

## **Shri Amarnathji Yatra – Chairman directs Sri Sri Ravi Shankar Committee Report being placed on Shrine Board website**

JAMMU, APRIL 15 - As per tradition, the annual Amarnathji Yatra concludes on the date on which Raksha Bandhan falls. Thus, last year the 46 day long Yatra commenced on 29<sup>th</sup> June and concluded on 13<sup>th</sup> August, the date of Raksha Bandhan. This year the duration of the Yatra has got reduced by 7 days as Raksha Bandhan is taking place 11 days earlier than last year i.e. on 2<sup>nd</sup> August 2012, even though the Yatra is scheduled to commence on 25<sup>th</sup> June 2012, four days earlier than last year. This position and other related factors were explained at length by Shri Navin Kumar Choudhary, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Shri Amarnathji Shrine Board when some media persons met him last evening.

The CEO recalled that the Shrine Board had set up a Committee, chaired by H.H. Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, to consider all relevant factors and recommend the basis on which the schedule and duration of the 2012 and subsequent Yatras could be settled. He further recalled that this Committee was specially set up consequent to an Agreement concluded by the Shrine Board in June 2011 with Baba Yatri Niyas and various other organisations which had raised issues about the basis on which the Shrine Board fixed the Yatra duration. The Sri Sri Ravi Shankar Committee comprised eminent religious personalities like Swami Avadeshnanandji of Haridwar and Swami Gyaanandji of Vrindavan. The other important members of the Committee included Shri Y.V.Sharma, President, Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Jammu; Dr. C.M. Raina, Assistant Professor Rashtriya Sanskrit Sansthan, Jammu; Shri R.L. Bharti former Member J&K PSC; Sh. Prem Gupta former Inspector General of Police, Jammu and Shri R.K. Goyal, CEO of the Shrine Board. The Committee had held extensive consultations with the representatives of all stakeholders, over several months, before finalising its recommendations.

The CEO explained the various factors taken into consideration by the Sri Sri Ravi Shankar Committee and while responding to questions about the year to year variations in the duration of the annual Yatra, the CEO stated, by way of example, that in 2009 it had been initially announced that the Yatra would be for a period of 60 days along both the routes but, nearer time, the Yatra had to be curtailed to 51 days on the Baltal route and to 40 days on the Pahalgam route because of serious difficulties faced on account of adverse weather conditions and slow melting of the heavy accumulation of snow on the frozen tracks. The change in the Yatra schedule upset the journey schedules of Yatris from distant areas in the country and generated serious complaints from the pilgrims who had to forego their Railway and other bookings and face serious inconveniences. In

2010, a 55 days Yatra had been announced along both the routes but, again due to adverse weather conditions, it had to be reduced to 49 days, generating wide spread complaints from the affected pilgrims. Citing statistics, the CEO disclosed that during 1995-2003 the average duration of the Yatra was 29.5 days.

The CEO reiterated that, as per the parampara, the annual Yatra culminates on whatever date Raksha Bandhan falls. Thus, its duration in a given year can be 20-25 days longer or 20-25 days shorter than the duration in the preceding year, depending on the date in August on which Shravan Purnima (Raksha Bandhan) is to be observed. It is, therefore, not possible to maintain a fixed duration of the Yatra every year. The CEO stressed that it was the bounden duty of the Shrine Board to ensure the safe, secure and smooth conduct of the arduous pilgrimage to the Holy Cave, located at an altitude of 13500 ft, which involves an extremely difficult climb across high mountain ranges, in altogether unpredictable weather conditions. In 2011 Yatra 107 pilgrims had lost their lives on the tracks or in the Camps. This has led the Shrine Board to decide that all those seeking to undertake this arduous Yatra in 2012 should be required to furnish a medical fitness certificate while seeking registration.

