The Trek To Baba Dham
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Before I first reached Baba Dham on pilgrimage, I did not fully know the love and power of Baba. Nor was I aware of the importance of Baba Dham. When my wife, Usha, insisted we go there on pilgrimage, I first declined. This happened several times, until she became so adamant about taking me to Baba Dham that I could no longer deny her. I and my wife carried water from the Ganga and went to Baba Dham via railway to worship Siva. Now, I no longer resist when she persuades me to accompany her to Baba Dham.

Baba Dham is a small town in the Deoghar district of Bihar state in northeastern India. It is also called Baidyanatha Dham, or Deoghar. It is well connected by road and rail from various parts of India. Baba stands for Lord Siva and Dham indicates His abode. Therefore, the place where Lord Siva lives is called Baba Dham. Siva is worshiped at the temple as the Linga. It is one of the twelve Jyotirlingas noted for fulfilling all the wishes of devotees. Legend tells that whosoever worships Siva here, with water from the Ganga, will get all wishes fulfilled.

Pilgrimage to Baba Dham can be easy, or difficult. It is easy if a devotee travels by train or bus to pour water on Him. But it is difficult when he or she walks the 105-kilometer distance between the Ganga and Baba Dham on foot, carrying

Gangajal, water from the Ganga, on a balance pole called a kawar [see photos below].

On our second pilgrimage, my wife and I chose the difficult path and carried gangajalon both sides of the kawarand reached Baba Dham in four days. The third and fourth time, I journeyed along with my family members, again on foot. The last time we visited Baba Dham was in July, 1995.

On July 16, my wife, children and I left for Baba Dham from Kathmandu. We halted for a night at our home town, Janakpur, on July 17. Janakpur is the place where Goddess Sita, wife of Lord Rama, was born. The next day, July 18, at 11:45am we proceeded towards Sultangunj (where the Ganga flows) crossing the Nepal-India border. Since there is a special relationship between the two countries, no passport or visa is required to cross. This is a great advantage to the people of the two countries. People of one side cross without any restriction, for employment, education and other activities. For religious purposes, the Nepalese go to Baba Dham, Gaya, Kashi, Prayag, Mathura, Vrindavan, Rameshvaram, etc. Similarly, the Indian people visit Janakpur and Lord Pashupati Nath of Nepal.

We traveled the entire distance from Janakpur to Sultangunj on the bus. It was around 2:00am on July 19 that we reached Sultangunj. In the early morning, we gathered the gangajal, tied it to the kawarand started for Baba Dham.

The person carrying the kawaris called kawaria.There are certain norms that the kawariashave to follow during the pilgrimage. Self-restraint is a basic characteristic. All the kawarias,male or female, are expected to put on simple clothes of orange color as a mark or reflection of sannyasa.A sannyasiis a person who relinquishes all worldly possessions and cultivates spirituality. While on pilgrimage, the kawarias

are to develop a sense of wordly detachment and renunciation.

On the way to Baba Dham, each kawariacalls the other "Bam" which stands for Siva, or Shankar. It's an ancient name of Siva. All through the pilgrimage, the kawariaswalk barefooted. They hear about Siva, tell about Siva, write about Siva. Whatever they do, they do for Siva. The skies resound with slogans like "Bol Bam,"meaning, "Speak Siva;" "Age Bam, Pichhe Bam, Daye Bam, Baye Bam,""Siva is ahead, Siva is behind, Siva is on the right and Siva is on the left." Another common slogan is, "Baba Nagaria Dur Hai, Jana Jarur Hai,""Baba's place is far ahead, but we need to reach there." It is very pleasant to call out these slogans loudly or chant them as mantras.

The Bamshave to take strictly vegetarian, sattvicfood during the pilgrimage. Even garlic or onion is avoided. One has to bathe each time one goes to toilet. At the time one goes to toilet, he has to put the kawarat some sacred place. Before carrying the kawaragain, he has to worship it.

People visit Baba Dham all through the year. But most kawariascome during Magha (February) or Sravana (July-August). The kawariaswalk round the clock, though the intensity declines through the night, when the kawariasmust walk with the help of a torch. The pilgrim's route, with Sultangunj on the one side and Baba's temple on the other, is filled with the kawariasin orange-colored attire.

We heard that on July 17, Monday, one hundred and fifty thousand kawariaspoured gangajalon Baba. This number far exceeds the usual number. Though, on other days, there is also a great rush to offer water to Baba.

It is interesting to note that though the kawariaswalk through the loneliest places, they are never robbed. Even the women kawariasfind themselves safer during the pilgrimage than at their own home.

My family and I stayed the night at Rampur. The distance between Sultangunj and Rampur is 28 kilometres. In the evening, we performed prayers to our kawars.

