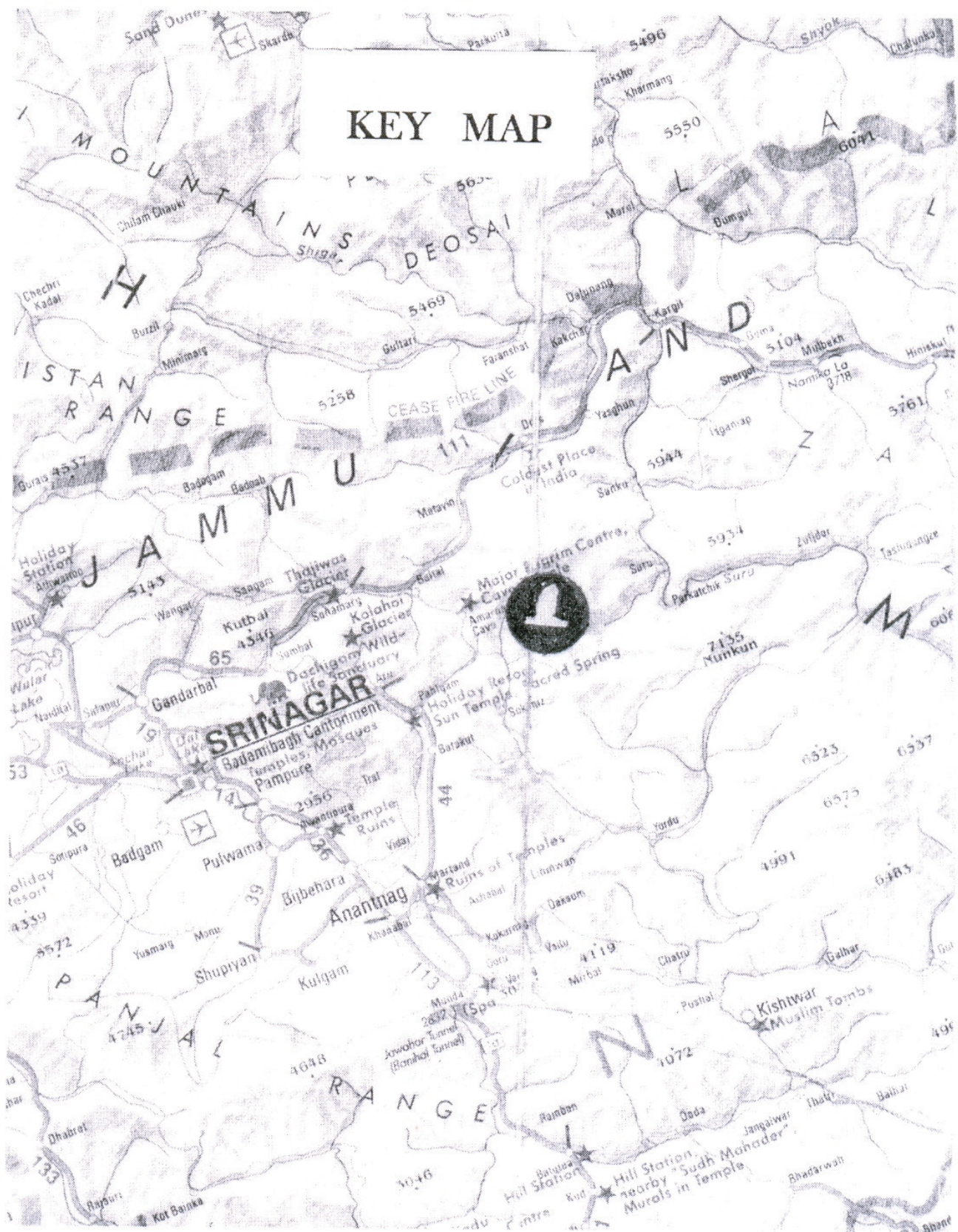


TIRTHA OF AMRESHVARA

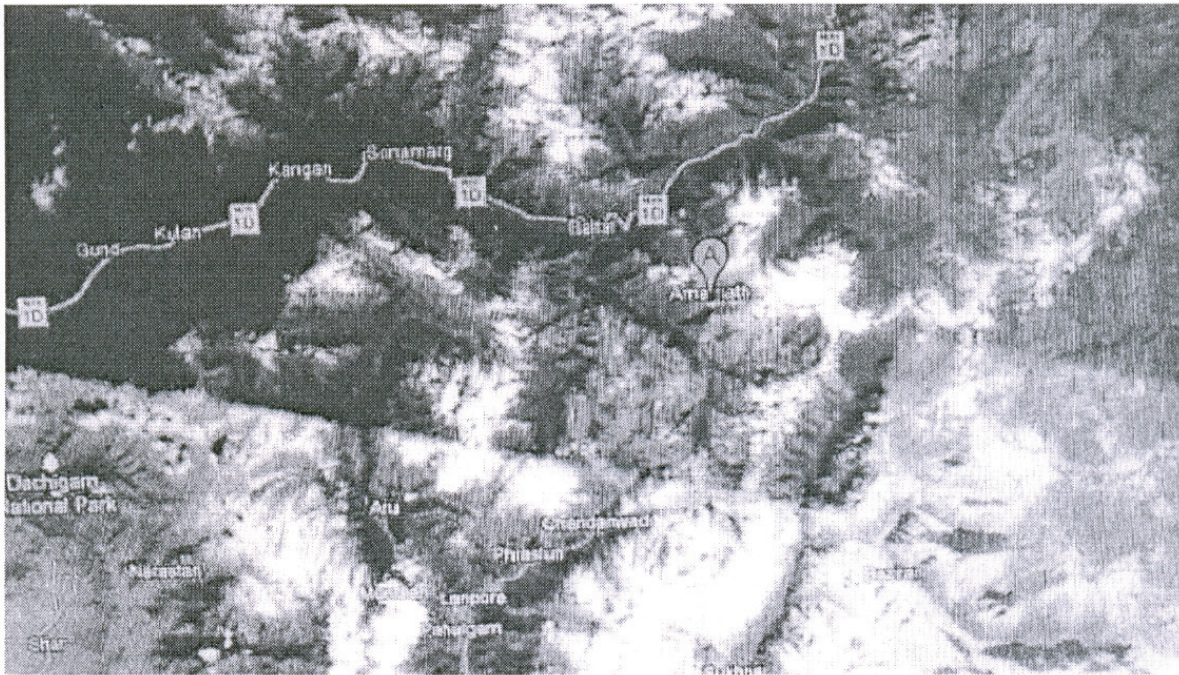
By M.M.Munshi

At the head of Sind Valley in Kashmir bounded on the north by *Antargiri/Maha Himavanta* (Great Himalaya Range) and *Saskach* (Sasakot) mountains in the south, is located the “*Tirtha of Amreshvara*” the holy cave shrine of Amarnathji (34 12' : 75 01) at an altitude of 12,720 ft (3878 m) where *Syambu*(self created) only ice *linga* in the world has been visited and worshiped since early historic if not pre historic times. The earliest references pertaining to Amarnathji Shrine are found in *Nilamata Puran*, *Bhrngisasamhita* and mahatmayas of *Amreshwara Kalpa* and *Amarnatha* , *Kalkana's Rajtarangini* and other texts

According to *Bhrngisasmhita* *Mahakala* (the Angel of Death) approached the *devtas* and told that that they would have to die. The *devtas* troubled at this threat and proceeded to the abode of *Swami Surji* (Lord Shiva) and entreated his protection.. Lord Shiva appeared to them with bright countenance , showered upon great favour and enquired about the cause of their distress. The *devtas* represented that *Mahakala* was about to destroy them and they dreaded his power upon which Shiva with his great mercy and kindness raised his plaited hair and out flowed *Amuravati* –the stream of immortality by which the *devtas* were freed from the persecution of *Mahakala* . Shiva converted himself into *Raslingum* (Immortal emblem) of ice and hence began the pilgrimage and prayers at *Amreshvara* .The other legend pertaining to the formation of the Ice *Linga* is that Shiva's consort *Parvati* was eager to learn about secrets of life and immortality and prayed to her lord to reveal the same to her. While sporting over the Himalayas Shiva rested in a cave and revealed the secrets of immortality to Parvati and transformed himself into an Ice *Linga* . A pair of snow pigeons also resting in the cave overheard Shiva's discourse also became immortal.



According to Bhrngisamitha a person who bathes in waters of *Amurveth* (Amuravati) and rubs the *Vibhuti*(ashes) gets *Moksha*. A person who goes on Amarnathji Yatra after performing ablutions along the traditional route gets the same boons as one gets from *Ashvamedha Yega*. A persons who performs ablutions at the *Sangam* (confluence) of *Amurveth* and *Panjarangini* (Panjtarni) in *kalyug* gets pardon for crores of sins. Pilgrimage to Amarnathji is considered several times most auspicious then the pilgrimages to **Kashi and Triveni**



