

RELIGIOUS AND MYTHICAL ASPECTS OF MATA VAISHNO DEVI SHRINE: A SOCIOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION

Ravinder Singh (PhD)

Centre for the Study of Social Systems
School of Social Sciences
Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

Abstract- The paper tries to understand the religious and mythical aspects of Mata Vaishno Devi shrine. Therefore, I have divided the paper into two parts. The first part of the paper deals with the religious aspects of Mata Vaishno Devi shrine in which it looks at how the society understands the beliefs and practices. In this part views of scholars like T.N.Madan, Emile Durkheim, Diana L. Eck, and Michael Lambek etc. have been taken to understand the relationship between society, religious beliefs and values. The second part of the paper tries to outline the various mythical stories associated with the Mata Vaishno Devi and how the society interprets them. The scholarly works and ideas of Kathleen Erndl, Tracy Pintchman, Levi-Strauss and other local literature on Mata Vaishno Devi have been taken into consideration.

Key words: Religious, Mythical, Mother, Society, Pilgrimage, Shrine, Belief, Rituals, Sacred, Profane.

1. RELIGIOUS ASPECT OF MATA VAISHNO DEVI SHRINE

In the Indian tradition, religion has played a central role in which it is not only associated with the worship in general but in some contexts it has controlled the entire community by worshipping the supernatural beings. So, the beliefs and rituals becomes the central concern of a religious life in which beliefs could be fulfilled only when rituals become the mechanisms (Jain, 2001:285-286). In the same way, Lambek (2002) argues that religion is associated with the belief in supernatural beings (Lambek, 2002:22).

In the context of Mata Vaishno Devi there are various religious aspects which have been associated with the pilgrimage and the Hindu society. It could be seen in the form of beliefs and rituals, notions of pilgrimage, Hindu values of life, sacred space, *pindis* of Vaishno Devi and various spots of Vaishno Devi includes the *Trikuta Mountain*.

Photograph No. 1: Shows the pilgrims beliefs and rituals.



Source: Clicked by myself on 23 March 2013 at Dakshini Darwaja at Katra (Jammu).

Durkheim (1995) said that beliefs are important part of every religion. While understood the beliefs and values, he argues that the whole world is divided into two domains, sacred and profane; such is the distinctive trait of religious thought. Beliefs, myths, dogmas and legends are either representations or systems of representations that express the nature of sacred things and their association with the profane things. He also opined that sacred things can be anything material or non-material form (Fields, 1995:34-35). Durkheim argues that without the shared values and moral beliefs social life is impossible and has emphasized on the importance of collective worship in which the integration of society is strengthened, members communicate and comprehend the moral bonds which unite them (Haralambos, 2003:456-457).

“Who is the Mother of the Vedas and the science of Vedanta and who is giver of victory and personification of victory itself? The institution of the shrine of Mata Vaishno Devi has a long traditional, spiritual and religious history” (Bhattacharyya, 2007:212).

A. Pilgrimage and the Notions of Sacred Space

Throughout the world the pilgrimage exists in which the sacred journey takes place because societies or communities consider certain places as sacred or holy and start worshipping or make a religious journey to these places (Stoddard and Morinis, 1997: ix). Singh (2010) said that the sacred space has been associated with the landscape in social and cultural history. It considers that place which has been historically recognized as sacred and would continue in the future. Singh (2010) also tells that the sacred space comes into existence when some human beings searched them and through ritualisation process they make them alive and later it becomes the religious tradition. That sacred space is not just limited to one particular community but it is the place which is considered as equal for all the peoples from diverse cultural background. He also argues that the notion of sacred space would be understood only through deeper faith embedded in that particular cultural context (Singh, 2010:7-11).

Bremer (2006) argues that the Cultural geographer Yi-Fu.Tuan (1977) has noted that, "*Space is more abstract than 'place'.* What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value" (Bremer, 2006:25).

As the pilgrimage to the shrine of Mata Vaishno Devi, has been associated with the notions of sacredness and is considered a religious journey for the whole community or society. Madan (2000) said that the religious tradition has defined space and time as sacred which is opposed to the secular or profane. The Hindu notions of sacredness rooted in the earth which they consider as divine and there are so many holy places or pilgrimages that have been associated with the sacred (Madan, 2000:97). In terms of sacred Madan understood that:

The sacred as a particular class of phenomena, as a kind of knowledge, as a variety of activities in space and time, and as a typology of roles and persons (Madan, 2000:2)

As Eck (2012) has defined the India as a sacred geography in which the whole of India could be seen as a vast network of pilgrimage places (Eck, 2012:2). Grotzbach (1994) argues that most of the pilgrimages in the Hindu religion have been associated with the high mountains which are considered as a sacred space (Grotzbach, 1994:181). Bhardwaj (1983) said that in the Hindu literature the word pilgrimage known as tirth yatra which means undertaking journey to river fords and it's an ancient and continuous religious tradition in the life of Hindus (Bhardwaj, 1983:2).

Lokeswarananda (1995) said that in every religion there have been defined sacred places and these holy places have their relation with that particular society and it requires its followers to visit at least once. Such places are considered as supreme in every religion. Similarly, a Muslim's lifetime ambition is to visit Mecca and if he can visit it even for a short while only, he feels he has achieved something of which he can be legitimately proud. Every Hindu aspires to visit Varanasi, the holiest of all the holy places known to Hinduism. A Christian has the same feeling about Jerusalem (Lokeswarananda, 1995:47). For instance the similar argument has been said by a British civil servant Norman Macleod in 1860 in which he associates Hindus with the Varanasi, Mecca with the Muslims and Jews of old with the Jerusalem (Eck, 2012:1).

