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WEDNESDAY | OCTOBER 07, 2026 | RABI' AL-THANI | 24, 1448 AH

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The Cave That Time Cannot Melt: Inside the Amarnath Yatra

"Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase." Nowhere does that old line feel more literal than on the trail to Amarnath, where the staircase is carved from Himalayan rock and the destination is a lingam made of frozen water.

High in the folds of the Kashmir Himalayas, at a height where the air thins and breath turns visible, there sits a cave that has drawn pilgrims for well over a thousand years.

Inside it, water dripping from the rock ceiling freezes into a column of ice that grows and shrinks with the phases of the moon. Devotees call it the Holy Lingam, a natural form of Lord Shiva, and every summer tens of thousands of people walk for days through glacier fed valleys just to stand before it for a few brief minutes. It is one of the strangest and most moving sights in Indian religious life, a place where geology and devotion have quietly merged into something that feels, to those who make the journey, genuinely miraculous.

Ask most Kashmiris how the cave was found and they will tell you about Buta Malik, a Muslim shepherd who is said to have stumbled upon it while grazing his sheep. According to the popular account, a holy man gave him a sack of coal which turned to gold when he opened it at home. Rushing back to thank the sadhu, Buta Malik instead found the entrance to the cave and the ice formation within.

The tale, passed down through generations, became so central to local memory that for decades a share of the offerings collected during the yatra went to the Malik family, a quiet acknowledgment woven into the pilgrimage's own history.

But the cave's documented past reaches back much further than any single shepherd's tale.

The eleventh century Kashmiri chronicler Kalhana mentions pilgrimages to a snowy peak associated with Shiva in his Rajatarangini, the great historical narrative of Kashmir translated by the scholar Aurel Stein. Bilhana, another eleventh century poet, also referenced sacred ice formations in the region in his Vikramankadevacharita.

These references suggest that reverence for an icy manifestation of Shiva in the mountains predates any specific discovery story by centuries. What Buta Malik's tale likely represents is not the ori-



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gin of the pilgrimage but a later retelling that renewed local memory of a path that had, for various historical reasons, fallen into partial disuse.

In Hindu tradition, the cave is bound to one of the most evocative stories in Shaivite mythology. Shiva is believed to have chosen this remote, icebound spot precisely because no living being could follow him there, wanting complete solitude to reveal the secret of Amarkatha, the tale of immortality, to his consort Parvati.

As the story goes, he abandoned his bull at Pahalgam, released the moon from his hair at Chandanwari, let go of the serpents around his neck at a spot now called Sheshnag, and left his son Ganesha at another point along the route before finally reaching the cave.

Even the presence of a pair of doves nesting there is said to have unsettling significance, since legend holds they overheard the secret and, having gained immortality, continue to appear before pilgrims each year.

This layered mythology gives the yatra its emotional architecture.

Every landmark on the trek, whether it is the glacial lake of Sheshnag or

the meadow of Panjtarni, carries a story that transforms physical exhaustion into spiritual meaning. Pilgrims are not simply climbing a mountain. They are retracing the very steps of a god shedding his earthly attachments one by one.

For much of its history, the Amarnath Yatra remained a relatively local affair, sustained mostly by Kashmiri Pandits and devotees from northern India. Its transformation into a pan Indian spiritual event owes something to modern communication and transport, but also to specific moments that captured public imagination. Swami Vivekananda's visit to the cave in 1898 is often cited as one such moment.

He wrote afterward of being profoundly affected by the experience, an account that helped introduce the shrine to audiences well beyond Kashmir. Today, the pilgrimage is managed by the Shri Amarnath Ji Shrine Board, a body constituted by an act of the Jammu and Kashmir legislature in 2000, with the Lieutenant Governor of the Union Territory serving as its chairman.

The scale of organization required is considerable. Pilgrims must obtain a compulsory health certificate before registering, since the trek climbs to roughly 3,880 metres above sea level, altitude that can trigger sickness even in otherwise fit travelers. In recent years the board has capped daily numbers on each route, following directions from the Supreme Court aimed at protecting both pilgrim safety and the fragile mountain ecology.

Two routes lead to the cave, the traditional and longer path from Pahalgam in Anantnag district, and the shorter, steeper route from Baltal in Ganderbal district, with helicopter services also available for those unable to walk the full distance. The yatra has not been without tragedy. Sudden weather changes have repeatedly proven fatal, most devastatingly in 1996 when a blizzard killed over 200 pilgrims, and again in 2022 when flash floods near the cave swept through campsites. Security has also weighed heavily on the pilgrimage's modern history, given its location in a region that has seen decades of conflict, with attacks on



pilgrim convoys in past years prompting far tighter protection along the route.

