



A Historical Review of 'Tirth Yatra' in Devbhumi

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Abstract

Due to the availability of all the necessary environment for livelihood along with natural beauty and spirituality surroundings, the 'Devbhumi' (Uttarakhand) has been the centre of attraction of ascetics, sages, intellectuals, inquisitors, devotees, tourists, wanderers etc. since ancient times. Administratively divided into Garhwal and Kumaon divisions, there are 13 districts in Uttarakhand state of India. In present research paper, the antiquity of travel and pilgrimage in the Garhwal region has been studied.

Key Worlds : Pilgrimage, *Tirth*, Journey, Worship, Religious, Garhwal

For the fulfilment of the need of life, man has been traveling to big mountains, dense forests and inaccessible places since his inception. With the passage of time, the meaning, nature and purposes of his journey have also changed. In the first phase of civilization, the journey of man was made only for the collection of food, by the time of the Neolithic period, the purpose of his journey was determined for agriculture and animal husbandry. In the Harappan period, in addition to the land route for trade, it also started by water route. In Vedic and post-Vedic times, travel started for knowledge acquisition, trade, victory aspiration, pleasure as well as for visiting religious places of pilgrimage. Due to the rise of pilgrimages in the Vedic era society, 'Yatra' (travel) became an important part of people's life in the form of pilgrimage. In the Middle Ages, in addition to war, trade, religion, travels started for reasons like entertainment, knowledge, pleasure etc. With the passage of time, travels started for economic, socio-cultural political, geographical, tourism, education, health and scientific reasons. Therefore, due to various reasons, the process of going from one place

to another is called '*Yatra*' (travel), whose nature and purpose may be different, an important form of this journey is '*Tirthyatra*' (pilgrimage).

In the course of his development, when man was unable to understand the natural phenomena and its invincible powers and mysteries, then he started accepting an unknown invincible invisible power as divine. Due to this concern and devotion, as a result of the worship of the divine form, the concept of '*Tirth*' was awakened and human beings started traveling to the elements of nature as a pilgrimage with a sense of worship and respect to win from many natural diseases and unknown powers. Gradually, the word '*tirth*' became so wide that every good work, feeling, person and nature, which motivates man towards the direction of good deeds, started being considered as '*tirtha*'. The word '*tirtha*' is derived from the words 'ti' (three) and 'rth' (meaning), in religious texts, the attainment of religion, work and salvation has been called '*tirtha*', '*Tirth*' means one who sanctifies. Generally, that river, lake, temple or land is also called a pilgrimage, where there is such a divine power that on coming in contact with it, the sins of man are destroyed unknowingly (Kalyan teerthkan,31). The meaning of *tirtha* in Rigveda is also used for shallow places of river, road and holy places (Rigveda,13/3/13 & 1/169-6).

Before the arrival of Aryans in Garhwal, even among the castes like Kol, Bhil, Kinnar, Gandharva, Kirat etc., the existence of God has been recognized as an invisible force for freedom from natural forces, diseases, incidents and fear of animals. For whose worship, small trips were made etc. At present, the tradition of ghost worship, shadow worship etc. prevalent in the Uttarakhand region is a form of this (Dabral,1965). The Kirat caste, described in the Vedas, epics and Puranas, is credited with imagining the fierce form of Shiva, '*Rudra*', '*Ghantakaran*' or '*Bhairava*' (Dabral,1964). The Rudranath temple situated at an altitude of about 3583 meters and many *Ghantakaran* temples situated at higher altitudes are proof of this. Kiratas must have travelled to these places for the purpose of offering and worshiping these deities. After the Kirats, there was the arrival of the Khas caste, who did agriculture and animal husbandry and worshiper of nature and sun, which established many places of worship like Badrinath, Kedarnath, Gangotri, Yamnotri, Mahasu and Budha Kedar

etc (Fakliyal,1983). In this caste there was a custom of offering milk when a cow gives birth to a calf, and worshiping their deities before starting any work, for which they made small religious journeys (Dabral,1963). After the Khas caste, the practice of divine imagery, *linga* worship and religious worship for this purpose was started by the Dravidian caste in the natural elements such as trees, rivers, mountains etc. This caste is also credited with the construction of temples and idols where they made religious pilgrimages on special occasions (Dabral,1960). Till this period religious pilgrimages continued, but the evidence of the spirit of pilgrimage is not found.

With the advent of the Aryans in the Vedic and later Vedic eras, religious journeys continued as before, for worshiping, worshiping and performing *Yagya-havan* etc. to please the natural forces and various gods and goddesses. Apart from this, in the later Vedic period, ashrams of sages and sages started being built on their banks, considering the river Ganges and Yamuna as holy. Due to the prevalence of Varna and Ashram system, devotees started visiting these places considering them as pilgrimages to attain knowledge, blessings and salvation. This is probably where the pilgrimage was born. Many sages and sages, full of unique natural beauty, made this region the centres of their spiritual practice and knowledge.