Vidyarthi (1979) argues that before the 1950 there were some Indologists, orientalist and travelers who have given some little description of Hindu pilgrimages. But after the 1950 the cultural analysis of pilgrimage places started getting attention by the anthropologists. For instance the L.P.Vidyarthi 1953-54 in Banaras, Bose 1955-56 in Bhubaneswar and later these studies were inspired by Robert Redfield. As the Robert Redfield in 1955 has defined the great and little tradition while discussing the concept of civilization and in the city of Madras, Milton Singer's (1955) attempted to explain the cultural centre, cultural specialists and cultural performances. He also argues that in 1958 Mckim Marriott and B.S.Cohn's has defined the concept of networks centers in the integration of Indian civilization and the Gaya, Vidyarthi (1961) has defined the Hindu place of pilgrimage as a dimension of Indian civilization and culture, in which he said that Gaya is a sacred geography, where happens interrelationships of complex Hindu social structure (Vidyarthi, 1979:11-12). Sharma (2011) argue that the pilgrimage places were considered as sacred and secular in the traditional India because during the cultural occasions people from different communities interact with each other which leads to cultural bounds. For instance the various pilgrimage places include, Kashi, Hardwar, Ramesvaram, Dwarka, Badrinath, and Ajmer Sharief (Sharma, 2011:56).

In the present context of India, there has been many other sacred places of Hindu pilgrimages discovered which are similar to the Varanasi and Kashi, i.e. Mata Vaishno Devi shrine, considers one among them. A pilgrimage to the holy shrine of Mata Vaishno Devi is a delightful journey to the place where Mata Vaishno Devi, had spent some time while observing various spiritual disciplines and penances. It also includes the certain places, where the goddess performed mystic sports. One climax of this pilgrimage is to reach the holy cave where she merged her human form with the divine astral form of her creators, the three supreme energies¹ (Chaturvedi, 2007:34). A pilgrim is often the best of travelers. He or she carries the idea that pilgrimage place is one goal among other greater transcendent ones (Visvanathan, 2010:58).

Bhattacharyya (2007) argues that in the Hindu tradition, pilgrimage plays a very important role in one's life. It is considered as a sacred journey. In one sense the pilgrimage in its true tradition is undertaken to meet the gods and have face-to-face

¹ These three supreme energies are goddess Kali, Lakshmi and Sarasvati.

communication with him or attain a deeper state of spirituality and experience a higher vision of truth. This tradition is so strong in which the whole India could be viewed as a vast network of pilgrim centre which has served as a perennial source of power to the Hindu mind, enlightened and warmed its inner recesses and also provided much needed sustenance to the emotional and cultural bonds of the people from one end of country to the other. He also argues that Vaishno Devi shrine is one of the religious shrine in India and the Hindus considers it as a sacred (Bhattacharyya, 2007:211).

Jammu has also considered as the city of temples, where founds many temples, shrines and pilgrimages everywhere in which worship of goddess is prevalent. Some have local reputation and some are known outside the state. The pilgrimage to the holy shrine of Mata Vaishno Devi considers a journey to the divine mother or sacred space (Ganhar, 1973:1). As Erndl (1993) understands pilgrimage is a physical as well as a geographical place where the mother resides. He associates pilgrimage with power and affection which attracts the pilgrims to reach their, with a specific desires they wish to have fulfilled or just to experience and participate in that power. The journey could be undertaken as the attachment with the human or the divine world or a transition zone between the realms of sacred and profane (Erndl, 1993:83).

The various steps of the pilgrimage in the context of Mata Vaishno Devi remind and explore the notions of the sacred space. When a pilgrims arrives at *Katra* which has considered as the sacred town of Mata Vaishno Devi. At *Banganga*, which is considered as significant because the myth of Banganga says that, goddess was accompanied by Hanuman also called languor Vir, who felt thirsty at this place. The goddess shot her arrow (ban), causing a river to flow i.e. known as Banganga and many pilgrims bath while starts their journey. At *Caran Paduka*, the myth says that the divine girl stopped for sometime at this place to look whether Bhairon Nath was following her or not. Now a temple has been built around the goddess footprints and many pilgrims do the same activities which are associated with myths of Caran Paduka (Erndl, 1993:64).

It is also believed that touching the feet of goddess at Caran Paduka, means seeking her blessings and right path in life and at *Adkuwari*, where pilgrims gets the motherly feelings, when they perform ritual of going through holy cave means, a pilgrim is coming out of the mother womb and gets purified. At the *shrine of Mata Vaishno Devi*, one fills with devotion and fervor² (Chaturvedi, 2007:48-55). Vidyarthi (1979) had considered the sacred complex of Kashi, a microcosm of Indian civilization, in which he argues that in the pilgrimages, the pilgrims were from diverse backgrounds or regions, which attains the spiritual, secular and sacred experiences at the time of journey (Vidyarthi, 1979:7).

Therefore, the whole space of Mata Vaishno Devi has been seen as sacred in nature. As the section has discussed the pilgrimage and the sacred space, but why the society are considering it as sacred and for what purposes they keep practicing beliefs and rituals and going on the pilgrimage of Mata Vaishno Devi shrine. The next section deals with it.

B. Purusharthas of human life

It is believed that the pilgrimage to the shrine of Mata Vaishno Devi considers the attainment of four Hindu values of life. These consist of *Dharm* or righteousness, *Arth* or material pursuits, *Kama* or contentment and *Moksh* or enlightenment. According to a belief in the folk literature, she is popular known as the '*Moonh Maangi Muradein Puri Karne Wali Mata*', which means whatever her children wishes; the mother fulfills that desires and lacks of pilgrims' visits from all parts of India as well as abroad³ (Shrine Board, 2010:9). In the encyclopaedia of Hinduism, Jones and Ryan (2007) has defined *purusharthas* or four ends of human life, in which *Artha*, comes the first, which means prosperity and worldly well being, in the second *Kama*, takes place which is associated with the pleasure or erotic satisfaction, then comes the *Dharm*, in the third place which means right conduct and adherence to social law and in the last *Moksh*, comes i.e. liberation from the rounds of birth and rebirth. They also argues that these all offers a balanced approach to the world and also maintains its equilibrium (Jones and Ryan, 1991/2007:150).

