that sacred stone is called Munda-prishta and is preferred for placing pindas. And it is also worshipped with great ardour due. Devout Hindus offer pindas on it first.

**ADI GADADHARA’S EPISODE**

As the legend goes, once there lived in the Satya Yuga a demon by name Gada. He was exceptionally strong in his physique and was a byword for his super abundant strength. It became an object of envy to everyone including Brahma, the Creator. Having kept an eye on him, one day Brahma approached and asked him to give his bones for making a formidable weapon to be used for loka kalyana. At the very mention of the purpose, Gada deeming it is an especial honour done to him, agreed; whereupon Brahma commissioned Viswakarma to make a mace out of the bones. He
did. And it was presented to Lord Sri Mahavishnu for the protection of the universe. This powerful mace was used against a mighty asura by name Heti, who on performing dhirgha tapas obtained the boon that he would not be destroyed with any missile, like arrow, or discus. When his misdeeds became intolerable to innocent life in asrnavatikas, Lord Mahavishnu killed him with the mighty, weighty mace. As it is imbued with uncommon inherent potentialities, it was able to suppress the raising head of Gaya during Brahma’s sacrifice, when the Lord Protector standing on Dharmasila pressed it with that mace. Hence the image of Sri Mahavishnu with that mighty mace in His hand is worshipped here and He is called the ‘Adi Gadadhara’.

**PINDAS AND THEIR MERITS**

Gaya is deservedly famous as a pitru Kshetra and confers merits of an infinite variety on ardent theists for observing rituals like dipping in the river Phalguni, offering pindas at many places, performing sraddhas to the departed, worshipping at many shrines, giving danas to the deserving etc. On account of the presence of gods of all denominations, the soil, water, climate and nature have acquired such sanctity that they cure incurable diseases, absolve people of their sins, fulfil the cherished ambitions, liberate the departed from the shackles of further births and shower heavenly bliss. Scriptures proclaim that there is no other place so sacred and auspicious for offering pindas to the manes as this hallowed land consecrated by the presence of Dharmasala, Vishnupadas and the imperishable Banyan Tree. It is said that when pindas are offered, the ancestors who had gone to hell for committing sins, go to heaven, and those who by merits reached heaven would be freed from the vicious circle of births and deaths and merge with Paramartha. It is here alone sanyasins are permitted to offer pindas to themselves without any paraphernalia, but by mere raising of the danda. Again here there are certain relaxations in the observance of rituals for the sraddhas and pindas, like privacy is not insisted on in the case of sraddhas, nor the pitrus be invoked as done elsewhere. And in the case of pindas, one can offer at any time, though Bhadrapada dark half is the most auspicious time. For
sure, supreme and perfect achievement of the reward, one has to observe certain austerities, like dining once a day, sleeping on the floor, restraining from sinful associations, abstaining from drinks and absorbing in devotional programmes. Those preferring the performance of sraddha here have to do the same in his own place before the commencement of pilgrimage, and if done they are entitled to get better results; for, doing it in their own place serves as a call to the pitrus to visit Gaya along with them for their liberation.

The Mahabharata brings out the glory of this place in a characteristic way fathers should aspire for more sons, the reason being that at least, one of them may go to Gaya and offer pindas for the liberation. The Gaya mahatmya too emphasises it that among the four prescribed ways for achieving Mukti, performance of sraddha at Gaya is one and it is given pride of place; the others being, one, acquisition of knowledge; two, residing at Kurukshetra; three, dying in an act of saving a cow. Here are some instances that visualise the greatness of Gaya as Pitru Kshetra. According to one account, when king Vishala offered pindas, he found to his surprise the appearance of three hands stretching out to receive them; and they were of three distinct colours one was white, another red, and the last black. On questioning, he was informed that the white was his father’s hand and had gone to heaven for the good deeds done; the second red one was that of his grandfather’s in hell for, the sin of killing a cow; the third black one was that of his great grandfather’s and was also in hell for the sin of killing a sage. And all would be liberated by his performing sraddha at Gaya. What a boon! How sacred is the place. Another. This illustrates that not only one’s own blood relations are liberated, but those who desired alliance with the family, but could not due to unavoidable conditions. Legend says that Bharadwaja, the renowned sage when offered pinda, he found two hands stretching out to receive them. Finding him awe-struck, his mother present there said, that one was her husband’s and the other was that of one who desired to marry her but could not. Though he sublimated his aspiration after her marriage, he remained as her adorer. Hence the two hands; one was that of her husband - Kshetrin in and the other her adorer- bijin. Needless to say that
this is all due to that sacred sila.

**THE MAIN TEMPLE**

This lies at about 2 km from the station. It is of modest dimensions, the interior and the exterior belie the glory it proclaims and pitiable it is that poor maintenance and inadequate attention peep at the pilgrims from every frame. Many parts are in dilapidated condition. As one enters and proceeds towards the garbha griha only antiquity lays itself bare everywhere, but the sights of congregations of priests, chanting hymns; clusters of pilgrims offering pindas and scores of devout persons observing them lifts his heart. The spacious court hall is adorned by the most venerated Vishnupadas and Dharmasila and infront of them people in their hundreds huddle engaged in obeying the directions of the learned brahmins. The image Adi Gadadhara is quite enchanting both in size and decoration. The temple contains quite a good number of mini shrines dedicated to the adorable gods and goddesses and among them the shrine of the sun-god draws the pilgrims most. Pilgrims normally visit them after a dip in the Phalguni river flowing beside the temple. While returning, they invariably buy copper plates embossed with the foot-prints of Lord Sri Mahavishnu.

**PLACES OF ITINERARY INTEREST**

Vayu purana gives an elaborate account of this kshetra measuring about 37 miles in area, beginning with Pretasila to Mahabodhi which naturally includes Buddhist pilgrim centers. There are about forty five thirthas and many visit worthy shrines in Gaya. Pious pilgrims visit almost all, staying for about a week here, and if pausity of time shortens their stay, they invariably visit sub thirthas like Gayashiras, Munda prishtha, Uttaramanasa, Matangavapi, river Phalguni, Akaya Vata, Vishnupada and Mahabodhi. Visit to Buddha Gaya is neither by passed, nor postponed by any, under any condition.
Buddha Gaya

It is about 12 km from Gaya. Being a renowned pilgrim centre for both Hindus and Buddhists, it is made accessible by a wide variety of transport facilities and amongst them bus travel is cheap. It is here the Mahabodhi – the oldest and most venerated tree in the world is found and worshipped by more than half of the total population of the world. It has a tale spectacular to narrate about an Indian prince, who achieved monumental results through founding of a new religion, which is embraced by millions of billions of people throughout the length and breadth of the world. It is from here Dharmaghosha-Ahimsa paramodharma and Dharmam saranam gatchami rose into firmament with such crescendo that captured the imagination of every thinking mind and entrenched itself on the throne of every feeling heart. It is this divya vrksha that tolled death knell to war and violence and dried up the rivers of blood to fill them with nectar of love to flow down to the four corners of the world. It is here simple Siddhartha became Bhagawan Buddha and established a spiritual empire not over palm and pine; but over the mind and heart living across the seas, and up above the skies. It is this tree whose leaves fetch a fortune every year on Buddha Pournami day, as rumoured that each leaf is sold to foreigners soon after falling to the ground for a fabulous price of one hundred rupees. And foreigners from Far-East particularly visit on this day only to procure them for worshipping in their houses. Down the ages right from Asoka hundreds of imperial monarchs have visited it and made liberal endowments to perpetuate that event of events in the history of mankind.

This Mahabodhi lies at the back of the temple towards the west. And the temple enshrining the image of Buddha is equally held holy. It is built in a spacious compound and has mini-shrines of different kinds. It is an architectural marvel dominating the landscape by its huge dimensions with a tall tower measuring 170 feet in height. As Siddhartha meditated and got illumination here, Buddhists visit and deem it as the centre of universe. Several kinds of Buddhist relics were excavated in this area in 1881, when
Government launched the renovation programme. The image of Buddha is very attractive and is being worshipped by both Hindus and Buddhists with equal fervour, since Buddha is considered as the ninth incarnation of Sri Mahavishnu and Buddhist relics have formed a part of Hindu worship. Vayu pura records that Aswatha Vriksha embodies the Trio-with Brahma at the base, Vishnu in the middle and Siva on the top. Another object of worship that draws pilgrims most is a mango tree and it calms equal attention too. It is worshipped with sprinkling of water and it yields bliss.

This holy region was called Urvila during the Buddha's period; the present Niranjana river, Lilajan and the Mahabodhi, an ordinary peepal tree. As it is luring many nationals from abroad due to the imperial patronage of Buddhism and systematic propagation by adherents, it is growing in importance as a prime centre for pilgrimage, and so several countries of the Far-East have built many imposing shrines of their own, but each is distinct and different in its size, sculpture, shape etc., and they are reflecting their traditions faithfully. Of the many, the temples of Bhutan, Nepal, Japan, China, Ceylon and Thailand deserve special mention, because of builders, the religious zeal expressed in lavish expenditure over the construction of sculptural beauties and architectural marvels. These visit-worthy shrines are located within a radius of 4 km. There are monasteries housing priests and their personnel, built adjacent to them. They too draw attention due to sublimity emanating from them.
Kasi is the first place that flashes across your mind, when even you think of a pilgrimage; the first indispensable visit-worthy thirtha Kshetra dedicated to Lord Maheswar; the first in the list of All-India yatra-cum Tourist centres proudly advertised by the Tourist Organisers, marked with a big dot in their map; the first place of first preference for both vanaprasthasram - the last stage in life and kshetrasanyasa - binding the pledger's presence in this city till death; the first place of pious Hindu's last wish to breathe his last there and immersion of ashes in Ganga; the first seat of ancient Viswavidyalaya, specialised in Sanskrit studies and traditional lore; the first holy city having much-revered bathing ghats, numbering 64; the first holy city boasting of modern Hindu University, imparting education in 42 different branches of knowledge, and Hindu culture in all its aspects; the first of the most ancient living cities, displaying the vestiges of Vedic culture; the first that witnessed the performing of ten horse sacrifices one after another; and the first of many such firsts; for, it is the first dearest seat of Lord Maheswar, who himself on selecting for permanent settlement pronounced, "The three worlds form one city of mine, and Kasi is my Royal Palace there In". So the galore firsts can be stretched as far as patience permits, since it is the endless end extant amongst the centres of pilgrimage for Hindus.

From time immemorial, particularly from the dawn of aptitude for religion, highest veneration is extended to this holy place by all classes of people; especially by those, who realised the potency of devotion and fear of sin—daiva bhakti and papabe ethi. As it was deemed the holiest place due to permanent presence of Maheswar - the Bhaktavashankar, and the flowing of all-purifying
Ganga, hundreds of emperors performed yagas, and built many shrines and dharmasalas for the comfort of ever-increasing influx of yatris. One can come across small shrines adorned with Siva lingas at the head of each bathing ghat, in addition to well-built, and neatly maintained temples at many places. The lanes and by-lanes are dotted with pedestals for sivalingas, making Hinduism peep from every inch of this holy city. Being the centre of Sanskrit learning, literary activities of high order, and religious performances of all types, this place is so busy round the clock, and through all the seasons, that time seems to stand still here. Modernity has never wiped out traditionalism nor mutability gulped down the hoary culture, founded and nurtured by the famous Maharishis. So an infinite member of generations have visited, are visiting and will visit, deeming Kasi Visweswar’s darsan is the highest goal of life – the be-all and end-all of religious living.

It is one of the three most sacred places of Pilgrimage advocated by scriptures, the other being Gaya and Prayagra. And the famous treatise – Tristhal Sethu by Narayanabhatt bears ample evidence to this. It is here the untouchability was totally eradicated in the impact itself. Narayanbhatt’s reference establishes this fact beyond doubt. He says – “In the Kali age all demerit that may arise from touching the untouchable objects is removed by Lord Siva himself, who in his boundless mercy takes daily bath at Munikarnika in the early hours of the day for the benefit of humanity. Buddha gave his first sermon and set in motion the wheel of law here in Mringadava, or Sipatan now goes by the name Saranath.

