

## SPECIAL KOA MEETING MINUTES

### 1. Summary of KOA Symposium of 31st January, 1998 - Verona, NJ

KOA organized a symposium titled, " Strength, Unity & Diversity" on 31st January, 1998 in Verona, NJ which was attended by over 75 people representing ten KOA zones. Meeting started with observing one- minute silence as a tribute to 23 KPs who were massacred in Wandhama and followed by a wonderful Vandana recital by three children. Lalit Wanchoo, President of KOA welcomed attendees to the meeting and opened the meeting by emphasizing the role of the organization and describing the purpose of the meeting as to develop coordinated approaches for socio-cultural programs, to identify issues that may hurt our community in the long run, and to define long term plans for the organization. Lalit Wanchoo attributed KOA's success to the continued change of leadership and the support of membership. In addition, he requested members to keep the enthusiasm and eagerness among members going for the momentum towards the achievement of KOA's mission objectives.

Meeting was conducted in following four sessions:

**Session 1:** Experiences and Perspectives of Past Presidents was moderated by Lalit Wanchoo. Seven past presidents, Mohini Kaushik, Surrender Nath, Hari K. Tiku, J. B. Kaul, Suresh Raina, & Ashok Raina presented their experiences and the directions for KOA.

**Session 2:** Membership Programs and Issues was moderated by Sunita Dhar. In this session young adults Neeraj Bhat, Anita Wokhlu and Mr. Ganjoo spoke where as written views of Amrita Mattoo were read by Autar Mattoo about their experiences as a KP youth and how the organization can help to keep youth motivated for Kashmiri culture. Suggestions were made to: provide simplified multi-volume guide of KP culture, primer (audio/CD) for Kashmiri language, separate mail server (kpnet type) for youth, provide a book of short stories narrated by grand-parents, provide assistance in arranging internship. In this session Veena Kaul and Nirmala Mitra presented women issues and addressed the need for a family support group. In addition, Pran Kaul described KOA's sponsor a child program and its accomplishments.

**Session 3:** Coordination and New Directions was moderated by Ashok Raina. Sunil Fotedar and Lalit Koul described the accomplishments of KOA's internet activity and emphasized the need for future. Internet is viewed as one of the elements for keeping our community members connected. Subhash Razdan, President of National Federation of Indian Association (NFIA) described its role and how KOA can work with this organization. He also informed the recent installation of a life size statue of Mahatma Gandhi in Atlanta. Rabinder Kaul, Pran Kaul, and Suraj Bhat summarized their respective zones activities and issues.

**Session 4:** Open Forum for Discussion was moderated by Rakesh Kaul. This forum provided an opportunity for any body to make their suggestions or concerns. Suraj Bhat

talked about his views regarding role of IAKF and Pran Chaku expressed his views about the procedure for selection of directors and President of KOA. Due to time constraint, the moderator requested each participant to give one line suggestion for the organization. Mostly attendees voiced for unity of the community and more support for refugees.

**Summary:** KOA missions should be revised as the needs of membership has changed over time. We need to stay united to achieve success in our social and cultural programs. People who have been in US for over 20 years should play a role of 'Buzarg' for unity of the community and provide guidance. Start a family support group. Issues related to loneliness, post delivery help/education and relief, virtual 'Maliyun', divorce and battered women cases, and confidentiality needs to be addressed by the support group. Advertising in Koshur Samachar about KOA regional contacts. Registering KOA as a helpful organization with INS and International Resource Centers. Self Training/Discipline and motivation is required on part of members. Make educational opportunities known to KPs outside the USA, particularly the list of Universities, list of scholarships/eligibility. Audio visual presentations on specific Kashmir issues / practices and places (e.g. Parbat, TulaMulla). Recognition for achievements. More active participation/ leadership for women. Community must provide constant nurturing/support and opportunity for parents who are trying to teach their kids Kashmiri Culture.

## **2. KOA Community Outreach Meeting, December 7, 1998 Cupertino, CA**

After a successful meeting in New Jersey in Jan 98, Kashmiri Overseas Association held its second KOA Outreach Meeting for 1998 in the City of Cupertino in Northern California on Dec 5, 1998. About 70 members representing all sections of our community attended the meeting.

It was a great success in being able to provide a direct interface between the members scattered all over the US with their community leadership. It also provided a forum for generating ideas for new directions for KOA consistent with its charter. Sunil and I thank all the members who were able to come to the meeting and also to our KOA President Lalit Wanchoo for having initiated this series of Outreach Meetings.

