



KASHMIRI PANDIT COMMUNITY A PROFILE

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Introduction

Kashmir and its people has been a favourite subject for writers, poets, thinkers and historians. There is hardly any aspect of this beautiful valley and its inhabitants that has not been written about over the centuries gone by. The rich natural beauty of this paradise on earth, its flora and fauna, art and craft, tourist resorts, culture and literature, games and sport, every aspect has been covered in prose and poetry in major languages. Kalidasa has sung of its immortal beauty in Sanskrit. Chinese, Tibetan and visitors from the Middleeast have described the life, the people and the thought of this Eden of the East in different languages. Grierson, Stein and others have written volumes in English about the language and works of this land. Poets including Siyaram Sharan Gupta, Hafeez Jaladhari, Ali Sardar Jaffry, Kamal Ahmad Siddiqy and many others have composed beautiful poems in Hindi and Urdu in praise of this picturesque place. Local poets like Mehjoor, Azad, Masterji and Nadim have written poems in Kashmiri, giving expression to their love for their motherland. Anand Kaul Bamzai, Tyndel Biscoe, Jia Lal Kilam, Prof. Som Nath Dhar and many other scholars have written about different facets of this wonderful place and the people living here. In spite of all this rich material it occurred to me that I should also write about the Kashmiri Pandit community, the original inhabitants of this place, in my own way and picturise its profile as I see it. Earlier I have written a book, 'A Window on Kashmir', which gives historical, political and cultural account of Kashmiris. This volume is different in as much as it is an effort to study this unique community in all its aspects, religion, culture, living pattern, habits, attitudes, profession, troubles and tribulations suffered, and the like. It is an attempt to present a holistic portrait of this small community along with its distinct features.

As is well known, for historical reasons this community has been rendered into a minority and that too a miniscule one. Naturally, therefore, whenever there is a seminar, an exhibition, a cultural show or any other display of the multi-lingual and multi-ethnic character of our vast country and different states and different areas are represented, Kashmir is represented by the majority Muslim community, and rightly so. The art and culture of Jammu and Ladakh also is displayed but more often than not the Kashmiri Pandit community goes unrepresented although it has made no mean contribution to different facets of life in Kashmir in particular and the country in general. I felt that it was of paramount necessity to describe the salient features of the characteristics of this ethnic group, which has a tradition of more than five thousand years.

I had the privilege of attending a global meet hosted by the Kashmiri Hindu Samiti, Karnataka organized under the aegis of the All India Kashmiri Samaj, which was inaugurated by the Chief Minister of Karnataka and attended by a galaxy of distinguished guests and delegates from the different corners of the country. One of the guests, a former Chief Secretary of the state, recited a Malyalam poem, which if loosely translated runs thus: 'In whatever country you are, in whatever dress you are and in whatever favourable or unfavourable environment you are, do not lose the sweetness of your mother's milk'. As a Kashmiri, displaced from my homeland by adverse circumstances and gun trotting marauders, these lines

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touched my heart. I was reminded of the sweetness of my mother's milk. I asked myself a few pertinent questions. Am I, who practises Sanatana Dharma, to lose my cool, harbour hatred and get unnerved in this situation? Should I not carry with me the sweetness of my mother's milk wherever I am and in whatever situation I may be? At once I realized that as a Kashmiri Pandit I have inherited the sweetness of my two mothers, the biological mother and the land of my birth.

My biological mother has breast-fed me singing Leelas of Krishna Joo Razdan and hymns of Parmanand and lyrics of Arnimal. She has cooked for me rice puddings and other dishes chanting '*Indrakshi*', '*Panchastavi*', '*Bhawani sahasranam*' and '*Gaurim ambam*'. She has kept me busy and in good humour in my childhood, reciting the '*Vakhs*' of Lal Ded. I cannot, therefore, help being what I am, God-fearing, humble, peace loving, respectful and law-abiding. From early childhood she has poured the nectar of Sanskrit Shlokas into my ears, which have taught me to respect all faiths '*Shrutir vibhinnah, Smritir vibhinnah*', treat the entire world as one family, '*Vasudhaiva kutumbakam*' and pray for peace, prosperity and well being of the entire mankind, '*Sarve bhavantu sukhinah*' as also other forms of creation, the elements and the various facets of the nature, '*Om dhyo shanti, antarikhshagun shanti*' which are all pervaded by the Divine, '*Ishavasyam-idam sarvam yad kinchit jagatyam jagat*'. I have seen her and heard her say prayers in the morning for the peace and prosperity of the entire world, of the good and bad people and the virtuous and the sinners. This is the milk of my mother that has sustained me. This is the milk, the sweetness of which I need to preserve even in the adverse circumstances.

As regards the other mother, the land of my birth, I am conscious of what has been stated in the Atharva Veda, '*Mata Bhumi putro'ham prathivyam* - the earth is my mother and I am the son of the good earth'. I am convinced of what is stated in the Ramayana, '*Janani janmabhumi sha swargad-api gariyasi*- both mother and the birthplace are superior to the heavens'. I am patriotic to the core and love my motherland, India but my birthplace is Kashmir, which is engraved in my heart. I was born in the fragrance of the flowers of different hues found in plenty there. I have grown up in the soothing breeze, musical brooks, dancing fountains, lofty mountains and the shade of the gigantic chinars of the valley. My ancestors have contributed to the rich tradition, rich culture and rich ethos of the land in a big way. This has provided me the sweet milk of the philosophy of life and of thought, feeling and perception, which is through and through sweet. It is this sweetness that the Malayalam poet wants me to preserve and carry forward. It is this sweetness that gives me my identity and it is this sweetness that is dear to me. Whether in or out of Kashmir, I shall preserve the sweetness of the milk of my mother and the land of my birth. India is my motherland but Kashmir is my birthplace. No body can deprive me of my right to go back to Kashmir, live and work there and feel proud of belonging to that part of the country. It is the sweetness of this milk that I want my readers to taste by reading this compilation.

