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## Hari-Ki-Pauri

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Haridwar, a district of Uttarakhand State, is one of the seven holy pilgrimage centres in India. In the holy city of Haridwar, there is a famous ghat of the Ganges named Hari-Ki-Pauri, a brief description of which is presented here through a series of dialogues.

It was a glaringly sunny afternoon. One could guess by the windows reflecting the bright sunlight that it was extremely hot outside. Generally, the rains come in June and the sky gets clouded over, but the weather this year had so far been severely hot with a blue sky and a few fleecy white clouds. The air-conditioned hotel room was, however, pleasantly cold and comfortable. On the sofa at the far end of the room, Sharad, a well dressed man of fifty was sitting with his legs crossed. He was a tall well-built man, with a solemn face. His daughter Shivani stood looking at herself in the dressing-table mirror and his wife Punima, a refined woman in greenish-yellow sari, shimmering against her fresh golden complexion, was taking something from the shelf.

“Mom,” said Shivani turning to her mother, “you said that unlike in Varanasi, the weather in Haridwar is pleasantly cool. But outside, it is too hot in here even for a gentle stroll.”

“The weather is changeable in its own way,” answered her mother. “The coldest place of the country may turn hot sometimes. The cool and windy weather may be followed by a sudden change to hot and sultry conditions which can prevail for weeks.”

“We are going to Hari-Ki-Pauri, Shivani,” said Sharad, getting up to leave. “I think you’re sure to change your opinion of it once you get there.”

Her eyes sparkled with delight. “Hari-Ki-Pauri!” she echoed. “Oh, Pa, I’m excited about visiting it. They say it’s a wonderful place.”

“Well, hurry up – it’s within walking distance from here. But with the sun still being strong, we’ll get a rickshaw.”

The family walked down the stairs and at the hotel gates, they took an e-rickshaw to Hari-Ki-Pauri. When they reached there, Shivani was thrilled to get the view of the platform surrounded by the fast flowing currents of the holy Ganges from the bridge over the stream, particularly because she had never enjoyed such a beauty spot before. They stopped there for a while, and then descended to the platform where they felt as though they were in the cool and affectionate lap of the great mother Ganga. The oppressive afternoon heat, which had followed them all the way through the town, could gain no entry to the ghat like it were a no-go area for it.

“Is this the same Ganga that flows through our Benaras?” Shivani asked her father. “I wonder it is a bit different there. Look, she is not as wide as she is there, but then again, she flows quite fast here.”

“You see hills here on either side of the city,” said Sharad pointing towards them, “but you must have seen none from the window of the train by which you came here in the morning. It shows that Haridwar is at the line where the Himalayas and the vast northern plains join, or it is at the southern extremity of the mountain range, and this is why the river, as it arrives here journeying down a high and long slope, flows faster than it does on a gentle slope of a plane like Varanasi; it is narrower here because the main flow of water has been diverted to many new courses which finally meet together on the plains ahead and also because the slope on which it flows here being higher, it does not find time and a flat surface to spread over as it does on the plains.”

“I’d refer to Haridwar as the gate of Hari’s home. Papa, if I’m correct, why was this Holi city named for it?”

“The Dev Bhoomi namely Chardham (Badrinath, Kedarnath, Gangotri and Yamunotri) is situated at the massive Shivalik mountain ranges to the north of this city. It is believed to be the home of Hari and Har. Now that Haridwar or Hardwar is at the foothills of these mountain ranges and provides an entrance to the Devbhumi, it has been named as the gateway to the grand palace of Hari and Har.”

“Oh I see,” Shivani said, after an interval of silence. “Now I can figure out what Hari-Ki-Pauri suggests. The word ‘pauri’ literally means ‘a threshold’. So if Haridwar refers to the gateway of Hari’s home, then Hari-Ki-Pauri, as its name implies, is the doorway of it.”

“Absolutely! It is also called Brahma Kund and has a great significance for us because it is one of the four places where the drops of elixir (which the sea produced when it was churned up by the gods and demons) accidentally spilled out of the pitcher which was being carried away by the bird Garuda, the celestial carrier of lord Vishnu.”

Shivani paused before asking further questions. She looked around at the imposing surroundings and glanced up at a temple on the top of the hill adjacent to the town. “Papa, look at that,” she said pointing in that direction. “Could you please tell me about that temple?”

