

## Muktinath, Nepal: Spiritual Magnetism and Complexity in Space

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### Abstract

Muktinath located at the central part of Nepal Himalaya is a holy site dedicated to Lord Vishnu. The sacred power of Muktinath is eulogized in ancient and puranic mythologies. The spiritual magnetism of Muktinath is associated with *Shalagram* (a fossil stone, symbolizing Vishnu) miraculous cures, super-natural beings, sacred geography and difficulty of access. There the devotees experience the gods' blessing, purity and inner peace. Therefore, manifestative power of the place attracted believers and kings to provide special protection and related programmes resulting to develop various monuments, *gompas and powas*, etc. and complexity, not only in the sacred site but also in the pilgrimage route leading to it. The settings, natural scenery and the staged development along the lengthy route to Muktinath "*Muktikshetra*" - salvation field make the whole territory sacredscape. Each stop along the way in itself is, a link of greater or lesser importance between earth and heaven, man and god, the profane and the sacred site of Muktinath. Ultimately this converges to a theosphere, known as faithscape — a divinely manifested territory where human beings experience the message and inherent meaning of the power of mother earth. This paradox helps to develop complexity in space and to continue the mass of pilgrims and their self-organizing cyclic movement. This study is based on participatory observation (at least six times) in the line of phenomenological approach.

**Key words.** *Spiritual magnetism, pilgrims, Shalagram, miraculous cures, super-natural, sacred geography, faithscape, sacredscape, nature spirit, power of place.*

### Introduction

Among the five most holy sites dedicated to Lord Vishnu, the four - Badrinath (north), Jagannath Puri (east), Ramaeshvaram (south) and Davaraka (west) lies in four cardinal

direction of India , and the fifth site Muktinath (north-east ) is situated in the central part of the Himalayan Kingdom of Nepal , near Tibet, forming a star shape (Figure 1). These five holy centers radiate light of bestowing wisdom and relief form transmigration. Muktinath (Mukti = salvation, Nath = god) acknowledged with Shalagrama, Krishna Gandaki, Shalagrami and Muktikshetra (*salvation field*) is not only rich in different expressions like social and religious, legends, myth and fable in history but also in clearly visible attributes of religio-geographic realities. The interaction between the religio-geographical realities and the pilgrims, humans and the divine, microcosm and macrocosm have maintained many types of traditions and created spiritual magnetic complex sacredscape in Muktinath. 'Spiritual magnetism means drawing power of the sacred center which is derived from human concept and values via historical, geographical, social and other forces that coalesce in a sacred center' (Preston, 1992:23). Unless the believer or devotees feel a sentimental attachment to the place, the pilgrimage cannot be accomplished. Pilgrimage (*Tirtha Yatra*) refers a journey to the sacred place or shrine constituted by the sentimental attachment to that place. Thus, "Pilgrimage" not only means the physical act of visiting the holy places but also implies to mental and moral discipline (Bhardwaj, 1973:2). Without secularization, rituals and deeper interconnectedness, the place can not be magnetic to the sentimental attachment of the pilgrims. Hence, magnetism of the place and sentiment of the pilgrims are interdependent or complementary (Allen, 1994:594-95).

This paper attempts to show religio-geographic aspects and spiritual magnetism of Muktinath on the basis of participatory observation (at least seven times) in the line of phenomenological approach.

### **Religio-Geographical Aspects and Holy Spots**

The sacredscape of Muktinath (3749 m) is located at Muktinath Village Development Committee (VDC) of Mustang District, Dhaulagiri Zone, Nepal (Figure 2). It is situated on the western slope of Kalodanda (So-So Danda, in local Bhote language) in between