As Madan (2000) has defined Hindu values of life *karma* and *dharma* and argues that *karma* means that law of universe which associates with the birth and death of a human being. He defines that the word *Karma* is derived from the Sanskrit root kri which means action. The basic doctrine of the word *karma* in a very popular belief means all action has its reaction and he associates the word *karma* with the transmigration of souls (Madan, 1991/2000:65). The word *Dharma* has been derived from the Sanskrit root dhr means to hold and in etymological the word means to hold a thing and maintains its beings and in the Hindu belief *dharma* is the law of universe (Madan, 2000:77). He associated *dharma* with the right action in day to day life and he said that *dharma* is a synonym for righteousness, goodness and virtue. He also said that the *dharma* theory deals with the good conduct and thought which leads to the spiritual merit and happiness (Madan, 1991/2000:67). In the practical aspect of Hindu life *dharma* has been associated with the moral code of conduct in terms of given respect to elders (Madan, 2000:71). He also argues that the rules of *dharma* go down when a person comes out of his cultural context and accepts all diversities (Madan, 2000:76) the way of living and behaving in a general society (Madan, 2000:77). *Moksha* is the fourth stage in the Hindu values of life and in general

² The paragraph has discussed about the various spots of the pilgrimage journey to the shrine of Mata Vaishno Devi.

³ The existing literature agreed on this point, that there is close association of Mata Vaishno Devi with her devotees. Secondly, shrine board is publishing this information booklet for the pilgrims.

Moksha means *mukti* from one's life and in the Hindu tradition it has been associated with the attainment of higher spiritual goal in life (Jones and Ryan, 2007:292).

In the context of pilgrimage, the pilgrims may have some hidden motive to be fulfilled; Madan (2000) argues that why people in such a large numbers visit the tomb of Mu in al-din tomb and Ajmer and argues that it is the belief which inspires the followers. He told two reasons behind such a huge number of pilgrims, the one is material motive and another is spiritual motives. In material pursuit peoples visits there to gain some wealth or to thank him for help already received. For instance, when got the victory Emperor Akbar had visited the Ajmer and Mu in al-din tomb shrine on foot to thank god. In spiritual motives, a pilgrim reaches the pilgrimage places to get power or establish a relationship with that power (Madan, 2000:242-244).

Therefore, the section has discussed about the Hindu values of life in the context of pilgrimage. It also has spoke about the spiritual powers which attaches the pilgrims to the pilgrimages places. So, the next paragraph has understood the relationship in the context of Mata Vaishno Devi shrine.

C. Belief associated with the Call of Mata

The *Call of Mata* or the *Call of Goddess* has been considered as one of the most important belief in the context of Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine. The belief has explored the association of Vaishno Devi with her pilgrim's. The pilgrimage to the shrine of Mata Vaishno Devi itself starts with the notions of the call of Mata and it could be observed when pilgrims interact and communicate with each other and if they inquired about the purpose of their visit to Vaishno Devi, much response could be the mother called themselves. Whether the belief regards the call of Mata, created by different Hindus text or the shrine board itself or the pilgrims, but one could find it is practical in nature. As shrine board (2010) mentioned, that the call of Mata is not just a belief but a strong experience of one and all that the divine mother sends a call to her children. It also says that in the local folklore, the call of Mata beautifully expresses as, *Maan Aap Bulandi*, which means the mother herself calls (Shrine Board, 2010:9). It is a special belief among the Hindus that, whoever had reached the shrine of Mata Vaishno Devi is because of mother's call for his/her well wisher (Chaturvedi, 2007:6).

Photograph No. 2. A Pilgrim prostrating himself on the route to Mata Vaishno Devi.



Source: Clicked by myself.

Chaturvedi (2007) explored certain relationships on the notion of the call of, which understands the mother-children relationship. He argues that in the context Mata of Mata Vaishno Devi, a child reaches there only when mother calls and in the holy shrine the child wants to meet the divine mother. He said that the affection is like the iron attracts towards magnet and in the shrine the child wants to be in the lap of mother because of love which is considered as universal of life. In the world there is no material thing which compares with the mothers love and in the shrine of Mata Vaishno Devi millions of her children come to meet her. It also said that to worship mother with truth and honesty, then the person will get the chance to meet again and again (Chaturvedi, 2007:6). The local folklore has give high place mother, i.e. *Maa Samaan Daata Nahin*, No one can give like a Mother can. It has also said that, the divine mother Mata Vaishno Devi, not only showers her love on her children, but also calls them to her abode to receive her blessings (Shrine Board, 2010:3). Chaudhary (2003) argues that, it is the belief of most of the peoples on Mata Vaishno Devi, who considers this pilgrimage a spiritual journey, in which the pilgrims feel fresh and active (Chaudhary, 2003:2).

There is a beautiful song written which explores the call of Mata in praise of the deity, which is mentioned below:

You called me, Seranvali

Here I am here I am, Seranvali

O Flame Mother, Mountain Mother, Gracious Mother!

The whole world is but a wayfarer,
Whose destination is your door?
High mountains, long roads
Couldn't keep me away, Seranvali!

In an empty mind, a flame has ignited
On your path, friends have joined.
How can I open my mouth and ask you,
Without asking, I get everything, Seranvali!

Who's a king; who's is a beggar?
All your worshipers are equal.
Giving darsan to all, You draw them to your breast Seranvali!⁴ (Erndl, 1993:62).