How Amarnathji shrine could have been ordinarily discovered I cannot do better than quote from the life of Swami Vivekananda. 'I can well imagine how the cave was first discovered. A party of shepherds, one summer must have lost their flocks and wandered in search of them. What must have been their feeling as they found themselves unexpectedly before this unmelting ice lingam of white camphor with the vault itself dripping offerings of water over it for centuries unseen by mortal eyes. When they came home they whispered to other shepherds in the valleys how they had suddenly come upon **Mahadeva** 'It is believed that when Satisara (Kashmir valley) was drained of its waters by Balram at the instance of Lord Vishnu for the destruction of the monster **Jaldoba**, it became populated through the efforts of Sage **Kyaspa** (Kashap Rishi) and **Nagraja Takekit** and it so happened that Bragesh Reshi was roaming through the Himalayas saw and gave clue of the cave shrine **Amreshvara** and a detailed account of the *tirthas* along the route for performance of ablutions while approaching the cave shrine and told that he had propitiated **Swami Surji** and procured from him the **Scepter (Chari)** which he had entrusted to Nagraja. They should obtain the Scepter (Chari) from Nagraja which should lead the yatra proceeding in a body on way to the cave shrine.

A number of authors have stated that the hill station of Pahalgam is a derivative from **Bailgam** named after the Lord Shiva's mount Nandi who was left at Pahalgam when Shiva himself proceeded to the sojourn of Amarnathji cave along with Parvati. It seems to be height of imagination of the authors. I cannot throw much light as where Shiva left his mount but can certainly point out that Phalgam is a distortion of Pahelgom (shepherd's village). Had even Pahalgam been named after Shiva's mount a Sanskrit or at the most a Kashmiri word like *Nandi*, *Brishap*, *Vresh* or *Dand* would have been used and **not** the Hindi term of **Bail**