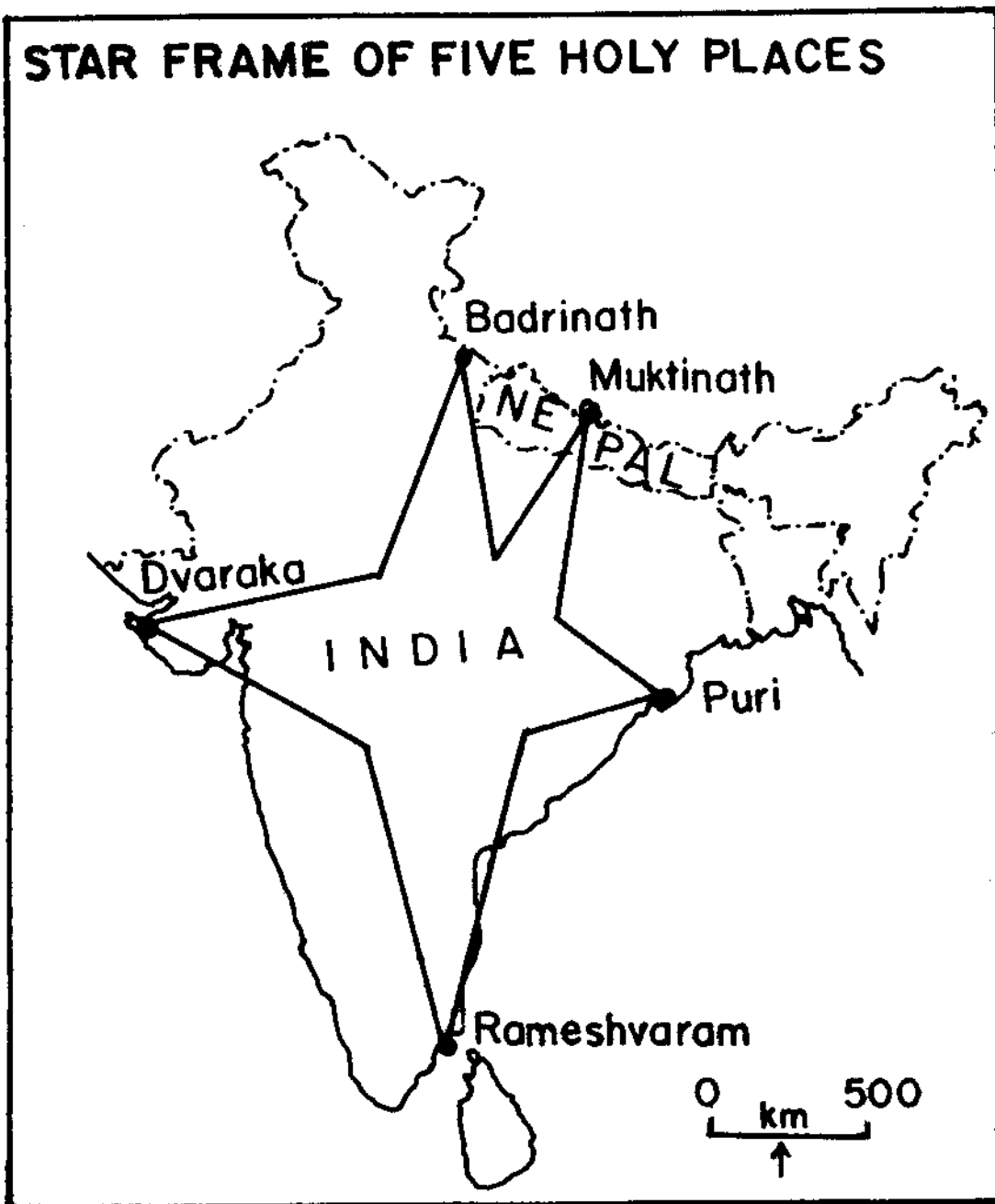


Figure 1

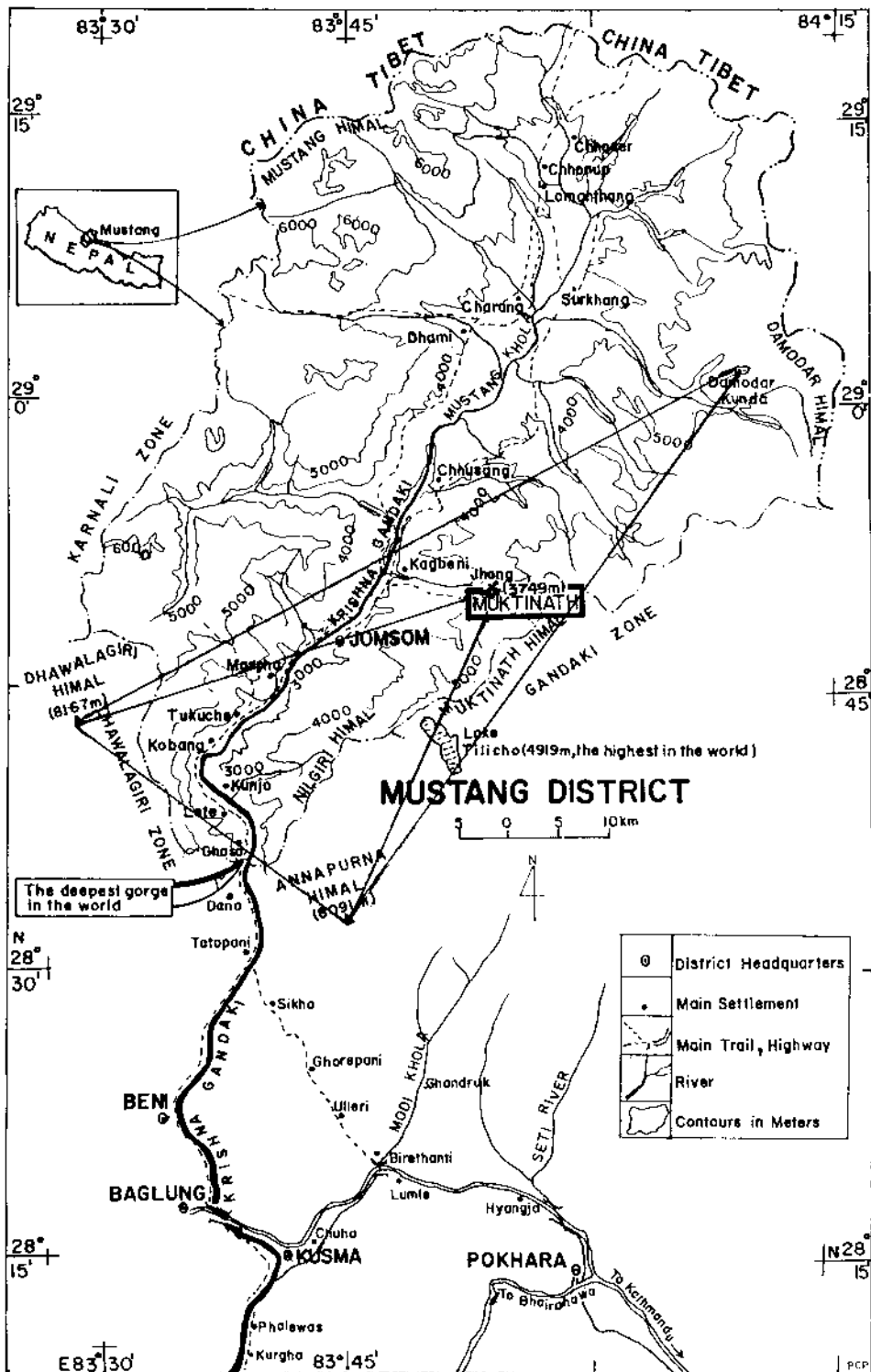


FIGURE 2

Annapurna Himalaya (south) and Damodar Himalaya (north). It lies in the rain shadow area of the Great Himalaya and at the head water of Jhong Khola (Muktinath Khola, a tributary of Kali Gandaki) of the Trans Himalayan dry valley zone. Mukthinath is, therefore, virtually unaffected by South Asian Monsoon. The area experiences markedly arid climate with cool summer and cold winter. At the background of sandy, stony and snowy land features, patched of alpine vegetation in the inner valleys and thorny bushes in the mountain slopes are dominant scenes and settings in the area. Except the landscape of Muktinath sacred site, the landscape of Muktinath Valley (clearly defined by three mountains - Khatung, Yakgawa and Dzong Palden and different ridges leading to them) appears remarkably barren and denuded and dotted by different fortress like villages.