She is present everywhere, one could worship her within oneself, in a local temple, at home or at her Shakti pithas (seats of power). But those who visit the shrine of Mata Vaishno Devi, they say, in response to her call (Erndl, 1993:62). There is also a belief regards Jai Mata Di, in English 'Jai Mata Di' means 'victory to mother' and it can be seen when the huge masses of pilgrims shouting the phrase 'Jai Mata Di', while on the way to Mata Vaishno Devi shrine (Erndl,1993:3). In the local literature, Jai Mata Di has analyzed in such a way which talks about divine mother,

Entire universe is resounding by the call of the Mother from her abode. The whole atmosphere is full of calls renting the air "Jai Mata Di" singing the glory of the divine mother. The thirsty devotees are thronging the abode in all the seasons of the year. Nothing deters them; be it the sweltering heat of summer or ice cold night of winter, or it may be torrential rain of monsoon. The devotee forgets all his woes and difficulties of the journey in the hope of meeting the divine mother (Chaturvedi, 2007:6).

In the sacred shrine of Mata Vaishno Devi, one finds that, how the words Jai Mata Di comes out of one's mouth. The whole ambience of the place seems to be filled with the holy words and with continuously shouting this phrase pilgrim enters into the sacred cave to have a vision of the revered holy mother (Chaturvedi, 2007:8). It is believed that when pilgrims feel difficulty on the way to Vaishno Devi, at that time some supernatural power seems to be in this sacred mountain, so they climb up those great heights step by step singing glory and hailing victory of the goddess, by shouting 'Jai Mata Di' (Chaturvedi, 2007:6). Dalton (2010) argues that, the constant chanting of Jai Mata Di or victory to the mother in the context of Mata Vaishno Devi provides self realization (Dalton, 2010:148). The shrine board records has showed that, even the handicapped people and pilgrims who crawled up and take days to reach the holy cave and all the way (see the photograph no. 8 listed in the Appendix VI) chanting, Jai Mata Di (Choudhary, 2003:2). In terms of Jai Mata Di, various boards has been seen on the way Mata Vaishno Devi shrine, which is shown in the photograph no.

Photograph No. 3: A bill Board Shows the Slogan Jai Mata Di.



Source: Clicked by myself at Sanjichat on the way to Vaishno Devi Katra (Jammu).

The atmosphere at Mata Vaishno Devi shrine is vibrant. The following important *Jaikara's* has been listed because these *Jaikara's* considers the important part of the pilgrimage journey to Vaishno Devi. It is also believed that when the going gets

⁴ This is a Hindi song from the film *Asa*, which was sung by Narendra Chanchal, when the actress and actor made the pilgrimage to the Mata Vaishno Devi in the film, (Erndl, 1993:39).

rough, the 'pilgrims' shouts to each other these *Jaikara*'s. Thus, the contemporary important *Jaikara* or an act or utterance regards Jai Mata Di are:

Aram se Bolo (Say it softly): *Jai Mata Di!*

Zor se Bolo (Say it loudly): *Jai Mata Di!*

Pyar se Bolo (Say it with love): *Jai Mata Di!*

Aage Wale bhi Bolo (People in the front): *Jai Mata Di!*

Piche Wale bhi Bolo (People in the back): *Jai Mata Di!*

Angrez bhi Bolo (English people also): *Jai Mata Di!*

Sare Bolo (Everybody say): *Jai Mata Di!*

Dukh dur Karne wali (Remover of troubles): *Jai Mata Di!*

Sheranwali (Goddess with Lion): *Jai Mata Di!* (Erndl, 1993:63-64).

D. Vision of Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Sacred *Pindis*

The worship of Mata Vaishno Devi in the forms of three *Pindis* or outcroppings, that represent the three Mahashaktis of Shaktism i.e. Mahalakshmi, Mahasarasvati, Mahakali (Erndl, 1993:4). The uniqueness of the sacred *pindis* is that it emerged from one single rock form; each one is distinctly different from the other in color and texture. The pindi to the extreme left is whitish in color and is worshipped as the holy *pindis* of Mata Mahasarasvati. In the centre there is sacred pindi of Mata Mahlakshmi with a yellowish red tinge. Towards the right is the holy pindi of Mata Maha Kali with a black tinge. In the Hindu religion these colors has been associated with these great mother goddesses (Shrine Board, 2010:10-11).

It is believed that the goddess in her manifestation of Mata Mahakali, who represents, Tam Guna⁵ blesses her devotees by giving them strength to never lose heart and constantly battle the forces of darkness till they prevail upon them. As Mata Mahalakshmi, who represents, Raj Guna⁶ blesses her devotees with wealth and prosperity. As Mata Sarasvati, who represents Satva Guna⁷ blesses her devotees with pure thoughts and a high intellect. In fact, this hearts the faith on the Shakti or power of the goddess, to seek blessings of the goddess and beseech her to grant them their wishes. Each person on earth contains the attributes of Tam, Raj and Satva Guna in some degree or the other. His or her behavior is therefore conditioned by which attribute is predominant. However to lead a full and meaningful life a balance has to be struck amongst the three. This balance is extremely difficult to achieve and needs divine blessings. It is only at Vaishno Devi that such blessings are possible simultaneously from a single source of Shakti or power. This is what makes the shrine of Mata Vaishno Devi unique in the world (Goswami, 1998:66).

Thus, the sacred *pindis* of Mata Vaishno Devi is enlisted below in the photograph no.

Photograph No.6: View of the *Pindis* (outcroppings) of Mata Vaishno Devi.



Source: www.maavaishnodevi.org/2012⁸.

The similar qualities has been discussed by Dasgupta (2010) argues that the understanding of threefold ended, 'Om', 'Tat' and 'Sat' in the sacred Vedas in Indian society denote the philosophy of pure humanity. 'Om' means the act of sacrifice, gift and austerity as enjoyed in the ordinances of Vedas. 'Tat' denotes the various act of yajna without aiming at its fruits and 'Sat' denotes the sense of reality and goodness (Dasgupta, 2010:189). The concept of Gunas or qualities plays very important role in the Hindu way of life as the Sankhya school of philosophy said that the world is divided into two parts i.e. spirit and matter. The matter part of the world has been associated with *Prakrati* or Mother Nature from where the world has evolved. Prakrati has composed of three extremely subtle and intangible substances called Sattva, Rajas and Tamas. If Prakrati is compared to a rope, these three substances constituting Prakrati are its strands. A strand or a string is called quality in Sanskrit. That's why these substances are called Sattva-guna, Rajo-guna and Tamo-guna (Bhaskarananda, 1998:159).

