



5. Dhavrikund

The pool at the base of the waterfalls was alive and swirling and the accompanying roar reverberated through the entire area. The river seemed to be announcing her triumphant arrival here with fanfare.

The Narmada expressed her exuberant nature in such lively, tumbling waterfalls. Her mood at the falls was as playful as that of a carefree teenager.

This gorgeous bank of the Narmada's waterfalls was the very first sight that greeted us upon our arrival at Dhavrikund, after hours of walking in the scorching heat. We stood immobilised on top of the cliff, gapping at the scene. Then I thought, 'We should leave our belongings at a *dharamsala*, bathe, wash our clothes and freshen up. Then we can return to gaze at these waterfalls to our hearts' content. Till then, we can listen to their roars and rumbles.'

The *dharamsala* was nearby, facing the falls. We went there to bathe, leaving our belongings in the care of a *sadhu*, whom we assumed was the

caretaker. We had been transfixed by the wild dance of the waterfalls, and it had been hard to tear ourselves away. Our first look was just an overview; we would do a more thorough inspection of the falls that evening. We decided to stay on an extra day. It was just not possible to do full justice to this extraordinary work of art by the Narmada in a single day.

The evening drew near, and the sun had lost much of its fury. It was the perfect time to view the waterfalls. We settled ourselves at a spot opposite yet quite close to the falls. At first glance, it appeared that the Narmada had a two-storeyed house at this spot. She slid down the banisters from the upper storey to the lower. On closer observation, we realised that the main waterfalls of the Narmada actually charged down no less than seven storeys.

There were all kinds of waterfalls there: large and small; broad and narrow; those that fell over sheer vertical drops or those that slanted downwards at an angle like a playground slide. Some of the falls were aggressive, others infiltrated the rocks sneakily. There were even one or two waterfalls that sashayed down like models on a catwalk. The centre of the main fall cascaded down in a pale green column. Those falls were indeed green-throated.

Dhavrikund is the ultimate supermarket of waterfalls. You can choose the waterfall you like best, watch its charging current, listen to its roar, get drenched in its spray and make it your own.

Down in the pool, an even more intense war was being waged. The pool looked like an enormous boiling cauldron. It was impossible to make out whether its activity was a process of creation or destruction. The seething waters leapt, reared, pounced, dashed, struck, pushed, shoved, jostled and then rushed onwards, rippling and foaming, shattering and scattering like thousands of broken pearl necklaces.

The Narmada took great pleasure in wrestling with the rocks. The fight between river and rock always ended in a victory for the river.

*Shivlings*¹ that form in this pool are worshipped all over India. People would come from far and wide to collect these stone symbols of the Hindu god Shiva. Now however the sheer volume of charging water made it impossible to retrieve the sacred symbols.

I turned my attention to the birds wheeling above the falls. They seemed to be pleading with me, "Take a little notice of our presence too."

I could not resist having a bath, seating myself under a cute little waterfall. I thereby became a proud graduate of this Dhavrikund University of the Narmada.

The following night would be *Sharad Purnima*². We had arrived good time to witness the full moon, but as night approached the sky was shrouded in clouds, blocking the sight of the moon. It also rained in the middle of the night. I had never been so furious with the clouds before. If I could, I would have burnt an effigy of the clouds, so great was my disappointment at not sighting the full moon.

Fortunately by morning, the clouds had vanished and the sky was clear.

There was a small room at the *dharamsala* occupied by a *Baba*³. He kept it padlocked whenever he went out. We had mistaken him to be the caretaker of the place. Our luggage lay strewn about, out in the open.

"*Baba* ," I asked him, "may we keep our things in your room?"

"I'm going to take the cows out to graze. I'll come back in the evening," he replied.

"Oh, do you take care of the cows too?"

