

BRIEF INTRODUCTION OF THE ELEMENT

NARMADA PARIKRAMA



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The Narmada Parikrama is a spiritual journey which holds immense religious significance amongst Hinduism. In the cultural milieu of India all elements from nature are considered sacred and one of them is the river. In the Hindu philosophy the river is considered sacred and is worshipped as a mother goddess. This tradition of Narmada Parikrama is into existence since the ancient times. The significance of River Narmada has been historically evident in terms of its mentions in great epic tales and ancient sacred texts. "There is an entire section called *Rewakhand* under *Skandh Purana* which glorifies and celebrates the sacred river Narmada."¹ "Other *Puranas* such as *Matsya* and *Padma Purana* mentions the existence of millions of pilgrimages and religious centres along both the banks."²

The etymology of river Narmada literally means a river which takes away a man's ego. "Legends say that the great Ganga River visits river Narmada once in a year in the guise of a black cow to cleanse herself from the collected sins of mortal humans."³ It is also believed that while Ganga washes away since with one holy bath, a mere auspicious sight of Narmada may purify one's sins. All these aspects demonstrate the strong religious and cultural significance of the river Narmada in Hindu religion.

This Parikrama is a unique way in which the river goddess Narmada is worshipped by doing barefoot circumambulation involving a journey of approximately 3500kms over the span of six to eight months. By following all the ancient rules the required time used to be 3 years 3 months and 13 days. It is believed that this Parikrama was first done by the great sage Markandeya. There are many historic sacred towns and centres which have emerged on the banks of the river on both the edges. There are Ghats, religious institutions and temples with great importance on these edges. The banks of Narmada has also been the land of meditation and penance, culturally known as *tapobhumi* of many great sages and saints who acquired salvation such as Rishi, sages Agastya, Bhrgu, Atri, Bharadwaj, Kaushik, Markandeya, Shandilya and Kapil.⁴ The son of Ravana, Meghnad, who was a great devotee of God Shiva, also had established deity temple, which place is now known as Meghnad Ghat.

River Narmada originates from the Amarkantak mountain where there exists a temple dedicated to her and sacred water tank. From here the river travels across diverse geographic conditions through the states of Madhya Pradesh,

¹ <https://hinduism.stackexchange.com/questions/14530/what-is-the-story-of-river-narmada-from-puranas-and-significance-of-narmada-pari>

² https://bharatdiscovery.org/india/%E0%A4%A8%E0%A4%B0%E0%A5%8D%E0%A4%AE%E0%A4%A6%E0%A4%BE_%E0%A4%A8%E0%A4%A6%E0%A5%80

³ <https://hinduism.stackexchange.com/questions/14530/what-is-the-story-of-river-narmada-from-puranas-and-significance-of-narmada-pari>

⁴ <https://narmadariverstone.narmadamarblestone.in/maa-narmada/#:~:text=On%20the%20banks%20of%20Narmada,is%20a%20holy%20pilgrimage%20place.>

Maharashtra and Gujarat. The river flows in different form at different topographical contexts. The path of the journey along the river bank is challenging. Sometimes it takes the Parikramavasi through the deep forest, while sometimes there are plain grounds. Thus, the journey on the banks of the river provides very diverse experiences.

The most important aspect of this pilgrimage is to leave on the sacred journey with bare minimum things from the material world with faith on the goddess Narmada that she will take care of all the challenges which one might come across while walking on this path of the unknown. While walking for days and months away from the world, one finds solace in the nature which gives an opportunity to be conscious and aware of each single moment that allows one to observe nature, processes of nature, a pause to listen the voice coming from within, and the most important aspect to finding one's inner self. This pilgrimage is a path of self realisation allowing one to understand and know who am I amidst the lenses of the material world and expectations of the society. The experiences of Parikramavasi on this journey are transcendental, spiritual, divine, mysterious, mystic and most of the time beyond an outsider's understanding. As described by one of the Parikramavasi while narrating her experiences she said that, *"There is pain on this path, but no sufferings! There is a joy and inner peace even though the body is physically exhausted after walking for hours! "*

Devotees mostly wear white cotton simple clothes; keep one or two extra pair of clothes and a water can, (*Kamandal*) to carry water from the river which they drink and also take in the use to perform the evening rituals while praying the Goddess. Mostly the devotees, the Parikramavasi starts walking on the sacred journey early morning after having bath in the river. They continuously walk and cherish the experiences, interactions with nature, individuals and groups in form of *satsang*. During the four months of the monsoon, called *chaturmas*, devotees stay at only one place as it is the risky time due to rise in water level.

