

## **Geography and Sacred Symbolism of Muktinath Shrine, Nepal**

— Donald A. Messerschmidt\*

### **Introduction**

The celebrated Hindu pilgrim resort of Muktinath lies at a height of nearly 13,000 ft. at the head of a valley draining westwards from the Muktinath range into the Kali. Well watered by springs and streams it evidently enjoys a comparatively moist climate. . . It is a place to which several thousand pilgrims come every year. . . It owes its sanctity to the presence of the thrice-sacred 'shaligram'. . . regarded as emblems of Narayan or Vishnu.<sup>1</sup>

So wrote the British Himalayanist Tilman after traversing Nepal's northern mountains and highest valleys over thirty years ago. A decade later the Tibetologist David Snellgrove wrote describing the place, the people, and the sacred aspects of Muktinath as a Buddhist shrine.<sup>2</sup> On reading these brief travellers' accounts I set my goals. At first I had only to visit Muktinath, which I accomplished as a traveller through Thak Khola and Manang late in 1964, just as winter was beginning to close in around the mountain passes. One of my most vivid memories of that time is of the icy cold spring water gushing from the shrine's famed 108 water spouts — too cold for bathing except by the hardest and most ardent Hindu pilgrims.

That first visit was insufficient to stifle my anthropological curiosity about the place and the people, particularly the Hindus who visit it annually. I returned in 1980, during August and September (a much

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1. H. W. Tilman, *Nepal Himalaya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952) pp. 191-192.

2. David Snellgrove, *Himalayan Pilgrimage: A Study of Tibetan Religion by a Traveller Through Western Nepal* (Oxford: Bruno Cassirer).

warmer season). to examine the shrine site more analytically and holistically, viewing it in terms of its many facets as a sacred place. Elsewhere, my colleague Jyoti Sharma and I have written of the Hindu pilgrims who visit the place and of the social processes observed on their arduous quest.<sup>3</sup> In the present account I limit the discussion to the geography of Muktinath shrine in terms of its sacred symbolism and sociological meaning.<sup>4</sup>

Muktinath is located in northern Nepal at 29° 11' N. Lat., 83° 53' E. Long., at an elevation of 12,460 ft. (3800 m.) on the western slopes of the Damodar Himal. The site is directly north of two of the world's highest peaks, Dhaulagiri (26,795 ft., or 8,167 m.) and Annapurna - I (26,492 ft., or 8,073 m.). The entire region around Muktinath enjoys the rainshadow effect of these peaks.<sup>5</sup>

In geographic terms, Muktinath thus falls within the high Himalayan arid zone bordering the Tibetan Autonomous Region of China (Xizang). This area of northern Nepal is very much like Tibet in geography and in culture and is often called the Bhot (Tibet) by Nepali speakers. Muktinath shrine lies apart from any town, in the northeastern corner or the dry inner valley region of upper Thak Khola. It is near the source of the Muktinath (or Dzong, Jhong) river which flows six miles (9.6 km.) west to its confluence with the larger Kali Gandaki river. There are a number of villages scattered round about the valley; perhaps the most well known of them is Kagbeni, situated where the Muktinath river meets the Kali. The confluence, or *beni*, is sacred to the Hindus, and many pilgrims perform *sraddha* funerary rites there for their patri-

3. Donald A. Messerschmidt and Jyoti Sharma, "Himalayan pilgrimage to the Hindu shrine at Muktinath: Cultural meaning and social process," *National Geographic Society Research Reports*, 1980; "Hindu pilgrimage in the Nepal Himalayas," *Current Anthropology*, Research Conclusions (1981) vol. 22, no. 5, pp. 571-572; "Hindu pilgrimage to Muktinath, Nepal," in E. A. Munnis, editor, *Pilgrimage: The Sacred Quest*. Forthcoming, 1983; and, "Social process on the Hindu pilgrimage to Muktinath," *Kailash* (A Journal of Himalayan Studies, Kathmandu). Forthcoming.

4. My most recent sojourn to Nepal urges me to examine Muktinath's environs in the future from yet another perspective, that of an environmentalist and social scientist concerned with the peoples' role in the condition renewable natural resources. This is prompted by my employment from 1981 to 1983 as the project anthropologist on the joint United States/Nepal Resource Conservation and Utilization Project.

5. J. D. A. Stainton, *Forests of Nepal* (New York: Hafner, 1972).

monial ancestors on the way to the Muktinath shrine. Except for the immediate environs of the villages in the valley, however, the landscape appears starkly barren and denuded.<sup>6</sup> The inhabitants are agro-pastoralists, raising wheat, barley, and buckwheat on their irrigated fields, and herding yak, sheep, and goats on the mountain slopes. A number of these people are also long-distance traders.<sup>7</sup>

In cultural terms, Muktinath falls within the zone of Himalayan people called Bhotia (people of the Bhot). They often insist on calling themselves 'Gurung,' however, and even claim to have the traditional clan system of the Char Jat Gurung of the lowlands.<sup>8</sup> They are not recognized as such by those lower elevation Gurungs. The residents of Muktinath and vicinity are the Buddhist and speak a variation of the Tibetan language. They look and dress, and live in houses, like their neighbors in Tibet proper.