Kamal Ahmad Siddiqi has perhaps composed these lines with reference to the plight of my community: '*Mujhko bakhshi hai havadis ne qayamat ki nazar, sangrezun ko na samjha tha na samjhunga gohar* - The adversities have hardened me and given me a deep insight, I shall never mistake stone pieces for

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diamonds'. So let it be known that no body can take me for a ride. I shall see to it that I am counted, consulted and reckoned in any dispensation. I shall fight for my rights in all constitutional ways available to me. I was a Kashmiri, am a Kashmiri and shall remain a Kashmiri. The two things that are as dear to me as my own life are my '*Za-zyav*' mother tongue and '*Zena-jaay*', birthplace. I shall preserve my language and culture, the sweetness of the milk of my mother, wherever I am, in whatever situation I am. May God help me in my noble endeavour.

The urge in me to preserve the milk of my two mothers described above, and to repay their debt prompted me to write this book. In as much as this is an insider's account my readers will forgive me if they find it self-laudatory at places although I have tried to be as objective as possible but all the same my attempt has been to rekindle a sense of pride in my fellow community members of their rich tradition and culture. The material that has gone into making of this book has appeared from time to time in many prestigious journals, '*Koshur Samachar*', the official organ of the Kashmiri Samiti Delhi, '*Naad*', the mouth-piece of the All India Kashmiri Samaj, New Delhi, '*Aalav*', the voice of Kashmir, issued by the Kashmiri Hindu Cultural Welfare Trust, Bangalore, '*Vitasta*', the beautiful journal published by Kashmiri Pandit Sabha, Kolkata and others. The readers will, for this reason, find some facts repeated at places. I seek their forgiveness and request them to bear with me in this regard. If the readers in general find this work informative and Kashmiris in particular regain the pride for their heritage and tradition, I shall feel satisfied that my effort has not been in vain.

T.N.Dhar

1.0 BACKGROUND

It is of paramount importance that in order to study the profile of the Kashmiri Pandit community we should study and reflect on the rich and unique culture of Kashmir, the land of their birth. With this end in view, let us first try to figure out what the word culture connotes. Professor Terry Eagleton has defined culture in these words, 'Culture, etymologically speaking, is a concept derived from nature. One of its original meanings is husbandry. At first the term denoted a material process, which was then metaphorically transposed to the affairs of the spirit. The Latin root for this word is 'colere', which can mean anything from cultivating and inhabiting to worshipping and protecting. But 'colere' also ends up via the 'cultus' as the religious term 'cult'. The idea of culture signifies double refusal: of organic determinism and of the anatomy of spirit. It is a rebuff to both naturalism and idealism. The very word culture contains a tension between making and being made, rationality and spontaneity'. According to S.T.Coleridge 'culture is what comes naturally, bred in the bone rather than conceived by the brain'. Raymond Williams has something different to say in this regard. He is of the opinion that 'culture is the organization of the production, the structure of the family, the structure of institutions which govern social relationships, the characteristic form through which members of the society communicate and a structure of feeling'. T.S.Eliot, on the other hand, has defined culture as 'the way of life of a particular people living together in one place; that which makes life worth living; that which makes it a society – it includes Arts, Manners, Religion and Ideas.' After the mid twentieth century culture has come to mean the affirmation of a specific identity – national, ethnic, regional rather than the transcendence of it. All these definitions make culture overlap civilization. In order to differentiate between the two, we can say in simple terms that culture is the way we think and civilization is the way we live. The former has a definite and telling effect on the latter and the two together give us our distinct identity. In effect culture of a society manifests itself in the shape of its civilisation. Culture is conceived and conceptualized in thought and word but civilization is demonstrated in creed and deed as also by the living pattern.

Of all the names and epithets given to their land, it is the name '*Ryeshi Vaer*' that sums up the entire gamut of the culture of Kashmiris. '*Ryeshi Vaer*' literally means a garden of sages. This land has produced an innumerable number of saints and savants, sages and Sufis, who have always stood for the durable human goods of truth, freedom, wisdom, humility, simplicity, compassion, contemplation, worship and the like. The common Kashmiri has adopted these qualities and imbibed them in his thinking and actions. In the idiom of Mary Pat Fisher it may be stated that the map of our Kashmir couldn't be colour-coded as to its Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist identity; each of its parts is marbled with the colours and textures of the whole. We have had Buddhist view of life and cosmos thrive in this land for many many years in the past. We have had a distinct non-dualistic ideology called the '*Trika*' Philosophy shape the metaphysical thinking of this land. We have had the Vedic rituals of the Sanatana Dharma as the basis of our very existence. There used to be an admixture of '*Shakta*' and '*Tantra*' in our way of worshipping and then, with the advent of Islam in fourteenth century we witnessed the rise of Sufi order in this land. All these in course of time got merged and produced a blend of cultures, which is humanistic, pious and pure, yet very simple and straightforward. It has taught us to turn from the fragmentary to the 'total', from

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the superficial to the 'profound', and from the mundane material to the 'spiritual'. Religion has never been an obstacle to this unique culture. In my neighbourhood, there lived a Sufi, who used to define religion as '*Gaev gudom*', the rope with which we tie a cow lest it should stray into the fields and eat the crop. Once the cow knows that it has to eat only the grass and walk only along the periphery of the field, there is no need for the rope any more. Similarly a man needs the religion only so long as he does not develop wisdom to discriminate between right and wrong, reality and falsehood, truth and untruth and existence and non-existence.

A specialist in new religious movements in his own right, Professor Timothy Miller has rightly observed that, 'Human culture is always evolving and reinventing its own past and present. There is no cultural vacuum from which anything truly new under the Sun could arise.' We call our way of life 'Sanatana Dharma' or the Eternal Law of Do's and Don'ts of life. Our belief is that God, Universe and the Vedas are eternal and co-existent. Strict adherence to the prescribed norms ensures cosmic harmony, order in the society and the welfare of mankind. Due to this belief Hindus, the original inhabitants of this land, were neither interested in recording their history nor inclined to force their way of thinking on any one else. The basic ideology has been twofold. One, '*Ekam Sat Viprah bahudhah vadanti* – the Truth is one and the learned describe it in many different ways' and the second, '*Aano bhadra kratavo yantu vishvatah* – let noble and beneficial thoughts come to us from all sides of the world'. John Renard, Professor of Theological Studies at St. Louis University, USA has said about Sanatana Dharma, 'I have been intrigued by the tradition's flexibility – some call it ability to subsume every religious idea. The larger Hindu tradition represents an extra-ordinary rich gallery of imagery of the Divine. It has encouraged visual Arts to match the Verbal. There is complete religious tolerance and it is free of large scale proselytizing.' This eternal way of life, this age-old culture of ours is said to be five millennia old on the basis of the '*Saptarishi Samvat*' adopted by us from time immemorial. Ours is perhaps the only almanac in the country, that gives this '*Samvat*' and the running year is 5081.