Agenda and the summary of the meeting that lasted for about four hours is as follows:

### **Agenda**

- 4.35 to 4.45 PM - Introduction Remarks by Vijay Dhar -- Zone 9 KOA Director & Sunil Dhar Northern CA KOA Chapter President
- 4.45 to 5.30 PM - KOA Outlook -- Lalit Wanchoo - President
- 5.30 to 6.20 PM - Community Perspectives -- Pushpa Dhar, Vinod Moza, Tara Choudhary & Sh. Brij Kishan Saraf (KOA Zone 9 residents)
- 6.20 to 6.40 PM - Kashmir Shavisim Fellowship -- Vijay Dhar (of Mill Valley KOA Zone 9 resident )
- 6.40 to 6.50 PM - Community Perspectives (Cont.) -- Mohan Bhan (KOA Zone 9 resident)
- 6.50 to 7.15 PM - Break
- 7.15 to 7.35 PM - Community Perspectives (Cont.) -- Sanjay Dhar (KOA Zone 9

resident)

7.35 to 8.20 PM - Open Form of Q&A

### **Summary:**

#### **Introductions**

The meeting was chaired by Lalit Wanchoo and began with introductions by Vijay Dhar, Director KOA zone 9 and Sunil Dhar, President KOA Northern California Chapter. Vijay provided the background about the outreach program and appealed to the members to participate with passion to help generate programs to preserve our cultural identity. Sunil referred to the role of the Silicon Valley in making Internet possible from the grains of sand and emphasized the need for Silicon Valley members to play a befitting role in the community affairs.

Combining this thought with what Sh B.K. Saraf said later, KP's of the Silicon Valley have a role in building of 7 bridges (in reference to the 7 bridges of Srinagar connecting KP's across Vitasta) between the 7 continents which have become the home to Kashmiri Pandits.

Kpnet and KOA website is a vehicle that KP's from Silicon Valley can nurture and evolve further.

#### **KOA Outlook**

Lalit Wanchoo President of KOA outlined the purpose of the meeting and provided comprehensive review on the KOA structure and its charter. Lalit emphasized the change of the leadership, support of the membership, and enthusiasm and eagerness of volunteers as the key points for the 20 years of success of the organization. Lalit provided details of the various programs that KOA has been supporting. The broad categories of these are:

Educational Assistance, Sponsor A Child, Medical Assistance, Refugee School (Udhampur), Financial Assistance, Family Support Group, Annual Camp, Youth Internship, Internet (Web & KPnet), Newsletter (KPI), Calendar, Directory, Cultural/Social/Religious (Speakers/Singers/Publications), and Chapter Level Activities.

In addition past programs that included Construction of A Refugee School-\$6,000, Purchase of Medical Van - \$18,000, Children Nutritional Support - \$5,000, and Women Vocational Training - \$2,000 were also highlighted. Lalit discussed in detail the summary of the last meeting in New Jersey in the area of membership, programs, and general issues and ended his presentation with the future direction of the organization.

#### **Mrs. Pushpa Dhar:**

1 Pushpaji pointed out that KOA should first ensure that the membership is expanded to cover most of the members. She estimated that right now only 25-30% of the families are members. This will help in getting them committed to the cause of the organization and also help raise funds for the programs.

2 Also we should have a system of earmarking funds for the local chapters.

3 Accountability and co-ordination should be built in between local and national level.

4 We should preserve the Kashmiri character in our festivals and get-togethers.

5 During our get-togethers we should organize activities to get children interested in our Kashmiri heritage and involve them in discussions.

6 Not let our empathy for camp dwellers to dilute.

7 A local directory should be published and updated regularly.

### **Mr. Vinod Moza**

· As a new member to local community he appreciated the caring of the community for other members. This kind of caring has manifested itself in our caring for unfortunate folks back home.

· We have not done equally well in preserving our cultural identity and heritage. In the tradition of "Batta Gav Vangun" we have been too eager to adapt ourselves and lose our values, rituals and traditions. He read inspiring quotations from "Deep Impact", anthropological text's etc. and added sarcasm to his arguments to emphasize need for us to pass on what is left of our rituals and language to the future generations.

### **Miss Tara Choudhary**

· Giving a very insightful speech from the perspective of a KP teenager growing up in US, Tara put our community's crisis in the context of the broader problem of extinction, of cultures, of traditions, of languages and of species.

· Tara highlighted the strengths of our traditions thus, "As Kashmiri Hindus, we have always had to co exist with other cultures. This quality is built into our system of beliefs and values. Our religion teaches us to live in harmony with nature. We worship the world around us. Our most revered religious symbols have to do with mountains, lakes, and rivers. This is unique in a world which is becoming increasingly uniform and where people are alienated from nature. We must learn to respect nature and all that comes from it, including people of other cultures".

· But she was candid in reposing the responsibility of keeping our identity alive upon ourselves. For this she asked all of us to live our culture, language and rituals in each and every KP home.

"The language must be spoken, the stories told over, the customs kept alive, followed respectfully and practiced with dedication, the traditions adhered to and the memories revived with love, every day."