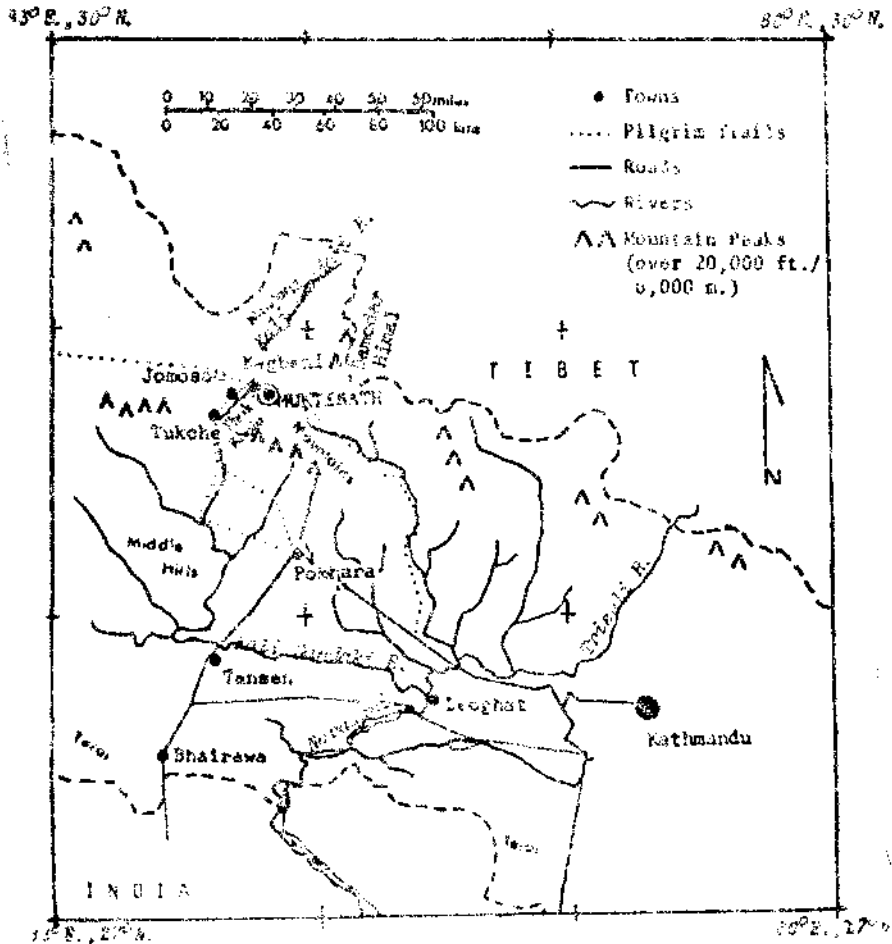
The valley of Muktinath is a part of what is locally called Baragaun (twelve villages, Nep.) and Bhotia of this place are sometimes called Baragaunle. South of Baragaun, in the rest of Thak Khola region, live the non-Bhotia Thakali people, a Tibeto-Burman speaking ethnic group that is much more closely related to the Gurungs by both linguistic socio-cultural criteria. The Thakali are traders and agro-pastoralists of some reknowna in the anthropological literature.<sup>9</sup>

The geography of this part of the Nepalese Bhot, and the cultural distinctions of the Bhotia people, contrast with the monsoonal central

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6. *Ibid.*, and Alton C. Byers, "Wood supply in Muktinath, Nepal: A preliminary study," unpublished M. A. Thesis, Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York, 1978.
  7. Sydney Schuler, "Migratory traders of Baragaun," *Contributions to Nepalese Studies* vol. 5, pp. 71-84.
  8. Donald A. Messerschmidt, *The Gurungs of Nepal* (Warminster. Aris & Phillips, Ltd., 1976).
  9. Dor Bahadur Bista, "The political innovators of upper Kali-Gandaki," *Mau* (1971) vol. 6, pp. 52-60; Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf, *Himalayan Traders* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975); Donald A. Messerschmidt, "The Thakali of Nepal: historical continuity and socio-cultural change," *Ethnohistory*; Donald A. Messerschmidt and Nareshwar Jang Gurung, "parallel trade and innovation in central Nepal: The cases of the Gurung and Thakali Subbas compared," in Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf, editor, *Contributions to the Anthropology of Nepal* (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, Ltd., 1974, pp. 197-221).

Map 1.

## THE REGION OF MUKTINATH AND WEST CENTRAL NEPAL



and western hills, the **pahar**, immediately south through the mountains, and with the Nepalese Hindu caste and ethnic people (the **Pahari**) of the foothills.<sup>10</sup>

Muktinath is sacred to the Hindus as a complex of temples, springs, trees, and other natural features imbued with supernatural characteristics.

10. See Dor Bahadur Bista, **People of Nepal** (Kathmandu: Ratna Pustak Bhandar, 1972, Second Edition).

There are two Hindu temples (*mandir*), a small Buddhist temple popularly referred to by the Nepalese as *gompa* (Tib., *dgon-pa*, monastery), and a number of the small, outlying shrines and sacred monuments. The main Hindu temple houses an image of Vishnu in the form of a black ammonite (*saligram*), one of the fossils for which the Muktinath area (and several geologically related regions of the greater Himalaya) is well known. The three-tiered pagoda-style temple is bounded on the east (uphill side) by the running spring water that has been channeled through 108 spouts. It is these water spouts under which the devout perform their most important ablutions as pilgrims to this place.