Muktinath is 21 kilometer (trail distance) north - west from the district headquarters Jomsom (2710m, Dzongsom in Tibetan) and one kilometer away from the nearest settlement Ranipowa. Besides, Ranipouwa (*Dharmashala*, rest house built in 1806 B. S. by Subarna Prabha, the wife of King Rana Bahadur Shah), the settlement of Ranipouwa village is connected with the growth of mountain tourism in Manang and Mustang Valley. These valleys were opened for mountain tourists in April 1997. Muktinath is the suitable location for night halt to the trekkers of the famous Annapurna circuit route, who traverses the Thorung pass (4450m) from Manang side. From the pass Muktinath is located at the trail distance of 15 kilometer. The old settlement of the area Dzarkot (in Tibetan language *Dzar-Dzong*, means a fort or castle) is three kilometer (trail distance) away from the sacred site. Dzarkot is the largest among the villages of upper Muktinath Valley and the home of former ruling chief of the area (Bista, 1971:38). Out of the total 175 houses of the VDC, Dzarkot consist 65 followed by Purang 36, Khinga 35, Ranipowa 21, and Lupmg 18 houses. These six villages form a remarkably homogeneous attributes in terms of religious (Tibetan Buddhism) and socio-cultural entity.

The sacred territory of Muktinath covers an area of about half square kilometer. Four principle sacred structures: Vishnu (Muktinath) temple in the centre, Jvala Mai Gomba

(Buddhist temple) in the east, Nirsimh Gomba in the west, Shiva temple in the south are located within the premises of Muktinath. Similarly, many sub-structured sacredscape like 108 (Go-Mukh) water spouts (known as Dharha Tirtha which half circles the Vishnu temple compound at the back side), Muktikunda (water-pool at the front side of the Vishnu temple) and pilgrims rest houses (Dharmashalas) in different direction, confines in the sacred territory (Figure 3). Besides, the sacred grove and small mound whose soil scents like the rice pudding are the other sacred marker of Muktinath. These principle sacred structures, sub-structures and sacred marker have combinely acted as powerful motivators to the pilgrims and undertake self-organizing pilgrimage. During the pilgrimage to Muktinath nature gives devotees the rhythm of the power of the place, dialogue with the nature and himself through the changing weather condition, the relief, the geology, the vegetation and their unique landscape. However, in order to attain the manifold aims, pilgrims have to venture the pilgrimage in according with certain rules and religious practices.

### **Structured and Sub-structured Sacred Sites**

The spiritual magnetism of a sacred site depends upon the structured (temple and Gomba), sub-structured (water spouts and pool) and sacred marker (mountain, lake, river, and grove) of the place. These sacredscapes and the sentiment of the pilgrims (faithscape) are complementary and co-dependent for the evolution of distinct sacred place and pilgrimage, because, faithscape and sacrdescape provide an ideal medium for symbolism, manipulation and transformation of the past (Singh, 1995:99). The sacredscape of Muktinath consists of structured and sub-structured holy spot as follows -

#### **Vishnu Temple**

Vishnu Temple (locally called as Muktinath or Muktinarayan temple) occupies central location in the holy territory. Three storied copper-roofed and topped with a gilded brass pinnacle, pagoda (in *Pahari* style) temple of Muktinath, with southward facing main gate, is built on a square platform of a single tire (30.8m<sup>2</sup>, paved with marble stone (Figure 4).