"Perhaps you have mistaken me for the caretaker," he said. "I am neither the caretaker here nor a cowherd. I'm a pilgrim. I am staying here for

¹Shivling : The male symbol representing the Hindu god Shiva, who is the destroyer of evil

²Sharad Purnima : A harvest festival celebrated on the night of the full moon in the Hindu month of Ashwin, which falls between September and October. It marks the end of the rainy season

³Baba : An honorific, sometimes added to the name of a person to show respect

*Chaturmas*⁴, for the period of the monsoon retreat. I will continue my pilgrimage after *Dev Uthani Ekadashi*⁵, the official conclusion of the monsoon retreat."

"Why do you take the cows out to graze then?" I asked.

"She's my cow," he said, referring to the older animal. "She is undertaking the *parikrama* as well. So the cow is a pilgrim too. I travel with her. She is the mistress, I am her servant. I have made a commitment on her behalf."

"Where did you start your *parikrama*?"

"From Amarkantak⁶. I brought her calf with me from there too. She has grown up to be an adult cow now. At Reva-Sagar, where the Narmada merges with the sea, my cow gave birth to this calf. Pilgrims named the calf after that place. The cow's name is Narmada, and her calf's is Reva."

His cow and calf were both tied to a tree outside.

"Did you go through Shulpan Jhari?" I asked him. "The Bhils must have robbed you."

"Yes, they robbed both me and the cow. They took away all her ornaments. They even took her bell."

"What if they had taken the cow?"

"I'd give them my life but not my cow," he replied.

He might very well have done just that.

The famous British author R L Stevenson had undertaken a short journey through France with a mule. He had written an account of it in his book, *Travels with My Donkey*. Had this pilgrim written a book titled

⁴*Chaturmas* : The four holy months from July to September, observed by pious Hindus. It is believed to have been a period of deep meditation by Lord Vishnu. July to September is also the monsoon season in India

⁵*Dev Uthani Ekadashi* : Marking the end of the four-month period of meditation by Lord Vishnu, which coincides with the end of the monsoon, the day also heralds the beginning of the auspicious marriage season for Hindus

⁶*Amarkantak* : The place which is the source of the Narmada. It is located in the Maikal Hills, the meeting point of the two mountain ranges, the Vindhyas and the Satpuras at the eastern edge of Madhya Pradesh. Amarkantak is a pilgrim town in a natural heritage area

The Narmada Parikrama with a Cow, how fascinating it would be! Some chapters of the book might include 'My Cow's Thoughts' and 'When the Bhils Robbed the Cow', and so on.

Just then the cow moored. "I must go now," said the *Baba*. "My cow is calling me. It's time to take her out to graze."

Once again, I was drawn back to the waterfalls. Observing them from a distance, I understood how they were formed. The Narmada's main stream flows from the far bank, over rocks, to the near bank from where it cascades down as myriad waterfalls. All the falls drop into the pool below. From this pool, the Narmada veers dramatically back towards the far bank. Then swiftly, she contracts and flows into a deep and rocky gorge. The rocks rear up on either side like the walls of a formidable fortress and the Narmada, now as narrow as a canal, flows meekly in between.

The Narmada is a member of a large family of rivers that sweep through the Indian sub-continent. She ranks fifth in order of length, but her distinctive characteristics lie not in her size or the quantum of water she carries but in her complex and rocky character and her intoxication with waterfalls. She exults in her waterfalls, in the the gorges and narrow valleys, the forests, the mountain ramparts and in all the creatures living on her banks.

Because of the mountainous and rocky terrain, we had crossed over from the bank of Narmada which now lay on the opposite side. 'Well,' I consoled myself, 'I can walk along this side and still be able to see the parts of the opposite bank that I missed, and so feel less regret.'

Walking further, I met a young *sanyasi* near a hut. "What is your name?" I asked.

"The Very Reverend One Thousand and Eight Venerable Huzurudit Kashi Varanasi Laharatarata Kashish Nirmal Parakh Sat Saheb Kabir," he intoned.