The water spouts of Muktinath give it its local Tibetan name: 'chumig-brgay-rtsa,' or literally a hundred-odd springs.<sup>11</sup> The Nepali name 'Muktinath' is translated as 'Lord (*nath*) of Salvation (*mukti*).' Its other names used by the Hindus, are: 'Muktichetra,' for the "Holy Place (*chhetra*) of Salvation"; 'Muktnarayan,' for Narayan, another name for Vishnu, and 'Saligram,' for the fossils (*Saligram*) that abound there. Saligrama is its most ancient name, that by which it is identified in the *Mahabharata* and *Puranas* and by which it is known to some geographers.<sup>12</sup>

The fame of Muktinath as a Hindu place of pilgrimage is renowned and ancient. The strong and the faithful have been attracted to this sacred site continuously for many centuries from throughout South Asia. The site was recorded as one of the principal goals on the "grand pilgrimage of India" two thousand years ago in the *Tirtha-Yatra* (or pilgrimage) section of the *Mahabharata*.<sup>13</sup> Pilgrims come throughout the year, but special occasions such as the full moon (*purnima*) are especially efficacious. Our research was conducted in August and September, 1980 (Bhadou 2037 B. S.), at the time of the "Full Moon of the Sacred Cord" (*javai purnima*).

11. David Snellgrove, editor and translator. "Places of pilgrimage in Thag (Thakkhola): Tibetan manuscripts, produced by Tshampa Ngawang of Drumpa," *Kailash* (1979) vol. 7, pp 73-170.
12. Nando Lal Day, *The Geographical Dictionary of Ancient and Medieval India* (New Delhi: Oriental Books Reprint Corporation, 1971, Reprint Edition; Original Edition, 1927); Surinder Bhardwaj, *Hindu Places of Pilgrimage in India: A Study in Cultural Geography* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973); Joseph E. Schwartzberg, editor, *A Historical Atlas of South Asia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).
13. Bhardwaj, 1973. *Op. Cit.*

The **janai** is the sacred cord worn by men of the highest Hindu castes (the **tagadhari**).<sup>14</sup>

For these Brahmin, Chhetri, and Thakuri men, **Janai purnima** is the day each year when the cord is changed for a new one. The handspun cotton string worn by men over the left shoulder and around the torso. A devout Hindu man and wife may travel long distance to a particularly sacred site to perform the ceremony. The ritual of changing the **Janai** is elaborate and includes bathing, shaving, cutting the nails, and observing a partial fast. For pilgrims, there is the added exercise of observing caste rules prohibiting eating or touching unclean things, and of visiting sacred sites along the route, all under the austere circumstances of being **tyagi**, one who renounces all material things and avoids sin.<sup>15</sup>

#### A Sacred and Symbolic Place

The religious and cultural geography of Muktinath shrine was a principal focus of our research. In viewing Muktinath as a sacred complex, we determined that the site has nine outstanding characteristics. Some of these nine characteristics have been identified in the literature relative to other sites.<sup>16</sup> They correspond to the Existential, Transcendental, and simple Retreat aspects of sacred Hindu sites described by Surinder Bhardwaj.<sup>17</sup> The nine characteristics of Muktinathe as a sacred Hindu shrine are described as follows:

##### (1) Dedication to Universal and Supernatural Concepts

Hindus perceive Muktinath to be sacred as a shrine Vishnu. This contrasts with the rest of the Himalayan region which is more closely associated with Lord Shiva. Shaivites, however, also visit Muktinath and believe it to be an equally efficacious place to receive **darshan** (the

14. Andras Hofer, **The Caste Hierarchy and the State in Nepal: A Study of the Muluki Ain of 1854** (Innsbruck: Universitätsverlag Wagner, 1979).

15. For a more complete description of the caste restrictions and social processes of the pilgrimage to Muktinath, see Messerschmidt and Sharma, 1983 and n.d., **Op. Cit.**

16. Agehananda Bharati, "Pilgrimage in the Indian tradition," *History of Religions* vol. 3 (1963) pp. 135-167; Bhardwaj, 1973, **Op. Cit.**; James Preston, "Sacred centers and symbolic networks in South Asia," *The Mankind Quarterly* vol. 20, (1980) pp. 259-293. For non-Hindu sites, see Victor Turner and Edith Turner, **Image and pilgrimage in Christian Culture** (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978).

17. Surinder Bhardwaj, "The geography of pilgrimage," a paper presented at the symposium, 'Pilgrimage: The Human Quest,' May 1981.

deity's blessing, or "sight vision").<sup>18</sup> Muktinath is also sacred to Mahayana Tibetan Buddhists for whom the deity of the central temple is Gawo Jogpa (dGa '-bo' Jogs-pa, Tib.), the Serpent naga Deity.<sup>19</sup> Gawo Jogpa's image is one and the same as Vishnu's, in the form of a black ammonite fossil shaped like a ram's horn or a curled serpent. (It is sometimes called the Serpent Stone)<sup>20</sup> The juxtaposition of Buddhist and Hindu elements at a single site is not atypical of Hinduism generally.<sup>21</sup> The combination of such sectarian systems is typical of the religious syncretism and tolerance found within Nepalese culture.<sup>22</sup> The Buddha is, after all, one of the classic avatars of Vishnu.<sup>23</sup>

Muktinath's dedication to the universal deities of Vishnu and Gawo Jogpa represent its existential aspect; it is, in Bhardwaj's schema, a **mandir tirtha**, literally a "temple-site pilgrimage."<sup>24</sup>

## (2) Association with Natural Elements

A Principal finding is that the Muktinath data conform with many observations that certain natural elements take on premier importance