“That mountain is called Bilwa Parvat. It is believed that Mahadev went by way of it with the half burnt body of Sati and while he was crossing it, the heart of Sati fell at where the temple is built. So this ancient temple became famous as Mansa Devi Temple and is regarded as one of the sixty four siddhpeths. Mansa Devi, as the name suggests, grants her devotees all that they wish and this is why Haridwar always flourishes under her kind and generous reign.” Sharad paused for a moment. “Now you turn to look back,” he continued, turning to face the opposite direction. “Look, there is a line of hills on the other side and at the far end of them on the right there is a high mountain on whose top you will see another temple of the same kind. You know, that is Neel Parvat where, according to the legend, Chand-Mund, the army chief of demon king Shumbh-Nishumbh was killed by Maa Durga, so the temple that was later built there was named after the fallen demon and is now known as Chandi Devi Temple. Chandi Devi is a deity who is very fierce to the reprobates and kind to the true devotees to her.”

While they were busy talking about all that, a vendor passed by shouting, ‘A mat for only ten rupees’. It arrested Sharad’s attention. He stopped him with a wave of the hand, bought a mat

and spread it on the platform floor. The family sat on it, continuing to have conversation. But a little while later a professional photographer arrived there and asked to take photos of them. Then the photographer had hardly finished his job than a man in sky blue with a receipt book in his hand came up to them, pleading for donation to the Hari-Ki-Pauri Management Committee. Sharad pulled a hundred rupee note out of his wallet and gave it to him.

When they had all gone away, Purnima looked at her husband and said, “I’ve heard that Ganga Arti here is very famous. Unfortunately, I’ve never had a chance to see it. What time does it start?”

“Yes it is very famous and the holiest of the Hindu rituals. It is performed at 7.30 every evening.... well, he added glancing at his watch. “There are still two hours to go. Meantime, we’ll enjoy a long bath in the cool water of Ma Gange. I’m sure you’ll feel it is winter and not summer. Oh by the way, you’re sitting in the sun – do you feel oppressed by the sunlight?”

“Oh, no, not at all – it’s such a pleasant place to be,” was their answer.

“Pa,” asked Shivani, leaning forward and looking at her father with an ecstatic expression in her eyes, “how do they offer arti to Ma Ganga?”

“Do you see that temple adjacent to the west bank just across the bridge?” he said, pointing.

She turned her head to look at that. “Yes, I do,” she replied. “There are a lot of temples around there.”

“You’ll see scores of worshippers and priests gathering there with bells and arti lamps in their hands after dark. They will stand on the ghat along the river bank and swing those lamps from side to side over the stream to the jingle of the bells and the rhythmical beat of the drums. Then devotees will float thousands of deepaks (a piece of camphor burning in a pot made of a leaf) on the stream and with that it will look like it is not the water but the tiny lamplights are flowing down. Finally, all the visitors thronged on this platform and on the ghat at the other side will stand still, heads bowed, hands clasped in front of the great mother.”

“Oh, this is how Ganga Arti is done at Varanasi, too. Anyway, can you tell me why Ganga is the river of honour and why we call her mother?”

“Ganges is the holy river of our country because she is regarded as a goddess. According to ancient legend, king Bhagirath, standing on one leg, prayed for over a thousand years that the god Brahma would release Ganga from his stoup, that the god Mahesh would cushion her fall on the earth thereafter; and that he would finally redeem the souls of his sixty thousand ancestors (who had burnt in the fire of Kapil Muni’s anger) by making her flow through the place where the remains of their burnt-out bodies were lying. We bath in it for deliverance from our sins. However, Ganga in its broader sense represents water which is essential to life on the earth, and this is why we call her mother. Besides, a unique feature of this river is that its water remains pure even though it has been stored for a long time.”

“It means every legendry thing has got to represent something, is it?”

“Of course they do. Since most people don’t understand the laws of nature, our ancient thinkers adopted symbols as an easy way for them to be au fait with those laws. They also linked different things to religious beliefs in order to persuade people to follow rules established by them. For example, the water of Ganga is good for health so they called its water nectar and related this river to the divinity and thus succeeded in compelling them to make use of it.”