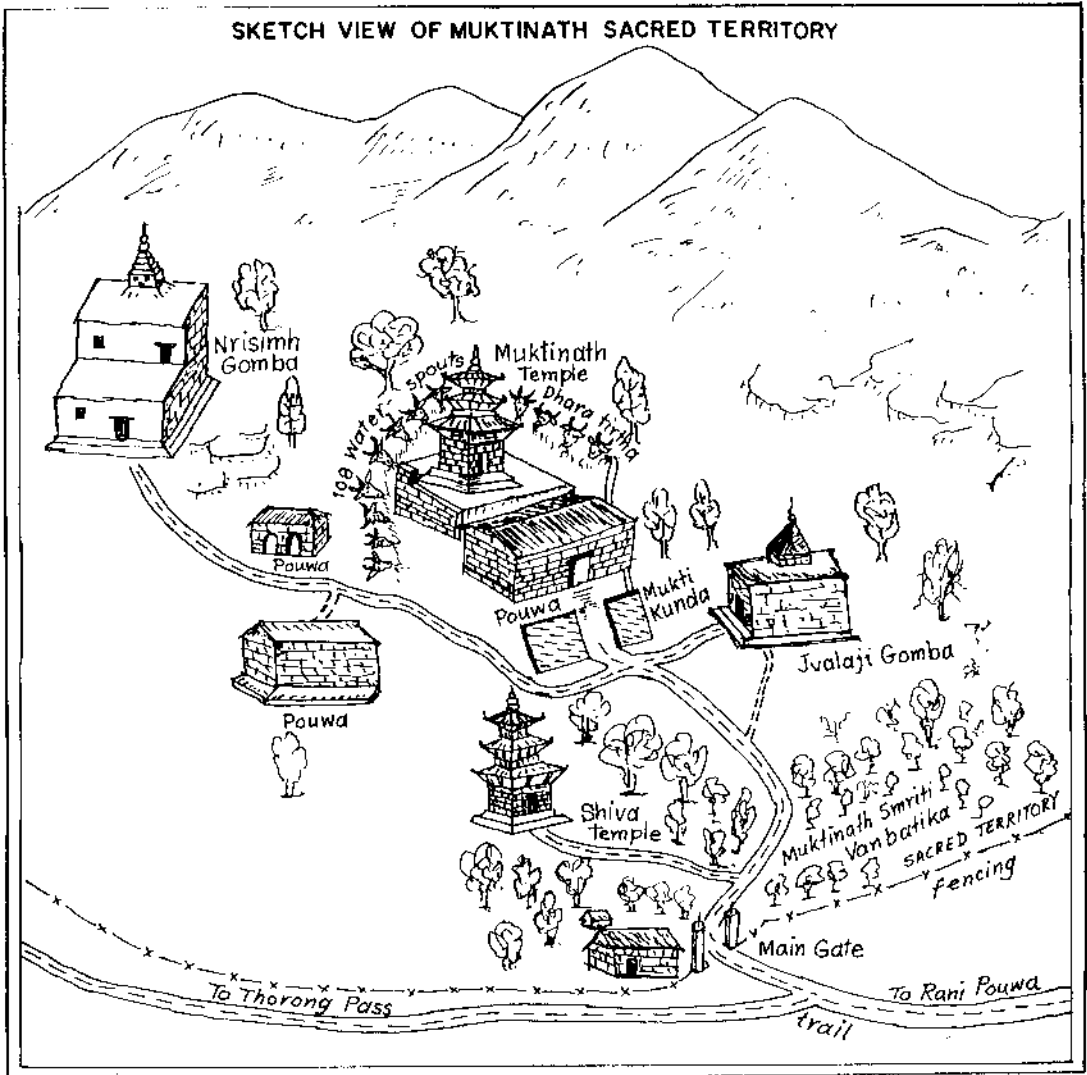


Figure 3

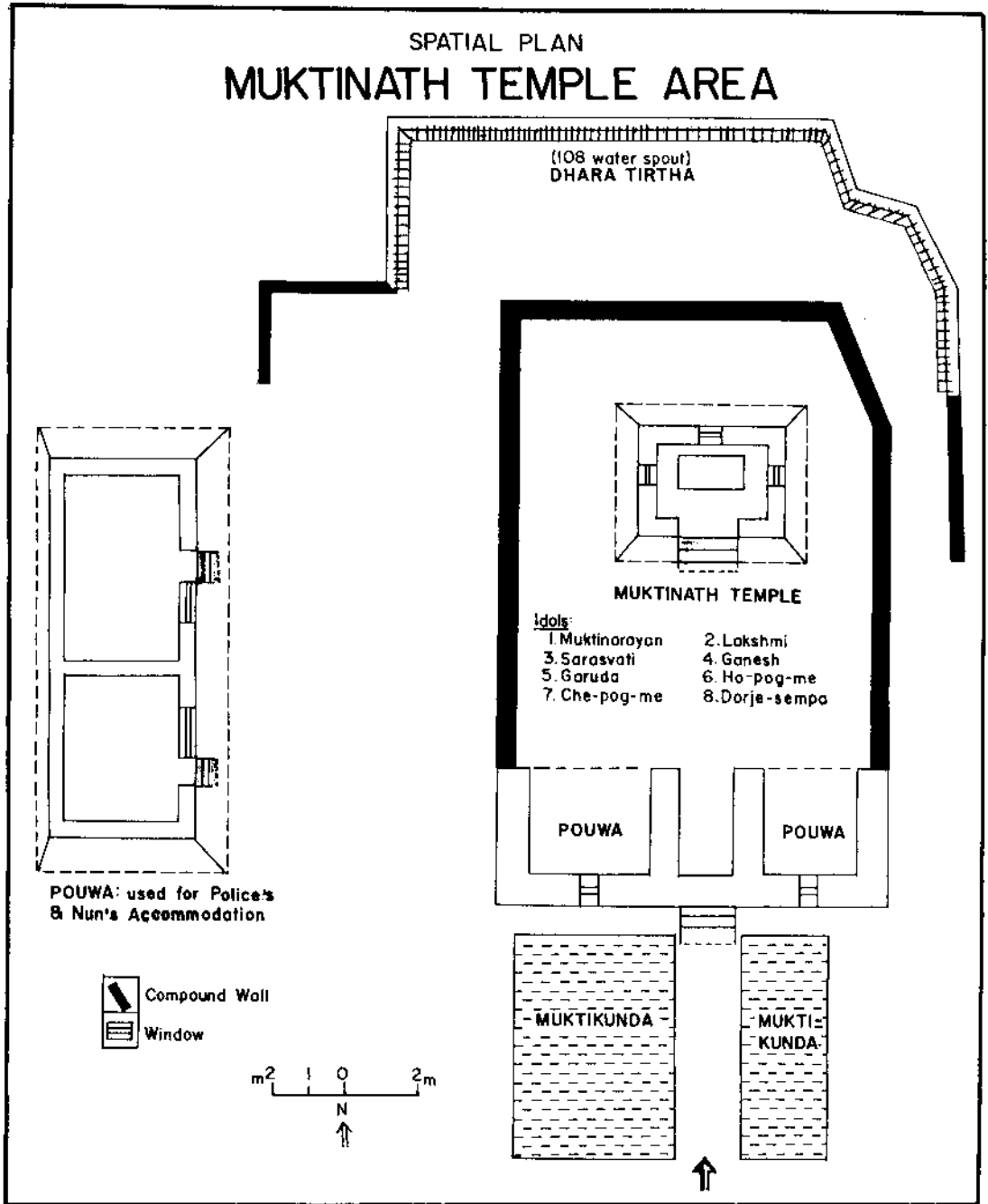


Figure 4



Under the shade of seven hoods of snake, four armed lotus position (with cross legs) copper image of Lord Muktinath (1m.height, Mukti - nath = salvation lord) is enshrined at the central north location of the Muktinarayana temple. Narayana is the another name of Vishnu. The upper pair of hands holds the *Chakra* (wheel) and *Sankha* (conch shell) while the lower pair gesticulates the gesture of fearlessness (*Abhayamudra*). Copper image of Vishnu is almost 150 years old (Kaschewsky, 1994:160-161). The image of Lakshmi (86cm. height, goddess of wealth, fortune and Vishnu's consort) and Sarasvati (86cm. in height, goddess of art & learning, and Brahma's wife) are sanctified on the either side of Vishnu. Just in front of Lakshmi and Sarasvati sits small images (30 cm. height) of Garuda (the divine bird, carrier of Vishnu) and Ganesh (the younger son of Shiva) respectively. Three images of Buddhist Mahayana gods (42cm. Height) viz. *Ho-Pang-Me*, *Che-Pang-Me* and *Dorge Sempa* also exist in the front line of the same sanctum. Central to this temple is a Shalagrama (black ammonite stone) for which Muktinath is popular for Hindus and others. Buddhists worship this Shalagrama as *Gowa Jampa* 'the serpent deity' and Hindus as Vishnu (Figure 4).

The shrine is considered to be an antique of 2000 years (Dahal, 1998:350). However, the inscription on the bell located at the southern side of the temple and brass plate of the second roof of the temple reveal that the present temple in Pagoda style was built on around 1815 BCE.