This universally famous; eternally young; perpetually divinising, religiously emancipating; spiritually ever-growing, and morally undiminishing city has many more august names that published its glorious past and beckons a visit sooner than hearing it. It was called Varanasi, for, it is an island surrounded by the holy waters of Varuna and Asi – the tributaries of Mother Ganga; Kasi, for it is the place of supreme brilliance – tremendous shrining, lighting up the way to Nirvan; Avimuktaka – for it is free from sin on account of Lord’s eternal presence; Ananda Kanana; for it affords the highest delight to Lord Mahasmasana; for, here lie the five elements in great cemetery, as dead bodies reach after final destruction. And
Lastly Banaras, a corrupt form of Varanasi in use till 1956, and was changed to Varanasi by Government. Skanda purana grows eloquent and pours down in torrents evidence to testify the glory of this holiest of holies in as many as 15,000 verses. A great honour! A covetable place!! An enviable asset!!! None can claim any comparison.

**SOURCES**

Scriptural evidence is available in abundance, and religious literature in all its genres is soaked to such an extent that its aroma emerge at the very touch, or sight of titles, whose number is legion. The Vedas, epics, puranas, histories, travel accounts with their vast corpus stupify anyone and if one approaches with bright intellect, quick perception, and physical endurance, it turns out a rewarding experience worthy to be cherished for ever.

**ANTIOQUITY**

The story of Lord Maheswar’s selection of this place for permanent settlement is quite fascinating and sheds light on his love for Parvathi, his inseparable spouse. After marriage, it appears once Menaka – Parvathi’s mother bewailed, “My son-in-law is without proper dwelling place, without wealth and without attractive personality too. It is indeed a folly that Parvathi committed in her selection. They are ill-matched in very aspect.” Parvathi narrating it, told him her resolve to settle down at her parents’ house. To please her, Maheswar commissioned Nikumbha to manoeuvre Divodas, the king of Kasi out of that grand city. Nikumbha appeared to Aunikumbha, a brahmin of great austere life in dream and asked him to build a temple for Maheswar. He passed on this to Divodas, who accomplished the pious wish of the Brahmin. Lord Maheswar soon after installation started granting several kinds of boons to the worshippers, and so the temple became very popular in a short period. Though everyone’s desires were fulfilled, the gift of son for Divodas remained withheld. Unable to making compromise with his misfortune, the king demolished the temple beyond recognition. Hearing this Nikumbha
flew into ungovernable rage and cursed that the city would be depeopled - Jansunya soon. The curse ran its course. Then Nikumbha invited Lord Maheswar to settle down here permanently. He descended with Parvathi and soon it developed in all directions - dasadisas. And the Omni-merciful Maheswar began bestowing on all, blessings and demonstrating his powers through several miracles. Infinitely contented Parvathi, assuming the name of Annapurna started offering people anna - daily food, the basic necessity of man's existence. And lo! she made her position supremely august and incomparably mighty that her Lord himself was constrained to come to her for food with a bowl in his hand. This is exquisitely represented in the temple dedicated to her, lying adjacent to her Lord's shrine! According to one version, she represents Goddess Sakti, and Varanasi is one of the ancient Saktipithas. Sakti's left hand fell here, when Maha Vishnu's sundaran disc cut out the corpse of Sakti into several pieces, when carried by Siva. And it is worshipped since then.

THE ORIGIN OF KASI

Skanda purana embodies the origin of this holy place and narrate several glories connected with the sports of Lord Maheswar played in this thirtha kshetra. It is Maheswar's capital, and he abides in it eternally. Bhaktavasankar—the Omni-benevolent God is the supreme brilliance and shrines in all his resplendent splendour to light up the way for his children's Nirvana–kas to shine, he releases the worshippers from the shackles of Punarjanma. To live, or die in Kasi is considered meritorious and several millions of devout Hindus prefer living here in the last stage of their life. Some go to the extent of taking the vow of kshetrasanyasa – living in the presence of deity, and under no circumstances going beyond five knosas of Lord Mahadev; for, dying in Kasi ensures liberation from the wheel of transmigration. Ardent theists living far away reconcile themselves soliciting their nearers and dearers to immerse their ashes here at least. Hence the craze for astinimarjana here. There is a belief current that the water at the Lord's feet is so efficacious that it cures incurable diseases, besides removing the worst worries.
and anxieties, gnawing at vitals. Some ardent sanathasists, who visit this holy kshetra—observe the panchakraśi ritual—going round Kasi in a circle of 50 miles starting from Manikarnika, which ensures heavenly bliss. Some bigots commit religious suicide at Kasi Karvata—a place near the mosque behind the temple. In general, it is believed by all that the darsan of Kasi Visveswar is the goal of life, and strive their best to visit it at least once in their lifetime. During the Treta, Dwapara and Kali yugas, say until the beginning of this century, when adequate transport facilities were not available, devout thists were going with great fervour and in large groups to Kasi bidding as it were, adieu to kith and kin, since returning was doubtful. Kasi, in fact, is so woven into the texture of Hindu living that no other kshetra evokes so much veneration as Kasi.

THE FAMOUS GHATS

All religious activity takes place on the picturesquely situated crescent shaped left bank, consecrated by scores of famous ghats and holy shrines built atop the flights. There 64 ghats, among them Manikarnika ghat, Kedar ghat, Harischandra ghat, Hanuman ghat, Bindumadhava ghat, Pancha Ganga Ghat etc., are exceptionally holy. Lord Viswanath, they believe does not dwell in that holy Mandir itself, he is seen in every inch of the place, and particularly in the Ganges water and on the ghats. Hectic spiritual life goes round the clock and in every season. And certain places dear to the Lord are much crowded. Each ghat has a story of its own, and casts a special spell imbued with holiness and so people congregate on them for several purposes, like bathing, giving danas, offering pindapradas, listening to Pumas etc. Boat ride to other ghats on opposite bank is another attraction here.

MANIKARNIKA GHAT

It is the most heavily crowded ghat and is very auspicious for reasons more than one. It has a small tank in the centre with flights of stairs on all sides. The story goes that in the dim past, Lord Maha Vishnu attracted by its sanctity decided to do penance here. Before commencing it, he dug a pit with his Sundarsan disc for water to
using to ablution purpose. During the course of penance lasted for years, his perspiration slowly flowed down into the pit and it started overflowing. Awe-struck Maheswar seeing it shook his head, a little violently, perhaps. His diamond ear-ring then fell into the pit and so is called Manikarnika. Taking fancy for this, he resolved to give the potent Tarakamantra in the ears of those who die here. Moreover, he takes his bath every morning in this tank, making it holier. So the waters remove all sins. As this is consecrated by Lord Maha Vishnu by his penance and Maheswar by his bath, it is deemed to be doubly efficacious. Burning the dead and performing pindpradhan confer here special merits.

**HARISCHANDRA GHAT**

It is here the truthful Harischandra’s glory came to be published to mankind. It is well known that to keep up the word given, he passed through many ordeals and the final scene was enacted here. When his descended sword was about to severe the head of his own wife, there descended then the august divinities to stop him from killing her. They declared in chorus that he came out in flying colours, whereas Viswamitra failed miserably in the test of truthfulness conducted. He was smothered with praises and prizes too. So this ghat has become one of the much sought after ones. Many, after bath remember him and offer prayers soulfully.

**DASASWAMEDHA GHAT**

This is one of the busiest ghats with a hoary history, and it is here the city’s major activities are carried out in every field of human existence. It is the hub of the holy city, and hence the focal point for shopping, sight-seeing, worshipping etc. It comprises a wide thriving area and is always over crowded due to existence of fashionable shops, modern restaurants, and star category lodges; and each one is overflowing with humans—busy with several transactions of their own. The ghat is heavily crowded with colourful congreagations of yatris engaged in bathing and offering prayers at the behests of pandas. Religious discourses, chanting of slokas and singing of Sankirthans fill the air and please the soul, if one has time and taste for them. As it is very near to the holy
Viswanathji Mandir, so nothing but concourses of pilgrims going
with small copper vessels in their hands, filled with Ganga for
abhisek greet your eyes. In brief, it is the soul of Kasi and sum and
substance of spiritual life.

It is here the illustrious Bhrasiva kings of exceptional valour
and military prowers performed Aswamedha yagas one after
another. And at the completion of tenth, they used to take
cermonial bath with religious fervour, attended by pomp and
splendour befitting their royalty. So it bore that name—
Dasaswamedha ghat since then. The belief current in those days
and even today is that a bath after the horse sacrifice is very
efficacious and is equal to soulful salutations to Kesava. Many other
odd, yet credible legends took place here. Hence very sacred.

**PANCHAGANGA GHAT**

According to belief, the five famous rivers - Kirana, Dhuta-
papa, Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati meet here. The famous
Bindu Madhava temple is situated at the head of the well built flight.
And it is also consecrated by the association of Mahakavi Tulasidas,
who joined the Ramanandmath, situated atop the ghat, and
acquired proficiency in sastras with which his mind was fully
blossomed, fit to writing that immortal Ramacharitmanas. So
lures pilgrims for prayers always.

**KAPALA MOCHANA GHAT**

Lord Maheswar, legend says, committed the sin of Brahma-
hatya, when he plucked out the fifth head of Brahma in a fit a anger.
He went round the world for expiation of sin with skull bowl in his
band, taking bath in every holy thirtha. It was only here his bowl
disappeared, signifying the redemption of sin; so it became very
sacred. It purges one of all sins when bathed.

**HANUMAN GHAT**

It lies next to Harischandra ghat. It is famous for its remark-
able tranquility that lured and enabled Vayuputra Hanuman to
mediate and got his wish fulfilled. This area is colonised, as it were,
by South Indians – People from Tamil Nadu, Andhra, Kerala and Mysore., as evidenced big sized Dharmasalas and fine temples maintained by their Trusts bearing the marks of South Indian sculptural models.

**HISTORICITY**

There is no dearth of historical evidence, but the available one is so suffused with the mystery of Lord’s sports that it becomes humanly impossible to draw a precise line between legend and history. As it is consecrated by the presence of Ganga, irrigating vast plains, besides cleaning the people of their sins, it has been occupying a conspicuous place from the Vedic times. Many pouranic samraths and and h Istorical personage yeamed to extend their sovereignty over the holy and strategic area. The preising deity - Maheswar in his invisible from too, took a leading part in deciding the fate of people and the city. During the period, when the religious fanaticism reached the zenith, he revealed his cosmic from that brought in far - reaching changes. And thereby, he reinforced people’s faith in him and also established that physical might is inferior to spiritual might. Many miracles that happened in and around the golden Mandir bear testimony to this fact.

With the advent of Muslims, Kasi fell victim to constant raids, loot, arson and destruction. Some of Mlechchas, in addition to plundering the city, mutilated the sacred Sivalinga and consigned it to unholy places. But the irony of it, no sooner did the invader turn his back than religious fervour reinstalled it with agamic rituals, through committed Pitadhpathis and theist rulers, thereby showing to the world that Hinduism aprathihata and its glory, ajaramara But on one ocassion, this holy city went bereft of Sivalinga and regular worship. This is history. Regular prayers were restored with the invisible, yet invincible power of Maheswar. It happened in the reign of Sikandar Lodi. This religious bigot, not only razed the temple, but also banned further construction of any shrine on the old site, or anywhere in the city. It continued for 17 years for lifting the ban, and to re-ewing the regular worship, every ardent theist, Pitadhpathi and subdued king tired, but in vain. The struggle between life and death ended only with publishing of the mysterious might of the Omnipotent Lord Maheswer. Lord sent drought as first
measure, followed severe epidemics which swept off unprece-
dented numbers. The Lodi had tremors—ghastliness of death when
danced naked, he condescended to implementing the suggestion
of Narayana Bhatta—a spiritual leader of great reputation. Naray-
ana Bhatta, attributing the calamity due to damage done to Mandir
and stopping of rituals, assured normally, if prayers were offered.
Lodi agreed. With the performance of powerful Anushthan yaga,
brought down heavy down pour. A boon to wateless land.
Opening the eyes, Lodi lifted the ban. The temple was then
constructed and prayers, regularised. Will the Omni compassionate
God ever let down his bhaktas? No! NEVER so far. Later
Aurangzeb, the zealot turned blind to history and damaged all,
held sacred. But efforts at restoration bore fruit in 1783 with the
construction of grand temple by Rani Ahilayabai. Her bounty is
now enabling the bhaktakoti to avail the darshan of the Lord and
offering of personal prayers a rare boon to the thiests. The Mandir
is also called the Golden Temple, for the spires—sikharas are
adorned with gold plates, donated by Maharaja Ranjit Singh in
1835. Let us enter and feast our eyes with Lord Viswanath’s
adorable form.