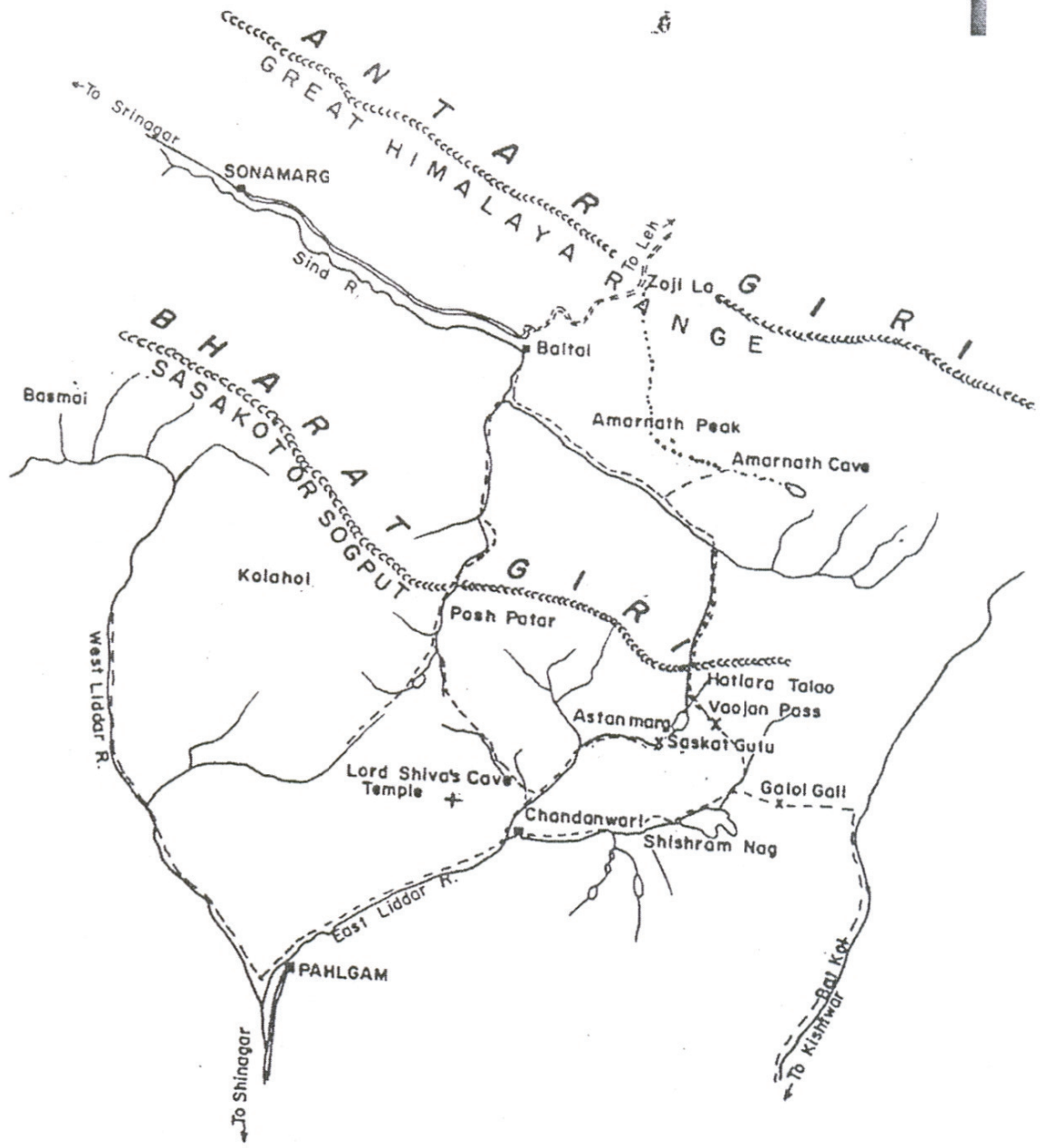
PHYSIOGRAPHY The mountain ranges in the area include **Antargiri –Mahahimavanta** (Great Himalaya Range) trending Northwest-Southeast isolating **Maha Sindhu** (Indus) basin [represented by Suru River] from From the basins of (i) **Vitasta** (Jhelum) [represented by **Lidari** (Lidar) and **Sindu** (Sind) rivers and (ii) **Chandra Bhagha** (Chenab) [represented by Batkol and Marwah rivers]. **Saribal** a south westerly spur of Great Himalayas isolated Chenab and Jhelum basins. Another westerly spur of the Great Himalaya's **Sashkach** (Saskot) forms water divide between Lidar and Sind rivers. The Saskach follows a westerly course and is traversed by the Sind

River at *Hang Satu* (Drun Nar) a narrow gorge just downstream of Sonamarg beyond which it is known as *Bharatagiri* (Sogput) or North Kashmir Range) isolating the Kishenganga Valley from Kashmir Valley.



The triangular mass of mountains bounded on the north by Sind Valley on the south and east by Lidar valley ,on the west by main Kashmir valley with peaks of *Gash Brar* (Kolahi),*Mahadeva Giri*, *Sureshviri* (Sairshor) *Shri Dvara* (Zabarwan) *Hareshvara* (Hareshor) and lakes of Tarsar, Marsar, Hodsar etc has no modern name but was known in ancient times as *Dudvana* . A number of authors/pilgrims in the past as well as recent times have wrongly mentioned the snow beds/fields along the routes to Amarnath as glaciers. These snow beds are nothing but accumulated snow in depressions, valleys and glens by snowfall, snowcreeps , avalanches and drift snow. A glacier known as *Handar* in Kashmiri is a solid mass of ice moving down the slope along valleys with an average velocity of 1 to 3 ft per day However it may not be out of place to mention here that almost all the side valleys of Kashmir including those of Lidar and Sind have been carved by former glaciers during the Pleistocene times. The former glaciers at present have retreated to higher levels some have totally disappeared while a few namely Nehnar, Koenjnar, Mushran, Kolahi ,Machoi and Harmukh have survived in the neighborhood of Amarnath Shrine. During the Pleistocene times these glaciers extended much down stream of Pahalgam and Kangan in Lidar and Sind valleys respectively

APPROACH ROUTES



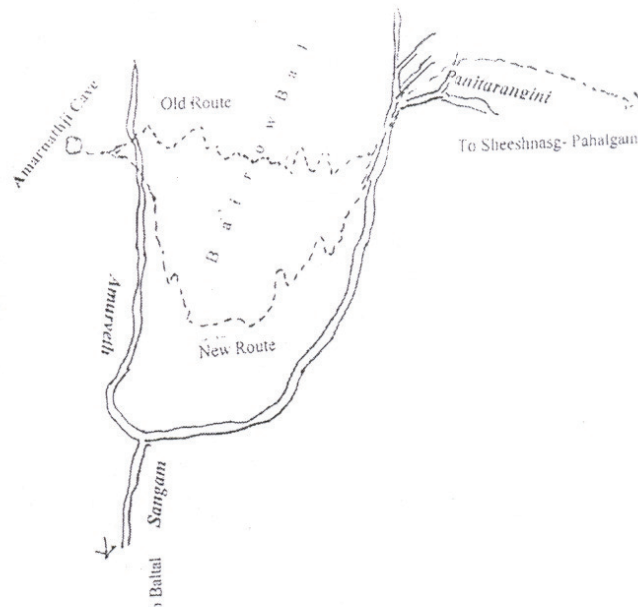
ROUTES The holy Amarnathji cave shrine though located in Sind Valley of by the side of a tributary of the Sind river known as *Amurveth* or Amarnath Nar has been traditionally approached from the Lidar Valley. According to Amreshvara Kalpa and Bhrngisasamhita some of the important places en route were the pilgrims had to perform ablutions for a meriful yatra , were *Sudashikhetra* (Shurayar), *Puranadisthana*(Pandrethan) *Javati* or *Tsakaanaga* (Zewan))*Padmapura* (Pampore), *Avantipurika*(Avantipur),*Chakardar* (Tsakdar),*Anantnaga* (Anatnag),*Mach Bhawan* (Mattan), Ganeshbal ,*Mamleshwar* (Mamal), *Nilganga*,Chandanwari 9,200 ft. (2011m),*ShushramNaga* (Shesh Nag)11,330 ft.(3,454m), *Panjtarangini* (Panjtarni) 12,611 ft.(3835 m) Between Sheesh Nag and Panjtarni pilgrims cross *Mahagunus - Vayurjana*(Vowjan)13,835 ft (4212 m) Pass . Beyond Panjtarni pilgrims used to proceed to the holy cave along a very narrow and steep track across Bairaw Bal and descend into the Amarnath Nar Just opposite the cave.