Visual image in the temple brings out that major portion of the inner space is occupied by the images of Hindu gods. But in practice, Buddhist nuns, (locally called as *Jhomo*) in the inner space and Hindu priest in the outer space of the temple perform their rituals. However, as in Gaya, Varanasi and Badrinath, the Hindus and Buddhists pilgrims worship both the Hindu and Buddhist images equally. This type of criss-cross between the space occupancy and religious practice in the temples presents both religious harmony and complexity in the sacredscape of Muktinath.

### **The Jvala Mai Gomba**

Javala Mai Gomba (*Sa-le-me-bar, Do-la-me-bar, Dong-pa* in Tibetan) lies at the distance of about 50m east from Vishnu temple. The Gomba has a Tibetan Buddhist architectural image, which covers 81.6m<sup>2</sup> area. The Gomba shelters the site of divine flame upon the soil stone and water. On the altar made just above the divine flame (covered by a small curtain), clay images of five Buddhist gods are enshrined almost in the semi-circular structure. The five Buddhist gods are namely *Padmasambhava* (precious teacher and sage who first introduced Buddhism in Tibet), *Vajrapani* (Buddhist Mahayana Tantrik), *Chen-re-sig; Manju Gosh* (Manjushree in Nepali and *Jyam-Yang* in Tibetan) and *Chom-den-de* (the historical Buddha). The height of these images ranges between 1.3m to 1.6m. As described by Snellgrove (1989:201) before the construction of Muktinath temple, Jvala Mai was the original site and main goddess of local Buddhists around Muktinath. Though it was also the main shrine of Hindus (Dahal 1988:63, Himabat Khanda (ed.) Yogi 1956:126-130) in the past, there is no association of Hindus priest at this Gomba because all the rites and rituals are performed in accordance with Buddhist religious practice. However, Hindu pilgrims have been worshipping the images since long past.

### **Nirsimh Gomba**

Tibetan style, Nirsimh Gomba lies in the western side of Shiva temple at a distance of about 65 metre. It occupies an area of 152.5m<sup>2</sup> and houses clay image of Padmasambhava (2.5m height) as the main deity. The images of two nurses *Kha-do-ye-chho-gyal* (Tibetan) and *Man-d-re-ba* (Hindu) sits on the either side of the main deity. Another image sanctified in this Gomba is of *Sen-Dong* (Tibetan Tantrik Guru). On account of its partial shape of Lion, Hindu pilgrims pay homage to this image as *Nirsimha*-the fourth incarnation of Vishnu. The main deity of the Gomba is Buddhist god but it is popular with the Hindu names 'Nirsimh'. The Hindu goddess Vajra Varahi is enshrined at the other side of the main deity.

### Shiva Temple

Pagoda style Shiva temple replicating Pashupatinath of Kathmandu is located the south of Muktinath temple. Four-faced image of Shiva "*Shiva Lingum*" is enshrined in the center of the temple. East face indicates '*Tatpurusha*' the basic seed of the cosmos and south face '*Aghora*' controller of death and symbol of cosmic integrity. Similarly, the west face symbolizes '*Sadyojata*' ever shining light, north face '*Vamadeva*' benign and boon giving god and controller of darkness, and the spherical form of upper portion of the Lingum symbolizes '*Ishana*' energy at the center of cosmic rhythm. Four other small shrines at the side of Shiva temple have recently built representing Dvaraka, Badrinath, Kedarnath and Rameshvaram. This reminds pilgrims the process of spatial manifestation of the four abodes of Vishnu lying in the four cardinal directions of India (Figure 1).

### Sub-structured Sacred Sites

One hundred and eight (Go Mukh) waterspouts known as Dhara Tirtha and Muktikunda (pool) are the main sub-structured sacred shrine located within Muktinath sacred territory.

#### Dhara Tirtha

The 108 (Go Mukh) cow-head shaped waterspouts exit at the distance of 4.67m from the backside compound wall of the Muktinath Temple. These water spouts are set on a 1.94m high stone wall, which partially encircle the Muktinath temple compound (Figure 3). The cow-head shaped brass spout is at equidistant of 30cm. Carefully channeled water of 108 Dhara Tirtha seep from the rocky hillside, just above the Muktinath temple. Discharged water from the Dhara Tirtha is channeled to Muktikundas through 80cm wide drain. Also it is said that there is natural underground connections between the source of Dhara Tirtha and the water on which the blue flame is burning, in Jvala Mai Gomba. The number of these 108 spouts has magical qualities and association. They symbolize 108 books of Tibetan Buddhist scriptures, 108 beads on the Buddhist rosary, the product of 122 zodiacs and 9 planets -the cosmic circuit. The priest of the Muktinath temple mentioned that Dhara Tirtha was renovated in 1990.

### **Muktikunda**

Two pools locally called as Muktikunda (salvation-pool) exist just in front of the Muktinath temple compound gate. The Kunda located at the eastern side is smaller (15.5m<sup>2</sup> area) than that of the western side (29.1 m<sup>2</sup> area). Approximately two metre wide path leading to Muktinath temple separates these two Kunda. The discharge of the 108 water spouts channeled underground is the source of these Kunda. Pilgrims strongly believe that holy bath in Dhara Tirtha and Muktikunda can purify one in all the numbers of 8.4 million organic species in the cosmos through which the soul transcends in the cycle of rebirth. Though the water is icy cold it has no effect on the pilgrims for the holy baths they desire. Cheerful in disposition, the pilgrims feel great securing of the rare aspect in their life. However, Buddhist pilgrims do not undress and take holy bath. They only sprinkle a few drops from the spout and drink some water.

### **Spiritual Magnetism of Muktinath**

Pilgrimage (Tirtha Yatra in Nepali and Indian expression) pattern to the sacred site through time and space is the result of the spiritual magnetism of the sacred center. Spiritual magnetism means power of pilgrimage shrine to attract devotees. Spiritual magnetism of the holy place gives energies to keep the places alive. It develops in a particular place of pilgrimage because of the interplay of traceable forces that seems mysterious to the participants but have measurable reality (Preston, 1992: 33). "Pilgrimage is a journey to the sacred place as an act of religious devotion" (Stoddard, 1994: 18). When motivated to magnitude of religious elements (also called as spiritual magnetism) of the destinations, they are enthused to visit the holy religious sites and centers. Therefore, 'Pilgrimage not only means the physical act of visiting the holy places but implies mental and moral sense' (Bhardwaj, 1973: 2).

