

Shri Amarnath Yatra :

Role of Shrine Board, Administration and Society

By Dr. Jitendra Singh

In the affairs of the conduct of holy Shri Amarnath Yatra, the major role is played at three different levels by Shri Amaranth Shrine Board (SASB), administration and society respectively.

Unfortunately, the biggest irony is the politicization of Shri Amarnath Yatra in the last few years which has led to the inevitable consequence of the politicization of Shri Amaranth Shrine Board (SASB). In order to understand this phenomenon, it is important to have a look at the circumstances and background which inspired the formation of the board, the composition of the board and the criterion for selection of its members .

Pertinent to mention here that the year 1996 was a landmark year when an unprecedented tragedy struck the Armanath Yatra leading to over 240 deaths following which it was decided to constitute a committee under the Chairmanship of Nitish Sen Gupta to suggest ways and means to make yatra more safe and comfortable.

The report submitted by Nitish Sen Committee is an important document in the entire sequence of events. The three main recommendations made by it were (a) period of yatra to be around 30 days but extendable as situation improves. (b) security of yatris to be the responsibility of administration (c) suggestion for an independent board to manage the affairs of the yatra.

Another important report submitted by General Mookerjee Committee in the year 1999-2000, by and large endorsed the suggestions made by Nitish Sen Gupta Committee and made some significant additional recommendations like for example (a) mobile medical vans during the yatra for the benefit of pilgrims (b) weather laboratory at the base of yatra route for timely forecasts for the benefit of pilgrims.

The SASB Act was passed in 2000 and the board was established in 2001. Another remarkable development during this period was the passage of High Court judgement by Justice Pramod Kohli in 2005 following a Public Interest Litigation in which the Hon'ble Court upheld the freedom of religion as enshrined in the constitution of India. The SASB was envisaged to include 10 members including the Governor himself.

The most notable objection to the composition of the board has been the ill-defined criteria for selection of its members. For example the existing board act allows for two male Hindu scholars, 2 female Hindu scholars, 2 distinguished Hindu members besides the representatives of trade and

environment. On the face of it, this is more or less a subjective criteria in which the Governor has free will to include such persons as members who are inclined to oblige his preferences and wishes. Besides, if the existing government of the state manages to impose its diktats on the Governor, the entire selection process itself becomes politicized and an eye-wash to suit the convenience of the ruling party.

Section 16 and Section 18 of the Shrine Board Act respectively give absolute powers to the Board members in managing administrative and financial affairs of the yatra. However, what has been unfortunate is the fact noticed particularly in the last few years that the members of SASB have surrendered this authority and privilege to the Governor and the State government for reasons best known to them. Whether this is the result of their poor understanding or their poor conviction is a subject of introspection.

The year 2008 was historic year in the history of Amarnath Yatra and so also in the history of Jammu and Kashmir in general, when a mass movement was witnessed over the issue of Amarnath Land row. The agitation culminated on August 31, 2008 with an agreement signed by the then Governor's Advisor whereby it was agreed upon to allow the land use for the yatra and also withdraw all the cases pending against those who has participated in the agitation. Unfortunately many of these points agreed upon are yet to see the light of the day.

POINTS FOR CONSIDERATION AND SUGGESTION

- i. Why should the yatra not be allowed for entire year i.e. all the 365 days with a provision of advisory to guide the desiring pilgrims about whether forecast and travel safety?
- ii. Facilitatory works like for example clearance of snow should be assigned to professional agencies and not given to agencies like Pahalgam Development Authority which are short of resources for this kind of works.
- iii. Proposal to introduce cable car
- iv. Widening of the yatra rules.
- v. Setting up of round the year permanent hospital at the base which could during off season of the yatra cater to local population and patients.
- vi. Weather laboratory has the base.
- vii. Subsidized to helicopter fairs for the sick and handicapped.
- viii. "Langers" tenders to be open to all to allow wider participation of bidders from all over the state .

SUGGESTION FOR SASB COMPOSITION :

- i. The constitution of SASB ought to be changed to accommodate the priorities expressed by the social and religious society.
- ii. Specific criteria ought to be fixed for selection of SASB members though expert panels for each of the categories notified in the act.

- iii. The involvement of Baba Armanath and Buda Amarnath (BABA) Yatri Nyas and members of civil society should be made mandatory in deciding the choice of the members for SASB.

ROLE OF ADMINISTRATION :

The role of administration should be confined only to the facilitation of the yatra, cooperating with the SASB in making arrangement for the yatra and most importantly providing the required security to the yatris. There should be a strict limitation to this role so that the administration does not exceed its brief to please the ruling polity at the cost of the sentiments of the pilgrims as was witnessed in 2008.

ROLE OF SOCIETY :

While SASB and administration have a great responsibility on themselves, the society also has a crucial role to play which is both a contributory role as seen for example in the form of dozens of langers voluntarily setup enroute the yatra and an advisory role to help the conduct of yatra through proper projection to the authorities of the sentiments and faith of pilgrims.

The SASB, administration and society can together help building a congenial atmosphere for the yatra without the circumstances ever provoking an agitational course.