This was a very dangerous route and many pilgrims while descending used to slip to death. Not only that many sadhus used to commit suicide on that track. Consequently a new track that follows the spur of Bairow Bal downstream with gentler slopes round the shoulder till it reaches the top of the spur and gradually descends into the AmarnathNar was constructed by an engineer after whom the track was named as Sant Singh Top. The Sind Valley route bifurcating from Srinagar-Leh Highway is shorter of the two was used during early summers only as it used to become very difficult sometime impossible by melting of snow bridges over the Sind river in summer.



But by the construction of the bridal path between Baltal and Sangam by army/border roads ,this route has also become negotiable throughout the summer. Another route bifurcating from Kishtwar Suru route via Marwah , Wardwan, Bhatkol valleys [along which the redoubt Zorawar Singh passed several times with his forces during the Dogra conquest of Ladakh,Baltistan and Western Tibet] enters the Lidar valley via Galol Gali between Sheesh Nag and Mahagunus. Amarnathji shrine is also approachable by a foot track from Zojilla Pass which passes along the foot of Amburnath Peak.The least known track from Suru via Seekhi Pantsal pass is the most difficult and has been hardly used by the pilgrims.



OLD AND NEW ROUTES ACROSS BAIROWBALL

HISTORY OF PILGRIMAGE

Like the mention of Glaciers along the Amarnathji route ,the of the history of the pilgrimage has also been wrongly documented. Numerous writers in the recent past have maintained that Amarnathji Shrine was lost for a very long time, some lost theorists like Pervez Dewan have gone as wild to claim that shrine had been lost for thousands of years others like O.N. Chraungoo and others have indicated for few hundred years., till it was rediscovered by Maliks of Batkut ,according to some between 1750-1775 AD and according to others by about 1600 AD quoting old Kashmiri Pandits and Maliks of Batkut without any authentic evidence. Some like Lt.Gen (ret.d.)S.K.Sinha former governor of Jammu & Kashmir have tried to give credit to the Maliks for of Batkut for having originally discovered the holy cave. Mention of Amreshvara in Nilamatta Purana and detailed description of the yatra in Bhrngisasamhita leave no doubt as to since when the Holy shrine of *Amreshvara* was known.



PANJTARANGINI (Panjtarni)

According to Kalhana's Rajtarangini Tarang II Samadhit (Aryaraja) 34 BC to 17 AD who rose from the position of a minister to the ruler of Kashmir was a great devotee of Shiva "used to worship a linga of snow above the forests which is not to be found anywhere in the whole world during the deliteful Kashmir summers" He abandoned his kingdom and retired to a hermitage *Nandikshetra* (Nandkul) in Sind Valley where he was welcomed by old sages. Kalhana in Tarang I of RajtaranginI verse 267 while narrating the legend of *Naga Suruvas* who bestowed his daughter *Chanderlikha* upon a Brahman youth[who had helped the Naga in partaking part of the harvest from the fields.] King Nara who's domain flourished around *Chakardara* (Tsakdar) near *Vijeshvara* (Vigbror) cast an evil eye on the young brahman's naga wife which aroused the wrath of Naga Suravas resulting in death of King Nara and total

destruction of the latter's kingdom. After completing a frightful carnage the Naga carved a place for himself and his Zamtur (son-in-law) at the present location of *Shushramnaga* (Sheesh Nag). Kalhana says "Is seen to this day[i.e. 1148-49AD] by Pilgrims proceeding to Amreshvara". Slightly upstream of Sheesh Nag towards Koenjnar glacier is located a smaller lake *Zamtirsaras* (Zamtir Nag meaning son-in law's lake)- the residence of Naga's Brahman son-in-law, transformed into a Naga. The full Translation of the verse 267 *Tarang* I of Kalhana's Rajtarangini leaves no doubt about the continuation of pilgrimage to Amarnathji Shrine during middle of 12th century. Stien's translation of Kalhana's verse is reproduced below

"The lake of dazzling whiteness resembling a sea of milk which he created for himself as a residence on a far off mountain, is to the present day seen by people on Pilgrimage to Amreshvara"

The fact that Zain-ul-abdin (1420-1470) the pious Muslim ruler of Kashmir, besides visiting numerous Hindu places of worship also visited Amarnathji shrine has been documented by his chronicler Jonaraja. Mention of Amarnathji has also been made by Abu-ul-Fazal in *Ain Akbari*. Ali Mardan Khan the Mughal Governor of Kashmir during the rule of emperor Shah Jahan's had sarcastically commented on the so called madness and religious eccentricism of streams of faithfuls ill clad, barefooted winding their way in rain and snow through slush and treacherous paths to behold what was not a God in a cave. It is believed that he dreamed of *Maheshvara* (Shiva) and changed from a cynical to a firm believer and composed the following Persian poetry in praise of *Mashvera*