The next morning, July 20, we worshipped the kawarsand proceeded towards our destination. Since we were barefooted, we felt the pinch at each step. My wife, Usha, does not walk much back home in Kathmandu due to pain in her back. But whenever she is on pilgrimage, it is she who supports me. She is always ahead of me. Similarly, my small children are also ahead of me. Sometimes, when I feel I cannot walk a step farther, my wife jokes with me, saying that I am overly conscious of the pains in my body. It is difficult for me to convince her how real my pains are.

All through the day we kept on walking. At places, we rested. We reached Jilebiamore at noon. After taking food and resting for some time there, we moved towards Suiya Pahar, which literally means "needle hills." The total length of this hill is 8 kilometres. Stones are so sharp and jagged that they give much pain to the kawarias.Even tears break from the eyes to walk on the coarse stones. Beggars put mud on the way so as to make the path easier in the hopes of getting alms from the kawarias.All along the way, we found beggars affected by leprosy. The kind-hearted kawariasthrow coins to them out of pity. It seemed to me that the majority of leprosy-affected beggars have clustered along the way to Baba Dham. Sometimes these beggars cry and sing songs together which make the kawariasfeel great pity for them.

That night, after crossing the Suiya Pahad, we stayed at Sivalok. We performed evening prayers. There was no proper place to overnight. No proper place to go for toilet. No proper place to take water. No proper bed to slumber on. The kawariasare not expected to use soap during the pilgrimage. They are not expected to shave or cut their beard or hair. One

has to stay either in the crowded dharmasalasor in small places on the way. Indeed, it is difficult to sleep.

After the morning prayer on July 21, we proceeded towards Kawaria Dharmasala. On the way, I was separated from my wife for some time. It is difficult for a group of persons to walk together. Quite often one member of the group goes ahead and the other is left behind. Therefore, many of the persons who come in a group or in family are separated. In the past, also, I and my wife have been separated for hours, not knowing the whereabouts of each other.

Thank God! After much anxiety, I happened to meet my wife again. In the afternoon, we proceeded farther and reached Goriari in the night, having crossed the river Bhulbhuliya. We were very tired. Amidst rainfall, we found it difficult to get a place to stay. It was only with a great effort that we found a place where we could take some refuge from the rains.

The next day, July 22, after the morning prayer, we proceeded towards the temple of Baba Dham. We were full of enthusiasm. The time and distance to reach the temple was short. We had to walk only 15 km more. Though we were weary, it was a pleasant walk. The frequent rain and the natural scenery all around served to sooth us. Quite often, we would forget ourselves in the thrill of the love of Baba.

Near the temple, we found many of the Dak Bamsmarching ahead. A Dak Bamis different from the ordinary kawaria, for whom time is no limit. A kawariacan take as many days as he likes. Commonly, it takes three to four days to cross the 105km. But a Dak Bamis time-bound. Usually, only a man becomes a Dak Bam.He has to complete the entire distance within 24 hours. If he fails to reach the temple within this time, he fails to be a Dak Bam.The Dak Bamcarries gangajalon his back. He is non- stop. He cannot sit. He cannot sleep. He

cannot eat. If he takes anything at all, he takes water, but that too while running. On the way, there are hosts who make hot water to pour on the bodies of Dak Bamsto soothe them. Some Dak Bamsbecome so hopeless that the other Bamsgive him support. It is difficult to believe how these Bamsmanage to reach the temple. It would not be possible to become a Dak Bamwithout the grace of Baba Himself.

We reached Darshania, 2 km from the temple, at 10:00am. We worshipped our kawarswith a great joy, having succeeded in our penance of bringing Ganga water to Baba. Before approaching the temple, a kawariais expected to take bath in the holy pond of Sivaganga Sarovar. This we did with grateful reverence.

By 11:00am we entered the temple. But there was too great a rush. It was difficult to pour gangajalon the Siva Linga. But Baba's kindness is great, and we received His blessings. The space within the temple is hardly 10 feet square. Sometimes it is suffocating inside. In the rush, many devotees are reported to loose consciousness or even breathe their last. But this time, ventilation eliminated the breathing problem inside. Also, the police arrangement was so nice that the kawariaswere made to enter the temple and come out of it efficiently.

All the members of our family were happy that we succeeded in paying homage to Baba. We also poured gangajalon Parvati, wife of Lord Siva and worshipped goddesses Lakshmi and Kali. For our family, it marked the victory of dharmaover adharma.

After paying homage to Baba, we went to Basukinath, some three hours journey by bus. At Basukinath, almost the same Gods and Goddesses reside as in Baba Dham. We poured gangajal on all the Gods and Goddesses that we could. We were cheerful as we returned to Kathmandu by bus. We have unfolded a deep love of Baba. We feel as if we are of Baba and

Baba is ours!