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In the Indian sub-continent Muktinath is listed as one of the most sacred places of "Grand pilgrimage" sites of Hindus (Bhardwaj, 1973: 51). There is the meeting of heavenly and

earthly planes. Therefore, it attracts thousand of Hindus and Buddhists pilgrims from different part of the globe as a source of religious merit, divine blessing and transformation of the spirit and power of place. Spiritual magnetism of Muktinath is expressed in the form of i) super natural elements, ii) miraculous cure, iii) sacred geography, iv) difficult of access, and v) long distance for pilgrimage.

### **Presence of Super -natural Elements**

The holy sites of Muktinath are associated with the presence of super -natural elements and their visible characteristics. The sacred site of Muktinath (north) and the two mountains Dhaulagiri (8167m southwest, fifth highest peak of the world) and Annapurna I (8091m south-east, eleventh highest peak in the world) forms a triangle with the apex upward indicating north and Damodar Kunda, Krina's sacred pool (Figure 2). Tilicho (4919m) the highest lake in the world, is located at the two vertices of Muktinath and Annapurna. Similarly, between the two mountains lies the holy Kali Gandaki in the deepest gorge of the world, at Dana. Some pilgrims interpret this gorge as the outer gateway of Muktikshetra. In this gorge, the high summits of Dhaulagiri (8167m, west) and Annapurna I (8091m, east) are only about 30 km apart. At 7500m elevation, the mountains are only 20km apart, and between them flows the sacred Kali Gandaki, at the height of 1200m (Hagen, 1971:53). Similarly, Muktinath and *Hamsa Tirtha* (Kagbeni) occupy the central location of the large triangle formed by Damodar Kunda at the north, and Dhaulagiri and Annapurna Himalaya at the base. This type of location association of Muktinath consisted of world recognized super-natural elements (the gorge, the lake and the mountains) register its highest order sacredness. Hence, pilgrimage landscape of Muktikshetra generates many levels of meaning, many sources of energy and many centres of attractions. Therefore, every pilgrim traversing through the deepest gorge in the world feel the sense of super-natural elements and the feeling that has moved into the boundless cosmic space.

The presence of continuously burning fire upon the soil, stone and water, called as *Jvala Mai* (Jvala = flame, Mai = mother) in Nepali and *Sa-la-me-bar*, *Do-la-me-bar* in Tibetan is the second empirical super natural element enclosed within the sacred territory of Muktinath. The Hindu pilgrims believe that the natural wonder of flickering blue flames on the three objects (soil, stone and water) were first lit up by Brahma, the creator in Hindu trinity, as the gift to human beings. From the small and curtained recesses of *Jvala Mai Gomba*, one can hear a constant gurgle sound of a river called as Mandakini of Svarga Ganga (the river of the heaven). Similarly Buddhist pilgrims believe that this is the place where the serpent deity is playing music to bless the pilgrims visiting there. These myths resemble with the invisible Sarasvati river meeting at the confluence of the Ganga and the Yamuna at Prayaga/Allahabad, India.

Likewise, there is a small mound towards the east of the *Jvala Mai*. The soil of the mound scents as the spicy rice pudding. It is said that small mound is the remaining portion of the offering on fire, made by the Brahma himself. So, the pilgrims before leaving the compound of the sacred territory collect some soil from the mound as Mahaprashada (the great offerings of Brahma). Local people and the pilgrims believe in the saying, whatever amount of soil they take out from the mound as Mahaprashada, it never loses its size and shape.

The next super-natural element in Muktinath sacred territory is the successful growth of banayan trees (*Ficus religiosa*) locally called as *Bhote Pipal*. Pilgrims find it noteworthy. On the whole pilgrimage from about Tukuche (34.5km south in the trail distance from Muktinath) onward, one hardly encounters any tree in the sandy and stony landscape. But in Muktinath and on its stretch, although the area is higher up in the mountain, one again meet banayan trees and the greenery. Local people and the pilgrims opine that in such dry area, the successful growth of banayan trees (scared to both Hindus and Buddhist) under which the Buddha, the apostle of peace and compassion was enlightened through meditation and preached his first sermon. The growth of banayan tree would not have been possible without the presence of super-natural power (sacred) of the site. Ultimately, pilgrims'

belief that the sacred space radiates fertility is strengthened here. Dahal (1998:54) explains a legend how banayan tree came to the holy site of Muktinath.

### Sacred Geography

Places on the faces of the earth are associated with different characters and values. The places associated with powerful religious sentiments and spiritual magnetism are strongly linked to sacred geography. Sacred geography is expressed in the Hindu concept - the place where the Mahabarat, Ramayana and Purans were lived out during mythological times (Preston, 1992:34). Kali Gandaki, one of the mains and the most sacred tributary of Narayani, from its source to the confluence of Trishuli River (Deoghat) is laced with several pilgrimage sites. Damodar Kunda, Kagbeni and Muktinath in the source area, Galeshwar, Baglung Kalika and Ridi in the middle and Deoghat at the last confluence, are the popular sacred sites located at the bank of Kali Gandaki. After Deoghat, the confluence of Trisuli and Kali Gandaki, the river is popular with the name Narayani in Nepal Tarai and Gangagi in India.

*Tirtha* is self manifested, not created by man. Like in Gangasagar there is no temple in *Hamsa Tirtha*. Kagbeni (2810m), the confluence of Krishna Gandaki and Muktinath Khola, known as *Hamsa Tirha*, is located only 10km (trail distance) west of Muktinath. Pilgrims believe that Vishnu's carrier, *Garuda*, "has been honored with an offering at the start of the pilgrimage he accompanies them until he reaches Kagbeni"- his original home (Kaschewsky 1994:143). Also, pilgrims think that holy dip and performance of ancestral rites (*Pitri Sharadha*) at the confluence of Krishna Gandaki and Muktinath Khola (Kagbeni) is the must for Hindus to clean themselves and ancestral souls on the way to Vishnu's abode. For this reason thousands of pilgrims arrives Kagbeni mainly during Ashvin Krishna *Pritipaksha* (called as 16 *Sharadha* - i.e. the waning fortnight 'dark half of March - April). This indicates that the spiritual magnetism of sacredscape varies in temporal dimension.



