



NEW

July 2010

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Dear Sai brothers and sisters,

Char Dham (literally: 'the four abodes/seats') are the four abodes of God in the four directions of India - Puri in the east, Rameshwaram in the south, Dwarka in the west, and Badrinath in the north. They were collated by the 8th century reformer and philosopher Adi Shankaracharya, into the archetypal all-India pilgrimage circuit to the four cardinal points of the Indian subcontinent in a bid to unify people across the region. Our sojourn this month is to the holy Badrinath.

### **Badrinath**



**Badrinath** is a Hindu holy town and a nagar panchayat in Chamoli district in the state of Uttarakhand, India. It is the most important of the four sites in India's Char Dham pilgrimage. It is in the Garhwal hills, on the banks of the Alaknanda River. The town lies between the Nar and Narayana mountain ranges and in the shadow of Nilkantha peak (6,560m). Badrinath was established as a major pilgrimage site by Adi Shankara in the ninth century.

### **Significance**

Badrinath has been mentioned as a holy place in scriptures and legends for thousands of years. According to the Bhagavata Purana, "There in Badrikashram the Personality of Godhead (Vishnu), in his incarnation as the sages Nara and Narayana, had been undergoing great penance since time immemorial for the welfare of all living entities." (Bhagavata Purana 3.4.22)

Badri refers to a berry that was said to grow abundantly in the area, and nath means "Lord of". Badri is also the Sanskrit name for the Indian Jujube tree, which has an edible berry. Some scriptural references refer to Jujube trees being abundant in Badrinath.

### **History and Legend**

The Badrinath area is referred to as Badari or Badarikaashram in Hindu scriptures. It is a place sacred to Vishnu, particularly in Vishnu's dual form of Nara-Narayana. Thus, in the Mahabharata, Krishna, addressing Arjuna, says, "Thou wast Nara in a former body, and, with Narayana for thy companion, didst perform dreadful austerity at Badari for many myriads of years."

One legend has it that when the goddess Ganga was requested to descend to earth to help suffering humanity, the earth was unable to withstand the force of her descent. Therefore the mighty Ganga was split into twelve holy channels, with Alaknanda one of them.

The mountains around Badrinath are mentioned in the Mahabharata, when the Pandavas are said to have ended their life by ascending the slopes of a peak in western Garhwal called Swargarohini - literally, the 'Ascent to Heaven'. Local legend has it that the Pandavas passed through Badrinath and the town of Mana, 4 km north of Badrinath, on their way to Svarga (heaven). There is also a cave in Mana where Vyasa, according to legend, wrote the Mahabharata.

Badrinath is mentioned in religious texts as far back as the Vedic period. Some accounts claim that the temple was built on a former Buddhist temple site.

One legend explains the reason that Vishnu is shown sitting in padmasana, rather than reclining. According to the story, Vishnu was chastised by a sage who saw Vishnu's consort Lakshmi massaging his feet. Vishnu went to Badrinath to perform austerity, meditating for a long time in padmasana. To this day, the area around Badrinath attracts yogis who come for meditation and seclusion.

Another legend says that Shiva and Parvati were doing tapas in Badrinath. Vishnu came in disguise as a small boy, crying loudly and disturbing them. Parvati asked the reason for his crying and he replied that he wanted Badrinath for meditation. Shiva and Parvati found that it was Lord Narayan in disguise. They then left Badrinath and moved to Kedarnath.

According to the Bhagavata Purana, "There in Badrikashram the Personality of Godhead (Vishnu), in his incarnation as the sages Nara and Narayana, had been undergoing great penance since time immemorial for the welfare of all living entities." The Skanda Purana states that "There are several sacred shrines in heaven, on earth, and in hell; but there is no shrine like Badrinath." The area around Badrinath was also celebrated in Padma Purana as abounding in spiritual treasures.

### **Badrinath Temple**

**Badrinath temple**, sometimes called **Badrinarayan temple**, is situated along the Alaknanda river, in the hill town of Badrinath in Uttarakhand state in India. It is widely considered to be one of the holiest Hindu temples, and is dedicated to god Vishnu. The temple and town are one of the four Char Dham and Chota

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Char Dham pilgrimage sites: It is also one of the 108 Divya Desams, holy shrines for Vaishnavites. The temple is open only six months every year (between the end of April and the beginning of November), due to extreme weather conditions in the Himalayan region.

Several murtis are worshipped in the temple. The most important is a one meter tall statue of Vishnu as Lord Badrinarayan, made of black Saligram stone. The statue is considered by many Hindus to be one of eight swayam vyakta keshtas, or self-manifested statues of Vishnu. The murti depicts Vishnu sitting in meditative posture, rather than His far more typical reclining pose. In November each year, when the town of Badrinath is closed, the image is moved to nearby Jyotirmath.