THE MANDIR

The present temple is surrounded by busy commercial
establishments. As we proceed passing through the shopping
complex, we see Anna Puma temple on the right side. It is small,
but studded to the portals with very many adorable deities. The
images of Goddess in sitting posture with Maheswar standing with
a bowl are extremely grand and invoke instant veneration. There
are many niches and mandapas adored with many dieties.
Offering Prayers we reach the garbhagriha of Maheswar. The
sacred Phallus—Sivalinga is installed in a square shaped brass plated
hollow. Every one is allowed to offer prayers himself, though there
are Pandas, who conduct the entire ritual with chants, if required.
Many prefer personal prayers—pouring of the Gangajala on the
Siva linga, waving of burning camphor, after garlanding it. It is a
rare privilege granted, and the performer experiences an inexplica-
cible thrill passing his spine, when uttered Harahar Mahadevi after
rituals. There are many more small shrines and several niches
around this holy shrine. A little beyond this, there lies the famous gnaga Vapi – well of knowledge, where the deity entered, when iconolasts destroyed the temple. Behind the temple to the East, near Jnana Vapi, there is the Mosque, built by Aurangzeb. In the by-lane behind the temple, there is a temple of Dhundhiraja Ganapati. Beliefs is current that he is the State officer of Varanasi, with Bhairava as Kotwal, the chief police Officer, Lord Maheswar, the Emperor and Annapurna, the Empness feeding the people. Feeling emancipated at the darshan of Lord Maheswar and Goddess Annapurna, Yatris then go about visiting several places scattered to the four corners of this sprawling city.

**TULASIMANASA TEMPLE**

It is of recent additions to the temple city, commemorating the exact place, where Mahakavi Tulasidas lived and composed his master pieces. The entire text of his sacred epic is inscribed on the merble walls inside the temple. The vast compound contains well laid out lawns and beautiful mandapas with several deities beckoning attention. It also goes by the man os Surekha temple.

**SANKATA VIMOCHANA TEMPLE**

This is dedicated to Hanuman and is fuequented by locals. Whenever any problem confronts them and assumes proportions defying any solution, they rush to this sacred sport and offer prayers. It is surrounded by greenery and serves as a park. Here according to belief Hanuman meditated and enjoyed celestial bliss. Hence attraction. Very many shops and restaurants extant have converted it in a picnic spot, as a matter of fact.

**BHARATAMATA TEMPLE**

It is very near to the station. It is a very big mandir housing a relief map of India on the floor. Hundreds of places of religious and historical significance are marked out on the colourful surface. A first of it kind in India drawing all kinds of visitors. Neither the image, nor any design is seen, but the huge relief map holds sway.
BANARAS HINDU UNIVERSITY

It is nearly 6 Km. of the main Mandir. It is set in a vast campus, covering about 2,000 acres nearly. Huge multi-stored buildings for classes, big hostels for scholars and well-built quarters for staff feast the eyes of the visitors and recall to their memory, the indefatiguable efforts taken by Madan Mohan Malavya, one of the greatest sons of India, and the founder of this greatest seat of oriental learning. And the adorable munificence of Maharaja of Varanasi, the inimitable donor too. The Shiva temple built by Birlas in white mirable is the crest jewel of the vast campus. The Bharat Kala Bhavan Museum, inside the campus contains several invaluable paintings of various Indian schools and sculpturals exhibits. Hence attraction.

SARANATH

It is lies at about 12 km from Railway Station. It is the centre of Buddhist world, with gigantic buildings, embellished with excellent architectural marvels, built by several nationals, like Chinese, Burmease, Tibetan etc., housing the grand images of Buddha in reclining, sitting and standing postures draw all kinds of people for reverent prayers. Buddha preached his first sermon here in the third century B.C. Ashoka, the marshal-monk-monarch erected many monuments and amongst them, Dhamarajika, Dhamekh stupa and the legent monolithic pillar surmounted by a magnificent lion capital are visit worthy.

RAMNAGAR FORT

It is situated on the other side of Ganga. It is the residential place of the Maharaja of Varanasi. It is housing the Royal Museum, besides an old temple dedicated to Maharshi Vyas. So this place named VyasaKasi too once. The museum possesses an impressive collection of arms, furniture, in addition to an antique clock deserving an indispensible visit.
AYODHYA
The Earthly August Seat of Dharma

The name RAM is so sweet, so potent, so sonorous, so auspicious, so sacramant, so magnificent, so dignified, so short, so inspiring and so solacing that no parallel did exist in the past, nor there is any possibility of conceiving, coining, or coupling by anyone, say a poet or dramatist, lyricist or novelist, sage or seer, philosopher or pitadhipati, politician or educationist, critic or cynic, living in the world—Eastern or Western, Southern or Northem, higher or nether, and in any language or dialect; idiom or speech, for that matter. For proof, ask anyone—"Is there anyone living without knowing, or uttering, hearing or reading that enchanting name?" Effort courts a failure – total and eternal. Could any religious fanaticism, or sectarian dogmatism shun it, resent it, ridicule it, expel it, expunge it? Successfully and justifiably? 'No' is the right answer, it bumps out straightaway! Enquire any man – Hindu, Christian, Muslim, Jew, Buddhist, Jain, Confucian etc., of his knowing, or hearing of it, the answer YES, startles you. It is so popular and universal that you can never get a negative at any time, or in any place.

This monosyllabled magic word was uttered in high heaven first, and poet Valmiki, the Adikavi here down below, with suffixes and prefixes glorified, rather divinised it with such superb imagination and creative excellence, that none be it immortal too could ever improve upon, much less degrade it. And perhaps there is nothing that remains to be tapped or exacted; for, that immortal recounter left nothing for fresh additions to be made by investigation or invention. And lo! with progress of time, it is gaining in potency, increasing in popularity, yes growing horizontally and vertically! In fact. Listen to suffixes and prefixes, it is gaining with march of time – Janakiram, Ayodhyaram, Gangaram, Dasaratharam, Jayaram, Saketaram, Kosalram, Rajaram, Doulatram, Sitaram, Raghuram, Vaidehiram, Tulasiram etc., all these prefixes are glorified by its
combination. And suffixes like Ramacharan, Ramanarayan, Ramanand, Ramgopal, Ramdhun etc., only heighten its dignity. Even other religionists affixed it to their names, out of extreme veneration and fascination for its glory. Ramsay Macdonald - Anglicised for Ramaswamy Macdonald, and Abbas Ram, Jaffir Ram illustrate this. Affix it to the fore or rear of any name, it only glorifies that name, divinifies its contents, dignifies its position, magnifies its status, solidifies its potency, and lastly, signifies its rich, untainted, inexhaustible, immutable power. Mere utterance - audibly or inaudibly, it exerts its impact.

Why? If put, the answer surprises, stupefies, enthralls, elevates, or delights with such inexhaustible mine of evidence that it at once convinces one to live up to its ideals, or strive for correcting the incorrigible nature inborn or cultivated. For, Ram is the only singular person among mortals and immortals, who not only lived in ideals, but for realisation of them alone, lived a full, stainless, exemplary, adorable life, and set such standards that celestials too acknowledging its merit bowed to him heartily and soulfully.

‘How?’ comes now. He is justice personified, and righteousness incarnated. For him, partiality, disobedience, infidelity, duplicity, opportunity never existed. They never rather came out of their hide-out during his day. He was an ideal king-be it for spouse, or stranger, he held the scales even. Always. Neither twisting, nor constricting of the law ever raised its head, nor left a dot on the broad white canvas of his life. Was he heartless, remorseless by the way? No! on the other hand, he was compassion personified. He rose above Swa-para-bhava mine-thine considerations. Proof. When pleaded to take back Sita after the death of Ravana, he demanded Agnipariksha as pre-condition, though he knew perfectly well, she was purer than purity; more adorable than FIRE. On another occasion, he sent her to forest in her full pregnancy. NO, not even stone, or stone-age man would have done it. He did. Look! the victim fell at his feet and endorsed his verdict as the just one!

As son-Mother earth has not so far produced a similar one. Has not scriptures dinned that father is God on earth? God never errs, even for fun! Hence his mute acceptance of a fourteen year
exile. Lo! He implemented it instantly without scope for second thought on either side. As husband—he is non—pareil. He is monogamist. Pure and eternal. Every attempt at seduction bit the dust. Example: Surpanaka as sundari ravishing with the promise of power and position to him failed; so ran home sans ears and nose. Sati’s attempt at testing ended in her woe. As brother, he was benevolent, yet scrupulous. Has not Bharata spurning the sovereignty of Bharata khand adored his padukas accepting to be his deputy? As for matrubhakthi, Kausalya’s verdict bore no blot; it was a spotless, white, blameless manga carta. As man, he was upright, stood for WORD. Once uttered never was it distorted, restricted, constricted or reformed.

See him from any angle, turn the microscope lens upside down, weigh it in any balance, neither appears there any blot, or dot on the crystal clear immaculate white sheet that his life was. So, each sees in his sublime countenance, an adorable attitude befitting the nature of person, and the angle chosen, "for Dasara-tha, he is the ideal son protecting Dharma; for Kausalya, noble son, like the graceful cool-beamed moon; for Valmiki, the only character worthy of composition; for Viswamitra, he is the Vedas personified; for Vasistha, the ideal house-holder; for people, a kind ruler non-paréil; for Sita a Dharmavigrah, with rigid adherence to monogamy. Hence Maheswar’s obeisance, the Vidhatha’s unbounded adulation. He was Dharmavatha, unparalleled, Nyaya d̄evatha in prestone form. Such apara Dharmadevatha was born in Ayodhya, the capital of Kosala country. So, the entire land was consecrated; people, divined; and time, glorified.

ANTiquity

Manu, the far-famed law-giver is the founder builder of this holy city—Ayodhya, who left behind a long succession of illustrious yugapurushas renowned for their immortal deeds, and super human feats that gods descended again and again, both to soliciting their assistance in the wars against demons, and shower encomiums on performing mahayagnas, in addition to seeing them adoring Bharatamata with priceless jewels, culminating in
Sri Rama’s presentation of an invaluable diadem with his matchless, ideal reign, Rama Rajya that became a byword for righteous rule, a second of which cannot exist in any point of time. Hence became an ardent yearning for every ruler, but proved a mirage. Sri Rama, the darling of the nation, rather mankind was the 65th descendant of Manu, ruling the entire Bharatha Khanda, from Himalaya to Cape. He was the rightful successor to a galaxy of celebated Samrats of Solar dynasty, starting from the venerable patriarch, Manu himself.