The CEO also explained that, as per experience gained in the past years, it is not at all feasible to work backwards and commence the Yatra in early/middle June as 25-30 ft deep frozen snow accumulations in the Yatra area take considerable time to melt and for the tracks to the Shrine to be cleared and declared safe. On past experience, the snow-melt assumes momentum from around early June and, if the weather remains generally fair and there are no fresh snow falls, it becomes possible for the tracks to the Holy Cave, passing across the 14000 feet high Mahagunas Pass, to be cut, cleared and repaired by the end of June/early July every year.

The CEO reiterated that around mid June, when the snow melt picks up momentum, the State Police, Central Police Forces and the Army start moving to their designated deployment areas for setting up the Security Grid, which takes 10-14 days to be established. The Army commences its movement before all others as its personnel occupy the highest points along the ridges. He also pointed out that once the tracks start opening the concerned State Government Departments – Power, Water supply, Roads, Health, Animal Husbandry, Labour, Tourism etc – also require about 14 days to establish the required facilities on the ground. The CEO stated that the Shrine Board functionaries attempt to enter the Yatra area even before the arrival of Security Forces as considerable time is required for the installation of toilets and bath facilities, repair of prefabricated huts, setting up of tents and Langars, establishment of sanitation treatment arrangements etc. Once the weather clears it takes about 30 days to establish the Base Camps and about 15-20 days to establish the enroute Camps, which is possible only when the tracks have been cleared and declared open.

Reverting to the Sri Sri Ravi Shankar Committee Report, the CEO stated that its principal recommendations included:

- The annual Shri Amarnathji pilgrimage would symbolically commence on the auspicious day of Jyestha Purnima, a day on which the Shrine Board would organise a Pooja at the Holy Cave Shrine and, if this is not feasible, the Pooja would be held at any other suitable place in the Yatra area, to invoke the blessings of Lord Shiva for the smooth conduct of the pilgrimage.
- The Shrine Board would organise the process of registration from an early enough date for the Yatris to embark on the pilgrimage which shall commence via both the routes from 25<sup>th</sup> June 2012, which is an auspicious day, and conclude on Raksha Bandhan.
- The Shrine Board would undertake an exercise, during the first week of June 2012, to assess the ground situation and the status of snow-melt and explore, in consultation with all other stakeholders, the possibility of allowing the Yatris to embark on pilgrimage from 17<sup>th</sup> June 2012, an auspicious day on which “Masa Shivratri” falls this year. In such an eventuality, the Yatris could be registered at short notice through on-line or any other quick means.
- No Yatri would be permitted to embark on the pilgrimage to the Holy Shrine without securing a Registration Permit which shall be valid only for a specified date and route.

The Shrine Board, at its last meeting held on 24<sup>th</sup> February 2012, fully endorsed the recommendations of the Sri Sri Ravi Shankar Committee Report and decided that the Yatra 2012 should commence on 25<sup>th</sup> June and conclude on Raksha Bandhan, on 2<sup>nd</sup> August 2012. The Board further decided that the CEO would arrange a special Pooja on Jyestha Purnima, which falls on 4<sup>th</sup> June 2012, at the Holy Cave, if feasible, or at any other suitable location in the Yatra area, to invoke the blessings of Lord Shiva for the safe and smooth conduct of the 2012 pilgrimage.

The CEO stated that as per the directions issued by Shri N.N. Vohra, Governor J&K and Chairman of the Shri Amarnathji Shrine Board, the Sri Sri Ravi Shankar Committee Report has been placed on the web site of the Shrine Board ([www.shriamarnathjishrine.com](http://www.shriamarnathjishrine.com)) for the benefit of all those who have serious interest in being responsibly informed about the true facts and relevant factors which influence the schedule and duration of the annual Yatra to the Holy Shrine. He further informed that, as per the Chairman’s orders, if any print or electronic media agency wishes to obtain a hard copy of the Report, free of charge, they could contact Shri P.P. Singh, Additional CEO of the Shrine Board (0191-2569910) on any working day.

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