It is a fact that the only recorded History in India, the '*Raja Tarangini*' has been written by a Kashmirian, Kalhana. Yet ironically we do not have any record of our cultural heritage and historical events of the prior period and, therefore, we are unable to paint an authentic picture of the life and faith of our ancestors who lived in this pious land. As in the rest of the country, we have to draw upon legends, fables and other types of literature, verbal or written, in order to visualize the picture of our ancient heritage. It is very significant that in the Indian tradition the two great epics, 'Ramayana' and 'Mahabharata' along with the 'Puranas' form the corpus of our history '*Itihasa*', from which we have to figure out what our past has been like. Kashmir also has its own 'Purana' called the 'Nilamat Purana', which throws some light on our heritage. This 'Purana' vouches for the fact that after the water was drained from the vast area of Sati Sar, sages were invited to settle in the valley and do their penance in the calm and peaceful environment of this sacred valley surrounded by the Western Himalayan ranges. The aborigines, Nagas, Pishachas, Shvapakas etc. were assimilated and became extinct as tribes in course of time. During this period the rituals and the injunctions of the Vedas only were followed. The inhabitants today in effect are, therefore,

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the progeny of the sages who settled here for penance and eventual emancipation with a sprinkling of immigrant population.

It appears from the historical fact of the all important congregation of Buddhists having been held in Kashmir, during the reign of the King Kanishka, that this ideology had found favour with the peace loving citizens of Kashmir in course of time. It is from here that the ideology travelled as far as Japan, Cambodia and other Far-East countries via Tibet and China. In Kashmir, however, a strong non-dualistic philosophy, called Kashmir Shaiva Darshan, drove out this ideology but not before it had left an indelible mark on our culture. There are a number of places, which are named after the 'Bauddha Viharas' and are called in local language as 'Yar'. In Srinagar itself we have a locality named as 'Bodager' a corruption from 'Buddha Giri' or the Buddha's hillock. These together with the non-violent passivity of Kashmiris and their life style imbued with the tenets of Buddhism stand testimony to the fact that this ideology had sway on our thinking for a long time. It is proverbially stated that a Kashmiri Pandit does not kill even an ant or a fly. It was the effect of this philosophy that spirituality and divinity was manifest in the life style of the common man. Although Sikander But- Shikan, who ruled from 1389 to 1413, destroyed many Hindu holy places and temples yet the ruins of these temples at many places including that of Martand Temple stand testimony to the Sun worship also being prevalent here. There is a hill feature named as 'Aeta gaej' a corrupt form of Sanskrit 'Aaditya Guha' meaning the cave of the Sun. This corroborates the fact further.

Towards the end of the thirteenth century and the beginning of the fourteenth century Islam came to Kashmir. On the one hand the invaders came to conquer and rule the land and on the other hand this place attracted the Muslim Sufis also. They had been victims of persecution in their countries of origin. These Sufis believed in 'Khalwa' or spiritual retreat and propagated going from the outer exoteric to the inner esoteric. This way of thinking coincided with the prevailing tradition of 'seeking to refine deeper realization of the Divine within one's consciousness rather than engaging in critical theological discussions; realizing the possibilities of the soul in solitude and silence, and to transform the flashing and fading moments of vision into a steady light which could illumine the long years of life'. Thus came into existence a synthesized cultural framework that we proudly call 'The Rishi Cult'. Glimpses of this blended culture could be seen in the day-to-day life of an ordinary Kashmiri. Many Hindus used to swear by 'Dastagir Sahib', a revered Muslim Sufi saint. Any Muslim passing by a Hindu shrine would bow in reverence and any Hindu passing by a Muslim holy place would fold his hands in obeisance. There are innumerable holy places and shrines where both Hindus and Muslims would go to offer prayers. Hindus and Muslims equally revered Lal Ded and Peer Pandit Padshah, and other Hindu sages. Both the communities likewise held Nunda Rishi, Bata Mol Sahib, Dastagir Sahib, Rehman Saeb and other Muslim saints in high esteem. Muslim boatmen did not consume meat and prohibited items like onion and garlic when they had to ferry pilgrims to the holy shrine of Rajna Bhawani at Tula Mula.

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A Muslim lady, after washing her face at the river Vitasta called, 'Vyath' in Kashmiri, would join her palms and pray thus, '*Afu Khodaya fazal kar, badas ta janas, Hyandis ta Musalmanas* – God shower your grace on good and bad people alike, both on Hindus and on Muslims.' A Hindu woman, after pouring milk and water on the Shiva Lingam in the temple would pray thus: '*Sarve Bhavantu Sukhenah sarve santu niramayah sarve bhadrani pashyantur ma kaschit dukh bhag bhavet* – Let all be happy, free of worries. Let all see only beneficial and pleasant things and let no body meet with grief and unhappiness'. Salutations would be offered to Muslim elders by the Hindu youngsters and to Hindu elders of the area by the Muslim youngsters whenever and wherever they crossed each other. In return they would receive blessings in abundance. A Muslim returning after Hajj was received and welcomed by his Hindu neighbours and friends with an open heart. Muslims would greet Hindus on Shiva Ratri and Hindus would greet Muslims on Eid. Likewise the two communities would share each other's moments of happiness and grief and join each other on the occasion of marriages and funerals with care and concern.

To sum up we can safely say that the origin of the cultural stream of Kashmir is Vedic. It has absorbed the influences from Buddhism. It has been shaped by the Trika philosophy of Kashmir Shaivism and it has drawn from the Muslim Sufism and in turn influenced it deeply. The enormous literature that has been produced by the sages and savants of this land portrays a picture of '*Jnana*' or Knowledge dressed in '*Bhakti*' or Devotion. The message has all along been one of humanism, simple living, high thinking, altruism, contentment, purity and piety. As regards the festivals and the rituals, these are primarily religious in character and therefore, different for different religious groups. But there are some commonalities. Distribution of '*Tahar*', the cooked yellow rice on festive occasions is common between Hindus and Muslims. Nightlong singing of hymns in praise of the Divine is another common feature. The annual '*Urs*' or commemorative days of various saints are also celebrated jointly by all the ethnic groups with due reverence. The Hindus of the valley are called Kashmiri Pandits or '*Bhattas*' meaning in Sanskrit the learned and honoured people. The important festival that has become their identity is the celebration of Shiva Ratri in the month of February. Unlike elsewhere in the country, here the festivities are fortnight-long and this festival has the same importance for us as the Ganesh Puja has for Maharashtrians and the Durga Puja has for the Bengalis or the Ayappa puja in the South.

