

PILGRIM'S PROGRESS

The once arduous pilgrimage to Vaishnodevi is now a trekker's delight. For the navratras that begin this week, the shrine gets yet another face-lift.

■ by Shefalee VASUDEV in Vaishnodevi

VAISHNODEVI? NO PROBLEM," says a porter at Jammu airport to a group of foreign tourists who look rather lost. Somehow, this *deja vu* reassurance encapsulates the experience. Vaishnodevi has now become more like a "no problem" pilgrimage.

The trek to the highly revered ancient shrine—located 6,000 ft high in the Trikuta Hills near Katra, 62 km from Jammu—is now described as a fun journey by some. The new alternative track—which begins halfway up, just short of Adhkuwari—is a wide, smooth road without a steep incline, making it a lot easier for those who puff and pant as soon as they put their feet to test. This 6-km sheltered route that cost Rs 7 crore was officially thrown open in early 2000. Since then it has been consistently modernised further. This year, as the tourist-friendly Goddess waits for the 30,000-a-day throng of pilgrims expected during the navratras, the new track has been turned into a trekker's delight. Dotted with coffee- and colavending machines, this well-lighted route is spotlessly clean. Unlike most other pilgrimage places in the north—like Hardwar, Mathura and Varanasi where the first thing to strike you is the filth—the new route here has public conveniences at every kilometre, clean drinking water, emergency medical facilities and life-saving drugs in the booths. Multi-cuisine restaurants have equipped this track for the needs of the global tourist. No horses, so no dust or dirt. In November 2001, the computer-

isation of the yatra ticket issued from Katra, which allots a pilgrim number, has put an end to the constant hassles of the darshan queues.

"Mata Vaishnodevi is very pleased. This prosperity is her blessing," says 79-year-old Vishnu Prasad, a pandit at a temple en route to the shrine. His hooded eyes crinkle as he recalls, "Once upon a time, a trip to Vaishnodevi meant hours of a strenuous uphill climb on a stony road. Unbridled devotional fervour and cries of 'Jai Mata Di' were the only walking sticks. The darshan meant standing in endless queues, crouching and bending to enter the cave where freezing water made the devotees gasp as it touched their bare feet."

Then came the takeover of the shrine by the Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Board—an independent body instituted in 1986. Jagmohan, the then governor of Jammu and Kashmir, introduced this as one of his first and most controversial reform measures, overthrowing the control of the Dharmarth Trust managed by Karan Singh, the former maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir, as its only trustee.

The Goddess, as some say, was on the side of the shrine board. The board has lived up to the expectations of her believers. In 2001, the number of pilgrims to the shrine crossed 51 lakh compared to 13 lakh in 1986 and 21 lakh in 1990. "There has been a world of difference in the facilities," say Tishi and Lili Khanna, a couple in their sixties who first visited the shrine 15 years ago.

The recent makeover has included floriculture planning, giving the main viewpoints on the new route an aesthetic look. Especially Himkoti, a multi-



Photographs by HEMANT CHAWLA



BHAWAN SINGH

SHELTERING ROAD

The old route (left) from Katra to Vaishnodevi via Adhkuwari was narrow and mostly without shelter. The new track (right) is smooth, wide and less steep. It starts before Adhkuwari and ends outside the building of the main shrine.



BHAWAN SINGH

PROVISIONS IN PLACE

The shops that lined the old route to the shrine (left) were mostly tin-roofed and sold only the most basic eatables. On the alternative track now, multi-cuisine eating places have come up, like the one at Himkoti (above) which also has a newly inaugurated dosa outlet.

cuisine restaurant stop which will soon have a blooming rose garden. (Early this month, in a first-of-its-kind in north India, a dosa-making machine costing Rs 7 lakh was installed here.) A contemporary sculpture garden spotted on the way is yet another evocative diversion from the predictable sight of the surrounding hills. In January this year, the "Bhavan", the building where the shrine is located, too went for a face-lift. The entrance area to the main cave has been redone with spotless white marble, replacing the characterless stone seen earlier. The silver inside the shrine was transformed by a Midas touch. Fifty-seven kilos of pure gold—which includes the platform beneath the manifestations of the three goddesses, known as "pindies", the crowns and the railing around the idols—now dazzle those who attribute the new splendour to a seminally pleased mata.