Among the succession of luminaries that brought undying fame to the whole world, Puranjaya, Bhagiratha, Mandhata, Dilipa, Harishchandra, Ambarisha, Raghu and Dasaratha deserve special mention for their meritorious roles played during their golden days. They made themselves amarajavis for memorable deeds, such as valorous Paranjeya has the honour of being carried by Indra in the form of bull during his war against remorseless asuras, and hence gaining the title Kakutsa; Bhagirtha pleasing MahaVishnu and Maheswar with his severe tapas for bringing Goddess Ganga down to liberate his ancestors; Samrat-sage Mandhata, releasing from imprisonment Ravana, the demon king of Lanka at the entreaty of Brahma, besides the fortune of sucking the thumb of Indra in his infacy for living; Dilip’s magnanimous offering of his own body to the hungry ferocious lion holding to ransom Nandini, the celestial cow, for tending of which he followed to the dense forests at the behest of sages; truthful Harishchandra making the Omnipotent God and Devendra rush down to stopping the killing his own wife, for the sake of keeping up the word given, besides educating the adament Viswamitra; Ambarisha making the potent Sudarsana Chakra, forming an integral of his corporal body to protect him against pretadhamsas, and reforming the short tempered Durvasa; Raghu performing one hundred yagas besides the Viswajina yaga and giving away in dana all his possessions, including kingdom, true to the tenets of yaga, and imploring Kubera to gift money for helping a deserving arthi; Dasaratha leading his army at the humble request of Devendra to kill the demon Sambhasura, the formidable enemy of Devaloka, in addition to performing several yagas.
Into such imperial household, and to that gallant venerable Dasaratha Sri Rama was born as son, who by his triple motto-one wife, one word, one arrow entered into the innermost recess of heart of every devotee, blessing him with inexplicable beatitude. Though he bade farewell to the world by immersion in the sacred waters of Sarayu, his dhammaparipalana became immortal, making every governing body to imitate, imbibe and implement for care-free life here, and bliss there above.

After him many mighty rulers succeeded to that Dharmasimhasan and in Dwaparayuga too it enjoyed similar supreme glory. Brihadbahu, who was in the camp of Duryodhana during the Kurukshetra war, belonged to the same august line of rulers; and he was killed by Abhimanyu, the indubitable ferocious cub of Pandavas, Yet that dynasty did not go dry, it bore another species of rare the fruits, who brought unrivalled reputation in the realm of peace. Buddha, the Light of Asia, who upheld the superiority of compassion over violence belonged to Solar dynasty, and he was the 25th descendant after Sri Rama. Why, even Adinath, the first of 24 Thirthankaras of Jainism belonged to that great Ikshavaku race. He was called Rishabhadeva in his purvasram, and the scn of great king Nabhi. In addition, twenty out of the entire line of Jains belong to Ikshwaku race. And they have raised the reputation of their new-found religion by their preachings and personal observation. Almost all ruled from Ayodhya, or in suburban city called Saketa.

Ayodhya, the holy city that witnessed such spectacular glory was the capital and principal town that exercised its sovereignty over Akanda Bharata Khanda with heaven born Manu, as first emperor. And as such it carved out an unequitable name among the holy cities, and in fact, occupies the first place in the list of seven thirthas Ayodhya, Mathura, Haridwar, Kasi, Kanchi, Ujjain and Dwaraka. It is here hundreds of sacrifices of all types were performed, including Putrakameshtiyaga by the Solar Kings. Five of the illustrious Jain thirthankaras were born here. Buddha preached here his Dharma on several occasions and was largely attended by people of all classes, including kings: It was here venerable Vasistha - Kulaguru of Solar race lived, and was ap-
pointed during the time of Sudasa, who won the Dasayajana war with his spiritual power. Tulasidas’ immortal work—Rama Charita Manasa was written here. There are now several temples—Vaishnava, Saiva, Jain and Mosques in this place. So, visiting is a MUST to the god-minded man.

THE SARAYU RIVER

Ayodhya lies on the banks of the famous Sarayu river, taking its origin in the Kumayun mountains and is also called Gongra. It finds a reverent mention in the Rig Veda along with Sindhu and Saraswati. It is here on the banks of that self-same holy river Rama was born, nurtured and finally ended his life, making it all the more holy. Realising its holiness, yatris go to it for ceremonial both. For facilitating easy bath in Sarayu, many ghats with broad embankments and sturdy flights of stairs are built by philanthropists from time to time. Among them Ramghat, Lakshmanghat, Sugrivghat and Angadghat are specially famous. Invariably pilgrims take a dip at Swargadwara Ramghat. The Saiva shrine of Nageswara Mahadev adjoining this lures them first. Another temple Darsaneswar situated in the garden is also worth-seeing. Offering prayers to Siva lingas and other images of gods, they walk straight to Hanumangati.

HANUMANGATI

It is an ancient temple built on an elevated hill like mound with broad flight of stairs. It is one of the principal shrines visited by pilgrims and tourists alike. The life-size statue of Pavanaputra Hanuman is a sight adorable. It receives elaborate prayers every day, thrice. The sublimity pervading it, by the presence of large congregations of sadhus and bhaktas speak volumes of reverence shown to Hanuman, the fidelity incarnate, whose services to Sri Rama are memorable. This deity is according to sthalagna is the sentinel of Ayodhya and receives pujas with utmost devotion.
KANAKA BHAVAN

This main Ramamandir is situated in the heart of the city. Its architectural beauty and serenity lift the souls of yatris at its imposing sight. The beautiful, white marble idols of Sri Rama, Sita and Lakshmana in standing posture installed on the gold plated Simhasan, with gold crowns in North Indian costume feast the eyes and transports the viewers to blissful world. The chanting of ‘Ramnam’ by groups of people sitting in the spacious hall sends thrills. The sthalagna insists on uttering Rama again and again, explaining that when the lips are parted to utter the first syllable ‘RA’, all the sins escape, and with ‘MA’, the lips are closed, thereby allowing not any sin enter into the mind of the chanter. It was once during the Dasarath’s reign, the palace of Kaikeyi, Rama’s step mother and she willingly gave away to Sita on entering it, first time after the marriage. The present temple built on the same site exudes divine beauty and exceptional charm.

NAGESWARANATH MANDIR

The yatris are taken then to Nageswarnath shrine. It is an ancient temple, and according to legend, the holy linga was installed by Kush, Sri Rama’s second son during his reign, after Sri Rama’s Niryana. So has additional attraction.

MANI PARVAT

It is a sacred shrine built in memory of Hanuman, who while carrying the Sanjivini mount to giving life to Lakshman, rested here for sometime, keeping the mount here. Hence very sacred and visit worthy by pilgrims. It is situated two kilometres away from bus stand.
TULASI CHOURA

At about a kilometre’s distance from here there lies this famous temple. It is here Tulasidas, the Hindi Mahakavi wrote the famous Rama Charitamanas in a period of 2 years, 7 months and 26 days, making it reach to four corners of the world. This is the place of his divine inspiration that enabled him produce a masterpiece that in fact excelled the Valmiki’s Ramayana in popularity. The fraternity of writers miss not this august Mandir. A visit worthy place for all.

JANMA BHUMI

This is the prime attraction for every visitor after Kanaka Bhavan and Hanumangati. It lies at about half a mile away from Kanaka Bhavan. And it is here Sri Rama, the seventh incarnation of Sri Mahā Viṣṇu was born, so deemed as the most sacred, making the entire region honest – each atom, as it were exudes in explicable divinity; and atmosphere, surcharged with those incomparably lofty ideals of Pitrubhakti, Ekaptini vrata and Prajanuranjuka palana. To commemorate that auspicious event of his birth on this sacred soil, the legendary emperor, Vikramaditya built a grand temple. And it, in fact, could have perpetuated the glory of that avatarapurusha, but alien invasion and its impact brought incalculable harm to it and mankind.

Pilgrims then slowly move to other famous temples, like Tulasi Udan, Kala Ramjika Mandir, Jain Mandir, Gurudwara, famous mosque and the like studded to the Municipal bounds of that holy place. Devout Hindus make a journey to Bharat Kund lying at a distance of 24km. The present picnic spot of great attraction was during Rama Rajya, the much hallowed Nandigram, where Bharat, the ideal brother lived an ascetic life for 14 years. A visit – worthy place. Returning, they visit several temples at Fizabad, the Railway Station and principal town specialised in goods for this world and the higher world.
TRANSPORT

Air travel ends with Varanasi that connects with principal cities by Boeing Service. From this, buses take yatris to Ayodyha through Fizabad, which incidentally the last rail head. U.P.R.T.C. operates several types of buses connecting. Private organisations are playing Deluxe buses to Ayodhya, and to far off worth-seeing places.

ACCOMMODATION

Very many Dharmasalas of antique type provide accommodation, and a few lodges equipped with modern amenities also cater to the needs of visiting public, but many prefer staying at Fizabad, lying just at 5kms. off; for, new modern restaurants and star category lodges offer food and rest at one’s choice and taste.
INTRODUCTION

Who is superior to whom—the Creator or the created? Which is mightier to what the mover or the moved? Who deserves adoration first—the Primordial Being or His product? This questionnaire may easily be posed, but can’t be answered to the total satisfaction of the sensory organs. Logical explanations and figurative flourish may shut the mouth, only to throw open the doors of the mind to brood over them endlessly, restlessly, timelessly, resulting in answerlessly, to speak the truth. Hoary books—the repositories of the concentrated wisdom of Maharshis, affirm with examples from the life of the august divine personage of no mean distinction as Lord Maheswara that the Mover and moved-man and woman, Sivam and Shakti are equal, one does not exist independently of the other; their interdependence and reciprocal regard should be upheld and implemented, as exemplified by sharing of his half body to Mother Sati. It is mythologically honourable, but practically impracticable in the society of the days then or now. So it is rarely implemented, nay blatantly and deliberately derecognised, dishonoured, discarded, denigrated, desecrated and what not. Not by a negligible few, but a percentage touching the centum with an usual quota of exceptions, perhaps. Does this not mirror the impracticability of the truth expounded? Or embodying some snag? Or likely a bias deliberately imposed upon? Male chauvinism is totally, ruthlessly and openly holding this up to ridicule and subjugating woman to untold hardships, or public humiliation to such an extent that neither the ruling authority with military might, nor spiritual force of all the gods supporting the reformers and pravaktas has done anything in this? It seems, it is there ab initio and goes on ad infinitum, or at least to the zero hour of Mahapralana—the great deluge.
How could the lost ground be retrieved? Should it be allowed to continue? Does this not reflect the impotency of the subjugated? How could equality be restored? Willn't this inequality remain a slur on creation? Doesn't this sort of condition label Lord Maheswar as a hollow boaster, who concealed his cowardice in a crafty diction? "No, No, No, the argument is not right to the 'least point', bawl out Sakteyas. There is neither a loop-hole, nor did he give it a white wash. It establishes that Sakti gets her rightful place, if only it asserts and avows her powers. And establishes her rights in addition to exhibiting her possessiveness and continuing her perseverance till the end. She must assume dreadful form, display ferocity and hold on to pugnacity together with endorsing cruelty to achieving her objective. That is through Roudra alone, the injustice done can be rooted out; for, the submissiveness fails to get its position due at any time in this decadent society. This truth is represented by Mother Kali at Calcutta; and her tamasic puja, perhaps, is deliberately introduced with a view to righting the wrong. Her 'roudrrupa' though asserted as a retaliatory measure during the battle against Mahishasura, she retains it to strike terror into those, who disregard, or a mind to deride Srisakti.