When religions travel to new pastures they adopt many new things both ideologically and in order to gain acceptance among the local inhabitants. Buddhism underwent changes when it travelled outside India to Tibet, China, Japan, Korea and other places. Christian theology was reformed in Europe quite substantially. As regards Islam Lippman has stated that 'Prophet Muhammad's vision of a united poly-tribal community fused into one brotherhood by Islam has long since been proved to be unattainable because of which Islam thrives as a religion but not as a polity'. In India also a multitude of regional and tribal rituals and customs have got fused into the mainstream religion. The Muslim Sufis of Kashmir could not also remain unaffected by the influence of the local tradition of theology, ideology and philosophy, which was powerful enough to be resisted. Even though they continued to hold the Prophet and the holy Qura'n in high esteem, they absorbed the major tenets of the Hindu philosophy in their own spiritual practices and prescriptions. This became a very strong cementing factor between the Hindus and

the Muslims. The lead had come from Lal Ded. Sufi poets have tread on the same path and have earned respect, reverence and love from both the communities. Muslim singers sing Bhajans and hymns in praise of Hindu deities. Every classical singer sings the *Vakhs* of Lal Ded in the beginning before starting the Raga proper. Incidentally it is believed that the extant 'Ragas' or 'Muqams, as they are called, of the classical music 'Sufiana Kalam' are rearranged and systematized by the great Hindu lyricist, Arnimaal. The great names among Sufi poets like Shams Faqir, Shah Gafoor, Nyama Sa'b, Asad Parray, Wahab Khar, Rehman Dar, Ahad Zargar and host of others, have composed poems expounding 'Advaita' or non-dualism, in a truly Hindu tradition. The Hindu poets like Paramananda, Prakash Ram, Krishna Razdan, Raets Ded, Bhgyavan Ded, Master Ji and others have excelled in devotional poems.

It is interesting to see what these Sufi poets have said about their mentor, Lal Ded. Mohmud Gami (1765 – 1855), a great name in Kashmiri poetry, who may not strictly be clubbed with Sufi poets has written a beautiful verse associating every seeker with Lal Ded in these words: '*Tsonza shoobai ba khazmatsei, granz Sahibo hyetsthas na zanh. Ada nav pyom Lala matsei, aavaz vatsei no* - I am nothing but a maid to serve you, not important enough to be counted by you. Then I got the name of ecstatic Lala, My Lord! Did you not hear my wail?' Shamas Faqir (1843 – 1906, real name Mohammad Siddiq Bhatt), one of the leading Sufi poets of Kashmir who lived in Cinikral Mohalla in Srinagar was fascinated by the writings of Lal Ded. He has paid tribute to her in one of his compositions and also made a mention of her having given spiritual guidance to Nunda Rishi. Says he, '*Kor Lali ikavata aakash pranas, zan milanav Bhagavaanas seit. Lali trov zala no't manz pote'l khanas. Zan milanav Bhagavaanas seit. Tchala gayi Lala ma'ts shurahyar shranas. Hala tami kor zagi tikatar tarnas. Kala tami tsofnai nafsi shaitanas, zan milanav Bhagavaanas seit. Vopa deesh karni gayi Nunda reshanas. Rindav dophas aini Irfan. Tshyapi tshipras gyundun Shahi Hamadanas, zan milinav Bhagavaanas seit.* Lala did breath control called 'Pranabhyas' to realize the Divine. Lala offered a pitcherful of water to the idol in the shrine to know the Lord. Lala slipped to the riverbank called 'Shurahyaar' to take a bath and took a plunge to cross the river of life. She controlled the sense objects in order to realize Him. She went to give spiritual lessons to Nunda Rishi and the knowledgeable found it to be pure mysticism. She virtually teased Shahi Hamadan, who could not gauge her spiritual heights'.

Shahi Hamadan was a Sufi, who had come to take refuge in Kashmir and was instrumental in converting the local populace to Islam. His attitude towards non-Muslims was rather harsh. A local Kali temple on the bank of river Jehlum in the heart of Srinagar was converted to a shrine dedicated to him. His meeting with Lal Ded is, however, doubtful because the dates do not match. Another Sufi poet, Ahmad Batawa'r, a contemporary of Shams Faqir (1845 – 1918), has described the exalted spiritual position of Lal Ded in this verse: '*Lala matsi kala tso't nafsi shaitanas. Kala karan Alla Lal sape'n hoo. Lola ha'ts mahav gayi he Bhagavaanas. Jan chum meelith jahanas saet* Lala in ecstasy killed all her senses, engrossed in the love of God she became one with Him. My self is one with the universal self.' While poets other than Sufis have also sung in praise of Lal Ded, but the manner in which the Sufi poets have quoted her, repeated her idiom and referred to her reverentially shows the deep impact that her philosophy had had on their minds resulting in their express acknowledgement through their verses.

