Name of the Element: Narmada Parikrama

Community/ies: Hindu community

Region: Madhya Pradesh

Brief Description: The Narmada Parikrama is a spiritual journey that holds immense religious significance in Hinduism. In the cultural milieu of India, all elements of nature are considered sacred, and one such element is the river. In Hindu philosophy, the river is considered sacred and is worshipped as a mother goddess. This tradition of Narmada Parikrama has existed since ancient times. The significance of the River Narmada has been historically evident in great epic tales and ancient sacred texts. There is an entire section called Rewakhand under the Skandh Purana which glorifies and celebrates the sacred River Narmada. Other Puranas such as the Matsya and Padma Purana mention the existence of millions of pilgrimage sites and religious centers along both banks. The etymology of the River Narmada literally means a river that takes away a man's ego. Legends say that the great Ganga River visits Narmada once a year in the guise of a black cow to cleanse herself from the sins collected from mortal humans. It is also believed that while the Ganga washes away sins with one holy bath, merely seeing the Narmada can purify one's sins. These aspects demonstrate the strong religious and cultural significance of the River Narmada in Hinduism.

The Parikrama is a unique way of worshipping the river goddess Narmada by performing a barefoot circumambulation, a journey of approximately 3500 km, which takes around six to eight months to complete. Following ancient rules, the journey used to take 3 years, 3 months, and 13 days. It is believed that this Parikrama was first performed by the great sage Markandeya. There are many historic sacred towns and centers that have emerged along both banks of the river, including Ghats, religious institutions, and temples of great significance. The banks of the Narmada have also been the land of meditation and penance, culturally known as the tapobhumi of many great sages and saints such as Rishi Agastya, Bhrigu, Atri, Bharadwaj, Kaushik, Markandeya, Shandilya, and Kapil. The son of Ravana, Meghnad, a great devotee of Lord Shiva, also established a temple that is now known as Meghnad Ghat.

The River Narmada originates from the Amarkantak mountain, where there exists a temple dedicated to her and a sacred water tank. From here, the river flows through diverse geographical conditions in the states of Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Gujarat. The river changes form depending on the topography. The journey along the riverbanks is challenging, sometimes taking the Parikramavasi (pilgrim) through deep forests and at other times across plain grounds, offering very diverse experiences.

The most important aspect of this pilgrimage is to set out on the sacred journey with minimal material belongings, trusting that Goddess Narmada will take care of the challenges along the way. While walking for days and months, far from the world, one finds solace in nature, offering an opportunity to be conscious and aware of each moment. This journey allows one to observe nature, pause to listen to the inner voice, and find one's inner self. The pilgrimage is a path of self-realization, helping one understand and reflect on their identity amidst the expectations of the material world and society.

The experiences of Parikramavasi on this journey are transcendental, spiritual, divine, and mysterious—often beyond an outsider's understanding. As one Parikramavasi described her experience, "There is pain on this path, but no suffering! There is joy and inner peace, even though the body is physically exhausted after walking for hours!" Devotees mostly wear simple white cotton clothes, keeping one or two extra pairs of clothes and a water can (Kamandal) to carry water from the river for drinking and performing evening rituals.

Devotees begin their sacred journey early in the morning after bathing in the river, walking continuously and cherishing experiences and interactions with nature and other pilgrims. During the monsoon months (Chaturmas), devotees stay at one place due to the rising water levels. People from all genders, age groups, and socio-economic backgrounds participate in this journey. Saints, sages, and ascetics who have renounced worldly desires also partake in the pilgrimage, wearing saffron or yellow clothes to symbolize their spiritual path. They live secluded lives, performing sadhana (spiritual practice) and penance in nature.

Devotees chant "Narmade Har!" while walking, praising the goddess. These saints have built ashrams and dwellings where they continue their spiritual practices. The spiritual journey begins from one of the religious centers on the bank, keeping the river on the right-hand side, similar to the circumambulation of a temple. The river must not be crossed except at the point where it meets the sea, and on the other end, near the origin temple of Narmada at Amarkantak.

Upon completing the pilgrimage, devotees visit the Omkareshwar temple, dedicated to Lord Shiva, and offer the sacred water collected during the journey. Parikramavasi are respected and provided with alms by villagers, volunteers, and Sewashrams—socio-cultural institutions that provide shelter, meals, and bedding. These institutions are run by community groups or temple trusts. The system of Sewashrams is a unique tradition in itself, where materials or money are donated to support the pilgrims' needs. Devotees originally consumed only fruits, flowers, milk, or curd offered by community helpers with adoration.

Over time, many Sewashrams have been established along the Parikrama path to offer food, rest, and other essentials to the pilgrims. Villagers and tribal communities on the riverbanks also provide supplies like flour, salt, lentils, rice, oil, turmeric, and chili, known as sadavrat. Although modern infrastructure has made the journey somewhat easier, walking for months to complete the 3500 km journey remains a significant act of austerity (tapashcharya). Some devotees dedicate their lives to the Parikrama, completing the journey repeatedly.

While other versions of the Parikrama exist, such as Uttarvahini, Panchakoshi, and Jaleri, the rawness and truthfulness of walking barefoot remain a unique experience compared to other modes of transportation. The Narmada Parikrama is a unique and deeply spiritual journey, leading to self-discovery and a stronger connection with nature, one's roots, and existence. This pilgrimage is not a tourist circuit but a sacred journey for understanding one's true self.