

[Terrorist Attacks Fail to Halt Amarnath Pilgrimage](#)

Category : [November 1994](#)

Published by Anonymous on Nov. 02, 1994

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Army Protection Required as 45,000 Trek to Remote Mountain Cave to Worship Natural Ice Lingam

The first thousand pilgrims set off by bus from the Ranbishewar Temple in Jammu on August 10th under heavy army security. The group, more than half of them sadhus, safely reached Amarnath Cave four days later after traveling the last forty miles on foot or horseback. In the following week 45,000 made the trek in defiance of a Muslim militant threat to attack the pilgrimage. Before the threat, the annual event was expected to attract 100,000 devotees of Lord Siva. They come to see the ice Lingam which forms naturally in the cave each August.

For four years since the insurrection in Kashmir flared up the pilgrimage had gone on peacefully. In fact, the entire logistical support for pilgrims' food, shelter, transportation, etc., was provided by the Muslim residents of the area—a demonstration of communal harmony and cooperation typical of Kashmir's past. Then the government siege of the Hazratbal shrine in Kashmir, which houses a single hair of Prophet Mohammed's beard, inflamed Muslims. The siege was lifted, but 13 army bunkers remained around the shrine. One Muslim militant group, Harkat-ul-Ansar, threatened to attack Hindu pilgrims if the bunkers were not removed. The threat, coming from a group comprised of hardcore, battle-hardened Afghan Muslims, was taken seriously by the government of India. This group was involved in the kidnapping of two British trekkers in June. Several other militant groups endorsed the ban. The Harkat-ul-Ansar has also threatened the Vaishno Devi Temple in Jammu. The shrine attracts three million pilgrims a year from all of India and is the mainstay of the area's economy.

The bunkers were removed, but new demands were made by the group. In response, 10,000 soldiers and paramilitary troops were assigned to guard the pilgrims. Even many Kashmir Muslim groups appealed to the Harkat to lift the threat, but to no avail. Before the threat, the number of pilgrims was expected to reach 100,000 this year, up from the 80,000 in 1993. There were 30,000 pilgrims in

1991, and 50,000 in 1992.

On Wednesday evening, August 10th, there was a grenade attack at the Tourist Reception Centre in Srinagar. Two policemen, Mustaq Ahmed and Sonnalullah, were killed and four others injured. Press reports are conflicting as to whether the four injured were police or pilgrims. The breach of security was an embarrassment for the army. A second attack occurred the following day, but no one was injured. Soldiers detected and defused two land mines along the route.

The pilgrims were undeterred. Amidst the chants of "Jai Bhole Shankar," "Jai Bamb Bhole" the first group of 1,000 boarded chartered buses and taxis and sped toward Udhampur, where an army convoy met the pilgrim's vehicles. Half of this first group stayed at Rambandh overnight, the others left for Pahalgam, from where the pilgrims go on by foot and pony to the cave. There were no crowds to welcome them there as in a normal year.

Terrified at the militants' threat, not a single storekeeper, "ponywallah," doctor or even government civil servant would assist with the pilgrimage, thus depriving the area of US\$12,500,000 in revenue from the pilgrimage. Storekeepers had stocked up for months in advance. Now the entire logistics of the pilgrimage was put in the hands of the army. Fearing security breaches, even Hindu organizations which had offered to feed the pilgrims were refused permission. "I do not know what to do," said Anant Prakash Sharma of Amritsar. He had spent \$10,000 on supplies to feed the devotees, just to be told to keep his things packed. The closed markets and restrictions on their movements made trekkers feel they were in a "zone of war," reported pilgrim Ravi Kumar from Amritsar. "Had I known that we would encounter such a situation, I would not have come," he lamented.

The pilgrims, each subjected to a body search and issued an identity card, made their way to the cave side-by-side with machine-gun toting soldiers. An occasional helicopter scanned the hilltops. Sandbag bunkers dotted the trailside.

The biggest disappointment for many pilgrims was the premature melting of the ice Lingam. It had been well-formed on August 4th, but by the 14th, when the first batch of pilgrims arrived, it had disappeared. The ice mounds representing Parvati and Ganesha were still there, but a fifth their normal height.

