

Meet the Majid Squad, a Group that Voluntarily Cleans Filth on Amarnath Yatra Routes

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Notwithstanding the National Green Tribunal directions, Governor N N Vohra recently decided that a 60-day-long, instead of the earlier 45-day-long, Amarnath Yatra would commence on June 28, 2018. The announcement has once again put the 25 Kashmiri boy volunteers on their toes, to possibly launch another cleanliness drive on the Yatra routes.

In September 2017, when Majid Yousuf Attar, 22, of Kashmir's picturesque town Pahalgam read an empathetic report—Amarnath Yatra: A Militarized Pilgrimage—on environmental impact, he immediately visited the Amarnath Yatra route. On his arrival, he found mounds of non-biodegradable waste, lying scattered everywhere, even though the Yatra had ended one month earlier.

The sight stunned him. The student of computer application then decided to save the mystic meadows of his hometown from the unabated assault—that over the years have amassed to the extent of setting an alarming melting rate in glaciers.

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Being a regular trekker, Majid had earlier witnessed plastic waste lying dispersed for months on the way to the Amarnath Cave, posing a serious threat to the environment. Down the routes, the grapevine among the human settlement remains: Surge in sickness and water-borne diseases during the post-yatra period has to do with pollution at Pahalgam. Majid is not ignorant about such issues.

He shared his idea of starting a cleanliness drives with his two friends Arif Wani and Sameer Wani, as soon as he returned from his inspection visit. Both natives of Pahalgam, readily agreed to be a part of the environmental campaign.

Majid's call came as a relief for a nature lover Arif, who over the years saw his hometown become polluted "due to unregulated pilgrimage footfall" being annually sent to the ecologically fragile zone.

"Being a regular trekker through the Amarnath Yatra route," Arif says, "it left me embarrassed whenever any foreign tourists would enquire about the filthy routes passing through the picturesque mountains."

To stop such shame, he says, somebody had to come forward to set the things in order.

"Besides," says Sameer, another volunteer, "it's a noble cause to keep this destination, a home to us, clean."

After Arif and Sameer, some other 15 local boys—below 25 years of age—became a part of the cleanliness drive. To further raise the squad strength, Majid started a campaign through social media, exhorting volunteers to join the trekking-cum-cleanliness drive. Within days, eight more boys from Kulgam, Pulwama, Islamabad and faraway Handwara came forward.

One of those boys was Taudeef Magray, an IT student at Sri Pratab College, Srinagar. "I came all the way from Handwara to Pahalgam to be the part of Majid's initiative," he says.

"Initially it felt like cleaning the filth and dirt of others. But for the sake of our homeland, we had to run this campaign."

Even after the team strength rose to 25, Majid realized that it was tough to carry garbage bags from such perilous mountains. He needed help — and for that, he approached an NGO that happily provided pony services to carry garbage bags, food and shelter to the boys.

Once good to go, the group of students arrived on the scene, where every type of filth lay before them. The muck was posing a serious concern to environment amid the official apathy.

"Tons of garbage was scattered be
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the waste thrown by Amarnath Yatris throughout the route from Chandwari to Mahagunas Top, running into a total of around 20km.

The first turn of the cleanliness drive started on September 20, 2017 through the arduous mountains of Chandanwari, Pissu Top, Naga Koti, Sheshnag, Wavbal and Mahagunas Top. The boys collected garbage during the first two days, and then transported the garbage bags on ponies on the third day, for dumping. By the end of multiple painstaking runs during the first turn, the boys had cleaned the entire area from Chandwari to Sheshnag.

"We had to spend three nights in the tent," Majid says. "But when we felt bone-numbing cold, we shifted to nearby huts."

The boys braved another icy cold session in the mountains when they began their second turn on October 12, cleaning areas from Sheshnag to Mahagunas Top. By October 16, when the third turn began, they were forced to dump some garbage at Mahagunas Top as it was difficult to carry it on ponies from there.

"On every turn," Majid says, "we reached Chandanwari by our own transport, and from there we used to walk on foot as there is no road connectivity beyond that."

The volunteers found disposable plates, spoons, plastic bottles and polythenes thrown across the Amarnath Yatra route. The worst affected areas were Pissu Top and Sheshnag. They also found untidy tentative pit toilets, large holes in the land.

"We filled those toilet holes by shoveling soil into them," Majid says. "But the shocking thing was how the government was doing nothing about them, even months after the Yatra."

Down in Pahalgam, when the Majid Squad became the talk of the town over their environmental volunteerism, many tried to divert a part of the limelight on themselves. One among them, Majid says, was the Chief Executive Officer of Pahalgam Development Authority (PDA). The CEO Mushtaq Simnani called these boys to his office one day to give them certificates.

"Simnani wanted to present us as his own group," Majid says. "He provided us certificates under Swachh Bharat Abhiyan campaign, which we refused. It was an attempt to hijack our welfare work for his own motives."

Once snubbed by the boys, the CEO went on to offer an interesting take on the filthy post-pilgrimage tracks in Pahalgam.

"Better ask this question to the shrine board," he brushes aside the query, negating the work done by the boys. "We're working on scientific disposal of garbage," he explains. "And for that, we had installed dustbins throughout the Amarnath Yatra route this year."

But the mounds of muck that Majid Squad cleaned lately not only mock his claims, but also expose how the 'world famous' health resort has been caught in "who will call the shot" game between PDA and the Shrine Board — both passing the buck.

Amid this Pahalgam putrefaction, Majid and his boy volunteers have shown the way.

"We'll continue this campaign in the future, but the government must act at the same time," Majid says. "The authorities should remain prepared before Amarnath Yatra begins every year. Otherwise this destruction will lead to collapse of these immaculate green areas one day."