



GAGBAL LAKE

GANGA ASHTAMI;

Ganga Ashtami is a unique ritual dedicated to the dead ancestors, parents and relatives performed in Kashmir. On Ganga Ashtami, ashes of those who had died during the past year are immersed in the Gangbal lake, which also known as Harmukh or Harmukata Lake. The ritual is also known as Shradha Ashtami.

Gangbal is a lake situated in the high mountains of the Harmukh range in north-east of Kashmir. The lake is at a height of 12000 feet. The Hindus believe that the lake is the abode of Lord Shiva. They believe that the Holy Ganga flows down, Shiva's hair locks--- the Jattas, and forms a divine lake of Gangabal. The Gangbal Lake has been a place of pilgrimage for the Hindus of Kashmir from very ancient times. The Gangbal Lake is also known among the Hindus of Kashmir, Harmukat Ganga. The Harmukat Ganga is considered by the Hindus of Kashmir as sacred as the Haridwar. The Hindu pilgrims perform the *Shradha* of their dead at Gangbal and immerse ashes of their dead in the Gangbal Lake. They believe that the immersion of the ashes of their dead in the Gangbal Lake and performance of *Shradha* for them at Gangbal that led to the salvation of the souls of their ancestors.

The Gangbal Lake is approached from Srinagar 45 kilometers by road via Ganderbal up to Naranag and then a trek of 15 kilometers upslope leads to the lake, which can be covered by a horse ride or by foot. Another trek (25 kilometers long) leads to the lake site from Sonamarg via the Vishansar Lake crossing three mountain passes Nichnai pass, Gadsar pass and Zajibal pass of an average elevation of 4100 meters. It can also be accessed through a trek from Bandipore via Arin.

Gangbal is reached from the Ganderbal-Sonamarg road. Wusan is the last village on the Sonamarg road, from where the ascent to Gangbal shrine begins over a hilly track which the pilgrims, cover on foot. The pilgrims to Gangbal take a different route for their return. The pilgrims followed the course of Krenk Nadi stream and reached the ancient shrine of Naran Nag. Ancient temples in stone dedicated to Jyesthesha and Bhutesha forms of Shiva, stand on banks of Krenk Nadi, at Naran Nag. Hindus of Kashmir, who could not take the ashes of their dead to Gangbal, immersed them in Krenk Nadi as well. The *Shradha* at Gangabal was held on the day of Ganga Ashtami, Ashtami of Bahadun Shulapaksh in Bhadra month every year.