Huma Asle Masheshwar Bood , Shahb Shaheki Didam

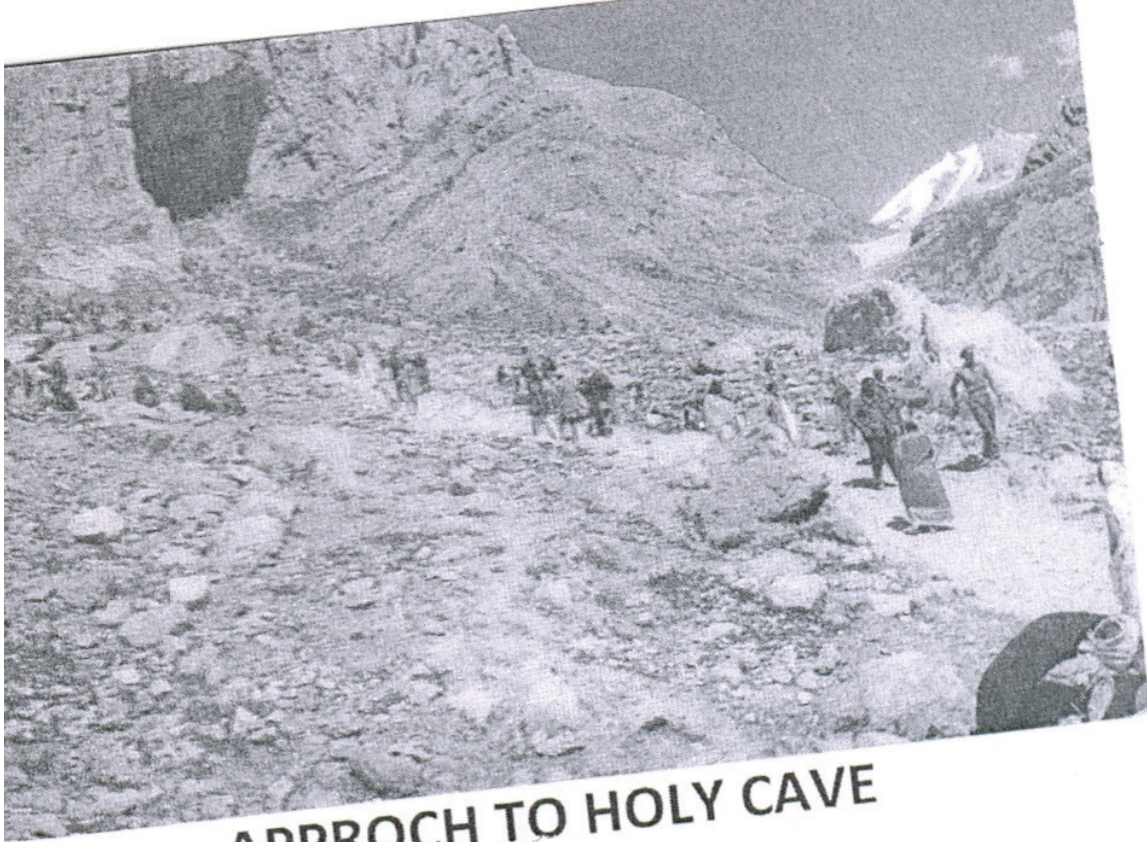
In the dead of night what I saw with my own eyes was indeed the lord of the lords the Maheshvar

Ajab Sanyase Dedam, Namu Narayana Guftam Ba Khake Payee Bosdom

The sight of the strange Sanyasi promoted me to chant Namu Narayana as I lay prostrate at his feet

Manam Marde Mussalmanam, Ali Khanam Hameedanam, Khuda Banda Parvar Bood

The verse has been compiled by me a devout Muslim, Ali Mardan Khan can say with certainty saw divinity unfolding before myself



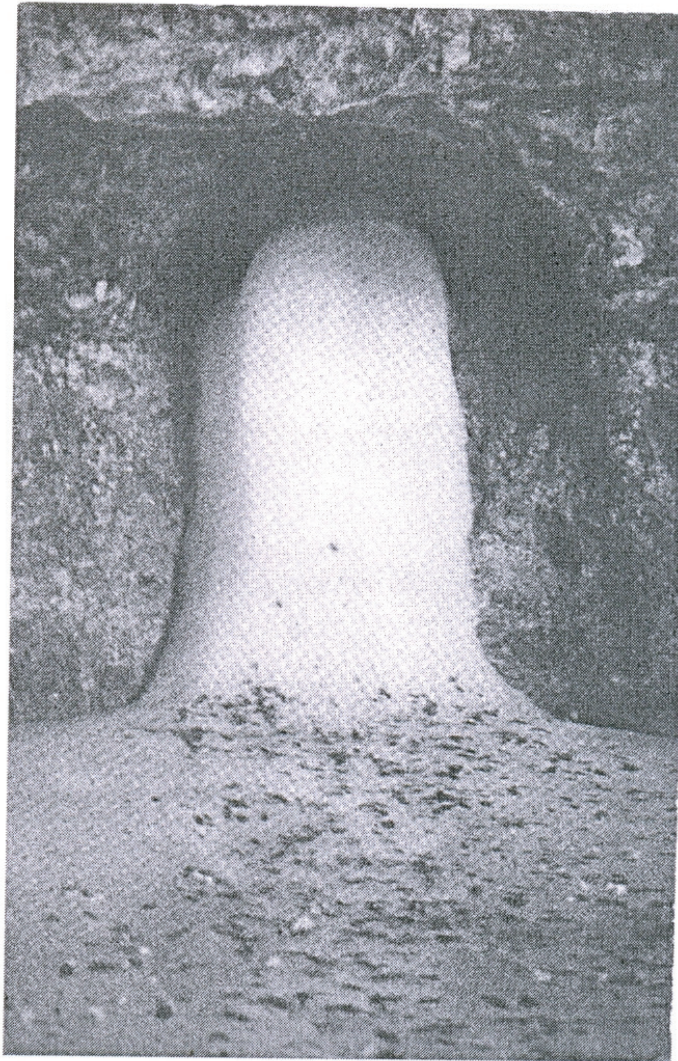
APPROCH TO HOLY CAVE

Francois Bernier the French Physician who accompanied Emperor Aurangzeb to Kashmir in 1665 after visiting Trisandya, Verinag, Achabal, Wular Lake Harmukh etc, was about two days away from a magnificent *grota* (cave) full of wonderful *congelations* (frozen things) apparently the Amarnathji cave. The relevant part of Bernier's book "Travels in Mughal Empire" is reproduced here "I was pursuing journey to a *grota* full of wonderful *congelations* two days journey from Sangsafed when I received the intelligence that my Nawab felt very impatient and easy on account of my long absence." Vincent A. Smith who has edited the 2nd edition of Bernier's book has observed that Grota full of wonderful congelations is the Amarnath cave where blocks of ice stalagmites formed by dripping water from the roof are worshiped by the Hindus who resort here as images of Shiva, glaciers surround