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Post 1990 period has been a period of turmoil, which brought shame to the composite culture of the valley. Religious extremism and fundamentalism overran the tolerant '*Rishi*' cult that had kept the two communities together till then. The Hindus had to run for their life and honour. They were hounded out and forced to migrate to Jammu, Delhi and other parts of the country to escape the wrath of the foreign provoked and controlled militancy. One has only to hope that good sense will prevail and the culture of mutual respect and harmony, brotherhood and acceptance of diverse faiths will once again thrive in this lovely 'Garden of Sages'. The valley that is known by the name of Kashmir has been referred to in the history, literature, memoirs and scriptures by so many other names too, Kashyapmar, Kashparera, Pradhyumna-peetha, Sharada-peetha and Sati Sar etc. It has had so many epithets, Aden of the East, 'Bhu-swarga', Paradise on Earth and so on. Just as every mountain peak of Kashmir is a place of pilgrimage, every spring is sacred and every cave is a shrine, every household of this holy land has produced a saint. Every village of this pious valley can boast of a sage of eminence. These saints and sages have perpetuated a tradition of peace and piety, truth and divinity that is fondly called the '*Rishi parampara*' or the tradition of sainthood. This tradition has crossed the boundaries of race and religion, faith and gender. These saints are reverentially remembered by all sections of the Kashmiri society. Eminent sages have made this place their abode during the time when Buddhism was at its peak here, during the period when Hindu Sanatana Dharma was at its zenith and during the time when Islam came to this land. We all owe it to our motherland to bring back this glory to our land, where flowers of all hues will flourish and enchanting fragrance will spread in every nook and corner. Let there be peace and let people of diverse faiths live here with dignity and honour. When that happens I as a true Kashmiri, shall distribute '*Tahar*' (cooked yellow rice) and '*Tsochi*' (baked bread) to all my friends and relatives.

2.0 KASHMIRI PANDITS

We, the Kashmiri Pandits are proud to be Kashmiris with this rich, varied and vibrant cultural background. By faith we observe the tenets of Sanatana Dharma. Our land is variously known as '*Pradhyumna Peetha*', '*Sharada Peetha*' and '*Reshi Vaer*'. We are known as '*Batta*' meaning honoured ones and as '*Pandit*' meaning learned ones. We are known for our simple, austere and honest living, for our scholarship and for our peace-loving nature. It is a fact of history that Kashmir is a Muslim-majority state but it is equally a fact of history that it has a rich Hindu past, which cannot be obliterated in spite of any concerted malicious effort to this end on the part of the negative forces. We have been living in this land from time immemorial. We have faced troubles, tribulations and the turmoil presented by the events that unfolded from time to time over many a century. After the advent of Islam in the fourteenth century we have had to leave the valley many times to safeguard our lives and honour. When the conditions improved we returned to this holy land as a lost child returns to his home or a bird returns to its nest in the evening. Sometimes when our services and expertise were needed, it was begged of us to return to our ancestral homes.

2.1 Shuklam

It is our tradition to begin any good activity with the word '*Shuklam*'. This Sanskrit word is very significant and means white. White symbolizes anything pure and pious, spotless and devoid of blemish and, therefore, it denotes 'The Supreme Brahman'.

We all know that on marriages and Yajnopavit ceremonies our ladies sing musical, meaningful and melodious songs and these are collectively called '*Vanavun*'. The lead song starts with an invocation of Lord Ganesha by the sacred symbolic word '*Shuklam*'. It is begged of him that the ceremony should pass off without any hindrance or difficulty. '*Shuklam kaerthaey heyivi vanavonuy, syadath kari Mahaganish sonuye* – Ladies! Utter the sacred word Shuklam and start the chorus so that our Lord Ganesh grants us success in our endeavour'. This singing is done in the form of '*Sama gana*' or recitation of Sama Veda in an elongated rhythm called '*Vilambit*'. Incidentally, different parts of our country have been the centers patronising different branches of one or the other Veda. As for our Kashmir some believe that it has been the seat of Rig Veda but the majority view is that the Paipplada Shakha of Atharva Veda was prevalent in ancient Kashmir. Even so the *Vanavun* has taken the Sama Veda as the model for its melody.

A month is divided into two fortnights, '*Shukla*', the bright fortnight and '*Krishna*', the dark one. Here again the bright fortnight is considered to be comparatively more auspicious. Three very important fasting

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days fall in this fortnight, 'Ashtami', 'Ekadashi' and 'Purnamasi'. Our new year begins on the first day of the 'Shukla-paksha' of the month of Chaitra. All our religious ceremonies, mantra chanting as also our daily prayer starts with this mantra in the form of praise of and a prayer to Ganesha:

Shukla'mbaradharam devam, shashivarnam, chaturbhujam, prasanna-vadanam dhyaye, sarva vigno'pshantaye, abhipretartha siddhyartham, poojitoyah suraira'pi, sarva vigna-chhidhe tasmai ganadhipataye namah – Let us meditate upon Ganesha, clad in white garments, whose colour resembles that of the Moon, with four arms and a smiling countenance, so that all the hindrances and obstacles are removed from our path. We bow to Ganesha, praised even by the gods, so that we achieve the desired without any difficulty.' Here again the dress of Ganesha, the Lord to be worshipped at the outset, has been described as 'Shukla', or spotless white indicating purity.

Goddess Saraswati, the deity of wisdom, knowledge and learning, whose worship has been very common in Kashmir is also referred to as 'Shukla', white, pure and shining. The shloka reads, '*Shuklam brahma-vicharasara-paramam, aadyam jagat vyapinim, veena pustaka dharinim'abhayadam, jadya'ndhakara-paham, haste sphatika malikam vidadhatim padmasane sansthitam, vande tam parameshwarim bhagawatim buddhi pradam sharadam* – We bow to Saraswati, the Goddess of learning, who is dazzling white, the crux of the thought of the Supreme, pervading the universe right from its inception, holding a Veena and a book and giver of fearlessness, one who removes the darkness of ignorance and holds a rosary of crystals in her hand and is seated on a lotus, the master of the universe, store house of fortune and giver of intellectual brilliance'. No wonder Kashmir is known as Sharadapeetha because our ancestors not only excelled in scholarship and learning but attached highest place of honour to knowledge in preference to worldly riches. The white rose of Kashmir is not only very attractive but also full of fragrance.

The other words to be uttered in the beginning are OM, TAT and SAT. The Gita says in Chapter XVII that these three words stand for the triple designation of the Supreme. OM is uttered at the time of yajna, charity and penance. TAT denotes undertaking these acts without aiming at the fruits thereof. SAT is used in the dual sense of reality and goodness and is thus very auspicious. It also denotes all deeds done as an offering unto the Divine. Let me, therefore, begin this work with the words Shuklam, OM, TAT, SAT with the hope that Ganesha will allow it to come to fruition unhindered and without any obstruction, Saraswati will make it meaningful, informative and purposeful so that it serves my brethren in all respects and the readers find it useful and interesting. I shall try and be as objective as is possible for an insider and write about my community without any malice towards any one else. The only aim of my writing these chapters is to present a true and factual picture of my community, which has a rich tradition and a distinct identity and which has suffered considerably in the past and has been facing a turmoil since the last decade of the previous century.