Environmental degradation from the sheer volume of foot traffic, langar camps, and waste has also drawn concern from ecologists who worry about the long term health of an already sensitive alpine zone. Yet none of this seems to diminish the pull of the place.

Each July and August, as registration opens and health certificates are issued by the thousand, families across India begin preparing for a journey many describe not as a holiday but as a debt owed to faith.

Officials continue refining infrastructure, medical posts, and crowd limits,

trying to balance access with preservation.

There is something quietly humbling about a shrine that cannot be preserved, only witnessed.

The lingam pilgrims travel so far to see will melt away again within weeks of their visit, indifferent to devotion, reforming each year through nothing more than cold air and dripping water.

Perhaps that is the real lesson tucked inside the Amarnath Yatra, older than any shepherd's tale and larger than any single myth. Some of the most sacred things people build their lives around were never meant to last. They were only ever meant to be reached.

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THE FADING SOUL OF KASHMIR

What happens to a culture when the language that people speak every day starts to disappear, old houses are torn down to make way for concrete buildings and the stories that have been passed down are only remembered by older people?

In the middle of Kashmir under all the scenery there is a struggle that is not very loud. This is a struggle to keep the culture of Kashmir alive as it slowly fades away because of things fighting and people changing how they live. Kashmir is not a place that people visit for fun it is called "Paradise on Earth". But Kashmir is more than that it is a place with a lot of history, religion, art and customs that have been around, for a very long time.

Kashmir has been a melting pot for cultures and religions since ages immemorial. The centuries-old traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam gave shape to unique hybrid cultures based on tolerance and harmony. Therefore the identity of Kashmir cannot be reduced to religion alone; it is seen in the culture, language, art and architecture and all the things that make Kashmir so unique.

In the old cities of Srinagar one gets to touch the remnants of the art consciousness of Kashmir. It's wooden windows, beautifully patterned, sloping tiled roofs and ancient holy places whisper stories of times when architecture was more than just a process of constructing structures, but one of conveying meanings. Structures like Jamia Masjid and Khanqah of Shah Hamadan among many others depict the architectural patrimony of Kashmir, amalgamating Persian, Central Asian and Kashmiri architecture. The Mughal Gardens like Shalimar Bagh and Nishat Bagh echo the illustrious past of Kashmir.

Nonetheless, while Kashmir experiences accelerated urbanization, numerous histor-



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ical homes and structures are being demolished and constructed into concrete homes that do not represent any form of Kashmiri culture. The valley is at risk of losing its identity amid such development. Thus, the preservation of these heritage sites has become an urgent matter.

This threat exists not only in the realm of architecture but also in the field of Kashmir's traditional arts and crafts that have represented the valley's cultural identity in the international community.

The unique craftsmanship behind Kashmiri pashmina shawls, papier-mâché, walnut wood carvings, and handmade carpets is not only a part of Kashmir's economy but also a part of its rich culture that has been passed down from generation to generation.

The pressure from machine-produced imitations, the decline in profits from craft sales, and lack of interest among young people to carry on the crafting tradition have made it difficult for an increasing number of artisans to earn a living through these



forms of craft. For many, the only way to secure their futures is to abandon their traditional occupation and seek a modern waged job. If these crafts die off, Kashmir will not just lose an industry but also centuries of cultural memories and pride.

The decline of the Kashmiri language is likewise a growing concern. Many children in today's households regularly communicate with each other and their parents/siblings in English, Hindi, or Urdu rather than in Kashmiri. Kashmiri is preserved largely in conversations between the elderly. Language is not just a means of communication, but also is a reflection of who people are as a society.

Languages contain in them the stories/folklore, proverbs, poems, humour, feelings and accumulated wisdom of an entire society. Language carries with it the emotional history of a people.

When kids stop speaking Kashmiri, there develops an invisible gap between different generations culturally. Folktales told during winters, sayings loaded with local wisdom, and the poetry in Kashmiri will start disappearing gradually. When culture starts

losing its language, that becomes the initial indication of culture dying.

One needs to give equal importance to the folklore and cultural practices of Kashmir. There has always been the practice of storytelling in Kashmir along with folk music, sufiana music, dancing, and zikr. Traditionally, wedding ceremonies, seasonal celebrations, and festivals had cultural elements involved. But due to changing life styles and advancements in technology, those elements have started to fade away.

How does it feel to have the picturesque mountains of Kashmir in their lives without being able to appreciate the culture and heritage behind them?