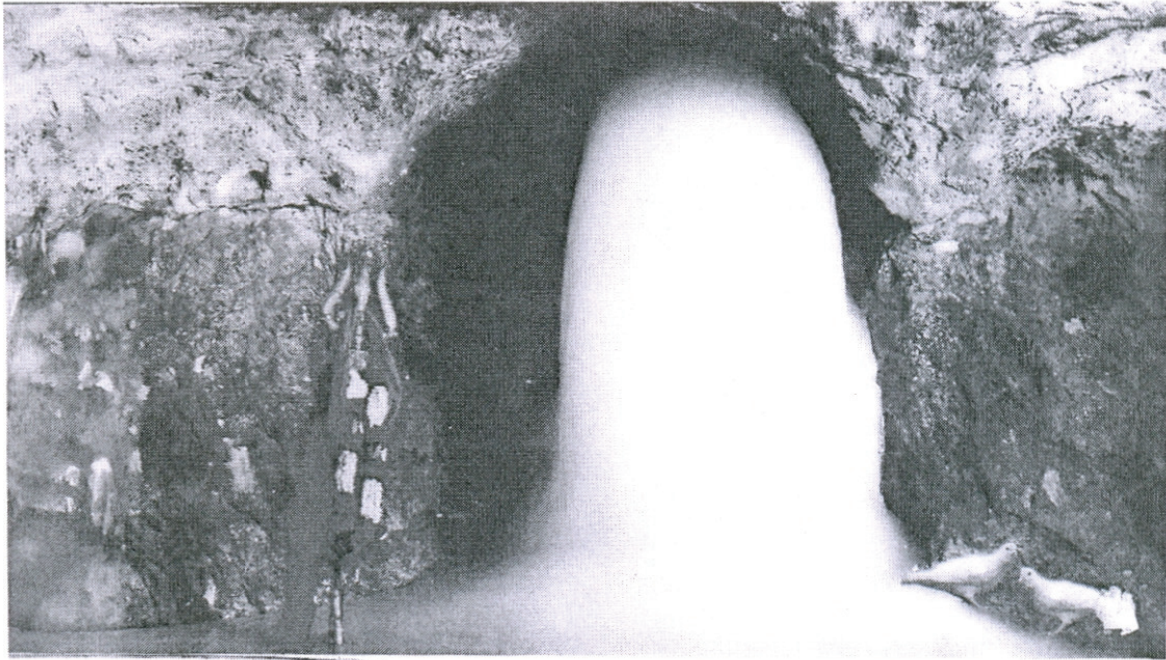
CAVE

Vigne in his book 'Travels in Kashmir ,Ladakh and Skardu 1842' says " Ceremony at the cave of Umurnath takes place on 15th of Sawan 28th July..... Not only Hindoos of Kashmir but those from Hindoostan of every rank and cast can be seen collecting and travelling up the valley of Lidar towards the celebrated cave which from his description must have been the place which Bernier intended to visit but was prevented" After returning from Ladakh Vigne himself intended to visit Amarnathji cave during the rule of Maharaja Sher Singh son of Maharaja Ranjit Singh of Punjab along the Lidar valley route in late season but was forced to return from Mahagunus due to bad weather. He has given a beautiful description of the pilgrimage though gathered from others which indicates that pilgrimage was in good vogue before 1840 -41.From his narrative we can also conclude that pilgrims not only from Kashmir but also from the plains of the sub-continent also visited Amarnath in great numbers . From the above it is clear that the holy shrine has been in continuous memory since far about two millenniums .



Even if it is assumed that Amarnath was lost for some time and rediscovered by Malik for which no convincing proof is available, it can easily be surmised that Amarnathji cave was not lost for thousands or hundreds of years. The pilgrimage must have been disturbed due to political upheavals or natural calamities or persecution of Hindus during the Muslim rule at the most for a decade or so. No community loses its collective memory in a few decades. Lawrence in his book 'Valley of Kashmir' maintains that pilgrims proceeding to Amarnathji used to be joined by Brahmans of Mattan and further up from Batkut Malik used to take charge of the Pilgrimage . According to him the Malik were supposed to keep the track in good order, carry