Kashmiri Pandits are all Brahmins. Whether there were other castes prevalent in Kashmir before the advent of Islam in the 14th century is a matter for detailed research. Some tribes of Dards, Pishachs,

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Shopaks are mentioned in the chronicles as being the inhabitants of the Valley. There appears to have been an understanding with these tribes and they were kept in good humour by giving them a dish of fishes on 'Gada Batta', a dish of special rice pudding on 'Khetsi mavas' or yellow rice on 'Monjhaer Tahaer'. When exactly they disappeared or whether they were subsumed is not known. Some scholars believe that there were some other castes besides Brahmins but most of them got converted to Islam and only Brahmins remained after withstanding the onslaught of the tyranny of the ilk of Sultan Sikander, the iconoclast.

How these Brahmins braved the hardship, troubles and tribulations, how they weathered the storm of tyranny and how they withstood the miseries unleashed by the alien rulers, their cronies and some black sheep of their own community, who had got converted for their self aggrandizement, is a story of bravado, perseverance and fortitude. Above all it speaks volumes about their spiritual strength and the unflinching faith they had upon their own traditional values. Their 'Yajnopavits' (the holy threads) were burnt by quintals. Their holy places were desecrated and raised to ground. Unclean and forbidden items like animal bones and flesh were forced into their mouths and special taxes called 'Jazia' were levied on them for professing a different religion. Many of them left their hearth and home and moved to safer places in the country. All honour to them that they carried forward, preserved and practised their traditional customs and rituals in all circumstances, changed environment and against all odds. What these traditional values are and what their spirituality connotes will be analysed and studied in the following pages under various headings.

3.0 DAILY ROUTINE

Since we are in minority, there are pockets of our dwellings where we have been living in the midst of the majority community professing Islam, a different faith. There are, however, some areas in the city of Srinagar where we have been living in large numbers. We have always persevered for harmony and brotherhood. We have respected the shrines and holy places of other faiths. We have preserved our tradition among all odds. Every cluster of ours has a neighbourhood temple, which has not only been a place of worship for us but also a hub of social activities. We rise early in the morning, take a dip in the river 'Vitasta' at the temple-ghat, perform 'Sandhya', and give oblation of water to our ancestors, 'Pitras', take a pot full of water to offer to Lord Shiva in his 'Linga' form, make circumambulation of the deity in the temple, read a couple of 'Stotras' with devotion and return to our homes. Some of us go all the way to the hill of 'Hari Parbat'. This hill, incidentally, is the abode of the Presiding Deity 'Sharika' of the Valley. It is believed that when the waters of the 'Sati Sar' as the valley at that time was, were drained off due to the efforts and penance of Kashyapa Rishi, after whom the valley gets its name, and when sages made it a habitat for their penance, a demon by the name of Jalodbhava would trouble them and disturb their penance 'Tapasya'. They reported the matter to their mentor Kashyapa, who requested Goddess to come to their rescue. The Goddess took the form of a myna (Sharika in Sanskrit and Haer in Kashmiri), brought a pebble in the beak and placed it at the mouth of the cave where the demon was hiding. Eventually the pebble grew to be a hillock and is the abode of the Goddess Sharika.

The hill has a huge wall erected around it during the reign of Akbar and has a few huge entry and exit points. The devotees start their circumambulation from the temple of Lord Ganesha, proceed to 'Devi Aangan' at the foothill of the main temple, pray there and then go around paying obeisance at different temples and shrines. Finally they come to the last gate 'Kathi darwaza', take rest there on the stone platform and then go back to their respective residences. There used to be almond trees in abundance in the fields between the hill and the wall around it. During the Spring season when these trees were in full blossom this place was a popular picnic spot on Sundays and holidays in general and on festival days like 'Navreh', 'Zanaga trai' and 'Vaisakh' etc. People would enjoy their favourite tea made in a Samovar and sip it with a helping of Nadar-monja after enjoying the kernel of dried water-nuts called 'Gaerya'.

Kashmiri Pandit is no different from a common man in regard to his daily routine. A common man is so engrossed with his daily routine that he hardly finds any time for other activities, hobbies, social service or spiritual quest. In this post-modern era the desires and aspirations of every one have touched the skies. Means and resources have also no doubt increased but these cannot keep pace with the increased demands. The result is a rat race that keeps man on toes all the time. All his time and energy is utilized in finding enough resources, putting them together and making use of them to satisfy his desires and meeting his aspirations. He gets up in the morning, prepares for the day, has a quick gruff and rushes to his work place. If he has his own vehicle, the traffic snarls are a source of tension for him. If he depends on public

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transport, its uncertainty causes him worries. Problems of the household and the office or establishment where he works make him tense and restless all the time. He has to work in an atmosphere favourable sometimes and unfavourable other times. He has to deal with people cooperative and understanding sometimes and hostile and unreasonable other times. All this adds to his worries and discomfort. Sometimes he feels frustrated and sometimes his perseverance and fortitude give him courage to rise up to the occasion. At times he wants to carry everyone with him and at other times he has to ignore and sideline some so that the roadblocks do not hinder his progress.

At his office he meets all sorts of people. There are appreciative seniors and thankless seniors, seniors who give credit to him for his initiative and accomplishments and seniors who deprive him of his due and take credit themselves while simultaneously blaming him for failures and shortcomings. There are cooperative and helpful colleagues and jealous and unhelpful colleagues, colleagues who support and supplement and colleagues who carry tales, hinder the work and engage always in leg pulling. There are diligent and zealous subordinates and lazy and incompetent subordinates, juniors who are eager to learn, assist and put in sincere efforts and juniors who always shirk work, find excuses for whiling away their time and dodge their responsibilities and thereby sabotage every work and programme. When the sailing is smooth his life appears to him a bed of roses and when it is rough and stormy he feels as if he is walking on the razor's edge.

At home again he has to put up with people of different attitudes and approaches. There is the conflict between the persons of different generations. Their thinking, their values, their assessment of different situations and their handling are poles apart. Then there is the clash of interests, which creates friction and is a cause for concern for him. Elders advise and juniors do not listen. Juniors demand and seniors do not accede. Tastes are different, habits vary and preferences do not often match. Income levels are different and expenditure patterns are different. Definitions of good and bad, right and wrong and desirable and undesirable are quite different for different members. Greed, coveting, envy, enmity and ego create mutual distrust, hatred and distances in the relationship. Social norms, unwanted traditions, decadent customs and obsolete practices are so taxing and demanding that he feels perplexed all the time.