There are individuals from society who comes to experience this unique tradition which is filled with divinity and spirituality. Their experience says that as the days passes during the journey, one becomes lesser concerned about the mortal world's worries and challenges. One starts being more conscious and aware about his or her thoughts, actions and existence. The devotees are from all genders, diverse age groups as well as from diverse socio economic and cultural backgrounds of the society. There are also saints, sages and ascetics who have left behind the material world and follow a life having an abstinence from the worldly desires in order to pursue the spiritual journey. These Sanyasis do wear saffron or yellow clothes which distinguishes them from the rest of the Parikramavasi symbolically representing their higher rich on the journey to achieve enlightenment. While walking devotees continuously chant "Narmade Har!" praising the goddess Narmada. These saints have made ashrams and dwellings amidst the nature where they are doing *sadhana* and performing

penance since years. They live secluded life away from the world while advancing on the path of achieving salvation.

The spiritual journey begins from one of the religious centres located on the bank keeping the river on right hand side in a similar way as a circumambulation is done in temple, keeping deity on right side in a clockwise direction. The river must not be crossed at any given point except at the point of meeting the sea and on the other end round the temple of Narmada origin at Amrkantak. The journey is considered complete after coming back to the point of origin from where the journey was initiated. After completion of the pilgrimage, the devotees are to visit the Omkareshwar temple which is dedicated to God Shiva and considered one of the twelve *Jyotirlingas*. The sacred water collected from the river Narmada during the journey is offered to the deity.

The Parikramavasi are respected and provided with alms by villagers, volunteers and *sewashrams*. *Sewashrams* are the socio cultural religious institutions which work on the concept of helping the devotees by fulfilling their basic needs of shelter for night stay, meals and bedding. These institutions are run by community groups or sometimes by the temple trusts since generations. The inhabitants and religious individuals donate to such ashrams either the materials required or money as per their financial capacity. The systems of Sewashrams and the way they function are beyond an individual's imagination which can be seen as a unique and beautiful tradition in itself. In Hindu religion such deeds are considered a great path to earn virtue. This tradition itself is another significant component of the unique cultural tradition of Narmada Parikrama.

Originally, the Parikramavasi used to consume only fruits, flowers, milk or curd that also when offered by community helpers with adoration without asking. Originally, the temple shrines, huts of the saints or religious institutions like *dharmashalas* were the only places where the resting place for Parikramavasi was available on the banks. Over the period of time there have been establishments of numerous sewashrams on the Parikrama path which are continuously working for providing food, resting place and other essentials for the Parikramavasi.

Many times the villagers and tribal communities residing on the banks of the river offer flour, salt, lentils, rice, oil, turmeric and chilli which is known as *sadavrat*. As the infrastructure facilities and resources have reached to the remotest part of the Parikrama path the journey has become little easier. However, to walk continuously for months in order to complete the journey of approximately 3500 kms, is the *tapashcharya*, an act of austerity. Few of the devotees have decided to devote their entire life by continuously doing the Parikrama by one after another. Apart from the traditional path of the Parikrama, there are other versions of the Parikrama such as, Uttarvahini, Panchakoshi, Jaleri, etc. Now days, many devotees have started journey with several modes of transports. However, the rawness and truthfulness experienced

while walking barefoot is unique compared to experiences attained through other ways and means.

The Narmada Parikrama, one of its kind found ever in the world is a relinquishing journey exhibiting deep spiritual and divine associations leading to find one's own true self. The journey also helps one to connect with nature, his or her own roots and existence. This Parikrama is not any tourist circuit, rather a very pious and sacred one allowing knowing who you are!