

miltasar



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Shiv Ratri

Ashok Raina, Beltsville, MD

A number of festivals are celebrated by Hindus in India and all over the world. One of the most prominent of these festivals is Shiv-ratri. For Kashmiri Pandits, Shiv-ratri is the most important religious festival. Celebration of this festival has remained proverbial from ancient times. In Kashmiri, Shiv-ratri is also known as Har-ratri and Herath. It is said that Lord Shiva called Devi Jagatamba by the name Hairte on this day which eventually got transformed into Herath. Shiv-ratri is celebrated on the thirteenth day of the dark fortnight in the month of Phalgun. In Kashmir we have maintained the ritual of Vatak-puja, along with the worship of Shiva and Shakti on this day. A historical episode reflects the faith of Kashmiri Pandits in Shiv-ratri. It is said that Jabar Khan, the Pathan governor of Kashmir, forbade people to perform Vatak-puja in Phalgun and instead ordered them to celebrate it in July. Helplessly, people obeyed the order but to everyone's surprise (harath) it snowed on that day in July. Since then the people of Kashmir recite, "Jabar Janda-Haras awu Wandha" (Jabar the rag-man, winter came in July).

Lord Shiva is omnipotent and omnipresent, being beyond all emptiness, the primal source of all. He has five functions: evolution sustenance, involution, preservation and assimilation. Just as a seed evolves into a tree, and in due course of time involutes back to seed, likewise the universal divine Shakti, the energy aspect, has to return to the absolute transcendental rest (Parma Shiva

state). An interpretation for the significance of Shiva-ratri may thus be the celebration of the union of Shiva and Shakti, also referred to as Shiva's marriage to Parvati. The 9th century Kashmiri saint-poet Utpaldeva describing Shiva-ratri wrote, "When the sun, the moon and all the other stars set at the same time, there arises the radiant night of Shiva spreading a splendor of its own."

The worship of Vatuka is dealt within several Tantric works. Vatuka, like Ganesha, has been described as a mind bom son of the Mother Goddess. He is the deity who saves his devotees from all sorts of misfortunes and calamities. When Kashmiri Pandits were driven out of the valley in the first half of the fifteenth century, a few families in the remote villages stayed back. It is speculated that these people may have started worship of Vatuka for their protection, the custom having been continued by others when they returned to the valley in the later part of that century.

Kashmiri Pandits used to celebrate Shiv-ratri festival over a period of 23 days. First six days (hurye okdoh to hurye shayam) were devoted to cleaning of the house and buying puja articles. Next 2-3 days were the days for devotional prayers. Dyara daham was designated for giving presents to married daughters and newly weds. Gadkah and Vager bah were special days for the worship of Bhairavas. Herath truvah is the day for Shiva worship. Herath Kharch (gift of money) is given by the eldest person to all members of the family on the following day. Herath truvah is the day for lord Shiva's worship. On Doon mavas, the prasad of walnuts and rice cakes (tomala-chuut) are distributed, in past, this often continued until Tila ashtami. The latter day also marks the end of winter, and is celebrated by burning kangris and singing the chorus of 'ja-tun-tn'. On the social side, there used to be great joy all around. People wore new and their nicest clothes, and families would sit together and enjoy the game with sea shells.

Since a number of us have migrated to far off places, all over the world, it is rather difficult to perform the Vatak-puja in the traditional way. However, we need to maintain the spirit of this, the most important festival of ours. Jotshi Prem Nath Shastriji has recently produced an audio tape for a relatively simple Vatak-puja together with a Mahimna Stotram. Offering and eating meat and fish on Shiv-ratri is strictly a Kashmiri Pandit ritual, probably to please 'Bhairavas'. However, there were people like Gurtus and Razdans, who observed strict vegetarianism during the Shiv-ratri festival. Most of us have given up the tradition of offering and eating meat on Shiv-ratri day.

One other practice was the celebration of salam on the day following Shiv-ratri. Muslim neighbors and friends used to visit us and wish happy Shivratri. People would also invite their relatives and friends for a sumptuous dinner. Since for us the significance of this day is gone, we can either do away with it or at least call it by a different name.

AUM NAMAH SHIVAYA

In writing this article, I have used information from articles written on this subject by Janki Nath Kaul Kamal, Balji Pandit, Sarwanand Kaul Premi, B.L. Khar and Swami Moti Lal.



[Arti \(Tiku\) Kaul gave a superb performance of Kashmiri and Hindi songs in Northern California, in June 1996.](#)

My Kashmir

KANCHAN AUTAR MATTOO



Kanchan Autar Mattoo is pursuing his masters degree in fine arts at the university of California (Irvine).

She sits and waits for us,
along the whitest of white peaks.
She does not understand
why we destroy her land,
her children, her life.
She wishes to be at peace
with the ones she bore
from the depths of her womb.