No doubt man is the architect of his own destiny but his own efforts are affected and influenced by other factors including the nature, his fellowmen, circumstances and chances. After all he is only a spare part, an important one no doubt, in this cosmic machinery. Of course much depends on the manipulations, machinations and maneuvering that he can muster. If he can grab the chances that come his way, if he is able to harness the nature and its phenomenon to his advantage, if he can carry his fellowmen with him and if he can make the best use of circumstances, things will work to his advantage. If he is unable to make the best use of circumstances and the chances coming his way, if his fellowmen do not go along with him and if the nature also goes against him, he is bound to meet with failure and all his efforts will be in vain.

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Often it has been seen that everybody works and expects a return and that too a return of his liking. He may or may not get the desired return. If he gets a return of his choice, his aspirations sore high and he becomes more and more ambitious. This opens up a Pandora box of desires and fruits, returns and rewards with the result that he remains hungry and thirsty all the time. If on the other hand he does not get what he had desired he feels frustrated and crestfallen. The remedy is there provided we recognize it and put it in practice. The remedy does not lie in stopping to act and leaving everything to fate and destiny. The remedy lies in continuing to put in sincere efforts and making the effort itself a goal and deriving maximum pleasure out of these actions and efforts, doings and deeds. The Bhagavad Gita advocates that we should not work for a fruit and fruit should not be made the cause of an action. This is misrepresented and misunderstood as if we are asked to work purposelessly. Working for a fruit and working with a purpose are two different things. All our actions have to have a purpose. That purpose inspires us to work, gives us the proper direction and helps us sustain our efforts in spite of the hurdles and difficulties that we may encounter. On the other hand fruit is an allurements, a greed that blurs our vision and over shadows our sense of discrimination with the result that we strive hard to get the desired fruit by hook or by crook. This corrupts our thinking and misguides our actions.

A question always haunts the mind of this common man, subconsciously though. He wants to know what the aim of his life is, what the purpose of his toiling is and why at all should he work. Some people work to fulfill their basic necessities and all their time goes in doing that and there is hardly any time left to think beyond these necessities. Others who are able to spare sometime after catering to their minimum needs may or may not give a serious thought to this question. If they are wholly materialistic, which mostly they are, they think that the aim of their life is to gain control on more and more resources so that their comforts are added to and their luxuries are ensured. They may succeed in this endeavour but they are never satisfied for there is no upper limit to seeking access to luxurious life. This gives them restless times though they are in search of peaceful life. There are others, though fewer in numbers, who rise above the materialistic mindset. They put in some more effort, some more labour and toil either for self-satisfaction or for the good of others. Serving others, helping the needy and catering to the needs of others give them utmost pleasure. Seeking this lasting pleasure and maximizing it by being constantly behind this wheel of service becomes the aim of their life. They are unmindful of their personal comforts so long as their deeds lead to alleviating the suffering and the misery of others, fellow human beings, birds or animals.

Whether we live for ourselves or for others is a moot point. It depends on our attitude, our way of thinking and our preferences. If selfless service gives us pleasure and satisfaction we like to live for others. Even then we feel that we are living for ourselves because we live for our own pleasure, which we derive from the service rendered. There is this story about two friends who held opposite views about the driving force behind our actions. One of them held that we always work for our own self and the other opined that many a time we work for others only. Once the two friends were on a long drive along a road running by

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the side of a dense forest. Suddenly they heard shrieking of an animal. The one behind the wheel stopped the jeep, alighted and began looking around. He observed that a stag had his horns entangled in a bush and was unable to free itself and was struggling and shrieking. He removed the bushes to a side and the stag got freed. The poor animal was overjoyed and hopped away into the forest. When he was back at the wheel his friend gave a hearty laughter and said, 'your action has proved my point. What personal interest did you have in setting the stag free, was it not only for the good of the animal?' He replied, 'on the contrary this action of mine has proved my point. Had I not helped the poor stag to get free from the bushes its shrieks would have haunted me and I would have lost my sleep. I acted only to ensure peace of my mind and to ensure a sound sleep for myself'.

4.0 SOME REMINISCENCES

I have left Kashmir long back. Soon after completing my studies I applied for a job in the central government, sat for the competitive examination, appeared in the interview and got an appointment. My first posting was at Meerut in U.P. Although I worked and lived outside Kashmir because of this All India appointment, yet my family and I would visit Kashmir quite often. Be it a marriage or a Yajnopavit ceremony in the family or in the relationship, be it an ailment or a bereavement or be it simply spending the vacation, we would travel to the happy valley. We would meet our relatives, friends and acquaintances and keep our bonds in tact. Above all we would visit some places of pilgrimage, places of recreation and places of importance and significance. My last visit was in 1988, when I could smell the change in the atmosphere and attitudes, feel the impact of the 1986 upheaval, realize the mood of hatred and animosity and naturally sense the impending tempest that was going to blow off the myth of the composite culture.

On return to Delhi I told my friends that the same Muslim friend of mine who would reverentially vacate a seat in the bus for a Hindu lady in Sixty's was scornful and disrespectful towards her in Eighty's. The mason and the carpenter working in a Hindu family, on being told to do their job sincerely, would observe smilingly, 'and why not, after all we only have to reside in this house eventually'. If a visitor from any other part of the country declined to hire a horse carriage at the Reception Centre, the *tongawalla* would mischievously remark, 'Of course you don't need a *tonga*, you need a mosque-ship, meaning a coffin'. The writing on the wall was there, loud and clear, for all to see. The storm that was brewing as an under-current came to the fore in 1990. There was announcement from the mosques that Hindus should leave or else face death. An old warning was repeated in these three rhyming words, '*Raliv, Tsaliv ya Galiv*' meaning either you join us (by getting converted) or leave the place or get killed. Hindus were hounded out and naturally they migrated en mass to safer areas. Not that this was the first time that the Hindus had to leave Kashmir due to persecution but the situation was different this time. In the past such mass migration was caused by the tyranny unleashed by the Muslim invaders, rulers and their governors and abetted by fanatic clerics. This time it was the result of well planned ethnic cleansing, master minded by a hostile neighbour but carried out by the fellow inhabitants of the valley. As an after thought and to answer the growing criticism from world over, the people who were responsible for bringing about this mass Hindu exodus started putting the blame on the then Governor Shri Jagmohan saying that it was at his instance that the Hindus migrated from the valley. There cannot be a worse travesty of truth. Kashmiri Hindus are no doubt peace loving and non-violent by nature but they are not so naïve as to leave their hearths and homes at the behest of some one. Ironically once the Hindus were gone, the hired mercenaries called Jihadis started tormenting the Muslim families by demanding large amounts of money, things in kind and their young girls for marriage. As a result many self-respecting Muslims also had to migrate to safer places in the country.