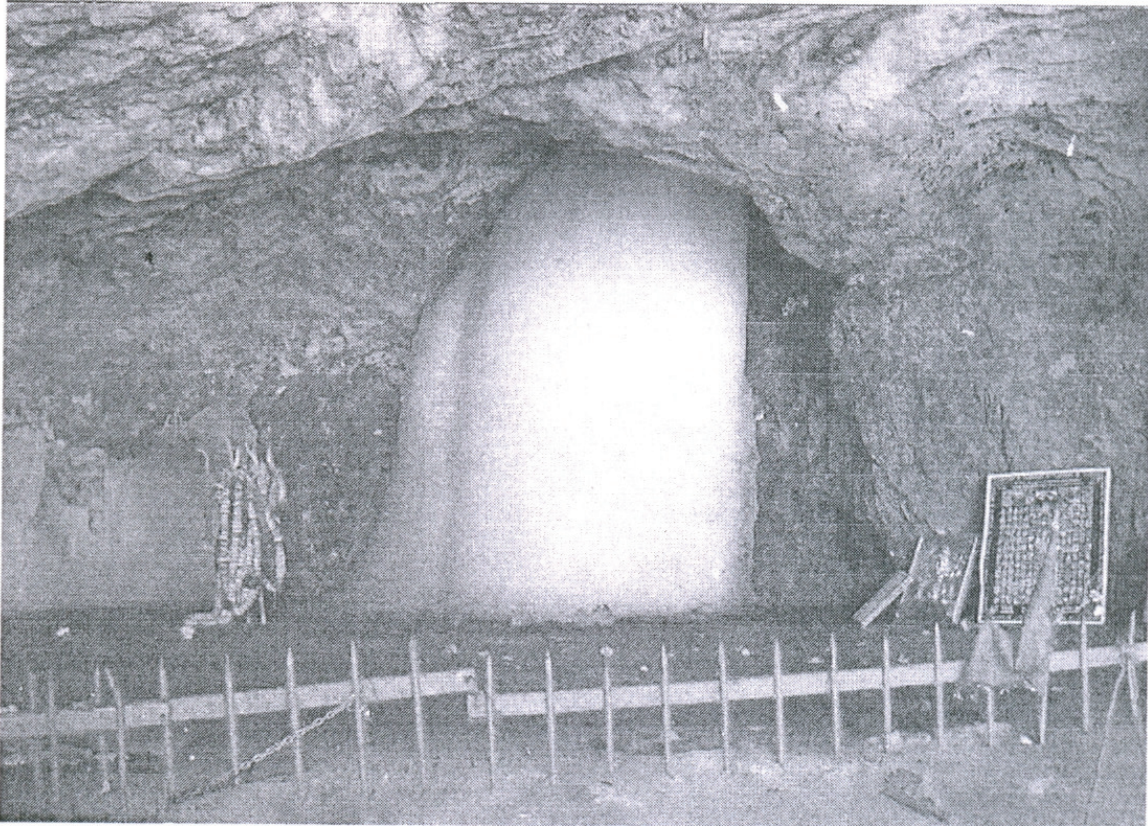
sick ones and ensure that nothing was stolen and as a result received one third of the offerings at the Amarnathji shrine. Lawrence does not mention anywhere that the one third of the offerings was paid in lieu of Maliks having discovered or rediscovered the shrine. There is no mention of the receipt of *rasum rahdari* received by the Maliks from pilgrims nor grants from the state government for the services rendered. It is clear that share of the offerings was for the services rendered and not for discovery or rediscovery of the shrine. Beside Lawrence, earlier travelers or other authors have also not mentioned anything about the rediscovery of the cave. It is not difficult to conclude that the cave shrine could not have been lost during a short span of few decades during which the *yatra* might not have seen the pomp and show and may have remained a low key affair in view of the adverse political climate. The theory that Maliks having discovered or rediscovered in or around 1775 AD is also constrained by the adversity of the time. At that time Kashmir was ruled by Afghans (1753-1819) who persecuted Kashmiris in general and Hindus in particular and would not have taken kindly to Maliks or anybody else claiming to have rediscovered any Hindu or Buddhist shrine. Such a discovery /rediscovery even if made would have been kept under wraps. It is highly improbable to presume that pilgrimage to Amarnathji could have been resumed during the Afghan rule for reasons already stated.



It has baffled the Kashmiri Pandits to have been told that the *yatra* to the holy cave was lost for a quite a long time, some lost theorists like Parvez Dewan have gone as wild to claim for thousands of years others like O.N. Churungoo have indicated for hundreds of years until it was rediscovered by Maliks.. Historically both look fantastic. There is nowhere any mention of *Yatra* ever having been banned. It is not possible that rulers like Zain-ul- abidin or Akbar or his descendants could have done that. Afghans took over from the Mughals in 1753 and ruled Kashmir for 66 years.. It is here that the whole story of lost and found is hinged.

According to Churungoo the Amarnathji cave was rediscovered by Maliks of Batkut by about 1600 AD i.e towards the end of Emperor Akbar's rule, and pilgrimage again remained in abeyance since the Afghan rule and was resumed only after Raja Gulab Singh arrived at the scene i.e. 1846 AD. Maliks claim to have located the Shrine by about 1775 AD and Parvez Dewan in article "Discovery of Lord Shiva's cave Temple" states that rediscovery of the cave

shrine was made sometime between 1750 and 1775. . All these claims are contradictory and cannot be accepted as factual. As already mentioned that pilgrims from all parts of the country in great numbers proceeded to Amarnathji during the Sikh Rule(1819-1846) long before Raja Gulab Singh appeared on the scene. Of late the former Governor of Kashmir Lt.Gen (ret'd) S.K Sinha for political or parochial reasons joined the band wagon and has gone to the extent that Amarnathji Shrine was not rediscovered but originally discovered and maintained by Maliks for a long time.As chairman of the Shri Amarnath Shrine Board he was planning to construct a Dwar (Gateway) in front of the cave shrine and get an inscription carved on a plaque that the shrine was discovered by Maliks of Batkut/Aishmukam



MALIKS In order to arrive at a logical conclusion we have to understand the history and back ground of the institution of Maliks .According to Baron Von Hugel , Malik ia a title of honour and distinction given to successors of *Davarpatis, Margesa* latter called Magreys or Darhals holding charge of Watch cum Military Stations on feudal basis on the passes/routes entering and leaving Kashmir by the independent Sultans of Kashmir ,and also to other clans like Chaks, Rainas Dars etc for their loyal services . After the annexation of Kashmir by Mughals in 1586 AD most of the Maliks of Magrey, Raina, Chak and other clans who had fought against the former were hunted, killed and banished from Kashmir.Some of the Maliks retreated into remote valleys to escape persecution. Some of them latter submitted themselves before Akbar and took the oath of loyalty were allowed to resume guarding of routes, administration and even judiciary. With the advent of Dogra rule in 1846 opening of all the routes entering and leaving Kashmir and gradual establishment of posts at regular and vulnerable places the ancestral occupation of Maliks came to an end. Since middle part of 19th century Maliks had to contend themselves with guiding and escorting the pilgrims to Amarnath, Harmukh,and probably to Sharda in Kishen Ganga valley. The allotment of a part of offerings