No one god holds true happiness,
 she cries.
 Allow yourselves to be one with me.
 For, I am she who you fight over.
 For, I am she who hundreds have
 died over.
 For, I am she who has been abandoned.
 For, I am Kashmir,
 and I want my children back.



KOA east-coast camp participants. About 230 people attended the 1996 camp held at Sunrise Resort in Connecticut.

Chinar-'Boiun' of Kashmir

by P.N. Wanchoo

Chinar, 'Boiun' (*Platanus Orientalis 'kashmiriana'*), Plane tree, London Plane, Sycamore, etc. are the various species of platanus known to the world. In Kashmir, it is aboriginally known as 'Boiun', a word derived from the Sanskrit expression of 'Bawani', the Goddess who has been worshipped in Kashmir since time immemorial. The large hollow trunks of this tree have often been used as places of meditation and these trees are regarded as being sacred. For this reason, they are usually planted at places of worship. At many places of Hindu worship in the valley of Kashmir, chinar tree trunks are painted with red oxide (sendur) and a multicolored thread (nar-i-ivan) is tied around their trunks. The trees are irrigated with milk by worshipers. Chinar is also associated with 'Maej Bhawani'- Goddess Durga's shrines in Kashmir, such as in Tulamulla and Tikar (Kupawara district).

Whether chinar is a native tree of Kashmir, or was imported from elsewhere, is unknown. Its mention is found in Kalhana's *Rajtarangni* (Raj VIII-2556-2706), being present in a shrine of Sharada in 'Saradavana'- in the upper Kishen ganga valley in north Kashmir. An earlier source, the 'Sarada Mahatmya', narrating the origin of tirtha and mentioning the various stages of pilgrim's routes reveals that at Ghausu - present day Goosu in Kupwara district of north Kashmir - a little grove of walnut trees and chinars existed by the side of Kamil river. Some foreign travelers, who traveled into the valley before and after the Mougul era have made mention of the existence of chinar trees in the valley.

There is no doubt that chinar is a beautiful and a majestic tree in its finest form. As a child I have drawn much pleasure from climbing and hiding in the hollow trunks of magnificent specimens that existed in the gardens, camping sites, and rural areas in Kashmir. I recall from my school days that the chinar with the largest circumference was about 400 years old, and existed at a camp site in Bejbehara. At the confluence of the river Indus and Jehlum (Vetesta) at Shadipur - also known as Priyag - a chinar tree has been known to be in existence for ages, and is used for immersion of ashes of the dead by Kashmiri Hindus.

The qualities, benefits, and experience of human relationship with this majestic tree symbolized its magnanimous and protective nature with that of the divine 'Mother Bhavni', and thus became known as Bouin in Kashmiri

One does not find any other species of chinar grow this large in size in other parts of the world, except in Kashmir. In general, chinar tree wood is heavy, hard and has a coarse grain. It is not much used for furniture making because of its heavy weight, and for the same reason it is used extensively for making butcher blocks and grain husking mortars (kantz and mouhals). While burning heat index (caloric value) of chinar wood is considered one of the highest, the shade of these trees in summer is the coolest and the healthiest. A walk over fallen dry chinar leaves makes a wonderful rustling and musical sound. Dry chinar leaves are burned to make light charcoal for use in the kangris.



Havan being performed at the east-coast camp.

YAGNOPAVIT CEREMONY - A PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

Rohit Wanchoo and Nishey Wanchoo

As the coming of age ceremony in the Hindu religion, yagnopavit had many levels of meaning for me and my family. It not only represents an induction into the culture, but also is a show of responsibility and obligation. This sense of duty was nothing short of overwhelming. From this point onwards, we would have to provide our best efforts to be an ideal citizen at all times. We would now have to resist temptation and choose the right path, without exceptions. The reasons for our decisions could no longer be superficial, they now have to be concrete in principle and of steadfast morals.

Before the ceremony itself, we had realized the magnitude of the experience of yagnopavit. We were aware of what was going on while sweat rolled off our forehead in front of blazing fire. But it was not until after the ceremony that we understood the ramifications of yagnopavit and the profound impact it would leave on our lives. It was not until after the ceremony that the emotions began to set in.

On May 19, 1996, it was a long day sitting at one spot in front of the havan fire. We shaved our heads as a mark of letting our egos depart. Later, we went around and asked for bhiksha. Earlier, we had celebrated manhidrat and devgon in preparation for the grand ceremony.

The day after the yagnopavit ceremony we felt different and, in some way, changed. We somehow felt lighter in our hearts and minds - not because of our shaven heads. We felt good about ourselves, even though we had not physically changed much, we felt transformed. This poses a question "Was there really any difference in us?" We do not have any answers, but we know that we had crossed a landmark event in our lives. We do not know where it may lead us. We guess only time will tell.