The food of Kashmir itself is rich with culture and heritage. The traditional food of Kashmiri people, known as Wazwan, is not only a lavish banquet prepared for weddings but is also a sign of hospitality and unity. Preparing the dishes in the traditional manner by 'Wazas,' which include Rogan Josh, Yakhni, and Gustaba, requires expertise in handling the recipes passed down through generations.

There is always hope in the face of chal-

lenges. Various local groups, such as inhabitants of the area, ethnic communities, artisans, and historians are attempting to keep the culture of Kashmir alive through numerous efforts. Some of these endeavours include restoring heritage locations, promoting festivals, creating training programmes for traditional crafts/activities, and promoting language and cultural/religious Revival efforts within the community. All these endeavours will cause the youth of Kashmir to become aware of the necessity of preserving their culture. But to preserve the cultural heritage of Kashmir requires everyone to work together. Further evidence of community involvement can be demonstrated by the fact that any individual can lend a helping hand to preserve our diverse and distinct cultural traditions.

All sectors of society (government, schools, families and youth) should act to protect their cultural heritage. Schools must take the lead to preserve and teach traditional or local languages and customs while supporting artisans in their efforts to preserve their culture through financial means.

The historic sites that serve as heritage sites for Kashmir should not be abandoned because of urban development projects that may damage those heritage sites. Lastly, in this world of globalization and modernization, the education of today's youth must encompass the understanding that preservation of cultural heritage does not preclude or hold back a society's development.

The cultural heritage of the Kashmir Valley is not only limited to the museums, the buildings of the region and the images in the history books on Kashmir. It is in the spoken words of the local people, the tunes of the folk music they create, the flavors of their food, the craftsmanship of their artisans and the legends that are passed on through many generations.

Preserving the culture of Kashmir is preserving the spirit of Kashmir valley. The spirit must not be suffered to die, for it will never be revived.

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Shehr-e-Khaas: The grooming Market of North Kashmir.

“A Historic Market Reborn in the Heart of North Kashmir”

Baramulla, one of the oldest city in the northern region of Kashmir, is emerging as a living testament to the region's rich history, art, and culture. Shehr-e-Khaas, the historic old town of Baramulla, sits gracefully on the right bank of the Jhelum River and surrounded by stunning mountainous landscapes that enhance its natural beauty.

This area, rich in culture and history, has long been a hub of life and commerce. Before the partition in 1947, Baramulla was one the most developed towns in the Kashmir, playing a significant role in trade across the subcontinent.

However, after partition, Baramulla's prominence waned. Neglected and largely untouched by modernization for decades, the town lost its central role in trade and development, becoming a shadow of its former self.

Despite the challenges, Shehr-e-Khaas has always carried the potential for revival. However, in recent years, the historic Old Town of Baramulla has been experiencing a profound transformation.

With comprehensive urban development initiatives and targeted infrastructure upgrades, the town is steadily regaining its charm and functionality.

This historic market starts from the famous shrine of Dargah-e-Aaliya and end at Azad Gunj.

Dargah-e-Aaliya which houses sacred relics of Prophet Muhammad (SAW), and the Jamia Masjid, here thousands of visitors from all over the valley visit every year to seek divine blessing, it is one of the busiest portion of market.

Where visitors like to eat famous Halwa-Parath.

In between there are almost 350 shops of different items, The most unique feature of the market is that almost all the shops



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are aligned and are on the bank of River Jhelum.

Old town Baramulla is connected to the new town with three bridges, among them the bridge which connects Jadeed market with Jalal Sahib Mohalla of the old town is serving as the lifeline for the market of old town.

This point is famous for Kashmiri Roti Kulcha and Girda.

The shops in the lanes of the old town invite visitors to indulge in a culinary journey, savoring the flavors of Rooth, Nadir Monje, and various mouthwatering street foods. Shehr-e-Khaas holds its own unique specialty, showcasing the town's diverse demographics.

From the aromatic Baker Khawani and delicious Kulchas to hot and crispy snacks, every lane in old Baramulla is a hidden treasure waiting to be discovered. After sunset, the market is gently pre-



served by the soft glow of its lights, reflecting in Jhelum, which enhance its natural charm and create an inviting atmosphere.

The lights, like a delicate preservative, help the market thrive in the evening, allowing its beauty and vibrancy to bloom long after the sun has set.

In the past few years Old Town Baramulla has started its journey of Development, which was earlier not possible due to violence but today, the streets of Old Town Baramulla glow with energy-efficient LED lights, transforming the town's

atmosphere and boosting its appeal.