Evidence of pilgrimage in Uttarakhand region is also found in epics. According to the Mahabharata Vanparva, after the descent of the Ganges, Bhagirath had offered sacrifices to the Ganges for the salvation of his ancestors (Vanaparva,139/1-4). According to the Kedarkhand after the exile of Sri Rama, sage Vashishtha accompanied his wife Arundhati on the mountain named Hindav (Ghansali, Tehri Garhwal) with the Kirats in their dress and behaviour like them. While doing this, he stayed till Rama's return from exile. At the same time, people started doing *tarpan*, *yagna*, rituals and other religious work in the Ganges and pilgrimage to holy places like Badrikashram etc (Kedarkhand, Skanda Purana,Chapter 206/1,2,3).

From Adiparva of Mahabharata to the end of Mahaprasthan Parva, Garhwal Himalaya has been described as the gateway to heaven and the place of salvation and sin, that is why pilgrimages were prevalent in the Garhwal Himalayas for the desire of salvation and fruit during the Mahabharata period (Vanperv.39-54,139-1145). During the period of Puranas, the

practice of pilgrimage for night rest, bathing, tarpan and worship of God had increased (Short Bharm puran,p241,Padam puran, Short Narad Vishnu puran, pp 632-770). The Kedarkhand of Skanda Purana gives a detailed description of the list of pilgrimages of this region, the pilgrimage and the avail obtained from going there (Kedarkhand, Chapter 40/27/28/29).

In the 6th century BC, the first Jain Tirthankara Rishabhdev's father Nabhi and son Bharat Chakravarti also came to Garhwal for pilgrimage and penance (Kala,1985,p24). This is confirmed by the receipt of ancient Jain idols from many places including ancient Jain temple at Srinagar and Guptkashi (Dabral,1965). Buddhist ascetics Ram Pandit, Shyam Kumar, Basant Kumar etc. had also travelled to the Himalayan region. The Buddhist Jataka tales describe the arrival of many Buddhist ascetics and Bodhisattvas in the Garhwal region (Bhojan Jatak, part-5,p479). Mahavesantara Jatak describes the ashram located in *Gandhamadan* mountain of Garhwal Himalaya as well as in many places from Rishikesh to Badrinath. The ashrams of many Buddhist ascetics and the salutations for doing penance are also found in Buddhist literature (Dabral,1968). It is probably due to the frequent visits and great influence of Buddhist ascetics that Shankaracharya had visited Garhwal in the seventh century and due to the establishment of many temples including Srinagar, Badrinath and Kedarnath, therefore Garhwal region became holy for the followers of Sanatan Dharma. Due to the establishment of monasteries in Srinagar and Joshimath by Shankaracharya and making these monasteries necessary for Hindus, the practice of coming here for pilgrimage started increasing. Till the first century BC, the importance of the five Prayag, Devprayag, Rudraprayag, Karnprayag, Nandprayag and Vishnuprayag of the Garhwal region was also at its peak. This was confirmed by the names of the pilgrims in the Devprayag inscription from the third century to the fifth century AD (Dabral,1990, Katauch,2019) and Jageshwer traveller name list of 6th to 10th century, Gopeshwer traveller name list of seventh to fifth century.

Many sculptures, inscriptions and temples received from the Garhwal region would have given information about *yatra* (pilgrimage) and pilgrimage activities in this region at different times, including the Barahat inscription of 5th-6th century, Mangair inscription of 8th-9th century, Pandukeshwar Inscriptions of 8th-9th century period, Badri-Kedar travel reference of Prince Kanakpal of Dhar Malwa in 888 AD, Khajuraho inscription of Chandela king of

1002 AD, Nala inscription of 11th century, Manadeva, Kalimath inscription of 11th and 12th century of Rudra Sen, Inscription of king Bhoja of 1205 AD related to the construction of the Kedarnath temple by the king, the Gopeshwar inscription of Ashoka Challa of the 12th century, etc. are prominent (Dabral, 1990 & Kala, 1992).

With the establishment of pilgrimages belonging to *Vaishnava* and *Shakta* sects in the Garhwal region, the practice of *yatras* increased. After the Mughal period, the construction of the Gangotri temple in the Gorkha period led to an increase in pilgrimage. Influenced by the natural beauty of Garhwal region, the British government promoted tourism activities and making the travel routes easier, along with the tourism activities the pilgrimage also increased. Even today, the pilgrimage in the Garhwal region operates as an integral part of tourism.

Conclusion :

It is clear from the above description that in the Garhwal region of Uttarakhand, devotees have been coming since ancient times to attain spirituality, penance, knowledge and salvation. After the construction of ashrams and temples in this area by the sages and sages during the Vedic period, it was considered necessary by the devotees to visit this area considering it as a pilgrimage. The importance of this area increased due to the arrival of Pandavas and Shri Ram in this area in the epic era. With the construction of many temples and pilgrimages centre, the Garhwal region became the main centre of spiritual, religious and tourism. Even in the present times, pilgrimage has preserved its antiquity as a major component of tourism, which is also the main source of the economy of the Garhwal region.

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