18. Agehananda Bharati, "Theoretical approaches to the anthropology of pilgrimage," a paper presented at the symposium, 'Pilgrimage: The Human Quest,' May 1981
19. Snellgrove, 1979, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 106-111.
20. The identity of Gawo Jogpa and Vishnu coincide most clearly in the concept of the serpent (**naga**). It is said that as Vishnu reclines between destructions of the universe, on the primordial waters, he is supported by serpents which are the ultimate source or support of the universe. See Mana Bajra Bajracharya (translator) and Warren W. Smith (editor), **Mythological History of the Nepal from Svayambhu Purana**, and, **Naga and Serpent Symbolism** (Kathmandu: Avalok, 1978).
21. See Gabriella Eichinger Ferro-luzzi, "The female lingam: interchangeable symbols and paradoxical associations of Hindu gods and goddesses," **Current Anthropology** (1980) vol. 21, pp. 45-68.
22. Pratapaditya Pal, **Vaisnava Iconology of Nepal** (Calcutta: The Asiatic Society, 1970). For an excellent study of the syncretism of Hinduism and Buddhism in Nepalese society, specifically among the Newars of Kathmandu Valley, see John K. Locke, SJ, **Karunamaya: The Cult of Avolokitesvara-Matsyendranath in the Valley of Nepal** (Kathmandu: Sahayogi Prakashan, for the Research Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies, Tribhuvan University, 1980).
23. Vishnu is one of the trinity of Hinduism, alongside Brahma and Shiva. The avatars of Vishnu are classically fixed at ten: Fish, Crocodile, Boar, Man-Lion, Dwarf, Rama with-the-axe, Rama-the-epic-hero, Krishna, Buddha, and Kalki (The One to Come).
24. Bhardwaj, 1981, *Op. Cit.*

in pilgrimage symbolism. Water, for example, is universally associated with Hindu sacred sites, either in the form of a lake or springs, or as a river source, a ford, or confluence. Water sources in the high Himalayas have always had a particularly strong attraction to pilgrims since prehistoric times as sources of the holy Ganges river. They are what Bharati calls "sin-destroying localities."<sup>25</sup> The importance of water is underscored by the Sanskrit term for pilgrimage: *tirtha* ( river ford ) or *tirtha-yatra* ( journey to a river ford; a pilgrimage )<sup>26</sup>

At Muktinath, three natural elements play a nearly equal role in the site's importance and uniqueness. They are: cold water springs, natural gas vents ( burning ), and the presence of fossils ( ammonites ) in profusion. A fourth feature, a grove of sacred trees, is also present. Each has been culturally modified or interpreted within Hinduism so as to have supernatural significance

**Cold Water Springs.** A set of 108 water spouts in the shape of boars' head gargoyles channel the natural spring water at a height and position, in a line, convenient for bathing. Bathing at religious centers is always meritorious to the Hindu and purification by bathing in these 108 water spouts is a principal ( and often the central ) part of each pilgrim's quest. The number 108 also has magical qualities. While to the Hindu each spout represents the head of a boar, one of Vishnu's ten avatars, to the Buddhist the spouts represent the eighty-four great magicians ( *maha-siddhi* ) of late Indian Buddhism. Each magician is believed to have ladled water out of the sacred lake of Manasarowar, in western Tibet.<sup>27</sup>

Second to the water spouts for bathing, water figures importantly in other ways. It is believed that "water like music of the gods" can be heard if one listens intently at a small Buddhist shrine nearby; this is the shrine where the Serpent Deity can be heard "playing music."<sup>28</sup>

And finally, devout Hindus frequently leave Muktinath with small vials of the sacred water to take back to their less fortunate friends and relatives at home. It is believed to have curative and spiritual cleansing powers.

Water is one of the transcendental aspects of Muktinath. As a water-oriented site, Muktinath fits Bhardwaj's schema as a *Jala tirtha* (*Jal, Jala:*

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25. Bharati, 1963, *Op.Cit.*, p. 137.

26. Bhardwaj, 1973, *Op. Cit.*, p. 2.

27. Snellgrove, 1979, *Op. Cit.*, p. 106-109.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 108, Figure 12.



water).<sup>29</sup>

**Natural Gas Vents, Burning.** There are three natural gas vents enshrined within the Buddhist temple of Muktinath, the so-called "temple with the 'miraculous' fire, which burns from earth, water and stone."<sup>30</sup> This temple is situated several hundred yards south of the central Vishnu temple<sup>31</sup> It is attended by nuns of the Tibetan Buddhist Nyingma-pa sect who oversee the upkeep of the entire religious complex ( paid for out of pilgrim donations ). David Snellgrove's description of the flames as he saw them in a 1956 visit, is as they still appear today :

The flames of natural gas burn in little caves at floor level in the far right-hand corner. One does indeed burn from earth; one burns just beside a little spring ( "from water" ); the one "from stone" exhausted itself two years ago (1954) and so burns no longer, at which local people express concern.<sup>32</sup>

The flames are a popular object of curiosity and veneration among pilgrims, Hindus and Buddhist alike. Buddhists interpret them as "burning changeless and unceasing from the hidden parts of Samvara Male (a tantric deity) and Female (his spouse),"<sup>33</sup>

Geologically, the natural gas which feeds the flames emanates from the same shales in which the famous Muktinath fossils are embedded.