· To quote her directly "The world will be poorer if there is no one to sing the Mahimna Path the way we sing it, play the Chakri, or sing Vanuwan on weddings".

· "Let us save our culture by living it in our daily lives. Let us do our bit."

### **Mr. B. K. Saraf**

From the perspective of a seasoned KP who has lived all his life in Kashmir (retd. as Chief Engineer, Power Development, J&K) Mr. Saraf referred to the multiple incidences of exodus in the past, Mr. Saraf sees "present Diaspora is very disturbing and ominous. We have now been effectively uprooted, deprived of our personal space and oxygen that sustained our culture, heritage and customs. Now we find ourselves spread thin throughout the world and in imminent danger of finding our cultural moorings snapped and drifting rudderless"

Taking inspiration from Jews, who maintained their identity for thousands of years by "their fierce, almost fanatical adherence to the modes and mores, religious and social traditions, and practices. They did not lose their faith in their cultural strength and it stood them in good stead and kept them bound together through their survival struggle

into a successful emergence as a power to reckon with."

The specific recommendations by Mr. Saraf were:

1. We must go beyond feasting at our cultural events and organize talks to disseminate our illustrious ancestors like Lal Ded, Arnimal, Master Zinda Kaul, Swami Lakshman Ji etc. to name only a few.
2. Bring books for children and sponsor comics like publications on Kasmiri Traditions to make an impression on the minds of the very young.
3. Women, who are community oriented by nature, should be given at least 50% representation in the KOA organization.
4. Organize world congresses & seminars to bring together KP intellectuals and commoners.
5. Encourage use of Kashmiri language at home as other communities do.
6. Increase the number of community activities on the west coast including camping, picnicking, hiking trips, etc. which involve children.
7. Facilitate marriages within the community by generating a database for eligible youngsters to use our internet & other media as "Virtual Manzimyours"
8. Help establish counseling services within the community to resolve ever increasing trends towards divorces.

Mr. Saraf's final remark was that we should harness Internet to build 7 bridges between the 7 continent where our community has spread thin. Preservation of our culture is a daunting task but doable.

**Vijay K. Dhar**, Kashmir Shaivism Fellowship, registered 501(c)(3) Federal and California Non-Profit Religious Organization.

Vijayji gave a powerful introduction to the profound heritage that KP's share in the form of Kashmir's unique contribution to Shaivism. He referred to his recent trip to Kashmir on behalf of Kashmir Shaivism Fellowship to purchase the land and properties near Ishbar in Srinagar, associated with the memory of Swami Lakshman Joo. The immediate and future aims of the fellowship are:

- Preserve and publish the teachings of Kashmir Shaivism, and provide fellowships to students of Swamiji.
- Publication of Self Realization in Kashmir Shaivism by John Hughes (Oral Teachings of Swamiji) and Shiva Sutra.
- Video's on Bhagwat Gita and Parmartha Sara.
- Preserve original manuscripts of Abhinavagupta, Kshemendra etc. and publish on Internet.
- A Permanent Place of Worship.

Details about KSF can be found on [www.ksf.org](http://www.ksf.org), which is also linked to the KOA Web site.

### **Mohan Bhan**

Mohan, who came to the event wearing a Phiran, quizzed the children about what he was wearing and also quizzed the rest of the audience about the strengths and weaknesses of our community. Mohan kept audience involved with his suggestions and remarks

regarding the survival of the cultural/social values.

**Sanjay Dhar**

- We must continue to mobilize and help the people still languishing in the camps back home.
- We must raise membership to \$100 to raise funds to more aggressively support rehabilitation work.
- Raise funds by working with the other communities.
- He also emphasized the need to use Kashmiri language at home.

Last session of the meeting was Question and answers which lasted for about an hour. Members asked questions regarding KOA programs, support for the refugees, and survival of culture. During the lectures, Lalitji rose at several occasions to clarify things, seek clarifications and also relate the suggestions with the ongoing activities of KOA.

Sunil rose and spoke in perfect Kashmiri, really worthy of appreciation as he has moved to North America when he was only 8 years old. Vijay and Sunil pledged (in Kashmiri) that now onwards we will conduct all programs in Kashmiri. During the break we had Kehwa with Mathi and Chum-chum. Some members remarked that the details about KOA activities were quite an eye-opener and wondered why such information is not disbursed on the KPnet. Lalit requested members to read their newsletter with more interest.

This was followed by several inputs and questions with active involvement of all those who were present. Some of that was related to need for KOA to work with KP organizations in India. Col. Kachroo, member of AIKS and visiting from Delhi provided valuable clarifications in this regard.

Lalit thanked Vijay and Sunil for organizing this meeting and appreciated presence of the members. Meeting concluded with the vote of thanks by Vijay Dhar. If anybody is interested in the hard copy of the presentations please get in touch with me at following phone or email address.

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