⁵ It is associated with the quality of darkness.

⁶ It is associated with the quality of inspiration and effort.

⁷ It is associated with the quality of purity.

⁸ It's an official website of Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Board.

E. Sacred Cave of Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine

It is believed that, the Mata Vaishno Devi cave symbolizes many religious symbols associated with the various gods and goddesses in the Hindu Pantheon. There are diverse myths regards the sacred cave of Mata Vaishno Devi shrine, who considers her as the great mother of all these gods and goddess. Chaturvedi (2007) explored the various symbols of gods and goddesses associated with the sacred cave of Mata Vaishno Devi shrine. The total length of the Cave is approximately ninety eight feet. In terms of the cave features, he has given certain accounts starting from beginning point of the Vaishno Devi cave to the end. In front of the cave, just left side there is a symbol of Vakra Tunda Ganesh⁹, which represents the association of Mata Vaishno Devi with Ganesh, the son of Shiva. Ahead to this point there is another symbol which considers as the Surya Dev and Chandra Dev means the god sun and moon deity, just behind the point, there has been seen the symbol of Hanuman¹⁰ called Launka veer. After that appears Shesh Nag on the upper left side, than it also shows the Shankh Chakra¹¹, Gada¹² and Padam.

Next on the ceiling of the cave are the symbols of Pandavas, Sapt Rishi, teats of divine cow, Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva and Parvati, ahead it seen Khambha that was gripped by the legendary worshipper Prahlad. Just below this can be seen the Yantra with innumerable mystical signs and symbols inscribed on it, beyond this there is the paw of lion, symbolizing the lion as well as associated with Mata Vaishno Devi as maa sheravali. Some further in the cave, on the left side are the symbols of Shankar and Gouri, than finally comes the sacred *pindis* of Mata Mahakali, Mahlakshmi and Matasaraswati and to the upper right side of these sacred *pindis*, again finds the symbols of Ganesh, Surya Dev, Chandra Dev and goddess Annapurna. To the right of the holy *Pindis* on the upper side one can again identify the symbols of Ganesh, Surya Dev, Chandra Dev and Goddess Annapurna. A little ahead of it can be seen the full hand of the goddess in the Vard Hast mode granting boons to the world and opposite to the sacred *Pindis* is the natural symbol of Lord Pashupati Nath. Then there found a huge water comes out of the base of the sacred *Pindis* and flows out of the sacred Cave, known as Charan Ganga and this water is also considered as sacred and many pilgrims takes the water to their home (Chaturvedi, 2007:62-65).

The local literature on sacred cave of Mata Vaishno Devi believes that, she considers as Shakti, where all gods as well as goddesses worship her as mother of all. Bhat (2009) said that in the shrine of Mata Vaishno Devi, earlier there was only one sacred cave tunnel which considers as natural creation, but in the year 1977 second tunnel was opened for the pilgrims and third tunnel was opened in the year 1998 (Bhat, 2009:2).

F. Religious Rituals

In the context of Mata Vaishno Devi different rituals worship occurs in day to day life. The daily prayer i.e. daily in the morning and evening, inside the holy cave of Mata Vaishno Devi considers herself as Durga¹³. The other important belief and rituals associated with the Mata Vaishno Devi are Navratra and Diwali. Jain (2001) said that Durkheim defines which ritual as a practical aspect of religion (Jain, 2001:289). To understand the rituals worship in the context of Mata Vaishno Devi shrine, two festivals has been considered most important Navratra and Diwali. Chaturvedi (2007) has defined, Navratra is the combination of two words Nav and Ratri which means nine nights. During the nine days, there happens the worship of Shakti or Divine mother. He argues that in Vedic philosophy, Shakti means Prakrati the female counterpart making possible the creation of the world. Hindus gives importance to the mother aspect of god because they believe that mother is the creative aspect of the whole universe (Chaturvedi, 2007:115). The goddess Durga has been worshipped as divine mother in various parts of India and in the Rig-Vedic Devisukta, she has been considered as the empress of the universe. In Bengal the worship of Durga is very popular especially during various festivals i.e. Durga puja, Navaratri and Dusserah (Swahananda, 1983:53), navaratri festival celebrates from Kashmir to Kanyakumari and Kamakhya to Hinglaj. He also said that in different contexts Devi has been imagined differently (Swahananda, 1983:34).

Rodrigues (2003) argues that navratras celebrates the worship of great goddess or Mahadevi, in which the whole nine days festival of celebrations happens in many parts of India and various rituals worship being performed at temple, home, particular community, society etc. For this occasion different communities start the planning some months far away from it and the markets decorate themselves according to the society needs for this occasion (Rodrigues, 2003:1).

In the local literature, Chaturvedi (2007) has given the brief description of navaratri which is celebrated twice in a year once during March-April, which celebrates the Ram navaratri or naumi and in September-October it worship the goddess Durga. The period reflects the starting of summer and winter seasons and it correlate with the climatic conditions (Chaturvedi, 2007:122). It is said that Rama's performance of the worship of mother Durga described in the Bengali Ramayana, which is not mentioned by Valmiki. It is described in the Devi Bhagavata, Kalika Purana, Brihaddharma Purana, and Mahabhadgavata. The Puranas describe the various aspects of the goddess. The Sage Narada advised Rama to obtain the grace of Durga to kill Ravana and to rescue Sita. So Rama worshipped the goddess in autumn and thence forward Durga Puja has been celebrated in this season (Swahananda,

⁹ Vakra Tunda means the first Incarnation of Ganesh.

¹⁰ Hanuman is the Hindu Deity and a great devotee of lord Rama and his story is mentioned in the epic Ramayana.