"Such a long name?" I queried.

"Huzurudit is the name of my *guru*," he explained. "My name is

Nirmal Parakh. I sleep out in the open beside the fire. I live under the sky."

"I'm going for a walk downstream, along the riverside," I informed him.

"I'll come along with you, if that's okay," he said.

He took his wooden cane and we walked along the gorge below the falls. Pointing out a rugged outcrop, the *sanyasi* said: "This is called Bhueetonga."

"What does that mean?"

"Bhueetonga means 'Bhima's⁷ Knee'."

It was not possible to go much further due to the steep cliffs and dense forest, so we headed back. I turned to look once more at the compelling waterfalls. There was a rainbow in the froth rising from the falls; it was not a complete arch but more like the curved blade of a giant sabre.

Just then a cheeky breeze came along, drenching me with its cargo of spray. I shrieked with delight at the sudden wet onslaught.

Looking around, I could see fishermen standing with their fishing lines right beside the crown of the waterfalls. The birds wheeling above were fishing too, suddenly dipping into the water and swooping up with their prize catch. Further down, the local villagers were crossing a narrow section of the Narmada by boat. They were going to attend a festival. I was entranced, witnessing all this activity until late in the evening.

That night was *Sharad Purnima*, the celebration of the moon's greatest glory. Fortunately, the sky was clear. The waterfalls had looked lovely sparkling in the sunshine. They would be incredibly beautiful in the flood of milky white moonlight.

I did not have the courage to go alone down to the waterfalls in the middle of the night. It was eerily still. The roar of the falls sounded even louder in that stillness. The cascades, so utterly charming by day, pounced like panthers by night. For some reason this place, so irresistibly beauti

⁷*Bhima* : The second of the five Pandava brothers, the warrior princes who feature in the Indian epic, the *Mahabharata*



ful in the daytime, became a fearsome monster at night. It was not safe to get close to the falls either, as the path had become very slippery. So I remained at the top of the cliff, watching the spectacle from a safe distance.

The all-pervading moonlight revealed the whole scene to me from my vantage point – the unceasing swirl of the river, the expanse of the opposite bank, the cascades crashing into the milk-white pool, and the pool itself which looked stunning. It glittered in the moonlight like an orb of concentrated light, as if it were itself a large moon.

At Dhavrikund that night, the full moon was a bride alighting from her palanquin, to depart only at dawn.

A king, they say, has to sleep in a different place every night. Though we were no kings we followed the same custom during a *parikrama*. Yet, in a place where we were ensnared by its beauty, we stretched our stay to two nights. Though we had stayed at Dhavrikund for two nights, I still did not feel like moving on. Would I ever be able to come back to these elegant waterfalls set in the middle of a forest? Perhaps not!

Then I thought, I should not feel sad at the sense of loss. Whenever the longing to see these falls arose, I could go to the Dhuandhar Falls at



Bheraghat. The Narmada is a river with abundant waterfalls, but the best two are at Dhuandhar near Jabalpur, and these falls at Dhavrikund near Omkareswar. By looking at one, it would be easy to imagine the other. Looking at both, anyone could tell that they were two sons of the same mother.

There is quite a difference between the two though. Dhuandhar is a single massive waterfall. At Dhavrikund, the falls are decentralised. The Narmada flows away from Dhuandhar through a narrow gorge of marble rocks. Similarly, at Dhavrikund, she also flows through a narrow gorge but the rock strata there are black or slate-coloured. The ramparts of the Narmada at Dhavrikund are similar to those at Bheraghat. It is said that history repeats itself: here, it is geography that is self-replicating.

So whenever the waterfalls of Dhavrikund came to mind and I had a longing to see them, I decided that I would go to Dhuandhar. That would lessen the pain of separation from these exquisite falls.

Still, as I left Dhavrikund I announced to its waterfalls: "I will come back and see you – one more time . . . one more time . . ."