The Sharda Peeth Rishi Model School at Battal Ballian camp is fully operational, and will soon start computer classes.

Helping Our Own: KOA's Efforts In Refugee Rehabilitation

Forced and sudden exodus of our community from Kashmir in early 1990 has been a very painful experience for all of us. Although they were able to escape from the cycle of deliberate and targeted violence against them, many of our unfortunate brethren had to seek shelter in the refugee camps in Jammu, Udhampur and elsewhere, and face enormous hardships in their individual and collective lives. In order to extend our helping hand to those in need and distress, KOA launched a number of projects. Six KOA sponsored projects currently in progress are:

- 1) KOA medical van and local volunteer physicians visit and treat patients in the refugee camps.
- 2) Nutrition and health maintenance program for about 150 children born in the camps is underway.
- 3) A school with four class rooms has been built in Udhampur.
- 4) Educational scholarships have been awarded for 55 students for higher technical education.
- 5) Financial-assistance is provided to persons affected with catastrophic illnesses for treatment.
- 6) Vocational training is provided to destitute women in the camps.



Young women receiving sewing training from qualified teachers at Nagrota camp in Jammu.

**Please Donate Generously to Help Young
Kashmiri Students in Need.
Contact Tej N. Koul**



**KOA medical van operated under the auspices of
Shriya Bhat Medical Mission.**

Kashmiri Hindus and the Cast System

By Subhash Kak

It is generally accepted that all Kashmiri Hindus belong to the same community or jati. Is that because they belong to a single cast or varna resulting from conversion of other casts to Islam? Or, does this represent a variant of Hindu religion where the caste system does not exist?

Let me first deal with the designation Pandit that is applied to Kashmiri Hindus. According to

Henny Sander in her book " The Kashmiri Pandits" (1988), this designation was requested by Jai Ram Bhan, a Kashmiri courtier in the Moughal court of Empror Muhammad Shah (1719-1749), and the request was granted. Apparently, before this period, both Kashmiri Hindus and Muslims were addressed as 'khuajah' in the Moughal court.



Some children of Mishriwalla camp, Jammu, gathered for their medical check-up.

Kashmiri Hindus call themselves 'Batta', which is derived from the Sanskrit word 'bhartri' meaning 'master'. Such an appellation may be a reflection of the community's self-image that emphasizes success and excellence, and it may not have any sociologic implications. Two subgroups that were considered separate are 'Buher' (Kashmiri for grocer) and 'Purib' (Kashmiri for easterner). It appears that these subgroupings, that have all but disappeared now, reflected the profession or business in the case of Buher, and an ancestry that could be traced to an immigrant from east India, in the case of Puribs, Kashmiri Hindus also have other names that indicate ancestry outside of India; for example, the name 'Turki'. The dominant philosophical and religious current in Kashmir is that of Shaivism. According to the texts of the Shaivites, all those who accept the (Shaivite) 'Kula Dharma' came to be known as 'Kauls', irrespective of their background.



An open-air school in Battal Ballian camp, Udhampur. Sun or rain did not dampen the urge of these children to learn.

The fact that Kashmiri Hinduism is universal does not mean that social inequality did not exist in Kashmir. Such inequalities reflect the social and political ideas of its times, and did not spring from any fundamental religious considerations. To return to the question: do Kashmiri Hindus

have a cast system? The answer is an emphatic no. Kashmiris are brahmin in the sense of Brahma Purana, according to which, every human being desirous of knowledge is a brahmin.



KOA-Midwest region get-together camp.

Internet Jokes

Russians space riders are called "cosmonauts", the American ones are called "astronauts";
what does one call a Kashmiri space rider?

A tabakhnaut.



**Participants at the mid-west region KOA camp held at
Indiana Dunes State Park, Indiana.**

Greetings and Gripes

Ashok Raina

Kashmiri Overseas Association is proud to bring you another edition of Miltsar. As you know, KOA publishes KPI newsletter as well as Miltsar. The newsletter is primarily meant for

communicating news about our community, both here and in India, and is mailed to all Kashmiri Pandits in the United States. On the otherhand, Miltzar contains short articles and pictorial descriptions of events and is mailed to only paying members of KOA. Miltzar is designed to be a forum through which we can share our individual knowledge and expericnces of our religion and culture with the rest of the community. This issue of Miltzar also carries a summary of KOA accounts for the past five years.

It is both ironic and sad that inspite of my repeated requests to our membership for news and articles for Miltzar, the response has been very unethusiastic. I am, once again, appealing to all members of our community to take active interest in contributing to Miltzar. KOA Board and the Executive, along with the editor would welcome your comments and suggestions.



Simi Bhat performing an Indian classic dance at the Southern California Shiv-ratri function.

**Wishing you all a very happy New Year
and Shiv Ratri Mubarik**