#### **Fossils (saligram).**

On the banks of the Gandaki, at Muktinath, is a precipice, from which the river is supposed to wash the Saligrams or black stones, which are considered by the Hindus as representatives of several of their deities, and which are the most common objects of worship in Bengal, where images are scarce. They are of various kinds, and accordingly represent different deities. Pilgrims, who have been at the place, say, that the stones are found partly in the precipice, and

29. Bhardwaj, 1981, *Op. Cit.*

30. Snellgrove, 1961, *Op. Cit.*, p. 199.

31. Snellgrove ( 1979, *Op. Cit.*, p. 108 ), translating from a Tibetan text that describes Muktinath as a pilgrimage site, interprets the distance as eighteen fathoms. This is a symbolically significant distance- 108 feet - but it falls short of the actual distance between the Hindu and Buddhist Temples.

32. Snellgrove, 1961, *Op. Cit.*, p. 201.

33. Snellgrove, 1979, *Op. Cit.*, p. 108.

partly in the bed of the river, where it has washed down the earth. On account of its containing these stones, this branch of the river is usually called Salagrami, and the channel every where below Muktinath, until it reaches the plain of India at Sivapur, abounds in these stones. All the Salagrams consist of carbonate of lime, and are in general quite black, but a few have white veins. Their color is probably owing to some metallic impregnation, which also occasions their great specific weight. They rarely exceed the size of an orange, and they are rounded, I suppose, by the action of water. Most of them are what naturalists call petrifications, and by far the most common are Ammonites, half embedded in a ball of stone, exactly of the same nature with the petrified animal. Others, which are reckoned the most valuable, are balls containing a cavity formed by an Ammonite, that has afterwards decayed, and left only its impression, or they are what Wallerius calls *Typolichi Ammonitarum*. The Ammonites or their impressions are called Chakras or wheels of the Salagrams, but are sometimes wanting. The stone is then a mere ball without any mark of animal exuviae. Some balls have no external opening, and yet by rubbing away a portion of one of their sides, the hollow wheel (*chakra*) is discovered. Such Salagrams are reckoned very valuable.<sup>34</sup>

... the smooth fossilized **salagram** stones .. are avidly collected and worshipped. Devotees drink the waters in which **salagram** is washed, praying, 'Narayan, you are the blessed ruler of the world; it is your pleasure to confer your blessings on all created beings. I drink this water in which your sacred feet have been washed that I may be cleansed of sin. Vouchsafe to pardon me, who am the greatest of sinners.'<sup>35</sup>

The black ammonites described in these quotations are found along the banks of the Muktinath river and in the vicinity of nearby Damodar Kunda, a high lake a few days travel north of the shrine. These **saligram** fossils give Muktinath its ancient name of Salagrama and it is thought, give the Gandaki river its prefix and alternative name of Kali (from *kalo*, black,

34. Francis Buchanan Hamilton, *An Account of the Kingdom of Nepal and of the Territories Annexed to this dominion by the house of Gorkha* (New Delhi: Manjusri, 1971, Reprint Edition; Original Edition, 1819).

35. Mary M. Anderson, *The Festivals of Nepal* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1971).

Nep.).<sup>36</sup> The ammonites, in the shape of wheels (**chakra**), are worshipped as Lord Vishnu.

Many pilgrims search for ammonites locally, and some make the three to four day trek to the rich fossil bed at Damodar Kunda. It is a small lake which some geographers identify as the ultimate source of Kali Gandaki river.<sup>37</sup> It is believed that unbroken ammonites are the most efficacious and that it is sinful to willfully destroy or deliberately break the stone and open it to expose the **chakra** design (the impressin of the shell). There is an inscription at the main Hindu temple of Muktinath admonishing people not to break or sell the fossils and that anyone caught violating the admonition shall have his or her hand cut off (inscribed in the name of the mid-nineteenth century Prime Minister, Jang Bahadur Rana). Nonetheless, local Bhotia villagers collect and sell worn or deliberately broken ammonites as souvenirs to non-believers and as sacred objects of veneration to Hindu and Buddhist devotees. Some people claim that the fossils contain gold or diamonds at their core, when in reality, they sometimes contain bits of pyrite or quartz.

According to recent geological research, ammonites are scattered throughout much of the region of Muktinath and Mustang District. While all may be associated with Vishnu, those found near Muktinath are particularly important in that they are: abundant, well preserved, and weather out of the enclosing shales in black solidary concretions that are easy to find, "according to one observer.<sup>38</sup> Local genera include **Prograyiceras**, **Blanfordiceras**, and **Paraboliceras**. They date to the Early Oxfordian to Late Tithonian Age (165 to 140 million years ago) at the end of the Jurassic Period.<sup>39</sup>

Arkell reports that "From ancient times splendidly preserved ammonites

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36. Ralph Lilley Turner, **A comparative and Etymological Dictionary of the Nepali Language** (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965, Reprint Edition; Original Edition, 1931) gives as one definition of the term **Kali**, "Name of a river in Nepal, which is rich in the stones called **saligram** and is considered sacred" (p. 90a).
37. Nando Lal Dey (*Op. Cit.*) correctly identifies the ancient Salagrama near the source of the Kali Gandaki river at modern Muktinath (p.133,174). Schwartzberg (*Op. Cit.*), however, confuses its location, sometimes placing it as a source of the Trisuli river and sometimes at or near Muktinath on the Kali Gandaki river (p. 14c, 27b, 34a, 34b, 99a and 139).
38. Eric Hatleberg, personal communication, 1980.
39. P. Bordet, M. Colchen, D. Krummenacher, P. LeFort, R. Mouterde, and M. Remy, **Recherches Geologiques dans l'Himalaya du Nepal, Region de la Thakkhola** (Paris: Editions de Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1971).

were broken down [from the Himalayas] by traders to be sold to Hindu pilgrims in the holy places of India. They were called Salagramas and were used as charms."<sup>40</sup> The most famous fossil beds are found NNE of Simla, in the north Indian Himalayas, in a geologic formation known as the Spiti Shales.<sup>41</sup>

**Sacred Grove of Trees.** Another relatively minor natural feature of Muktinath is the grove of **lekh pipal** trees, a species of poplar (*Populus ciliata*) which surrounds the sacred complex. It is commonly believed that there are 108 of these trees. In Buddhist belief, each tree is the resort of one of the great magicians which are also associated with the water spouts.