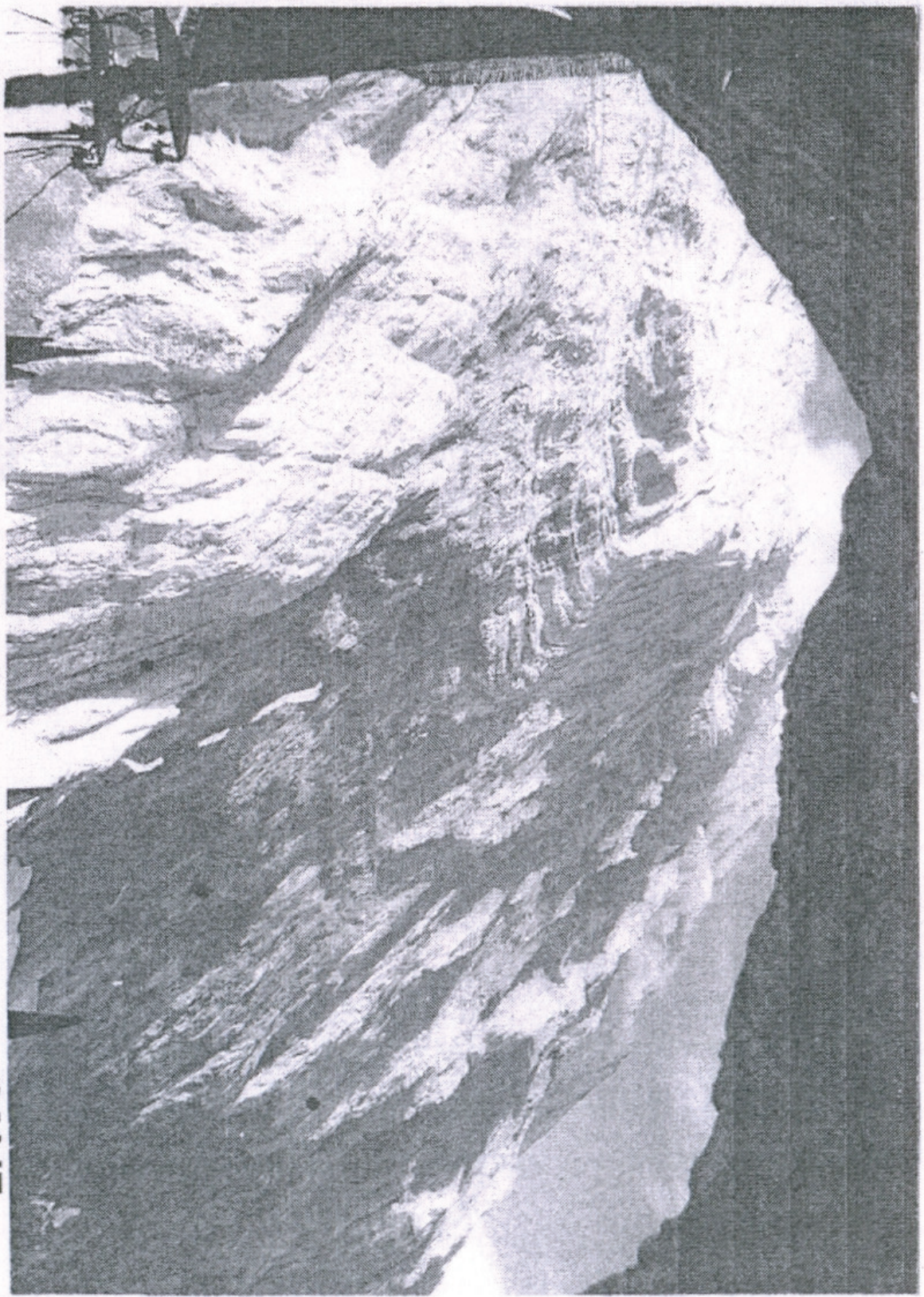
was in lieu of the services rendered. Since all the arrangements ,including the maintenance of track ,erection of sheds , medical care and police protection for pilgrims since long were made by the government of the day and lately by Shri Amarnath Shrine Board and several voluntary non government organizations the receipt of the one third of the offerings by Maliks is a **historical relic comparable to now abolished Jagirdaris and Privy purses.**

Prof Charungoo in his article has stated that “some people interested in anthropological or geological studies have said it is an encrustation of lime, chalcedony and archeological research by Pt Anand Koul has revealed otherwise. It is true that some observations made by pilgrims and travelers are not relevant including the one in “Tirtha “ published by CMC Ltd that at Amarnathji is an ice covered linga. Similarly Calcedony a form of Silica and cannot be assimilated by ice or water under any circumstances. However Linga is an stalagmite of ice may contain bicarbonate of Calcium which cannot be visually seen. Anthropology is the science of physiological, psychological and racial study of man while as Archeology deals with things, used or made by man from prehistoric to medieval times both have absolutely no scope for research at Amarnathji cave.

RETURN HALT A news item under the caption “ Another Shiva Cave Temple at Upper Pahalgam” appeared in Daily Excelsior of 28 th August 2001 stating that another cave not far away from Amarnath Cave ,which is being visited by about one hundred thousand pilgrims every year has been discovered. The news report reiterated that old Amarnathji cave was discovered by Maliks in 1775 and ruins near the newly discovered temple at Hapatgund were originally built by a Dogra Governor of Kashmir during the rule of Maharaja Ranjit Singh in 18th Century. Firstly the presumption of a Dogra Governor having built a temple in 18 th century seems to be the height of the imagination of the excelsior correspondent as **none** of the Kashmir governors during the Sikh rule in Kashmir was a Dogra and moreover Sikhs ruled Kashmir between 1819 to 1846 i.e 19 th century and not 18th century. As already mentioned the Amarnathji Shrine was known centuries before 1775.

Parvez Dewan has hypothesized that the newly discovered Shiva Cave temple could have been a base camp Amarnath Yatra. The postulation does not stand scrutiny as the new cave is not located on the traditional route, along which lie a number tirthas at which performance of ablutions was a must for a meriful yatra. According to Bhrngisasmhita) , Gates (1872) the pilgrims had to approach Amarnathji cave from Panjtarni ,Bhairow Bal and after having *darshan* returned passing down the Amurveth upto Sangam[confluence with Sind River] from where they found a way back to Pahalgam from a **different route from that of Sheeshnag, Mahagunus and Panjtarni** , crossed the pass north of **Saskaach (Sasakot) Peak and passing Hatiara Talav(Where scores of Pilgrims have perished by slipping over loose debris and scree into the lake)** and eventually reached **Astanmarg and Hapatgund**. Swami Vivekananda also returned along this route and described the Hatiara Talav as **“Celebrated Lake of Death”** This route was abandoned in early 19th century for being a very dangerous one, The Hapatgund cave temple which lies along this route could have been a halting place on the return journey. Regarding the newly discovered temple itself at Hapatgund according to Pervez Dewan the identification of the top knot on the head and a serpent coiled round the neck of the idol and a yoni shaped tank some distance from the cave confirms the existence of an ancient temple. Since the idols in the cave also according to Pervez Dewan are in situ [i.e rocks not transported from their original positions by natural or human agencies] and presence of a large number of Shivlings in a limited space and their damage by water indicate the possibility of the

VIEW OF BAIRROW BALL FROM THE HOLY CAVE



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