

## Hungry children feast at 'langars' for Amarnath pilgrims

Free kitchens or 'langars' set up along the highway for pilgrims on their way to the Hindu cave shrine of Amarnath are awaited with yearning by children in nearby villages. For, that's when the little boys and girls - who go hungry for most part of the year - get a chance to feast on snacks, sweetmeats, ice creams and what not and even carry some food back home.

A langar here, about 130 km from Jammu, on the 300-km long Jammu-Srinagar National Highway is one among over hundred such kitchens set up by various religious and social organisations for pilgrims to Amarnath in south Kashmir.

Mohammad Bashir, 9, along with his two village mates, was sitting on a cot at the langar with food piled up on his plate.

The boys had trekked seven kilometres from their village Sanasar in an overlooking mountain to reach the free kitchen for a 'sumptuous meal' - a rarity for them.

Bashir lost his father when he was six and had also to discontinue his studies. 'My mother can barely manage one meal for three children. How could I have continued my studies?' he asked.

At times they have just have a chapatti with salt, he said. 'That is almost like fasting,' Bashir said, his gaze fixed on the food.

Ashok Wadhwa, in charge of the free kitchen set up by a Punjab-based outfit, said: 'An average of 6,000 pilgrims take food at this langar, which is open about 22 hours a day.'

Wadhwa said about 60 people, including 20 cooks, from Punjab provide tea, coffee, sweetmeats, snacks and even ice creams. The food is for the thousands of Hindu pilgrims who walk the route during the two-month-long Amarnath yatra that began last month.

But Wadhwa said 'about 200 children from villages around also take food here and carry it home as well'.

Said Bashir's friend Rashid: 'To tell you the truth, we keep waiting for these two months in the year when we can really feast here.'

Rashid being a Muslim - and very young at that - does not know what the Amarnath pilgrimage is about. 'All I know is that it is because of Hindu Lord Shiva that we enjoy great meals here and feel on top of the world with our stomachs full with tasty food,' he says.

Sher Singh and his friend Mushtaq study in Class 11 in a government school in nearby Chanderkot village. The school gets over at 4 p.m. and after taking a one-kilometre detour on the way back home, they stop at the kitchen to eat.

Mushtaq, filling his plate, said: 'My father works as a daily wager with the Border Roads Organisation and we can never think of this sumptuous food at home. This langar means two months of god bestowed partying for us.'

The pilgrimage was earlier for one month but for the past two years it has been extended to two months.

'We pray that this pilgrimage should go on for even longer periods of time,' said Sher Singh.

Seeing the village children enjoying the free food, Wadhwa said: 'It is so pleasant and satisfying to see these children enjoy food like this. We encourage them to take food back home.'

And, according to Wadhwa, his organisation spends about Rs.3-3.5 million on the two-month-long langar.

*Binoo Joshi* ( © IANS / India eNews)