Muktinath along with its stretches (*Muktikshetra*) is known as the source of *Shalagrama* (the ammonite stone symbolizing Vishnu). Around Muktinath 104 km<sup>2</sup> area is considered to be the *Shalagrama* Range (Kaschewsky, 1994:162), and two extreme spots demarcate this *Kshetra* viz. the Damodar Kunda in the north and Muktinath and Kagbeni in the south (Poudel & Singh 1994:252). Therefore, the surrounding hill of Muktinath is called as *Shalagramagiri* (*Varaha Purana* 144:13, 29). However, *Shalagrama* is found abundantly in Krishna Gandaki (cf. *Kurma Purana* II.35.37, *Narasimha Purana* 64.22-26; see Kane 1973, vol. IV: 799). The “Forest Canto” of the *Mahabharata* (III.84.123-128) describes the merit of the *Shalagrama* and the holy site where it is found. Mythology also refers that the great Saint king Bharata had resided close to this place and performed austerity (cf. *Vishnu Purana* II.1.24, II.13.4). Another version of the same story is narrated in the *Shreemad Bhagavata Purana* (V.7.8-10; 8.30) which relates it to the name like ‘land of illustrious’, the forest of hermitage where *Pulastya* and *Pulaha* live. And it is well known as *Shalagrama Tirtha* or sometimes *Kshetra*.

The *Varaha Purana* (144:29) states that the *Shalagrama* hill in itself is a form of lord Vishnu, and therefore it is a ‘divine being’ (*Devata*; *ibid*: 145). It is also said that Lord Vishnu is always present in the rock of *Shalagrama* found in *Shalagrami*. *Shalagrami* is the name of Krishna Gandaki derived from the presence of black ammonite fossil found in abundance. In view of the shape, size, hollowness, linings, colour and number of circles, various sacred names are given to *Shalagrama*. They are most commonly classified into 32 types on the basis of colour (black, yellow, red and blue) and on the basis of circles thirteen main divisions and 199 types (for list see Kaschewky, 1994:150-151, Dutta 1985:178). All these types have distinct meaning with religious importance in Hinduism.

Apparently, Muktinath shows its association with Krishna, the eighth incarnation of Vishnu. The ritual tradition of worshipping *Shalagrama* offering *Tulsi*’s leaves (holy basil) indicates age-old Vaishnavite myth referring as to how Vishnu fallen in love with *Tulsi*, and later by her curse he himself became *Shalagrama* and later *Tulsi* became Krishna Gandaki River.

Pilgrims believe that a pilgrim on the way to Muktinath who finds *Shalagrama* whose linings (*chakra*) is discovered by rubbing away one portion of it, certainly relives *moksha* (liberation) from all sorts of bindings, boundages and sin. Similarly, he who finds *Shalagrama* with convolutions towards the right can never be a poor person.

Above mentioned different religious mythic context and dramatic features of landscape have produced strong association of Muktinath with sacred geography and a focal point for the movement of large number of pilgrims to it.

### **Miraculous Cures**

*Shalagrama*, sacred streams and lakes, hot mineral springs, heat of the divine flame and other natural and socio-cultural environments available in Muktinath are associated with healing of the diseases and miraculous cure. The range of cures attributed to these elements are related to both physical and psychological healing of diseases like syphilis, leprosy, arthritis, various kinds of mental stress and religio-social healing.

As reported by the local people and pilgrims, a holy dip in the Damodar Kunda (Krishnas' sacred Pool), Kagbeni and bath in 108 Dhara Tirtha is not only meritorious to spiritual cleansing but also they have the curative capacity of itching diseases. This is an empirical evidence that the watersheds and valleys of these streams and lakes at the higher parts grow abundantly herbaceous medicinal plants which are washed by the runoff and mixed in the water. Similarly, heating up of affected parts at the flame of *Jvala Mai* has the healing capacity to arthritis and leprosy. When the site is not crowded with the pilgrims, many of the patients of these diseases do visit *Jvala Mai* from the surrounding villages and get heating and healing. The nun who takes care of *Jvala Mai* Gomba asserted shyly that in a year about 20-30 pilgrims visit there for healing purpose.

Thermal springs are *Agni Tirtha*. Nearly all the pilgrims take a bath at the thermal spring of Tatopani and Jalthale of Myagdi, located at the bank of Krishna Gandaki. These places also mark the southern most gateway of the sacred territory of Maktinath. Pilgrims believe that the water of the thermal spring has the curative properties of different skin diseases and purifying power reliving sin and evil. They, therefore, carry hot water as *Prasada* (blessing offering) for the relatives and friends. Tourists traversing to Mustang who have faced foot ache problems also dip their legs into the hot spring water and get healing. Sometimes we can observe 2-3 trekkers staying 3-4 nights at Tatopani only for the same purpose. It is observed that people frequently visit Tatopani only for the healing of their skin diseases and arthritis. Even after the introduction of modern medicine, treatment from such natural process is popular.

Snellgrove (1989:201) describes that the site of *Jvala Mai* as the 'place of mind perfection' (*Psan-grab-gling*). At the *Gomba* the nun responded that the gurgle of the *Svarga Ganga* or the music of the serpent deity has the curative power to those who have been newly suffered from deafness. They explained that the guardians with their deaf child visit the *Gomba*, pay homage to the serpent deity and make to the child, listen the music. Similarly, it is believed that if dumb child is dipped into two *Muktukundas*' (located in front of Muktinath compound gate), he gains the power of speaking. Also there is a deep-rooted religious belief among the Hindus that at the time of death when the water in which *Shalagrama* is dipped, sprinkled upon the dead body, the soul would get good place in Vishnu's abode.