¹¹ Shankh Chakra, is manufactures by sea snail and in the Hindu religion, it is consider as sacred and has been associated with the god Vishnu.

¹² Gada symbolizes the power or the weapons in the hands of Hindu deities, i.e. Shiva, Parvati and Hanuman.

¹³ The daily prayer in the worship of Mata Vaishno Devi is itself the prayer for Durga and full prayer has been mentioned in the appendix IV.

1983:48). Navaratri is celebrated for the victory of Durga over demon Bhandasar and the battle lasted for nine days. The nine days are also associated with her nine incarnations (Chaturvedi, 2007:122). In the context of Mata Vaishno Devi, the celebration of navaratras festival of nine days divides into three parts which consists of three days each to worship the great goddesses. During the first three days, performed the worship of Durga in order to destroy all impurities, then the next three days, it worships goddess Lakshmi and wants spiritual blessings as well a wealth from her. At the final, there worships the goddess of wisdom, Sarasvati (Chaturvedi, 2007:115-116).

In the Hindu society these nine days, considers some ritual performances whether in the form of feast, fast or some other kind of religious performances. But now a day's these religious rituals could be seen as a cultural practice. For instance in Gujarat Garba and Dandia galore, Bengal, Bihar, Orissa and Assam Durga worship commences with huge tents coming up every locality. Images of the goddess Durga are worshipped in tastefully decorated Pandals (Chaturvedi, 2007:119-120). Chaturvedi (2007) said that during the navratri ritual, the people of Bengal worship Durga as their daughter, because it was the myth as well as a belief that Durga permitted by Shiva to meet her mother i.e. the wife of king of Himalayas only for nine days. So, the Bengali peoples consider Durga in their homes (Chaturvedi, 2007:124). The navratri festival is not just to worship the divine mother but in practical life it is also to worship the biological mother and it gives us the chance as well reminds us to respect the elders (Chaturvedi, 2007:123). One short report in the newspaper published which opined that there are many significance of navratri festival that worships Shakti associated with feminine qualities. It argues that it's a good approach to understand the women and also gives a positive energy to them. It also said that it brings a socio-cultural evolution because it encourages women to understand and explore the society and power in which they live (Times of India, 5 October 2011).

Preston (1980) has discussed about the Durga worship and argues that the pattern of worship has changed, because the present dimension of Durga worship could be reflected in many parts of India during the celebrations. For instance, in West Bengal lots of changes could be seen, in Orissa since 1960 the worship has been commercialized. It was just because of popularization as well as certain changes happened in the old tradition in terms of the festival and these new religious fact also hints some changes in religion (Preston: 1980:20). In the present context the modern navaratri rituals has changed some kind of traditional beliefs and according to a report on navaratri published in the Hindu newspaper, which says that now there has been huge rush especially during this festival and now various organizations are taking part in it. The bollywood also has started the all India singing competition and other activities include open religious discourse, international wrestling competition, environment awareness rally, heritage walks (The Hindu, October 5, 2011).

The festival of lights Diwali now a day's considered one of the biggest and grandest celebrations of India. One myth of Diwali festival is associated with the Lord Rama, who considered as the incarnation of Vishnu in the Treta Yuga, when he returned to his capital Ayodhya after the exile of fourteen years. The festival Diwali is celebrated during the *kartik dark* night i.e. comes in month of October or November or depending upon the Hindu calendar date (Hawley and Narayanan, 2006:91). The gods and goddesses associated with the Diwali are goddess Lakshmi, Gnesha, Rama, Sita, Lakshman and Hanuman (Hawley and Narayanan, 2006:94) and Chaturvedi also said that Mahakali is also celebrated (Chaturvedi, 2007:121).

For this occasion, most of the Hindus clean their houses, if possible some white washed. On the day many children comes out, buy crackers, candles and earthen diyas. A pair of earthen or image of Mata Lakshmi and Ganesha are must for Diwali worship. It also believed that during Diwali, goddess Lakshmi associated with wealth is supposed to visit everyone. It can be seen that the markets has close association with Diwali, because for this festival, the markets have seen extremely well decorated. It is also shown that many businessmen distributes sweets to their associates, families and friends and most of them begins it's a new year from the day (Hawley and Narayanan, 2006:92). Hamilton (1995) argues that rituals have its importance in social life, in certain contexts it maintains the social system as well as controls the human behavior. A ritual also symbolizes the representations of certain sentiments (Hamilton, 1995:114).

As the first part of the paper has examined the religious aspects of Vaishno Devi and has makes us familiar with many beliefs and rituals of this pilgrimage. Now the next section will deal with the mythical aspects of Mata Vaishno Devi shrine, which is outlined below.

2. Mythical Aspects of Mata Vaishno Devi shrine

As different myths associated with the Mata Vaishno Devi, argues that the origin of Mata Vaishno Devi was for the extinct of demons in order to protect the dharma on the earth. In one myth it was said that once there was a great war between gods and demons, due to the boon¹⁴ by the powerful gods, it becomes impossible to defeat demons. Because demons had got the boon that they were never killed by any person who took birth from the mother's womb. Therefore, these various myths go to Treta Yuga, when Ravan and the other demons worked their evil. So, the god and goddess decided to create a Mahashakti, the combine power of gods and goddesses and the task was assigned to the three Mahashaktis, i.e. Mahasaraswati, Mahalakshmi and Mahakali, they pooled their power and produced a Shakti in the form of a divine virgin (Erndl, 1993:40).

¹⁴ In religious theology, Boon means, a wish usually granted by a god to any person.

As there are various myths associated with the Mata Vaishno Devi, who somehow has explored how peoples understand these myths. These myths were based on the local dialect which includes the origin of goddess from the gods, the death of mahisa the buffalo demon, the birth of Kali and the final battle. On the other it also includes the story of Pandit Sridhar and the divine girl Vaishno Devi.