These lights not only enhance safety for pedestrians and drivers but also add a touch of elegance to the town's aesthetic.

Markets, which used to shut down early due to poor lighting, now stay open longer, creating a lively and inviting environment for both locals and visitors. After the completion of football stadium at Azad Gunj, it will not only boost local football talent but also contribute to the region's economic growth by generating employment opportunities, stimulating local businesses, and attracting tourism.

One of the ongoing challenges for the market is the obstruction of footpaths by vendors, which significantly disrupts public movement and causes inconvenience for daily travelers.

To address this issue, the local administration must take proactive steps to regulate vendor activities by designating secure, separate spaces for their operations.

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The Valley Turns Red and Gold: Inside Kashmir's Apple Harvest Season

..... The Apple Bowl of India

As September descends into the Valley, orchards from Sopore to Shopian dazzle with color.

Red Delicious, Golden Delicious, and even the less common Maharaji apples hang heavy from branches in south and north Kashmir as the streets fill up with wooden boxes, lorries loaded with apples, and a distinct fragrance of ripening fruit. For the next two months, the apple would be Kashmir's undisputed king, both at Indian dinner tables, as well as in the Valley's economy, culture, and spirit.

More than 75% of all apples produced in India come from Kashmir, which has become an oft-repeated statistic and also one that serves to identify Kashmir.

Almost two million Kashmiris earn their living in some way, shape, or form from the apple. The apple decides the fate of whole local economies of districts like Shopian, Sopore, Pulwama, and Kulgam.

With this season, however, the arrival of the harvest has been an incremental process, as it always is.

While early varieties like American Amri have come in from the orchards in August, the main variety, featuring Red and Golden Delicious, is being harvested in September; later varieties will ensure that orchards continue to be active well into October and even November.

The news from Kulgam's fruit mandis reveals that there has been an unprecedented influx of produce this year, and growers have been getting positive rates after several years of prices that have fluctuated erratically.

With Asia's second-largest fruit mandi at Sopore, which is justifiably known as the epicenter of the industry, mandis here have been working around the clock to transfer the fruits to trucks heading towards Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, and beyond.



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While the picture-perfect image of red apples contrasted against snowy peaks may give an impression of easy gains, it conceals the hard work put in by orchardists in the months gone by.

For this season, growers have been anxious about the unusually early budding, which growers have learnt, all too often, to take as a warning sign.

Early flowering makes them susceptible to frost injury, hail storms and unpredictable springtime weather that may take away a year's effort in a few hours.

Climate variability is one subject which Kashmiri apple growers often discuss and today they are as much tuned into weather reports as any farmer is tuned to market reports.

Alongside, are the perennial issues of the business, rising transport costs, traffic jams on the Jammu-Srinagar highway at the time of harvest movement, reliance on distant markets, and competition with

foreign apples from Iran, Afghanistan and also apples from Washington State varieties marketed in Indian cities.

The cold storage facilities have been enhanced in recent years through schemes such as the Integrated Horticulture Development Scheme; yet the problem lies in that the facilities are far from adequate to cater to a produce of this magnitude, and there arise cases of distress sales whenever the market is glutted with an abundant harvest.

But analyze that particular window with just spreadsheets and statistics, and something gets missed out on the way.

The apple harvesting season in Kashmir is very community-oriented, where families and children come together in orchards and work together as a family and neighbors do for weddings.

Meals are taken sitting under apple trees and the process of packaging, which includes sorting and wrapping of apples, turns into some kind of ritual, which gets transferred generation after generation.

There are local fairs and some other kinds of harvest festivals in a number of orchard belts which have started in the last few years, and tourists who are eager to visit those fairs to witness and also pluck some apples from the tree.

The tourism companies have managed to make a full economy out of this window in a subtle manner.

Tours to the orchards of Sopore, Shopian and Pulwama are conducted on a daily basis, where tourists get an opportunity to walk through the orchards, get to know about grafting and grading from the farmers themselves, and also have a traditional lunch called “Wazwan”.

Given that this is a region which usually talks about issues beyond orchards, one of the very few things which bring everybody to the same page as regards interest is the harvest of apples.

This includes the growers, traders,



transporters, and consumers.

This season will determine whether people will be able to pay school fees, plan marriages, and pay their debts in the hundreds of thousands of households.

The bad season may come due to some unanticipated hailstorm or a market collapse. The effects of such a situation will spread to the whole Valley in just a matter

of a few weeks.

As the process of picking goes on through September and October, all the attention will continue to focus on the mandis of Sopore and Kulgam, the weather conditions of Pir Panjal, and the trucks headed down to the plains.

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