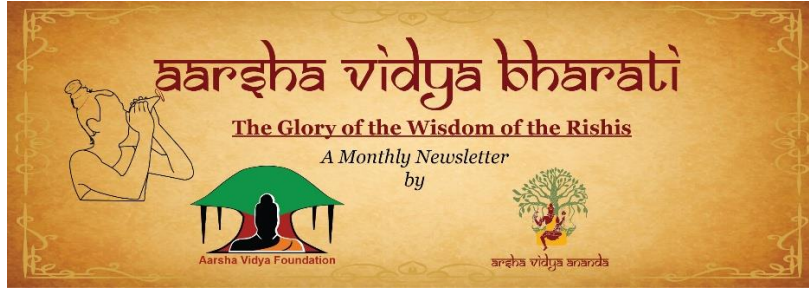

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Panch Kedar - A journey to the land of Shiva

By Kavita Shah, Mumbai



As the name indicates, these are the five revered shrines of Shiva in the Garhwal Himalayas in Uttarakhand. The Garhwal region is also known as Kedar Khanda after Kedar, one of the names of Shiva. There are many legends linked to these ancient temples. The creation and existence of these temples date back to the five Pandavas.

The most popular myth is that after the war at Kurukshetra, on advice of Krishna, the Pandavas went searching for Shiva to take His blessings as repentance for killing thousands in the war. Shiva eluded them by taking the form of a Nandi

and went into Patal Loka. The Pandavas chased Him. Bhima recognized Shiva. Shiva was pleased and He appeared. First came out His hump (Kedarnath Temple), then the arms (Tungnath Temple), the naval (Madhyamaheshwar Temple), the face (Rudranath Temple) and then the matted locks (Kalpeshwar Temple).

The first of the Panch Kedars is **Kedarnath Temple** (3583 mtrs) which is also one of the Char Dhams. An uphill trek of about 22 kms from Gaurikund leads one at the altar of Kedarnath which is near Chorabari glacier and Mandakini river, one of the tributaries of Ganga. In the year 2013, when a major mid-day cloudburst led to devastating flooding and landslides, miraculously, a big boulder the size of the temple, got riveted just a few feet away from the temple and protected the shrine. It is worshipped as Bhima Sheela, as he was the one to recognize Shiva, as the myth goes. The temple is open from Akshaya Tritiya to Kartik Purnima. The deity during the winter season is carried down to Ukimath, where he is worshipped for six months. It is said that Adi Shankaracharya was last seen by his disciples at the Kedarnath temple and that he took Samadhi at the age of 32 on this mountain. His Samadhi is near the temple. All the Char Dhams are connected to each other through the



high altitude passes and it is believed that Adi Shankaracharya has crossed these passes of the Himalayas to visit places in a short span of time.



get to see a rare flower called Brahmakamal blooming in this valley.

A moderate climb of about 1 km from the Kedarnath temple, takes one to Bhairavnath temple, also known as the Kshetrapal temple, which overlooks the entire valley and the deity is believed to be the protector of the main temple and the valley. It is worth an effort exploring this divine and beautiful valley which has the Chorabari glacial lake at the snout of Chorabari glacier (responsible for the 2013 mishap, also known as Gandhi Sarovar), and Mayali Pass, at the altitude of 5000 meters, a hidden gem of the Garhwal Himalayas. It is a privilege for an explorer to

Tungnath is one of the highest temples of Shiva at the altitude of 3680 mtrs. About 4 kms trek on a stone paved path from Chopta village through panoramic views of Nandadevi, Neelkanth and Kedarnath peaks, leads one to this more than 1000 year old temple. It is believed that this temple was found by Adi Shankaracharya. The priest here is a local Brahmin from Makkumath village. Every winter the symbolic image of the deity of Tungnath is moved to Makkumath. Tungnath temple is adorned on the Chandranath Parvat. Further trek of about 1.5 kms from Tungnath takes one to Chandrashila, the summit of Chandranath Parvat. It is a vantage, tranquil point where it is believed that Lakshmana, the brother of Lord Rama meditated.

The **Madhyamaheshwar** temple is believed to have been constructed by Bhima. It is located in Rudraprayag district, Goundar village. It is a 16 kms trek from Ransi village, an easy uphill walk till Bantoli, which is the point of confluence of Madhyamaheshwar Ganga and Martyenda Ganga. From this point it is a steep ascent. The temple (3497 mtrs) is in the green valley surrounded by Chaukhambha massif. There are small temples of Parvati, Ardhanarishwara and Saraswati in the vicinity. A steep narrow forest trail from here can be trekked up to Kanchni dhar, Pandavsera, Nandikund and after crossing a tough high altitude pass called Ghiya Vinayak and reach Tunganath or Kalpeshwar.



Rudranath is a natural rock temple at an elevation of 3505 mtrs within the dense forests of rhododendron dwarfs and alpine pastures. The face of Shiva is worshipped here. The river Vaitarni also known as Rudraganga flows near the temple. There are 2-3 routes to this temple starting from Sagar or Mandal Village, Gopeshwar. En route one can offer prayers at the temple of Ansuysadevi. This is one of the toughest steep ascents of 24 kms through oak and rhododendron forests and the surrounding majestic peaks of Nandadevi, Nandaghunti



and Draunagiri. The locals say that “Rudranath ki chadhai aur Jhansi ki ladai”. (the climb of Rudranath is like the war of Jhansi). This climb is the real crux, a major hardship and the most rewarding.

Kalpeshwar Mahadev is the last of the Panch Kedar. This temple is inside a cave at the altitude of 2200 mtrs where the Jata (locks) of Shiva is worshipped. This is a less trekked route from Pannar to Tolly Taal, a turquoise blue lake. Then a simple downhill walk through the forest and the trees of wild white flowers takes one to the Kalpeshwar temple. It is 40 kms away from Joshimath from where one can also visit Badrinath.

This sacred journey of more than 2 weeks at its end leaves one in complete awe and silence. One’s physical and mental conditions are tested and broken. The walking meditations and oneness with nature has purified the mind. The heart is filled with joy and love having surrendered it all at the altar of Shiva reigning from these high pristine mountains. Such divine, isolated temples with high energies adorned in the peaks of Himalayas culminate into *Samhita* between *Īśvara*, *Pūrva padam* and *Jiva*, *Uttara padam*.



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