A. Myths Associated with the Treta Era

Erndl (1993) said that the different stories associated with the cult of Mata Vaishno Devi, becomes relevant because she has been identified with the sacred geography of Trikuta Mountain. The first part of myth has associated Mata Vaishno Devi with the Treta Yuga which has associated her with Vishnu as well as with the epic Ramayana (Erndl, 1993:40). Pintchman (2001) explores that in the Treta Era, Vishnu had incarnated himself as Rama and Vaishnavi wanted to gain him as her husband and started mortification near the sea. As Rama was also on the way Lanka and met her and she requests him to accept as his wife but as already married to Sita he refused. In the story Rama also discusses about his Kalki incarnation in the Kali Yuga which was started in the 3000 B.C. at the time Vaishnavi will be his Shakti. In one context it is said that Rama advised her to go at the Trikuta Mountain and also sends Hanuman with her (Pintchman, 2001:59).

But when she reached the Trikuta Mountain, she has been associated with the various mythical stories as mentioned in various scholarly written works and the local literature. So, the various myths has been discussed below.

B. Myth Associated with the Bhairo Nath and Pandit Sridhar

The mythical association of Vaishno Devi with the Pandit Sridhar and Bhairo Nath becomes the relevant mythical aspect in the context of Mata Vaishno Devi. Erndl (1993) argues that the second part of Vaishno Devi story connects it with Bhairo and the Nath sect of yogis (Erndl, 1993:40). In the story there was a person named Pandit Sridhar belongs to the Hansali village situated near Katra, was the devotee of Vaishno Devi, the story goes back around some seven hundred years. In order to obtain an offspring, he performed Kanya Pujan or the worship of small girls as manifestations of the goddess and in the form of a divine maiden Vaishno Devi, appeared among them. She ordered Pt. Sridhar to arrange a feast for the entire village. Sridhar started inviting the people, includes Gorakhnath and Bhaironath¹⁵ and then Bhaironath issued a challenge that Sridhar would never be able to satisfy him in the bhandara. Next day when peoples begin to enter, Sridhar was anxious about the food, because it was not his desire but an opinion by the girl. Then the divine girl (Vaishno Devi) started to serve everyone food. When she started to serve Bhaironath, he objected the vegetarian food and stipulates liquor and meat. Then the maiden girl replied one should accept whatever is offered in a Vaishnava feast. Then Bhairavnath got angry and tried to grab her but she disappeared (Erndl, 1993:41).

Vaishno Devi took rest at various places on the way to Trikuta Mountain (Pintchman, 2001:60) is now a feature of the pilgrimage route (Erndl, 1993:41). The main stops of the present pilgrimage are, Banganga, Charanpaduka, AdKuwari and finally the Bhavan¹⁶. At Bhavan, in the image of Chamunda¹⁷ she beheaded Bhairo (Pintchman, 2001:60). Then Bhairo cried out, I quote it:

O Adi Shakti (Primeval Energy), O Generous Mother, I am not to meet death, because it is at the hands of the Mother who created the world. O Matesvari (Mother Lord) forgives me. I was not familiar with this form of yours. Ma, if you don't forgive me, then the coming age will view me as a sinner and castigate my name. A mother can never be a bad mother (Erndl, 1993:42).

After listen the words of Bhairo, mother promises him that after worshipping her people should worship him and in this way they attains the *Moksha* (Liberation) and that would be considered as a successful pilgrimage. In the present times, pilgrims while back from Mata Vaishno Devi, visits Bhairo temple to attain this *Moksha*. Still this myth is considered as relevant in the present context of Mata Vaishno Devi shrine; it can be seen by two ways; first, rituals performance by pilgrims and different myths regarding different spots has been seen as practical. Second, the story reveals the ideas of motherhood in the context of goddess.

C. Myth Associated with the People of Jammu

One myth of Jammu region has found in the story of Baba Jitoo, a devotee of Mata Vaishno Devi and was a poor peasant who had exploited by the local king several times because of humiliation he killed himself. The myth also said that the king becomes a leper and his whole kingdom destroyed. Now every year a festival held at Vaishno Devi as well as Jhiri fair in Jammu in the memory of Baba Jitto and interestingly the peoples who were behind the Jitto death their lineage are now arranged things for the feast (Foster and Stoddard, 2010:112). The story of Baba Jitto also relates with the Karma theory in Hinduism, Madan (2000) understood karma with good and bad actions in life which he associates with the earlier existence of life (Madan, 2000:65). Another myth associates Vaishno Devi with the Maharaja Ranjit Dev¹⁸ the ruler of Jammu in the 18th century, at the time of

¹⁵ The local literature has defined that both Bhaironath and Gorkhanath, belongs to the Sakta sect.

¹⁶ It is Holy cave of Mata Vaishno Devi, known as her home.

¹⁷ Chamunda is considering as one form of goddess Kali.

¹⁸ Maharaja Ranjit Dev (1733 to 1782 A.D.) was the most notable ruler of Jammu before Gulab Singh. He returned twice, once by the Mughals for disobeying their commands and second time by the Afghans for looting a caravan. Both the times he was released after negotiations and his kingdom restored him. He became the Maharaja of 22 hill states. His reforms, administrative ability and

Mughal rule in Delhi. Once he was called by the regional Mughal governor of Lahore, at the time he asked help from Mata Vaishno Devi, when he had his deal successful. Due to this kind nature of Mata Vaishno Devi, he established huts as well as starts water facilities for pilgrims at different places on the way to Mata Vaishno Devi and afterwards he visited the cave yearly (Foster and Stoddard, 2010:113).

3. Conclusion

Thus the paper has given the religious and mythical understandings of *Mata Vaishno Devi shrine*. It argues that sacred character of pilgrimage has its relevance in the present society. In India, there are many religious places, which people considers as sacred. It also has defined the aim of pilgrimage journey i.e. *purusharthas of human life*. It has explored the relationships between mother and child in the belief associated with the call of *Mata*. In general the paper have discussed about the religious rituals and the mythical associations of *Mata Vaishno Devi*.