### (3) Historic Tradition

Muktinath's fame dates to recorded references as the place known as Salagrama in the **Mahabharata** epic (c 300 B.C) and in the **Puranas** (c. 300 A.D. to 1000 A.D.). In these accounts it is listed as a major Hindu pilgrimage site. It ranks alongside such other historic and sacred mountain-and-water-oriented Himalayan sites as Kedarnath and Badrinath in north India and the trans-Himalayan sites of Mount Kailash and Lake Manasarovar in Tibet. Within Nepal, according to some informants, it ranks alongside Ridi (near Tansen), Gosainkunda (north of Kathmandu), and Pashupathinath (in Kathmandu Valley) as one of the four places of great sanctity.<sup>42</sup>

After the introduction of Buddhism in Tibet in the 7th century A.D., and as Indian Buddhism "declined and approximated to the surrounding Hinduism".<sup>43</sup> Muktinath was incorporated into the Tibetan tradition as one of a number of important pilgrimage sites. The temple housing the natural gas fire was built and other sites, based primarily on natural features such as caves, lakes, springs and mountain tops, were identified as holy. Snellgrove gives a detailed account of Buddhist pilgrimage sites associated with Muktinath throughout the Thak Khola region of Mustang District.<sup>44</sup>

40. W. J. Arkell, **Jurassic Geology of the World** (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1956), p. 406.

41. The Spiti Shales were first described by the geologist V. Uhlig, "The fauna of the Spiti shales," **Paleontologica Indica** (1903-1910) ser. 15, no. 4 (1-3). See also F. R. C. Reed, "Fossils from Nepal," **Geology Magazine** (1908) n. s. vol. 5, pp. 256-261.

42. See also Tilman, **Op. Cit.**, p. 192.

43. **Ibid.** p. 193.

44. Snellgrove, 1979, **Op. Cit.**

**(4) Staged Development**

The sacred complex includes temples and natural features described above, as well as a number of pilgrim rest houses (*pati, pauwa, dharmasala*). They exist in various stages of disrepair adjacent to the sacred grove around the central Hindu temple, and at the place called Rani Pauwa ("Queen's resthouse") about one-half mile (0.8 km.) south of the temple. It is clear that the temple complex and the associated pilgrim resthouses were constructed and rebuilt in stages, over a long period of time. Some parts appear quite new, while other parts appear old and decrepit. Snellgrove describes the Hindu temple to Vishnu as a recent addition while "everything else is Buddhist and Tibetan" and, on the whole, much older in appearance.<sup>45</sup> In fact, however, we have no idea of the age of most of the edifices at Muktinath and until archaeological and/or other documentary evidence is available, any dates are only speculative.

Until a few years ago, the largest of the resthouses, the so-called Rani Darbar ("Queen's palace") at nearby Rani Pauwa, was in disrepair and unfit for human habitation, according to local informants. It was recently refurbished by the government (in part to house the Nepal Army on maneuvers) and it now accomodates several hundred individuals at one time in large rooms which open on to a central courtyard. During the research, in 1980, this large facility was partly occupied by a contingent of troops and a few pilgrims. Similarly, one of the smaller resthouses at the south entrance to the sacred grove and shrine site was occupied by Nepal Police as a checkpost for non-Nepali (and non-pilgrim) trekkers and tourists.

There is little doubt that historically Muktinath was early on a place of great significance to the Hindus, pre-dating the arrival of Buddhism here by many centuries.<sup>46</sup> Snellgrove alludes to the part played by Hindu and late Indian Buddhist sages in establishing Muktinath within Buddhist tradition.<sup>47</sup> Its natural wonders suggest that it may have had humble beginnings as a type of "nature shrine,"<sup>48</sup> well before it was elevated to pan-Hindu and, later, Buddhist importance.

45. Snellgrove, 1961, *Op. Cit.*, p. 199-200.

46. See David P. Jackson, "The early history of Lo ( Mustang ) and Ngari "Contributions to Nepalese Studies vol. 4, pp. 39-56; and, "Notes on the history of Serib, and nearby places in the upper Kali Gandaki, "Kailash vol. 6, pp. 195-227; see also Messerschmidt, 1981, *Op. Cit.*

47. Snellgrove, 1979, *Op. Cit.*

48. Preston, *Op. Cit.*, p. 285, Table V.

### [5) Structured Approach

There is a field of religious influence around Muktinath that includes a series of lesser shrines typically visited by Hindu pilgrims during their many days' or weeks' trek to the shrine. These include shrines of various categories of regional, district (or subregional), and local significance.<sup>49</sup>

The devout Hindu beginning a pilgrimage from the **tarai** lowlands of Nepal may visit several sacred sites and temples on the way to Muktinath. For example, one large party of **tarai** Brahmins that we interviewed and observed during the research, reported stopping for worship at the following sites as they approached their ultimate goal:

--**Deoghat**, where the Gandaki river meets the Trisuli to form the Narayani river, in Nepal's Rapti Valley (inner **tarai**, see Map). Deoghat is an interstitial shrine in James Preston's classification, but although shrines of this nature "attract pilgrims from all over the subcontinent at certain times of year, at other times they are supported by regional or local devotees"<sup>50</sup> Deoghat has enjoyed both regional and interstitial status for many centuries, as an important stop on one of the main trade routes from India to the Kathmandu Valley<sup>51</sup> and as a former gateway community through which trade and travel northward into the hinterland of west-central Nepal used to be directed.<sup>52</sup>

--**Ridi**, near the modern town of Tansen, alongside the ancient pilgrim track from the **tarai** lowlands and near the modern mother road (Siddhartha Rajmarg) connecting Butwal and Tansen to Pokhara in the west-central hills. Ridi classifies as both an interstitial and a regional shrine, much like Deoghat. It also has some of the characteristics of a district or subregional "temple village"<sup>53</sup> It is frequently referred to by pilgrims as Ridi Bazar.

**Kagbeni**, at the confluence of the Muktinath and Kali Gandaki rivers. Kagbeni is an especially important site for caste Hindus to perform the final *śraddha* rites for their patrilineal ancestors. Kagbeni, in contrast to Ridi

49. Preston, *Op. Cit.*

50. *Ibid.*, p. 275, Table II.

51. Jahar Sen, "Land routes of Indo-Nepalese trade in the nineteenth century," *Journal of Indian History* vol. 54, pp. 687-711

52. Donald A. Messerschmidt, "Gateway-hinterland relations in changing Nepal," *Contributions to Nepalese Studies* (December 1980)

53. Preston, *Op. Cit.*, p. 279, Table IV.

and Deoghat, is more of a "marker shrine,"<sup>54</sup> marking the sacred confluence of two rivers. (Damodar Kunda, the sacred lake above Muktinath to which some of the other pilgrims interviewed went, also fits the description of a marker shrine.)

The interpretation of these sacred sites varies by person and occasion. What may be a subregional or local shrine under one set of circumstances may be transformed at a certain time of the year into a regional or all-South Asian shrine, as happens when long distance pilgrims pass through on their way to Muktinath. Muktinath itself represents several things to different people—an ethnic shrine to local Bhotia people of Baragaun and vicinity, a *meला* (fair) shrine during *yartung* (a Bhotia horse festival held here during August-September, annually), an all-South Asian shrine on the occasion of *janai purnima* (on the full moon of August-September), et cetera. Sometimes, as on the occasions of *yartung* and *janai purnima* in 1980, the shrine's different identities and meanings, and its importance to different religious and ethnic or caste groups, merge and the celebrations are enlarged and mixed. These various and sometimes merged configurations of meaning and function are what give Muktinath its appearance as a "multi-level, multi-purpose shrine"<sup>55</sup> Muktinath's complex as a religious or sacred "field"<sup>56</sup> from the point of view of Hinduism has yet to be fully studied and interpreted.

#### (6) Physical Ascent

Just as water is one of the natural elements around which Hindu shrines are consecrated, so are mountains or high places considered to be particularly important natural/supernatural features. The physical uphill approach to Muktinath, over mountain passes and through the high inner valley of Thak Khola, to the final hillside at the eastern end of Muktinath Valley, is an arduous ascent which only the hardy and the very dedicated Hindu can achieve. Climbs like this "represent the soul's ascent through penance and patience" to the final destination.<sup>57</sup>

An Indian Hindu *sadhu* encountered on the route to Muktinath expressed it well during a rambling sermon on what such a pilgrimage means to

54. *Ibid.*, p. 287, Table VII.

55. *Ibid.*, p. 285.

56. Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), p. 226.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 224.

the faithful pilgrim tyagi:

We go to receive **darshan** ( blessing or sight vision ) of God. On the way we will suffer the wet forest and we will endure the windstorm and raging rivers. People who come so far and bear these elements are fortunate, only they are able to see the beauty of it all. Lord Krishna and Rama dwelled in the forest where they found peace and contentment. Ram and Krishna and other **rishimunis** (seers) who spent time in the forest have shown us the path leading to peace and tranquility. They have shown us how to attain our **karma** (destiny) by going through all the suffering of the trip. That is why we go to **Muktinath**.

We go to Muktinath for pilgrimage, to receive **darshan** of God. We don't go for the **mela** (fair). **Darshan** doesn't happen at a **mela**, it only happens in the temple. You cannot see the beauty of it at a **mela**. At the **mela** there is only cowshit and horseshit, mostly horseshit. And it is crowded, there is no place to stay.

What is our obligation as human beings ? If you go traveling like this your spirit becomes pure, your body clean, your mind calm, your words sincere, your judgement clear. That ...., that is why we go to Muktinath.

- Fieldnotes of Sept. 2, 1980, pp. 203-215.

### (7) Uniqueness

Although Muktinath shares such aspects as its relationship to water and mountains, its orientation to Vishnu, and the presence of **saligram** ammonite fossils with some other sacred sites, it nonetheless shares with no other the unique combination of all of these elements and features in one place. The additional flavor of Muktinath as an example of sectarian syncretism with Hindu and Buddhist belief systems focused simultaneously on the same features, adds to its distinctiveness.