**CULCUTTA – THE SEAT OF KALI MA**

Calcutta, the premier metropolitan city of the state of Bengal, and the erstwhile capital of British India has a very long tale about the Sakti cult. And even the very origin of its name rooted in the dim past affords a fascinating reading. It is derived from Kalighat, where the celebrated shrine of Goddess Kali has been lying since time immemorial. Another version attributes its derivation to Kilkila. Yet, there is another Kalikartta, strangely making a hint that the income of the Village of that name was exclusively used for the worship of Kali. It is one of the Saktipithas enshrining the image of Kali in her fiercest aspect-revealed with garlands of severed human heads around her neck; hanging long, broad dripping tongue, sharp white incisors, long flowing unbraided hair, and dreadful dark-hued complexion. The installation of this archa-murthi has a fascinating story.
According to one version, the statue was installed first by the Roy Choudrys, the renowned Zamindars of Barisa district of 24 parganas. In the dim past, the site on which the present temple stands was a thick forest. Once, a devout brahmin called Atmaram while praying on the river bed saw a bright ray flashing from a spot on the bank. On the next day he found there a piece of stone carved like a human toe. He picked it up and started worshipping. He was informed in the dream that the toe was that of Mother Sati's that fell when Lord Mahavishnu cut the Sati's corpse with his Sudarsan chakra. He installed it with great devotion and later it developed into a big temple. There is another version, according to which the famous Santosh Ray Choudry, while sailing in a boat with his family one evening, heard the sound of conch from a distance. When went in that direction, he found a brahmin a brahmin giving harati to a big image of Kali with the consent of brahmin he brought it and installed at the present spot. Later Rajiv Lochan Roy erected a temple with the permission of the Collector Elhard. Yet there is another story that a Kapalika kept this huge image in a dense forest to enabling them to offer human sacrifice, but the Roy Choudrys using their status and influence wrested it from them and built a grand shrine for Kali ma. The Choudrys conducted pujas regularly and propagated the Sakti cult around 1809, the present temple came up and attracted global attention by the miracles occurred in the lives of adorers. In course of time, it developed in every direction to the extent that it raised the slogan - Jekhane Bengali, Sekhane Kalibari- where there is a Bengali, there is a Kali temple. For Bengalese, she is the Prime deity, and Calcutta is the august seat of Kali Ma. It is the seat of many other renowned manifestations of Sati, such as Sowmya Kali, Hajarhuja Kali, Sarvamangala, Simhavahini, Bow Bazaar's Firangee kali, Thanthania's Siddheswari, Nimitla's Ananta Mayee, Dhakshaneswara’s Bhabatarini, Tarasundari, Adyapitha Adyakali and Billin-gani, Daktay Kali.
THE SAKTHI UPASANA AND SIGNIFICANCE

As the intellectual luminosity of the Bengalees is of a special kind and stands apart form its counter-parts, its contribution to the nation’s reputation is quite outstanding, and many great sons of Bengal achieved remarkable progress in religion. Their innovative dynamism and reformatory zeal established several hoary institutions and noble traditions. Among them, Sakti puja is highly laudable and it is knitting the class and mass into an unbroken entity. It has a great past and originated in the distant past. Tantric literature envisages a complete picture of Sakti Upasana right from the Vedic age. Many eminent Tantrikas have realised ten Mahavidyas, like Kali, Tara, Shorashi, Bhuvaneswari, Bharavi, Chinna Masta, Dhumavati, Bangala, Mantangi and Kamala. And of them Kali is supreme. The word Sakti is ‘derived from the root ‘sakt’ means thereby ‘to be able to do’. Sakti normally stands for ‘female, but it is neither male or female, but only a force and manifests in rational form. Mother worship tantamounts to worship of the highest divinity as the MOTHER-Sri Mata. In Sakti worship, Siva is impersonal and inactive. But Siva and Sakti are interrelated as prakrit and purusha and they are inseparable. They are two in one, and not one in two forms. Sakti is really para tatwa Satchi dananda swarupini. Siva Sakti in his ultimate state is calm and motionless. Both together, they become active only in one form. Motion and action start then, manifesting in vibration. It is described in their literature that Kali is of eight kinds, like Dakshina Kali, Bhadra Kali etc.

Calcutta was the centre of Sakti Upasana, and from here illustrious Sakti saints, like Chandidas, Ramaprasad, Ramakrishna Paramahamsa published to the world the glory of Sakti Cult and turned the entire Bengal into a Sakti pitha of enteral importance. It is this Calcutta, the seat of Kali Ma, whose ardent adorers Ramakrishna Paramahamsa sent abroad his disciple Vivekananda, the religious leader of interplanetary reputation, whose voice thundering, silenced the baseless claims of superiority of some religions in the Parliament of Religions at Chicago, that brought
undying fame to Hinduism, the Mother of Sakteism. It is this Calcutta, a corrupt form of Kalighat, as presumed, became more popular, but at the same time acquired notoriety for Narabali, an inhuman practice of human sacrifice to Mothe Kali, besides animals of all kinds.

Renowned as the prime centre of Sakti Upasana, enshrining Mother Kali in several of its manifestations; eulogised in literature as a famous yatrassthala; inscribed as the hot-bed of political intrigues of the aliens; famous for producing several luminaries in every field of human activity, noted for broad casting dynamism in realms of religion and literature, this city of Calcutta, the seat of Mother Kali has been attracting people in lakhs since time immemorial.

SOURCES

History, mythology and literature seem vie with one another in embodying, and disseminating the glory of this divya saktipitha. The corpus of evidence embedded in the archives is so abundant that it supplies enough material for several doctoral theses, if there is enthusiasm enough to doing research. Devotional literatures of Chandidas, Kamalakanta, Ramprasad etc., too offer ample proof to the fame of Mother Sakti. Mundakopanishad, Kalikapuranam,Manusamhita, Devi Bhagavata, Markandeya and Brihatdharma Puranas in particular embody elaborate episodes about the emergence of this goddess and the fame of this place.

ANTIQUITY

THE ORIGIN OF THE SAKTIPITHA

It goes back to the legendary past and begins with Daksha Prajapathi’s supercilious behaviour and unpardonable egoism that brought his down fall. Deeming his role as Prajapathi, assisting Brahma in the act of creation as the highest, he grew arrogant and expected the Trimurthis to honour him. Always and at all places. It so happened once he entered the Council Chamber of Brahma
attended by several high dignitaries including that of Lord Siva. Everyone got up and respected him, except Lord Siva. The latter unquestionably higher in status, greater is position and mightier in powers spiritual or physical. The impudent Daksha felt wounded and nurtured ill-will against him. He ill-treated his own daughter Sati, given in marriage to Lord Siva deliberately humiliated her in not inviting her to any function, or ceremony gaily participated by all of his daughters in whom he was sending invitations with due honours. And used to fittingly reward them with presents etc. too. In addition, he invited Mukkotidevathas to a great yagna he performed except Lord Siva, though he was his son-in-law, besides entitled a share in the yagnaphala. Its ulterior motive was to dishonour Lord Siva openly. Learning about the performance of yagna, Sati approached her Lord for permission to attend it, though invited. The Lord acquainted her with the deep motive of her father and dissuaded her to stop attending. Under the plea that she would teach her father a lesson on the right conduct, she grew adamant and left for yagna much against the will of her Lord.

The unexpected happened—the insolent Daksha hurled a volley of derogatory words against Sati for coming uninvited, and also Siva, since she demanded explanation as how such yagna would be performed without the presence of the right person as Lord Siva. When humiliation meted out touched the nadir, Sati with streaming eyes and fluttering frame burnt herself in Yogagni. When informed of the gruesome ending, Lord Siva sent Virabhadra, producing him from his matted lock to destroy the yagnasala along with Yagnakartha-Daksha. In minutes the whole area was found littered with corpses. In the pandemonium prevailed, the gods ran in great panic. Not satisfied, Lord Siva himself descended straight and started Tandavamritiya with Sati’s corpse on his shoulder, when the whole universe was heading towards total extinction. Then came Lord Mahavishnu and dexterously cut the Sati’s dead body into several parts with his potent Sudarsan Chakra. The parts that came off fell at different places of the Punya Bharat. And when Lord Siva regained his mental poise, he made every spot a Saktipitha. devotees henceforth started offering prayers to mother Sakthi by building fitting shrines. Among the 108 such sacred
spots, Calcutta is one among them, where Mother Satī’s four toe fingers of the right foot fell. In course of time, it regained reputation as a great Saktipitha, due to the tireless activity of Roy Choudrys of Barisa distinct of 24 Parganas. Sakti Upasana thus started spread to whole of Bharat Khanda, but Bengal evinced keen interest in making it grow into a great cult of global importance.

THE EMERGENCE OF KALI

The birth of Kali, one of the amsas Mother Parvathi has an exciting background and begins with Sumbha-Nisumbhas the two demon brothers of great prowess and a series of their unending misdeeds. As in the tradition of demons of the past, these two did penance and obtained from Lord Siva the boon of not meeting death at the hands of male species. Becoming deathproof thus, they unleashed atrocious forces to appease their asura pleasures. Naturally, the innocent and pious people received the disastrous impact of their sadism. As they specialised in the acts of stealing yagnaphala legitimately due to gods, the performers of yagnas were disappointed and could not get bliss. When prayed to Mother Parvathi for merciful intervention, she sent one powerful goddess Kousika on this mission. She was a beauty non-pariel. The demon-brothers were reported of it and advised to marry her. They sent their loyal officers Chanda Mundas as mediators in this regard. She sent them back with the message that she would marry them only, when they came out victorious in the battle against her. Unwilling to fight, the brothers despatched a contingent of powerful army under the leadership of Raktabhoja, Dumarlochana and ChandaMundas to bring her by force.

The very moment Kousika saw the huge army of Chanda Mundas, she turned red in face, as one Siva came out of her body and instantly the colour of her whole person turned dark. It is from that terrible form was born Kali—the dark-hued goddess and also called Kalika—a powerful goddess, who drank away the blood falling from the body of Raktabhoja by stretching her tongue and covering the whole battle-field; for he was blessed to be born in thousand forms from a drop of blood spilled by the enemy. The danava
brothers who entered the battle ground, after the death of Chanda Mundas and party were put to death in the end by that frightful Kali in her fiercest form. This awful aspect of Mother Parvathi after danava samhara took her seat in the Himalayan region. This form of Kali strikes terror and destroys bonds and hence she is called the liberator. Lord Maheswar himself, the Mahakala lies under the foot of Kali like a corpse symbolising the fact, that purusha is Udasina, while prakriti alone is active and is the principal cause of motion. Siva and Sakti thus represent consciousness and energy, but they are ONE, and nothing but Oneness alone exists between them. In the cosmic projection, this one becomes God and Goddess.

This Kali is portrayed as a very merciful deity, though shocking in her external features, like broad red shot eyes, sharp incisors, awful countenance, shocking stature and riding astride a terrifying lion. She is infinitely compassionate and appears as Sarvamangala, Sundari, Durghatanasini, Mahasakti etc., and grants the desires of her devotees liberally. And always stands by their side. She is described by many names such as Kali, for her dark complexion; Karali for frightening form; Manojava for swift motion; Sulohita for blood coloured complexion and Sudhumravarna for smoke coloured visage etc.

**THE ORIGIN OF NAME**

There is an interesting anecdote in Kalikapurana narrating about her dark colour. It is said that when Sati was born in her next birth to Himavan, she was dark complexioned and was endearingly called Shyama and Kali too by the parents. After marriage with Maheswar, he once addressed endearingly as Kali in the presence of gods. Taking it as an insult, she did penance and got a boon to turn Gauri with her Lord’s blessings. She is moreover, Balipriya and tamasikahari: yet she proved extremely solicitous and immensely generous to her discriminating devotees, who see in her Adya sakti, the ultimate giver of liberation from the cycle of births and deaths, when they enjoy infinite bliss in worshipping her. And they popularised the cult through song and Upasana that demonstrate her superhuman powers.
Chandidas, a devout Saktaya sang in praise of Sri Krishna and his sports at the instance of Mother Kali. Bengal gradually became a great Saktipitha, as numerous branches sprang up through out the length and breadth of the undivided Bengal. In every village, town and city, Kali is worshipped with unparalleled ardour, and she is held as the chief deity of the Bengal. In the undivided Bengal different manifestations of Kali such as Tripura Meher Kali, Vikrampur Sourang Kali, Jayadev Samaskhan Kali, Bagura Kalyaneswar, Birbhumi Bringapur Kali, Ambika - Durga Mayee, Siddheswari, Maider Kali and Tamluk Bharghavi, and these are a few among many existing and have been receiving worship regularly. Along with these, with the advent of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa and his coming to the fore as a unique worshipper, it encircled the whole Universe, through the masterly exposition of Hinduism and its glory by his illustrious disciple Vivekananda. Paramahamsa turned himself into a household word in Bengal. His obtaining the sakshatkara of the Mother Kali heightened his Spiritual eminence and helped him to weld different sects into a corporate whole. The Satwika puja that was introduced at Dakshinewar temple accelerated the progress of Sakthi Upasana and with the banning of animal sacrifice at the Kali temple by legislation, the Calcutta Kali Ma too gained better rapport with other similar sampradayas and started changing in tune with the modern trends that became the prime cause of its popularity now.

