

Amarnath shrine to have an artificial Shivlingam too

When this year's Amarnath pilgrimage begins June 18, the pilgrims will have to pass by an artificial Shivlingam before paying obeisance at the natural one.

'The pilgrims will be allowed to spend time at the artificial Shivlingam, where they would be permitted to light incense sticks and drape it with flowers,' said an official of the Shri Amarnath Shrine Board.

'This proposal has been cleared to ensure that the natural ice Shivlingam is protected from the hands of the pilgrims, who invariably seek to touch the lingam and cause it to melt at a faster pace,' the official said.

Earlier attempts by the shrine board to save the Shivlingam from melting by keeping dry ice had failed to yield results. The Shivlingam had melted quite early in 2006 and 2007. Some attributed it to global warming and others to the 'wrongdoing' by pilgrims who visited the shrine ahead of the schedule.

All arrangements are being put in place to make this year's pilgrimage smooth and comfortable, the official said.

Traders and hoteliers in Pahalgam have decided to offer major discounts to the pilgrims.

The Himalayan cave shrine, located at nearly 4,000 metres above sea level, has been attracting 400,000 pilgrims. This year, because of the intense heat in the plains, the number of pilgrims is expected to go up.

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