Reference

- [1] Baker, Therese L. (1994). *Doing social research* (2nd Edition). New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc.
- [2] Berger, Peter. (1973). *The Social Reality of Religion*. England: Penguin University Books.
- [3] Bernard, H. Russell. (1988). *Research Methods in Cultural Anthropology*. London: Sage Publications.
- [4] Bhardwaj, Sunder Mohan. (1983). *Hindu Places of Pilgrimage in India*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- [5] Bhaskarananda, Swami. (1998). *The Essentials of Hinduism: A Comprehensive Overview of the World's Oldest Religion*. Chennai: Sri Ramakrishna Math.
- [6] Bhat, Chander M. (2009). *Shri Mata Vaishno Devi: The Shrine*. Kashmir: *Kashmir News Network*.
- [7] Bremer, Thomas S. (2006). Sacred Spaces and Tourist Places. In Danial H.Olson and Dallen J.Timothy (Ed.). *Tourism, Religion and Spiritual Journeys* (pp.25-35). London and New York:Routledge. Available at Taylor and Francis e-Library.
- [8] Chaturvedi, Jawala Prasad. (2006). *Mata Vaishno Devi Yatra Guide*. Jammu: Pustak Sansaar. (2007). *The Complete Story of Mata Vaishno Devi*. Jammu: Pustak Sansaar.
- [9] Durkheim, Emile. (1966 [1895]). *The Rules of Sociological Method* (8th Edition) (Sarah A. Solovay and John H. Muller, Trans.). New York: The Free Press. (1995). *The elementary forms of religious life* (Karen E. Fields, Trans.). New York: The free press. Available from Net Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data.
- [10] Eck, Diana L. (2012). *India: A Sacred Geography*. New York: Harmony Books.
- [11] Erndl, Kathleen M. (1993). *Victory to the Mother: The Hindu Goddess of Northwest India in Myth, Ritual, and Symbol*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- [12] Foster, G and Robert Stoddard. (2010). *Vaishno Devi, the Most Famous Goddess Shrine in the Siwaliks*. London. *Geography Faculty Publications*, pp. 109-124.
- [13] Grotzbach, Erwin. (July-September, 1994). Hindu-Heiligtümer als Pilgerziele im Hochhimalaya (Hindu Shrines as Pilgrim Destinations in the High Himalayas). *Erdkunde: Archive for Scientific Geography*, Bd.48, H.3, pp.181-193.
- [14] Haralambos, M and Robin Heald. (2003). *Sociology: Themes and Perspectives*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- [15] Jain, Sudhir K. (2007). *Study of Impact of Shrine Related Tourism on the Economy of Jammu and Kashmir*. Paper Submitted to Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Board, Katra (Distt. Reasi, J&K). New Delhi: Department of Management Studies, IIT.
- [16] Madan, T.N. (1995). *Pathways: Approaches to the Study of Society in India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- [17] Madan, T.N. (2000). 'Introduction'. In T.N.Madan (Ed.), *Religion in India* (pp.2-25). New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- [18] Madan, T.N. (2001). *Non Renunciation*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- [19] Madan, T.N. (2003). Religions of India Plurality and Pluralism. In Veena Das(Ed.). *The Oxford India Companion to Sociology and Social Anthropology*, (pp.775-801). New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- [20] Madan, T.N. (2006). *Images of the World*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- [21] Madan. T.N. (2000). Secularism in its Place. In T.N.Madan (Ed.), *Religion in India* (pp. 394-409). New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- [22] Pintchman, Tracy. (2001). Identity Construction and the Hindu Great Goddess. In Tracy Pintchman (Ed.), *Seeking Mahadevi: Constructing the Identities of the Hindu Great Goddess* (pp. 1-17). New York: State University of New York.
- [23] Sharma, A.K. (2011). Introduction. In A.K. Sharma (Ed.). *Religion and Culture in Indian Civilization* (pp.1-64). New Delhi: D.K.Print world (P) Ltd.
- [24] Sharma, A.K. (2011). Unity in Diversity in Indian Civilization. In A.K. Sharma (Ed.). *Religion and Culture in Indian Civilization* (pp.101-116). New Delhi: D.K.Print world (P) Ltd.
- [25] Shrine Board. (2010). *A Guide to the Holy Pilgrimage of Shri Mata Vaishno Devi*. Katra: Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Board.
- [26] Singh, Rana, P.B. (2010). Visioning of Sacred Geography: Remembering David Kinsley. In Rana, P.B.Singh. (Ed.). *Sacred Geography of Goddess in South Asia* (pp.1-16). UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

bravery make him one of the greatest rulers of north Indian states. George Foster, who visited Jammu about a year after Ranjit Dev's death, stands testimony to the lofty ideals, impartiality, religious toleration and wise administration.

- [27] Stoddard and Mornis. (1997). The Geographic Contribution to Studies of Pilgrimage: Introduction to Sacred Places, Sacred Spaces. *University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Geography Faculty Publications, paper*. Vol. 34, pp. ix-xi, Department of Geography and Anthropology, Louisiana University, Baton Rouge.
- [28] Strauss Levi, Claude. (2006). *Myth and Meaning*. London: Routledge.
- [29] Swahananda, Swami (1983). *Hindu Symbology and Other Essays*. Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math Publications.
- [30] Vidyardhi, L.P. (1979). *The Sacred Complex of Kashi*. Delhi: Concept Publishing Company.
- [31] Vishwanathan, S. (2011). Travellers and Pilgrims. In Sharma, A.K (Ed.). *Religion and Culture in Indian Civilization* (pp.181-196). New Delhi: D.K. Print world (P) Ltd.
- [32] Visvanathan, Susan. (2010). *The Children of Nature: The Life and Legacy of Ramana Maharshi*. New Delhi. Lotus Collection.
- [33] Visvanathan, Susan. (2011). *Reading Marx, Weber and Durkheim Today*. New Delhi: Palm Leaf Publications.