It is a matter of great interest to learn the oddity of installation of some Kali images for worship in Bengal. The image is installed atop a tree at Mehar; and in some other places, the images are kept half submerged in water throughout the year as at Khirgam, and it is called Jalodbhva Kali. There is another form called Guhya Kali and it is found in the palace of Maharaj Nanda Kumar of Bhadrapur. No where in India one can come across several types of the images of Kali and mode of worship as it is in Bengal. For Kali worship - Bengal alone offers variety, sanctity and piety of rare kind.
THE TEMPLE

The famous Kali temple is built on the bank of Bhagirathi at Kalighat, one of the busiest centres in the metropolitan Calcutta. It lies surrounded by big buildings on all sides with shopping arcades in front. The plinth area of the main mandir rises about three feet from the ground and has flights of steps on all sides. The huge image of Mother Kali is installed on a broad pedestal in a hollow depression of about 10 feet below the surface. The image in standing posture is gigantic in size. And is draped in red dress. She had three eyes. It reveals in rudrarupa. The potent weapons held in hands and frightful visage with broad eyes and sharp incisors strike terror. The garbha griha is quite big in size and has broad flight of steps to reach the feet of the Mother for worship. Normally the devotees offer prayers at the dwara itself. The unmanageable crowds almost from mom to night speak the unprecedented popularity of this saktipitha. There are minishrines for Lord Siva, Ganesh etc., around the main mandir.

PUJAS AND FESTIVALS

Here Kali is worshipped almost round the year, but particularly on Saturdays and Tuesdays the crowds are more. Krishna Chathurti celebrations have the greatest pull, and devotees in thousands flock and offer prayers with utmost ardour. Regarding the annual festivals, Deepavali celebrations reach the climax. The festivity and fervour are of rare kind and the auspicious time of worship has its uniqueness. Gaiety and sanctity mark the annual festival, when both class and mass participate lustily. The offering of worship on the midnight of Amavasya in Oct-Nov is a characteristic feature of Bengali custom. This is an old custom followed throughout the Bengal over centuries. In Calcutta it is a gala affair and lacs of people congregate both at Kalighat and Dakshineswar and at other places of worship too in the City.
CONNOTATION AND REPUTATION

"Bhuvaneswar" means the Lord of the world, and it refers to Maheswar – one of the Trimurthis of Hindu gods; and He is the Lord of Destruction, yet the most compassionate among them. It is applicable to places also; here it is the name of a place consecrated by the presence of Siva, and it is the metropolitan city of Orissa. It was and is the seat of government of one of the Indian states called Utkal then, and Orissa now. For centuries, it is called the cathedral city of India, on account of the infinite number of temples it has within its precincts. Legends credit it with having nine thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine temples, built by a single individual king-Yayati Kesari, a rare phenomenon, perhaps, second to none but to itself. It serves a royal banquet to the eyes of the devotees with numberless temples – small and big, old and new, simple and grand, ruined and maintained and visited or neglected, all but in one place. Though there is predominance of Siva temples every where, one can also see Vaishnava temples here and there. In addition, there are a good number of Jain and Boudhha shrines, either in adorables, or deplorable state reflecting the spirit of catholocity of the capital and its inimitable glory of tolerance to other religions. So Bhuvaneswar earned the sobriquet of the cathedral city of ancient India.

It is rightly called a Hari-Hara Kshetra due to possessing temples dedicated to Siva, and Vishnu as well. These imperishable rock treasures speak volumes of the catholicity of the religious outlook of the Orillas and the spiritual harmony existed in the past. Their massive proportions, soaring steeples, architectural excellences and sculptural adorations stimulate the instincts of devotion and transport one to regions of bliss. Moreover, the infinite number
of contrasts in dimensions, structures and daring virtuosity in sculptural art afford a wide range of source materials to the scholars to doing research. It is famous for the thirthas too. Many hoary pushkarinis, lying in several places narrate fantastic accounts of their origin, antiquity and sanctity.

**ANTIQUITY – POURANIC EVIDENCE**

Puranas recount that Lord Siva, the presiding deity of Varanasi, once had a problem to face with. He was irked at the prevalence of atheism and the unethical activities of its protagonists. Discerning the signs of incalculable harm approaching fast his votaries with its rapid progress, he grew restless and finally decided to quit Kasi and move to a safer place for a short period at least. While pondering over, it was suggested that the ever green mango groves of Utkal, sacred to Sri Maha Vishnu was desirable and conducive to Him in all respects. And the Lord has been abiding there since the beginning in his ethereal form.

When approached the presiding deity – Mahavishrī for refuge, He agreed to share it with him, on condition that Shiva shold not leave it at any time. This threw HIM into a dilemma. Sensing his doubts Maha Vishnu assured HIM that every thing which distinguished Varanasi from time immemorial was also to be found in that place. Satisfied with environs and atmosphere on examination, He stayed there in the form of Linga, which is now seen in the famous Linga Raj temple. Though many shrines were constructed, renovated and remodelled around this temple from time to time, the same Linga is kept on without changing its place. The Linga now worshipped has several other prominent names, among them – Tribhuvaneswar and Kritivas are very popular. The staying of Siva here brought another blessing unsought for. It harmonised the rival cults of Samvism and Vaishnavism soon after His settlement in the Vaishnava Kshetra. And it established name
as a famous Harhara Kshetra in course of centuries.

**HISTORY AND GROWTH OF LINGARAJ TEMPLE**

The Lingaraj temple – a magnificent piece of architectural marvel is the gift of one single dynasty called, Kesari that ruled in the seventh century. It took the present shape after a long period of five centuries, from the date of foundation to the time of installation of the deity. This imposing sculptural beauty dominates for miles around by its curvilinear tower measuring 147 feet in height. It was started by Yayati Kesari and completed by his grandson Lalithendu Kesari. Later Kamal Kesari added Bhoga Mandapa in the beginning of the tenth century. A little earlier, Parvathi Mandir was built by Vijaya Kesari. The final and the last addition of Naat Mandir was made by the queen of Salani Kesari in 1104. To be sure, there is no other place, where one can see such a continuity of buildings constructed so chronologically as here.

The famous Lingraj temple built in the North Indian Nagara style serves as a pinnacle of Orissan architecture. It occupies about 5 acres and is surrounded by a 520 x 465 feet thick high wall, pierced by three massive gates on three sides—on the South, North, and East. The Eastern gate is the biggest and is capped by a 50 foot-high pyramidal roof. As seen in the great Puri temple, the tower on the gate is small in size and adornment, when compared with the tower on the sanctum sanctorum. Atop the tower of the main temple, there are seen the replicas of the Orissan symbol of the lion crushing an elephant and the great Gryphones supporting the disc at the summit. They are exquisitely carved. Expect this, there is nothing that catches the attention of the visitors. As a matter of fact, sculpture is subordinated to architecture in the upper part. The main temple measures 147 feet in height and enshines three dieties on three sides—the principal one—Bhagavathi is on the North, Karthikeya on the West and Ganesha on the South. The Lord Lingraj made of black stone measures 8 feet in height and is encircled by a stone rim drawn to a point on the north side. The sculptural beauty on the walls attracts all sections of people. The scenes depicting the
marching army and jewellery displayed are superb. Many miniature buildings – votive shrines – the replicas of the tower found around the temple, constructed by the donors from time to time, but are totally neglected by the management. Standing in ruins, due to inadequate attention, they wring tears, to speak the truth. When caught between the wonder at the exquisitely chiselled, masterly embellished sculptural beauties, the handi-work of divine artists, and despair at the near ruins of the subsidiary shrines, the guide hastens the sight-seers out of the compound for seeing the worth-seeing ones, lying in its neighbourhood.

**SUBSIDIARY SHRINES AND THEIR FAME**

Among the temples that treasure up the gems of Orissan culture and sculpture Parasurameswar, Sisireswar, Brahmaeswar, Siddeswar, Megheswar, Mukteswar, Jameswar and Rajarani temples stand prominent and exercise great fascination. Though the maintenance is deplorably poor, their intrinsic loveliness and hoary antiquity hold insatiable curiosity and irresistible appeal. Sight-seers and devotees invariably visit them to feast their eyes with the remarkable art and fill their souls with divinity pervading them.

A visit to Ananta Vasudev temple on the bank of Bindusagar, dedicated to Maha Vishnu is considered a MUST. The temple enshrining the image of Anant Vasudev and Subhadra is a standing testimony of the commendable religious tolerance existing in this great kshetra. And justifies the belief of its being called a Hari-Hara Ksetra.

**SACRED THIRTIES AND THEIR ITHIHASAS**

This holy kshetra contains holier thirthas casting enhancement on the visitors by their strange stories. Among them, Bindusagara, Gosagara, Devipadahara, Papaanasani, Gouri and Kedara are considered worth-visiting for a dip. Ardent devotees take bath in them for purging off their sins.

Of the thirthas, Bindusagar is the biggest and has a mysterious story that attract thousands of pilgrims round the year. It is
1300 feet in length and 700 feet in breadth, with strong stone embankment on all sides. There stands a pretty shrine in the centre like a diamond set in gold. The story goes that Siva in order to compensate the absence of the Ganges here caused the construction of this tank soon after his settlement and bade the presiding deities of all the sacred rivers and tanks of the Akhand Bharat to deposit each a few drops of their waters. Soon His command was obeyed and the tank overflowed with sacred waters. Hence this thirtha is held in high esteem, and so a great craze for the pilgrims, whenever visited. It is recorded that the water having been contributed from all the rivers of our Punya Bharat, there is special merit when bathed in it. And the place was deemed highly sacred, hence the building of seven thousand and temples around it during its heyday. The Kedara Gouri has yet another story of eternal attraction. It is believed that the water has medicinal properties due to the natural spring inside and release women from the curse of barrenness, if bathed. A special attraction for the childless mothers. Some more places lying outside the city boundaries, yet accessible in a few minutes ride deserve space here.

THE PEACE PAGODA

Dhauli, lying at a distance of six km. presents historical evidences of its sanctity. The great Kalinga war proclaiming that Dharma Vijaya is superior to Digvijaya – the conquest of hearts is greater than lands was fought here by Asoka—the immortal marshal–monk–monarch and peerless champion of Buddhism. That immutable truth engraved on massive rocks lies here, drawing the visitors on knees without exception. A Santistupa was constructed at the instance of Japan Nippon Buddha sangha bends the heads of visitors in reverential bow.

THE UDAYAGIRI–KHANDAGIRI TEMPLES

The twin hills of Udayagiri and Khandagiri situated five Km. off Bhvaneswar contain both Hindu and Jain temples of historical and spiritual significance. There are many rock-cut caves built for Jain monks and they contain some inscriptions. In addition, there
are two thirthas-Akashganga and Guptaganga attracting pilgrims
with the divinity of their waters.

VAITAL DUEL

It is dedicated to the goddess Kapalini, enthroned upon a
corpse. It is a double storeyed temple and resembles a Buddhist
shrine due to the barrel shaped roof and frontal adornment. It
attracts Sakteyas and tantric worshippers in large numbers.

MUKTESWARA SHRINE

It is a Hindu shrine dedicated to Lord Siva but it adorned
with Buddhist sculptural patterns indicating thereby the religious
harmony that existed in those days. The Torana archway testifies
to the influence of Buddhist votive architecture. A much frequented
shrine. Besides these, the Orissa State Museum and Handicrafts
Museum are worth visiting also.