However, an agnostic dragged here by his devout wife refuses to get carried away by the glitter of the Goddess' golden accessories, "The mata earns very well. She can afford to be surrounded by gold," he remarks.

The earnings of the shrine, despite the cost-free darshan, would put many a turnover-proud industrialist to

shame. "The voluntary donations amount to Rs 8-10 lakh a day, jumping up to about Rs 15 lakh on good days," reveals a shrine board official. S.S. Bheria, principal secretary to the governor of Jammu and Kashmir and CEO of the board, declines to give the exact figure. "What you have been told is not very much off the mark," he comments with a restrained smile.

But prosperity speaks in many tongues. The main prasad shop outside the shrine pays an annual rent of Rs 3 crore to the shrine board while other restaurants and snack shops pay Rs 20-90 lakh a year. But for Sonia Bhatia, 22, an earnest Delhi girl carrying a red flag, who has been visiting the shrine "ever since I was born", the donations don't matter. It is the free *bhojanalayas* for the poor, the restaurants for the variety-conscious and the new bathing ghat for women inaugurated early this year that have made a difference.

Shopping? Of course. Even inside the Bhavan. There is many a shop selling music cassettes, CDs and religious knick-knacks. With a 24-hour hospital for emergencies and a fast-food joint to boot, the place promises some harmless fun for those who are not irked by religious dos and don'ts. Step out of the

PRASHANT PANJIAR



COMFORTABLE CLIMB

Compared to the earlier stony, cluttered and strenuous path to the shrine (right) the new route (left) is spotlessly clean and has facilities like benches, drinking water taps and booths for coffee and cola. It has also been equipped with basic emergency medical services.

Bhavan and there are shops that sell a large variety of biscuits, juices, chocolates and nuts. For those who like their menu cards long and promising, there is Chinese, Indian, Mughlai and south Indian to bite on. Vegetarian, of course. As the shrine board insists that only gas be used for cooking, not tandoors, pollution is under control and you can breathe easy.

"The attempt is to make this a complete spiritual experience, not just a religious one," says Bloeria who with a team of special advisers is planning to set up spiritual centres on the new track. There will be religious discourses, motivational classes and free-to-use musical instruments for those who might just want to break into an impromptu orchestra-backed bhajan. This and more amounts for the Rs 18-20 crore a year that the board has been spending lately on development.

PILGRIMS seem very pleased with the remodelling of the access to the main cave that houses the shrine. Ornate doors opening into smooth corridors have made the goddess easily accessible. At the exit door a friendly pandit presents each a small packed pouch with "prasad" written boldly on it. "Made in Vaishnodevi." No expiry date. It contains a "forever yours" silver coin—a memento from the Goddess herself. A couple of months ago, the holy water that earlier people used to fill from inside the cave was chan-

nelised into three outlets outside. The cave water now gushes out of the mouths of three lions carved in marble. Soon, the entire Bhavan will be redone in white marble.

The mata will soon grace the Internet too. Her e-darshan won't be allowed but those who feel queasy about the daylong queues will soon be able to book their tickets on the Net. By the way, no change of profile has been suggested for the priority queues. There is instant darshan for

A sculpture garden en route and the dispensary at the shrine building (bottom)



the very important (read powerful), aarti priority for some and sitting-outside-the-natural-cave priority for others. Like everywhere else, it depends on how you are connected to the Goddess' PR officers. What also hasn't changed is the dirt and filth at the Banganga Ghat which is right where the climb from Katra begins. Begging is prohibited and rates are fixed for the *pithus*—the porters who carry the luggage and children—and the horse cabbies, but their persistent pleas for "chai-paani" can send many a pilgrim round the bend.

Nonetheless, there is a curious and interesting assimilation of dynamics that indicates a contemporary religion. Vaishnodevi is one of the most popular pilgrimage places in India perhaps because here religion validates the currency of consumerism. This is also perhaps the only Hindu pilgrimage where all the *pithus* and the horse cabbies are Muslims who greet pilgrims with an earnest "Jai Mata Di".

Even though crowds charged with religious zeal sing and shout in the praise of the Goddess as they trudge uphill, it is obvious that V-darshan is no longer a test of devotion. Rather, with the modernisation of the shrine, devotion itself has become an easy-to-attempt virtue. Would Reebok or Nike consider setting up shop on the alternative track to sell trekking gear? Not a remote possibility, blessed as it is by the consumer-friendly goddess. ■