A common explanation was that the cave was relatively warmer this year as the temperature of the valley was high in August. The pilgrims mostly regarded the premature melting as an inauspicious portent. In fact, some declined to continue the pilgrimage and returned from Pahalgam.

The Sivalinga ["mark, or sign of the Supreme God"] is the most prevalent icon of Siva, found in virtually all Siva temples. It is a rounded, elliptical, aniconic ["of no definite form"] image usually set on a circular base or pitha. The Sivalinga is the simplest and most ancient symbol of Siva, especially of Parasiva, God beyond all forms and qualities. It is taught that God in this supreme state cannot be represented by any specific image, so a simple stone or other object is used as a mark instead. Naturally formed Lingams such as at Amarnath are considered very auspicious.

The pilgrimage's chief priest, Mahant Dipender Giri, is in charge of the Chari Mubarak, the holy silver mace which represents the Shakti or power of Lord Siva. The mace was carried as usual from his temple to the cave and arrived exactly on the full moon.

Hinduism Today correspondent M.P. Mohanty interviewed other pilgrims upon their return. Sunil Khanna of Delhi recounted, "We reached Pahalgam in the afternoon of the 14th. We got full army protection from Rambandh to Pahalgam. The Jammu and Kashmir local police [all Muslims] were very cooperative. I had the darshan on the 17th, then the Lingam was not there. I was not at all disappointed." Ramesh Kumar Mishra, from Bhopal in Madhya Pradesh, went with his wife and two children. "We had no fear of the militants during the entire yatra. We have nothing but praise for the security forces and army for providing foolproof arrangements."

Hariharanand, a sadhu from Shahjahanpur in Uttar Pradesh, explained, "I had to return from Chandanwari because of the rain and snow on the 15th. Many pilgrims returned from Pahalgam when the first batches of pilgrims reported the Lingam had melted." Shri Arjun Prasad Aggarwal, from Patna, said all along he had been happy with the arrangements of security, free kitchen and accommodation facilities. But he is unhappy on his return. "I had gone to see the Lingam. It has been a waste of time and energy."

Tajendra Sahani and nine members of his family made the pilgrimage. He reported, "My six-month-old daughter was probably the youngest to undertake the yatra." The family is from Rudrapur in Uttar Pradesh's Nainital District.

Some pilgrims came in open defiance of the threat. India Today quoted a member of a group of young bank officers from Bombay as remonstrating, "If we had all kept away, the militants would have claimed it to be their territory, and the place of worship would have been lost to us forever."

With reports from M.P. Mohanty, New Delhi

Cave of the Deathless Lord

The ice Lingam of Amarnath Cave was first discovered before the 12th century by a Muslim shepherd named Malik while looking for a missing goat. When he entered the mammoth cave in search of the goat, he found a five-foot Siva Lingam naturally formed of ice. He had seen Lingams in Hindu temples before, and upon his return to Hatnam, a small town on the Anantnag-Pahalgam road, he shared his discovery with a Hindu priest. The priest, however, did not believe Malik. He challenged Malik to take him to the cave. They reached the cavern after crossing the ice-cold waters of the River Liddar, climbing through the dense forests and over the rocky terrain. The priest was amazed when he saw the six-foot ellipse. Soon word spread everywhere that a new place sacred to Lord Siva had been found. It was named Amarnath, "The Deathless Lord."

The Lingam forms naturally toward the end of each summer from water dripping inside the 135-foot-high grotto. From time to time hot weather prevents the Lingam from forming, or causes it to melt prematurely, as happened this year. The cave is only accessible in late August when the snows have melted.

There are many legends told about Amarnath. Kalhana's Rajatarangini reports that before the 12th century it was visited annually by many thousands of pilgrims from all parts of India. The famous book Brangish Sanhit gives full information with regard to the origin of the pilgrimage. The book says that the chari (holy silver mace) was given by Lord Siva to Kashyap Rishi. Siva commanded that this mace be carried to Amarnath each year. This tradition continues. The mace arrives at the full moon in August/September (Shravan), which this year was August 21st. The event

coincides with Raksha Bandhan.

In ancient times Amritsar was the starting point. Since the 1940s, pilgrims have started from Srinagar. Were it not for the threats, 100,000 would have made the difficult trek this year.