The temple is approximately 50 ft (15 metres) tall with a small cupola on top, covered with a gold gilt roof. The facade is built of stone, with arched windows. A broad stairway leads up to a tall arched gateway, which is the main entrance. The architecture resembles a Buddhist vihara (temple), with the brightly painted facade also more typical of Buddhism temples. Just inside is the mandapa, a large pillared hall that leads to the garbha grha, or main shrine area. The walls and pillars of the mandapa are covered with intricate carvings.

The main shrine area houses the black stone image of Lord Badrinarayan, sitting under a gold canopy, under a Badri Tree. There are fifteen more murtis around the temple that are also worshipped. These include murtis of Nara & Narayana, Narasimha (the fourth incarnation of Vishnu), Lakshmi, Narada, Ganesha, Uddhava, Kubera, Garuda (the vehicle of Lord Narayan), and Navadurga. Hard sugar candy, Tulsi, and dry fruits are the typical prasada offered at Badrinath temple. The Tapt Kund hot sulphur springs just below the temple are considered to be medicinal-many pilgrims consider it a requirement to bathe in the springs before visiting the temple. The springs have a year-round temperature of 45°C.



**Tapt Kund**

The Badrinath legend states that Vishnu (Mahavishnu), did penance in an open space at the location of the Badrikashram or Badrinath. His consort Lakshmi (Maha-lakshmi) created shelter for him in the form of Badri tree (berry tree) to protect him from adverse climatic conditions. The sage Narada did penance here, and is believed to continue to do so to this day by reciting the divine chants called Ashta Akshara mantras (eight lettered hymns). Narada was also informed by Vishnu that his divine form subsumed both Nara and Narayana. The layout of the temple has three enclosures namely, the Garbhagriha (Sanctum Sanctorum), the Darshan Mandap (worship hall) and Sabha Mandap (Conference hall). The sanctum holds the central image of Badri-narayana (Vishnu), which is made in black stone and 1 metre (3.3 ft) in height. The four-armed Vishnu holds the Shankh (Conch) and Sudarshana Chakra (discus) in two arms in a raised posture and the other two arms rest on the lap in Yogamudra (meditative pose). The images of religious leaders Adi Shankara, Swami Vedanta Desikan and Ramanujacharya are also worshipped here.

In the sanctum, to the far right side are Nara and Narayana. Narada is kneeling in front on the right side and is difficult to see. On the left side is Kubera, the god of wealth. Garuda, Vishnu's vehicle is kneeling in front, to the left of Badri-narayana. Wings at the entrance are adorned with images of Hanuman, the monkey-god and a silver Ganesha. In the enclosure (prakara) surrounding the temple, a small shrine is dedicated to Lakshmi, Vishnu's consort.

### **Sapta Badri**

**Sapta Badri** constitutes a group of seven sacred Hindu temples, dedicated to god Vishnu, located in Garhwal Himalayas in the Indian state of Uttarakhand. The Badrinath temple, called the Badri-vishal is the primary temple among the seven shrines, followed by six others, namely, Adi Badri, Vridha Badri, Dhyan Badri, Ardha Badri, Bhavishya Badri and Yogadhayan Badri. The **Panch Badri** temple circuit consisted of only five temples, omitting Ardha Badri and Dhyan Badri or sometimes Vridha Badri. Rarely, Narasingh Badri is included in the Sapta Badri or Panch Badri list.

The abode of Vishnu in the Alaknanda river valley, starting from Satapanth about 24 kilometres above Badrinath extending up to Nandprayag in the south, is particularly known as the Badri-Kshetra in which all the Badri temples are located. Since the early times, approach to the main temple of Badrinath was only along a bridle path passing through badri van or (forest of berries). Thus, the word "Badri", meaning "berries", is suffixed to the names of all the Sapta Badri (seven) temples.

The main shrine of Badrinath is well connected by road and air but is closed during the winter season due to snow conditions, from October-November to April-May depending on the astrological dates fixed by the Temple Committee; the Raj Purohit (Royal priest) decides the auspicious day for opening the temple patak (doors) on Vasant Panchami day in end of April/early May while the closing day is Vijayadashami day in October/November. The other six temples are located in villages, largely in remote locations. A few of them can be approached only by trekking along bridle paths.

### Adi Badri



The Adi Badri the first temple complex among the Sapta Badri temples is an ancient shrine dedicated to Vishnu and is one among a chain of 16 small shrines located in the hill ranges 17 kilometres, beyond Karnaprayag (confluence of Pindar River and Alaknanda River) in Chamoli district. Seven temples of this chain were built during the late Gupta period (5th century to 8th century). According to tradition, Adi Shankara is attributed as builder of all the temples. In ancient times, when approach to the main shrine of Badrinath was closed due to weather conditions, pilgrims worshipped Vishnu at this temple.

The chief temple is dedicated to god Vishnu, which is built over a raised platform, with a small enclosure in a pyramidal form. The sanctum holds black stone 1 metre (3.3 ft) image of Vishnu. The image depicts Vishnu holding a mace, lotus and chakra (discus).