Besides these different kinds of curative power, the environment (settlement, landscape, atmosphere, etc.) along the pilgrimage route and sacred territory of Muktinath, provides an excellent atmosphere for psychological healing to the pilgrims. The sacred journey to the holy site like Muktinath takes the travelers out of the context of daily routine life and into a realm in which ordinary physical and social boundaries no longer apply. Pilgrims of higher and lower caste proceed together in the same group. During the religious occasion, the line

of pilgrims is never ending on the trail to Muktinath. The number of pilgrims is so large that the entire route environment resounds with legends, mythological stories and loud salutations to Muktinath - as *Jai Muktinath*, *Jai Shalagrami*, *Jai Shalagrama* and *Jai Damodar Kunda*. The environs help pilgrims forget all the social and family affairs stressed in their mind. Also, the pilgrims experience the awe and feel affinity by the sound of monastic conches and trumpets echoed from the monastery (located along the trail) regularly in the morning and evening. Similarly traversing through the culturally unique settlement of Thakali and Bhotias of upper Kali Gandaki valley and arriving at the greenery of the sacred grove of Muktinath, pilgrims feel peace and relief. While traversing through the gate located at the entrance point of the Thakali villages of Kali Gandaki valley, pilgrims feel that they are approaching nearer and nearer to the god. These different kinds of environs along the route and sacred territory of Muktinath significantly act as physiological healing of the pilgrims' mind and pilgrims assumption "miracles are available in the higher order pilgrimage centre"

### **Difficulty of Access**

Some pilgrim sites attain high degree of spiritual magnetism because of difficulty of access. The pan-Hindu sacred site of Muktinath is located in the upper terrace of Trans Himalayan valley (across the great Himalaya) about 4000m above the sea level. It is 108km. North from Baglung, the metalled road head and 96km from the fair weather road head Beni, Myagdi, opened just two years ago. The trail to Muktinath traverses through the difficult mountain terrain, wet and leech-infested forest, along the windy course of Krishna Gandaki, and directly through the main axis of the Great Himalaya, almost to the edge of the Tibetan plateau. In many places it is built into the sheer cliff above the river. Though the trail is made safe, however, the threat of landslide, risk of slippery, rock fall, and falling from the trail is still very risky. For example, during Sept. 1998 there occurred a heavy landslide near Tatopani *Bazaar*, Myagdi. This event created risk of life and difficulty of access to the pilgrims for a month. Also, Pilgrims should bear this type of risk in other portion of the trail because the region lies in the main central thrust zone of the Himalaya (Sharma 1973:85).

Besides, in several places pilgrims have to traverse through a steep ascending trail, where they (mainly the old and infirm) face difficulty to cross it. On our quest, pilgrims traversing to Muktinath mentioned that stone paved 3767 ascending staircase like steps of Ulleri, Myagdi and *Dharma Ukalo* (merit testing ascending trail) in between Dzarkot and Ranipouwa were the most difficult portions of trail to Muktinath. At *Dharma Ukalo* pilgrims pile some stone, as sacred marker, along the trail and feel that they have occupied space in Vishnu's abode and hope to obtain better reincarnation or easy relief from transmigration. Also some of the pilgrims from Terai explained about the high altitude sickness.

Similarly, after the opening of Mustang valley for mountain tourists, hotels/lodges and tea stalls developed along the trail in a chain like fashion (Poudel 1996:137). However, the owner prefers the tourists instead of pilgrims in the expectation of higher prices from them for their facilities. This kind of harassment of the modern tourism oriented activities also poses mental torture of access to the pilgrims.

In Mustang valley wind blows (31 km/hrs annual average) regularly from south to north with the columns of dust whirls up into the air and surprising regularity between 11 a.m. to sunset. This type of atmosphere along the trail to Muktinath also poses difficulty of access to the pilgrims.

Jomsom, the headquarters of Mustang district is linked by daily scheduled and nonscheduled flights of air services from Kathmandu and Pokhara. However, poor pilgrims from the rural villages can't afford the high charge (tourist flights) fixed keeping in view of the modern tourism. Also, pilgrims face the problem of holding of air ticket by businessman and its black marketing both in Pokhara and Kathmandu. Those who fly up to Jomsom also needs to traverse 21 km through the windy and gravelly Kali Gandaki course. Also they cannot avoid the possible atitudinal sickness. This way, from many aspects of access the sacred site of Muktinath deserves difficulty of access.

### **Long Distance for the Pilgrimage**

The pilgrimage to Muktinath takes the Hindu pilgrims beyond the barrier of language and socio-cultural boundary. Though, Muktinath is the Pan-Hindu sacred place, the neighborhood is dominated by Buddhist population (Thakali 1994:53), distinct both in language and socio-cultural aspects. The district consists more than 80 percent Buddhist people. Hindu pilgrims visiting to Muktinath are from the other districts of the kingdom and neighboring country India. Sometimes the migrated Hindus to overseas country also visit to the holy site when they come to Nepal. A study conducted during Oct. 1993 reveals that out of the total 907 samples, 92.8 percent represented different parts of Nepal (mainly western and central development region) and 7.2 percent from 4 places (Delhi, Calcutta, Bhubaneshwor & Madras) of India (Poudel and Singh 1994:260). However, the survey of Messerschmidt (1980:108-109) during August 1980 reveals that though there was variation in number, however, Hindu pilgrims representing the majority zones of Nepal and most states of India (W. Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Jammu, Maharastra, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Karnataka, etc.) arrive at Muktinath. This shows that the majority of the pilgrims visiting to Muktinath are from the long distance.

### **Conclusion**

Sacred place Muktinath is a complex, multi-level (local, regional, national and supra regional), multipurpose and multi religious, natural-cum man made shrine. The shrine's fame dates back to ancient puranic literature of Hindus and spread throughout the world where Hindus have settled down. In the sacred place like Muktinath pilgrims experience the power of place (nature-spirit) and strengthen their belief in religious texts.

A rich spatial sequence and symbolic narrative symbolizes the spiritual path and magnetism of the higher order sacred place. The spiritual magnetism of Muktinath associated with super-natural elements, sacred geography, miraculous cures, difficulty of access and long

distance for the pilgrimage, provide pilgrims experiencing the cosmic relationship between human being and nature spirit, a kind of deeper realization of the power of sacredscape. All the mysteries of Muktinath and *Muktikshetra* and deep system of faith to *Shalagrama*, and Krishna Gandaki cannot be easily interpreted. However, it can be narrated that powerful sacredscape are clearly marked with spiritual magnetism which certainly nourishes human psychological stress. In such places, pilgrims experience that the mother earth is alive and still ready to bliss her children if their heart and soul were opened with faith for her love.

### Notes

1 Messerschmidt repeatedly (1981:571, 1989:97) described the 108 spouts as boar's head, but in reality it is clearly cow head shaped (for confirmation see photo 4, Kaschewsky,1994).

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