### (8) Peripheral Location

In earlier reports of the Muktinath research<sup>58</sup> the issue of Muktinath's peripheral location was raised. We pointed out that Muktinath is near the

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58. Messerschmidt and Sharma, 1980, 1981, **Op. Cit.**



extreme northern edge of Hindu influence in this part of the Himalayas and at the same time is near the extreme southern edge of Buddhist and Tibetan influence. There is nothing wrong with this, and indeed, the idea holds up quite well under scrutiny. It is well known that for centuries the lower limit of Tibetan Buddhist culture was considered, for example, to be at a point several miles south of Muktinath in the lower part of the Thak Khola.<sup>59</sup> This point, at Kobang (or Gophang), south of Tukche village, has a temple that is 'aptly named in Tibetan 'Temple of the Bottom' (*smad kyi lha khang*) which Tibetan Buddhists still consider the boundary of their own religion and culture.'<sup>60</sup> It is interesting to note that Hinduization as a formal doctrinal change among the locals (Thakali) is of relatively recent arrival<sup>61</sup> and that a Shaivite Ganeshthan, representing the first Hindu shrine at Jomosom (the local district headquarter north of Tukche) was constructed only during the past decade. This event represents the recent increase in numbers of Nepalese government civil servants, mostly the Hindus from the lower hills (especially Kathmandu) in the region.

Nonetheless, there is an element of circularity in the argument about periphery and centrality in pilgrimage sites. I agree with Valentine Daniel's comments, that the concept of the center is a peculiarly European or Western one, and is a concept perhaps best defined in terms of the individual person's goals or orientation at a particular time.<sup>62</sup> What is center from one perspective may well not be so from another.

Muktinath is at the center when it is at the center of a pilgrim's thought and action. At other times it exists only as a peripheral idea or vision. As we noted in our earlier discussion of periphery and center, even the famous pan-Hindu sacred site of Varanasi does not escape the circularity of the argument: Varanasi, or Kashi, may be conceived of as more or less central (physically) to South Asian Hinduism, yet as one stands at the ghat alongside the Ganges river, one realizes that he or she is at a very distinct physical periphery as well, at the edge of a very wide river.<sup>63</sup>

59. Snellgrove, 1961, *Op. Cit.*, p. 181.

60. Jackson, 1978, *Op. Cit.* p. 217.

61. Shigeru Iijima, "The Hinduization of a Himalayan Tribe in Nepal." *Kroeber Anthropological Society Papers* No. 23, pp. 45-52.; cf., Messerschmidt, 1981, *Op. Cit.*

62. Comments from the floor at the international symposium entitled 'Pilgrimage: The Human Quest,' Pittsburgh, May 1981.

63. Messerschmidt and Sharma, 1980, *Op. Cit.* fn. 7.

## (9) Secular Associations

Many pilgrimage sites have secular relationships to socio-economic and essentially non-religious places and activities such as towns, trade routes, and fairs. Muktinath is no exception. Most recently it has become a popular destination for trekkers and mountaineers. Since the mid-1970s a flurry of building has been going on at Rani Pauwa, complete with small restaurants and hotels, one of which boasts private rooms, a solar-heated shower, European menu, and high prices.

Historically, Muktinath grew in popularity to travellers by virtue of being near the salt trade route along the Kali Gandaki river<sup>64</sup> and in its position astride the less well travelled, but still important foot track linking Manang District with Mustang District via the Nyeshang (or Thorung) Passes east over the Damodar Himal above Muktinath.

Its most famous secular identifier, however, is the annual **mela** called **ghora jatra** (Nep.) or **yartudg** (Tib), a horse-racing festival. The fair is organized exclusively by the local Bhotia populations, and is scheduled to correspond many years with the religious **janai purnima** ritual celebrations. (In 1980 the two occasions were held simultaneously; in 1981 they fell one month apart.) The fair typically draws over a thousand people. Virtually all who come, Buddhist and Hindu alike, local and from far, begin the festival day with a reverent visit to the Hindu/Buddhist temple of Vishnu/Gawo Jogpa. Only thereafter can the raucous horse racing, gambling, drinking, and general carousing and merrymaking of the fair begin (for the Bhotias) or the intense but quiet ritual, including the spiritually cleaning (and physically exhilarating) bath under the 108 spouts, begin (for the Hindus).

The most devout Hindus tend to avoid the crowded and rowdy festival and horse-racing which they perceive as a ritually polluting, non-sacred social event. In the vernacular Nepali, an interesting semantic distinction occurs which clearly distinguishes the sacred pilgrimage (**yatra**) from the more profane, or secular, pilgrimage quest (**jatra**). Whereas devout Hindus go to Muktinath on **yatra** or **tirtha-yatra**, for religious purposes, many Nepaleses (particularly of the hill ethnic and northern Bhotia groups, some of which have been only nominally Hinduized) perceive what goes on there as a **jatra**, a spectacle of sorts, to "go see" (**yatra hernu jane**). The root of both terms is iden-

64. Furer-Haimendorf, **Op. Cit.**

tical **yatra** in Sanskrit); only the pronunciation and local meaning differ. Harka Gurung makes a very similar distinction, but points out that the two meanings tend to “conver at the time of religious events when people travel to witness the procession of deities along prescribed routes or congregate at some sacred site.”<sup>65</sup> For devout Hindus, however, the meaning of **Muktinath** is clear. As the **sadhu** told us: One goes to **Muktinath** on **yatra** to receive **darshan**, the blessing of God.

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65. Harka Gurung, “Relationship of public and private sectors of travel industry,” **Nepal Review** vol. 1, no. 7, (1981) p. 31.