### Vridha Badri

Vridha Badri - also spelled as Vriddha Badri or Bridha Badri - an austere shrine, is located in the Animath village 7 km, from Joshimath on the Rishikesh-Joshimath-Badrinath road. The Vridha Badri legend says that Vishnu appeared in the form of a Vridha or old man before sage Narada who performed penance here. Thus, the idol installed at this temple is in the form of an old man.



According to legend, the image of Badrinath was carved by the divine craftsman Vishwakarma and worshipped here. At the advent of Kali yuga, Vishnu chose to remove himself from this place, later Adi Shankara found the partly damaged image in Narad-kund pond and established it at the central Badrinath shrine. According to legend, Badrinath was worshipped here by Adi Shankara, before his enshrinement at the Badrinath temple. The temple is open throughout the year.

### Bhavishya Badri



Bhavishya Badri, is located in a village called Subhain at a distance of 17 kilometres from Joshimath, beyond Tapovan and approach is through dense forest, only by trekking. It is situated on an ancient pilgrim route to Mount Kailash and Manasarovar, along the Dhaul Ganga River. It is situated on the way from Tapovan to Lata in the Niti valley.

According to the legend of Bhavishya Badri (literally "Badri of the future"), when evil transcends the world, the mountains of Nara and Narayana would block up the route to Badrinath and the sacred shrine would become inaccessible. The present world will be destroyed and a new one established. Then, Badrinath will appear at the Bhavishya Badri temple and be

worshipped here, instead of the Badrinath shrine.

### Yogadhyan Badri

Yogadhyan Badri, also called Yoga Badri, is located at Pandukeshwar at the elevation of 1,829 metres, close to Govind Ghat and is as ancient as the main Badrinath temple. Pandukeshwar is located on route from Govind Ghat to Hanuman Chatti, 9 kilometres away from Hanuman Chatti. Legend has it that King Pandu, father of the five Pandavas - heroes of the Hindu epic Mahabharata, meditated here to god Vishnu to cleanse him of the sin of killing of two mating deer, who were ascetics in their previous lives. The Pandavas were also born here and Pandu died and attained salvation here. Pandu is believed to have installed the bronze image of Vishnu in the Yogadhyan Badri shrine. The image is in a meditative posture and thus the image is called Yoga-dhyan (mediative) Badri. The idol is life size and has been carved from Shaligram stone.



According to legend, the Pandavas, after defeating and killing their cousins Kauravas in the Mahabharata war, came here to repent. They handed their kingdom of Hastinapur to their grandson Parikshit and went to perform penance in the Himalayas.

Copper plate inscriptions found here indicate rule by early Katyuri Rajas and the region was known as Panchal Desh, now officially designated as Uttarakhand. One inscription extols the grant of land given by King Nimbarana. Another historic location is the Suryakund, on top of Milam glacier, which is a hot water spring, where Kunti - mother of Pandavas gave birth to her son Karna, fathered by the sun-god Surya. Kunti was married to Pandu at Pandukeshwar.

Yogdhyan Badri is also considered the winter abode for the Utsava-murti (festival-image) of Badrinath, when the temple of Badrinath is closed. Hence, it is religiously ordained that a pilgrimage will not be complete

without offering prayers at this place.

### **Dhyan Badri**



Dhyan Badri is located in the Urgam valley, close to Kalpeshwar on the banks of river Alaknanda. It can be reached from Helang Chatti by a 12 kilometres trek enroute to Joshimath from Badrinath. The legend of Dhyan Badri (meditating Badri) is linked to the Urvarishi, son of King Purnajaya of the Pandavas lineage who meditated in the Urgam region and established the temple for Vishnu. The image of Vishnu is four-armed, made of black stone and in a meditative posture. There is also a temple to god Shiva built by Adi Shankara.

### **Ardha Badri**

Ardha Badri, located on the Joshimath-Tapovan road is in a remote village and can be approached only by trekking along a steep bridle path. As the size of the idol is small, the temple is called Ardha Badri (literal meaning half Badri).

### **Narasingh Badri**

The existing temple of Narasimha (Narasingh) at Joshimath, also called as Narasingh Badri or Narasimha Badri, is closely linked to the Bhavishya Badri legend, even though usually it is regarded as not one of the famous Panch Badri or Sapta Badri. The chief image of Narasimha is made out of the Shaligram stone, in the eighth century during the reign of king Lalitaditya Yukta Pida of Kashmir. Some believe the image is self-manifested (swayambhu). The image is 10 inches high and depicts the god sitting in the lotus position.

It is believed that one arm of the image is getting emaciated with time and finally fall off. When the arm disappears, the main shrine of Badrinath will be closed to the world and Lord Badrinath will shift to Bhavishya Badri shrine. With this cataclysmic event, Kali yuga will end ushering in the Satya yuga. Then the Badrinath shrine would get re-established. When the chief Badrinath shrine is closed in winter, the priests of Badrinath shift to this temple and continue their worship to Badrinath here. Along with the central Narasimha image, the temple also has an image of Badrinath.

**We shall resume our sojourn next month. Till then Sairam**



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