SISUPAL GUHA

The finale comes with the seeing of Sisupalgarh, lying at a
distance of 2 Km. On the bank of river Ganga. It has come into
limelight recently as a result of excavations carried out by the
Archeological Department. It is believed on the basis of available
evidence that it was the capital of Sisupal Kesari. With its rich
contents-different stratas of ruins belonging to two different and
distinct civilisations, it is casting unusual charm on scholars and
historians than the commonmen, visiting them through out the year.
Known as Arka Padma Kshetra, Konark occupies a prominent place in the history of the temples of India in general and Kalinga temples in particular. It is dedicated exclusively to the Sun-god—Surya Bhagavan, and it is the only of its kind existing in such gigantic proportions in the present; why in the past also for that matter. Though in ruins, the charm it casts on the art connoisseurs and the tourists is inexhaustibly irresistible and eternally enchanting; and lo! it is on the increase. No shrine in its abject ruins has ever attracted more tourists than this. Puranas and Itihayas enshrine a large body of facts extolling its glory with many memorable and awe-inspiring episodes. Mariners and merchants, who entwined their lives with the fall and rise of this Black Pagoda, testify to its glory with thrilling adventures of their own. Its conception and construction evoke amazement and wring instant veneration from any one. The renowned architect Sibai santra conceived and fashioned it as the temple chariot of the Sun-god with 24 gigantic wheels, drawn by seven mighty steeds. Though in ruins it visualises the colossal and magnificent scale it reached with every aspect of life it represented through its sculptural craftsmanship. Depiction of scenes representing a across section of the society is superb and beyond comparison. It is deemed as a marvel of all times, far surpassing the Tajmahal in craftsmanship. It is a tourist’s paradise and an art lovers’ sanctuary. On account of such enviable plus points of infinite variety, it has become one in the Golden Triangle of Orissa temples – Puri, Konark and Bhuvaneshwar.
ANTiquity

It is mentioned in Kapila Samhita that the region comprising the temple Konark and the river Chandrabhaga formed the integral parts of Maitraya woods, associated with the sports of many celestials. Prachi Mahatmya — another valuable treatise embodies many accounts of this once world famous temple. According to it, this is one among the hundreds of temples situated on the banks of the holy river Prachi and it was unique in many respects. Around this there existed many Aghraharams - Brahmin colonies, reverberating with the Vedic chants and hymns; and they were constructed primarily for the temple employees. It was a sea port of intercontinental fame, called Chitrotpala and carved out a name as a flourishing centre of religion and trade. Here on this Punyabhumii countless people used to throng during the annual festival for a holy dip in Chandrabhaga and to see the rising Sun believing that the Sun-god appeared with his chariot on this day. This same festival is being celebrated every year on the Magha Saptami—seventh day of bright fortnight of the Lunar month. Hieun Tsang the renowned Chinese philosopher recorded his observations and associations in his diary and called it Che-li-talo.

SamBA's Episode

Regarding the habitation and visitation of celestials and the performance of their 'lillas', here is an interesting Puranic evidence. It is extracted from Samba Purana, a veritable mine of many fabulous accounts. It narrates that Samba one of the sons of Lord Krishna was frivolous by nature and used to incur displeasure to his father quite often. Once when Krishna’s incense reached the zenith, he cursed him to suffer from leprosy. On imploring for mercy, he was asked to do severe penance in Maitreya forest of Utkaladesa till such time of finding the image of the Sun, floating on the river Chandrabhaga as an act of atonement. Samba did as bid and recovered from the loathsome disease. In token of reverence, Samba built a grand temple and installed the image. The
place thus shot up into prominence started attracting devotees. All this happened in centuries back only. With the passage of time, its glory had gone. And gone with it the sea also receding for about 3 Km. to the south-east of the temple and, the river Chandrabhaga becoming as insignificant pool. Yet in the very same place the present temple was built by the kings of Kesari dynasty.

**HISTORICITY**

Till the beginning of the ninth century, its exact position is shrouded in mystery, or rather hidden in the sea shore. Neither detailed history, nor substantial proof of its name and glory is available. It was only when the Kesari kings ascended the throne, its importance was realised and erecting of the shrines of unparalleled splendour was undertaken. Purandar Kesari set the wheels in motion. Impressed with the divinity hovering over the ruined temple, he built a new one and caused the issue of edicts for the regular performance of puja by Brahmans, with gifting of eight villages for their maintenance. When Raja Langula Narasing Dev, son of Anangabhima Dev came to power, he took vigorous steps to heightening the glory of the temple with a special design of his own and started construction under the able and direct supervision of his favourite Minister, Sadasiva. He employed twelve hundred artisans, who laboured for sixteen long years to complete and give it the present shape. It is estimated that two hundred crores, the entire revenue of the state collected over twelve years was diverted to making it a superb piece of art and a place of worship, matchless in conception, peerless in execution and timeless in reputation. It has immortalised his ambition of commemorating his victory over certain parts of Bengal and proudly celebrated absolute and uninterrupted freedom from Muslim domination of his country. As pointed out by the historians, it is more splendid than that one built by his grand father at Puri. And lo! more ornamental rather monumental than that of Tanjore, and deemed as a marvel of all times. This regally grandiose monument is dedicated to the Sun God, the lokabhandu-pratyaksha daivam, visible to all eyes, adorable with hearts hands and souls.
ITS SPECIALITY

The very conception of the temple resembling a chariot in motion breaks new ground and awakens amazement. Verily, it is a daring departure from the beaten track. It is conceived on a colossal scale, unknown to, and unheard of by people, living then, or now. To make it an exact representation of the chariot, it is fitted with twenty four gaint wheels, twelve on each side...and seven massive horses in front, symbolising the twenty four fortnights of the year and the seven days of the week respectively. To impart realism, the entire stupendous structure is placed on an elevated huge plinth, and as such it resembles an imposing chariot in suspended motion, ready to take the Sun-god to sky for riding across the heavens. The several tires on the pyramidal roof are domed with figures of lovely dancers etc.

The tower on completion rose to a height of 225 feet and was joined with a 100 feet high porch, whose base was beautified with several subsidiary shrines, fitted with flights of stairs, leading to the images of the Sun god, installed in well decorated niches on three sides. Exquisite craftsmanship peeps through every pore of the images studded on all sides. These superb works of art exhibit such delicacy and accuracy, possible only with tools as fine and sharp as needles. Further, the main temple with its porch and principal halls are so designed that the first rays of the Sun fall directly on the head of Mitraditya - the main image after passing through the halls. And the wheels are so fashioned and fitted to form sun clocks, enabling the reading of time according to the position of the Sun during the day. The whole mass of this giganatic temple is sorrounded by a huge conclosure, measuring 875 x 540 feet, with thick walls of varying width between 20-25 feet. This architectural marvel with unusual dimensions ranking very high among the uniques, fell to the fury of Kalapahad, the Muslim ruler of Bengal in 1568. Alas! its glory departed with the displacement of the arch-stone and the mutilation of all the art treasures, embellishing every inch of that grand structure. Later, earthquakes and lightnings erased its remaining beauty, leaving a few tall and remarkable portions to tell its sad tale to the world. The havoc caused by a terrible cyclone in 1848 completely buried its unearthly
glory in the send dunes.

Nay, its fall started, according to certain versions, immediately after installing the Kalasa atop the pyramidal roof. It is reported that certain columns of that great structure crumbled due to the excessive weight of the massive slabs, froming the roof without adequate strong support from below. Any way, the ruthlessness of the Muslim invader caused irrevocably irreparable damage to that superb art. Touched at its plight, Narasinga Dev, the king of Khurda did invaluable service to the theists by removing the deity of Sun.-god along with the Anur pillar to Puri in 1638 and installing them in the temple. They are being worshipped with great fervour. Consoling the grief-stricken sight-seeing enthusiasts thus, the guide takes them to other numerous places of interest, lying in the vicinity of this mediaeval monument of remarkable craftsmanship.

RAMACHANDI SHRINE

Halting them at the portal of Ramachandi shrine located on the river bed, he narrates the story thus:

“Ramachandi was the presiding deity of a small, yet popular shrine situated in the compound of the Sun temple. Luckily she escaped from the cruel hand of Kalapahad by a stratagem. Seeing the relentless iconoclast entering her Sanctum, she appeared before him in the garb of a maiden and solicited him to wait at the door till she returned with water for the goddess to avail her guidance. He obliged. Enraged at her inordinate delay, he dashed into the innermost shrine and found to his shock the pedestal empty. Presuming the running maiden to be carrying image of the goddess, he followed her past-haste to the bank of the river Kushabhadra. There to his surprise, saw the Goddess Ramachandi floating in the middle of the river, which was in full floods. Unable to garb her, he went back desperate.

Ramachandi then advised an ardent priest in dream to build a temple for her on the bank. Her behet was carried out with donations from religious-minded persons. Countless visitors offer prayers even today. Do your part.”

After worshipping her, pilgrims proceed to Bhuvaneswar.
Puri is situated on the banks of Bay of Bengal, in the coastal districts of Orissa. It is the religious metropolis of the State of Orissa, teeming with a population of three lakhs, and covers an area of 10,159 Km. The name seems to be of modern origin, abbreviated for Purushothama Kshetra of the past, in all probability.

It is a Railway terminus on the South Eastern Railways and is connected with every place of historic and religious importance of the state. As it forms the apex of the golden triangle of Puri, – Konark and Bhuvaneswar – the most worth-seeing holy places of Orissa, both private and State Bus Services are available in plenty. Tourist vehicles of all types serve the needs of the pilgrims and tourists at all hours from any point of alighting to any point of destination. It is 60 Km. off Bhuvaneswar, the present state capital. Its air port is connected with the rest of the principal airports of India by boeing flights.

UNIQUENESS

From time inmortal, it is famous for its religious shrines, historic antiquities and architectural treasures. It is a thirtha kshetra, and boasts of a host of holy lakes and ponds besides the blue waters of the Bay of Bengal. A bath in them purges one of his sins and diseases. Tradition registers that one gets salvation by his mere coming in contact with the air, soil and waters of this place, and will become immortal, if he offers soulful prayers to the deities enshrined in and around the Srimandir–Jagannath temple. Nay, even by uttering the names of scores of deities adorning the niches and minishrines, one’s soul – Jivatma gets lifted and flies to merge with Paramatma.
THE RATHA YATRA

The Ratha Yatra - the annual chariot festival is another notable factor for the world-wide popularity of the temple. It is held in the month of Aashad in such a grandiose and splendid manner that history has not so far produced any parallel to it, in matters of popularity, sanctity, immensity and sublimity. Its peculiarity lies in the fact that the three Moola Vigrahas are taken in procession in three separate and well-decorated gigantic cars from the Main Temple to Gundicha Mandir, lying at a distance of about two kilometres. The belief is current that he who stays here for three days and nights is freed from the cycle of birth and deaths. Its history is vast, and sanctity, defies description. Of the three, the Jagannath chariot is superb. It is 45 feet in height and elegant with soul filling decorations. It is supported by 16 wheels and as many as 2 lack people participate in it. It commemorates Lord Krishna's journey from Gokulam to Mathura. The deities remain there for a week. Millions from all over India avail this unique sight. There is a great craze for touching and tugging the car; for, it is considered as an act of emancipation by the orthodox Indians. The festivities of this grandiose event start with Hindu New year, when the trinity - Jagannath, Subhadra and Balabhadra take a boat-ride followed by bathing festival. After this, the deities are taken to the sanctum. Emerging from there the yatra begins and reaches the summer temple.

It is dedicated to Mahavishnu - the Lord of the Universe and He is called here Jagannath. It is one of the four Dhams of Srimannarayan, the others being Badari, Dwaraka, and Rameswaram. Sacred books describe that Sri Mahavishnu bathes in Badari, drapes in Dwaraka, dines in Puri and sleeps in Rameswaram. Hence the special significance is attached to the prasad in this temple.

MAHAPRASAD

The Nivedya ritual is unique. The Bhoga, or food offerings of Jagannath is called Mahaprasad. Perfect equality is maintained in
the distribution of the Mahaprasad. All—from prince to pauper are equal in claiming and partaking it as evidenced by the observance of eating by all at a time in one place, sitting side by side. As many as 64 delicacies—each is a culinary triumph are offered to the Lord with elaborate rituals. The method of cooking too is unique and they use earthenware vessels only. Seven distinct dishes are cooked at a time in seven vessels of different sizes, keeping them one over the other and placing on one oven. The food thus cooked is offered first to the Lord and next to the devotees numbering about 10 thousands every day. Needless to say, the kitchen must be gigantic, and it is the largest of its kind in the world. It is estimated that as many as twenty thousand people are dependent on the temple with six thousand males working as temple personnel is all departments of administrators round the clock. The hierarchy of priests is divided into 37 orders, and moreover, people belonging to every caste and profession are engaged for cooking and there are hundreds of them working on regular salary. This castelessness observed in cooking accounts for the emergence of the term ‘Sarvam Jagannatham’, signifying that there prevails in Jagannath temple only ONENESS and the Lord stands for equality. And encourage it in several ways.

ITS ANTIQUITY

It was called by many names in the days of yore. As many as eleven names are recorded in the scriptures. They are:

Each name has its own history, evidence and background. History and legend embody several awe-inspiring and breathtaking anecdotes, illustrating the divinity of the place. Renowned tourists and pious pilgrims made chronicles of their memorable experiences and observations, testifying to the glory of the place, during their sojourn and stay in this holy kshetra.
HISTORICITY

Several stories are narrated about the origin of the temple and its deities. Legend and history seem vying with each other in bringing out its divinity. So each guide, or local has his own version and interpretation, but confesses humbly that if one enters into the maze of its origin, none but God alone could take him out of it, for concrete evidence eludes the grasp of any of them. Ironically, divinity though invisible fills the soul of the devotee and makes him utter—“Many and varied are the ways of God and this is one as such.”

VUDAYANA EPISODE

Among the host of accounts two deserve mention and elaboration. According to one version, the presiding deity Jagannath was once called Neelamadhava and he was the son of Vudayana—a Pandian king. He was extremely fond of the aborigines of the place and became one with them—following their ways of life and living. He endeared himself to them to such a degree of inimitable intimacy and compassion that they treated him as their God and guide, when he was alive. On his demise, they made an idol of him and started worshipping. This is the reason for the ‘Sabaras’ enjoying certain rights in matters of administration and performance of rituals to the main deities even to day.

The story goes further that this enchanting idol was carried away by force to Malwa by Mahapadma Nanda. Later, Kharavela, the King of Kalinga invaded the place and on defeating him, brought it back and installed it with all fanfare. In the ninth century, Yayata Kesari constructed an imposing shrine here. Finding it ruined, Anantha varma Chodaganga started rebuilding it in the twelfth century. The present shape and size are given by his grandson, Anangabhima Deva, who spent the entire state revenue collected over 12 years. This account appears to be a blend of history and legend. Religion seldom escapes from this.
INDRADRYUMNA EPISODE

Another chronicle recounts on the basis of the existing wooden images of the presiding deities that one celebrated king by name Indradyumna of Malva constructed the temple in the dim past. Desiring to offer worship to the image of Lord Vishnu personally, he did penance and performed one thousand Aswamedha yagnas. Pleased with his devotional ardour, Lord Vishnu appeared in the form of log floating on the sea. Forthwith, he commanded the expert carpenters to fashioning the log into an image of Mahavishnu. Alas! the chisels lost their edges, when applied to that divine log. And blood started oozing at every stroke of the hammer. Mahavishnu then came in the form of an old carpenter and consoled the desperate king that he would make the image within 21 days, if a room exclusively meant for this with provisions, for absolute privacy were provided. The king agreed. As days passed, the king’s curiosity mounted and went beyond the stage of endurance. With uncontrollable inquisitiveness he opened the doors before the schedule time and found there, three incomplete images of Jagannath, his brother Balabhadra and sister Subhadra. When searched for the carpenter, he failed to locate him anywhere. All the three images were found in shapes only from the waist upwards. The hands of Balabhadra and Jagannath were not fully fashioned, nor polished. They were incomplete, while for Subhadra, no attempt at making hands was taken up. Fearing further disaster, Indradyumna installed and worshipped them with all due rituals. This credibly incredible account—a fusion of fact and fiction is to be only believed than questioned. Belief takes one nearer to the Lord, whereas doubt drives one out of the compound. Reserving the controversies to the research scholars, let us enter the temple for the darsan of the Lord.

THE MAIN TEMPLE – SRI MANDIR

This imposing shrine dominating the landscape for miles around, beckons the attention of the pilgrims with its architectural grandeur and sculptural beauty at a mere glance. It is erected on an
elevated place, called the Nilagiri—the Bule hill and in is in the heart of the city. It is one of the best specimens of Kalinga school of architecture, in its finished form, built by Chodaganga in the 12th century with a view to commemorating the shifting of his capital from southern to central part of Orissa. It is a supreme specimen of the richness and plasticity of the Kalinga style of architecture. This Srimandir, as it is popularly known has four well-marked out Mandapas. They are Boga Mandap, Naata Mandap, Mukha Mandap and the Bada deula—Main Mandap; and all the four stand in a line with entrances opening one into another. The Main temple is 210 feet high and it is the highest of the temples in Orissa then, or now. There is a blue disc over the tower and it is called the Sudarsan Chakra, the divine weapon adorning the right hand of Lord Krishna of Dwaparayuga. These four Mandapas are surrounded by two compound walls; the outer one is called Meganath pacharli and the inner one Bahar veda. It has four gates on four sides and they are called by different names. The Lion’s gate on the Eastern side is the biggest, and the others like the Elephant gate on the North, the Horse gate on the South and the Tiger gate on the west come next in size and importance.

The pilgrim entering the temple through the Lion’s gate has to ascend 22 steps called the Baisi pahach. In front of the Lion’s gate stands a 35 feet high pillar called Anur pillar and it is presided over by the sun’s charioteer-Anur. Offering prayers first to it, pilgrims reach the interior part, where there are more than 100 shrines dedicated to almost all the deities found in the Hindu pantheon; and that is the speciality here. As the temple tradition insists on one seeing the principal deities first before circumambulating, let us enter the Bada Deula to feast our eyes with the beauty of the Moola Vigrahah.

THE ARCHAMURTHIS

The images of Balabhadra, Subadhara and Jagannath, made of wood are installed on a broad five feet high pedestal called Ratna Sinhasan. The statues of Balabhadra, Subhadra and Jagannath are sufficiently big in size, are installed in standing posture. They measure six feet, four feet, and five feet in height respectively.
and are draped in white, yellow and black dress. The sanctum sanctorum is very spacious. Though bereft of sculptural adornments, it is unusually vast and there is provision for making pradakshina to the Mula Vigrahas. Strangely enough, there is neither dazzling diamond jewels, nor shimmering outfit, as seen in the south Indian temples found here. Why, even the pompous paraphernalia are conspicuous by their absence. Simplicity and oddity greet us at every step. There are many explanations and divergent versions about the form of deities and the influence they have on the ardent devotees. It is believed that the deities Balabhadra, Subhadra and Jagannath represent respectively the three major sects of Hinduism—Saivism, Sakteism and Vaishnavism, and standing on one and the same pedestal, they are establishing the essential unity of mankind and equality among their children. Hence the attraction for all the three sects. Another version says that the three images are the symbolical figures of the Buddhist Triad—Buddha, Dharma and Sangha; and so visited by the Buddhists in large numbers. Regarding the popularity and fame of the temple, many stories are circulated. According to one, the spirit of Brahma is embedded in the breast of Jagannath and it is the main cause for the unprecedented popularity, universality and sanctity of the place. Some believe that a piece of the bone of Lord Krishna is enshrined in the bosom of Jagannath. Yet others hazard a guess that the breast of Jagannath encases a tooth of Lord Buddha. The claims of several others may appear fantastic and baseless, but none can deny, or refute with evidence of the unearthly glory of Lord Jagannath.

MINI SHRINES AROUND THE SRI MANDIR

There are nearly as many as one hundred mini-shrines inside the compound. Among them, Kasi Viswanath on the southern side of the outer enclosure attracts many devotees. Sada bhujgouranga, Barabhahi Hanuman, Narasimha, Rameswara Mahadev, Dwarakanath, Badarinath, Lokanath, Barabai, Sitala, Kanchi Ganesh, Pataleshwar, Dadhi Vamana, and Navagrahas deserve special mention. Devotees join their palms as the guide narrates many special features of each, moving from corner to
KALPA VRIKSHA

Near the Mukha mandapa, there is an old Banyan tree standing to relate a strange story. It is believed that during the great Pralaya, Mahavishnu lying on a leaf of this tree floats on the water. He reveals Himself in the form of Bala Krishna to the sage Markandeya then. It is a wish-yielding tree; so barren women worship it for children. Sitting under its shade for a while, one feels relieved of the worldly cares together with the thoughts of sins. Devotees go round the tree touching its trunk and branches for emancipation. Some offer worship with ‘Pramidas’ bought from the stalls nearby.

OTHER SACRED PLACES IN PURI

Besides Srimandir there are several sacred places of worship in Puri. Its eight directions – Ashtadiks are guarded by eight sambhus, with distinct names like, Markandeswar, Yagneswar, Nilankanteshwar, Vilveswar, Baleswar, Isaneswar, Patalswar and Kapalamohan. Along with them, there are eight Chandis keeping guard the city. They are Baha Mangala, Sarvamangala, Bimala, Alamba, Ardhansani, Dakshinakali, Marichika and Harachandi. There are many sacred tanks in Puri. Among them the pancha thirthas – Indra Yamuna, Manikarnika, Markandeya, Swetaganga and Mahadadhi are deservedly famous and ardent devotees take bath in all of them for purging off their sins.

With such immense popularity and inestimable glory built up over centuries, Puri became a great spiritual centre and attracted many philosophers, preachers and monks of international reputation. Savants and seers like Sankara, Ramanuja, Madhva, Kabir, Nanak etc., established monasteries of their own to spread the Vedic culture and glory of the Land. Among such monasteries, numbering seventy, Govardhan Math of Sankaracharya, Radhakanta Math of Chittanya, Raghvadas Math of Ramananda, Uttaraparswa Math deserve unqualified praise for their selfless service. In addition to these monasteries, there are scores of Dharmasalas maintained by philanthropists catering to the needs of the ever increasing influx of
pilgrims. Dhoodwala Dhamasala, Goenka Dhamasala, Bhadia Dhamasala, Mahavir Dhamasala are popular and famous. Lodging houses with up to date facilities for comfortable stay are constructed in important localities to facilitating the pilgrimage enjoyable. Moreover, Tourist Bunglows and youth Hostels accommodate hundreds of pilgrims providing boarding, lodging and transport facilities round the clock.

The passing of temple administration from the Gajapati kings to the popular government inaugurated a new era. Under the efficient supervision of the Administrator appointed by the State Government, the temple is making commendable improvement in spirit with the changing trends of the times; yet there are many areas deserving attention and one can wish that its glory will never fade and it will ever stand up to justify the description of the Bramhanda Purana, which says, "Nothing can be a substitute for Puri as a holy pilgrim centre. Verily, it is the paradise on earth".
Badrinath Temple

The Principal deities of Badrinath
- Devotees preparing the prasad.

Yamunotri Temple.
Kasi Viswanath Linga – Varanasi

Triveni Sangam – Yatris taking bath
The Golden Spires of Viswanath Temple

The Buddha Temple - Buddha Gaya
Balabhadra, Subhadra and Jagannath – Puri

Gudicha Mandir – Puri
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