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Since then terrorism, killing, looting and setting buildings and bridges on fire have been order of the day. Guns, grenades and goons rule the roost. Going to Kashmir has become impossible for an ordinary person. Since the economy of the valley, which largely depended on tourism and trade, has got shattered there is an attempt on the part of the government to present a rosy picture. But the million-dollar question is whether the hearts have changed, whether mutual trust and confidence, love and harmony can be restored. We have been driven out of Kashmir but Kashmir cannot be driven out of our hearts. It is our motherland for the last five millennia. It is in our hearts. We long to go back to our roots, to our homes and to the cradle of our great culture and rich tradition. We long to go for a picnic to '*Badam Vaer*' the garden of almond blossom, for a circumambulation to Hari Parbat, for nightlong '*Keertan*' (singing of hymns) to Tulamula', for meditation to '*Deevi Aangan*', to fetch the holy clay for '*Partheshwara*' to '*Shankaracharya*' and to sing and dance with the running brooks, waterfalls and charming fountains. We long to go to Khrew to have darshan of '*Jwala Ji*', to go to Mattan and worship the Sun at the '*Martand*' and offer pooja at the feet of our revered '*Zishta Devi*' at Zeethyaer. We long to go to Sumbal, to the '*Sangam*' at Shadipore, to Anantnag, to Vaskur and Lala-Trag, to the sacred temples of Ganapatyar, Somyar, Raghunath Mandir, '*Ramatsandrun*', MahaKali and different Bhairavas on the banks of the Vitasta and elsewhere.

Let me tell my young friends who have not seen Kashmir in good old days that on the onset of the Spring we used to go to Hari Parbat for picnic under the almond trees. This would usually coincide with our festivals of '*Navreh*', '*Zanga Trai*' and '*Vaishyakh*'. Hari Parbat is, as the legend goes, that pebble grown into a hillock, which was brought by Goddess Sharika in the form of a myna in its beak and placed at the mouth of the cave to shut the demon Jalodbhava inside lest he should trouble the sages doing penance in the holy valley. There is a temple of the Goddess on this hill with '*Shri Chakra*' because of which the deity is also called '*Chakreswari*'. There are other temples for other deities starting from Shri Ganesha, all over the hill and devotees come to this place every morning for a circumambulation and worship. Around the hill a huge wall with some entry gates was constructed during the reign of King Akbar. All over the place there used to be innumerable almond trees. These would blossom in the spring season and the entire field would be striven with fallen flowers of these trees. It would appear as if the carpet of the green turf was embroidered by a craftsman with these flowers of light jasmine and white colours. It is this spot that we called '*Badam Vaer*' or the garden of almonds, which was a favourite picnic place for us.

Just below the staircase leading to the temple of Goddess Sharika there was a huge ground with a number of '*Dharmashalas*'. This place is known as '*Deevi Aangan*' or the courtyard of the Devi fondly called '*Maej Haer*' or Mother Myna since She had taken that form to rescue her devotees. Incidentally the Sanskrit word for Myna is '*Sarika*' and thus the name of this Presiding Deity of the Valley '*Sharika Bhagavati*'. This courtyard was the favourite spot for the devotees to sit cross-legged and meditate. Those who go for daily circumambulation to this sacred hill feature would invariably rest at this place for a while and recite '*Stotras*' and '*Shlokas*' in praise of their beloved Mother. During the almond blossom it was here and around this place that people would throng for picnic, the favourite items for consumption being '*Nadaer Monja*' (a savoury item made of lotus stem), '*Gaerya*' (a water lily nut), '*Mogael Chai*' (a

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decoction of black tea leaves) and a variety of bakery items, '*Kulchi, Telvor, Bakirkhaen, girda, katlama*' etc.

'*Ashtami*' or the eighth day of the bright fortnight of every lunar month is the day of pilgrimage to Tula Mula. Here we have the shrine of 'Maha Rajna' in a L-shaped spring. The whole area covered by an iron fence is paved with chiseled stone slabs with a number of huge Chinar trees grown all over. Outside the fence there are rows of houses; the ground floors of these houses are used as shops providing various items of necessity and pooja and the upper floors are used as Dharmasalas. By the side of the shrine a branch of the river Sindh flows where the pilgrims take a dip before entering the holy premises. Singing of '*Bhajans*' and the devotional music that continues throughout the night reverberates in the ears of us all who have been part of the festivities there in the good old days. The collective '*Aarati-Gaurim-ambam-amburuha-akshim-aham-eeday*' (I bow before the beautiful mother Goddess whose eyes are like lotus) sung by thousands of devotees in the morning and evening with a plateful of lighted lamps held with both hands is an indelible scene, which is imprinted on the canvas of my mind forever. It is customary to offer milk and candy lumps in the holy spring. The vendors would sell these items and attract customers by singing: '*Dodahan baeviv tami saet praeviv*' meaning that you offer milk and you will have your desire fulfilled.

On the eve of '*Shravana Purnima*', I remember going on foot all the way from my home in the downtown Srinagar to Durganag at the foot of the famous Shankaracharya hill. The ancient name of this hill was Gopadari but because of the Siva temple atop this hill it is popularly known as Shankaracharya hill. There would be groups of singers singing hymns in chorus to the accompaniment of '*No't*', the clay pitcher, Tabla and harmonium. I would pray in the temple, listen to a couple of '*Bhajans*' and then climb the hill. On reaching the top I would go up the first lap of the stairs leading to the temple and rest on a shelf-like pavement of the peripheral wall. In the wee hours of the Purnima I would have darshan of the '*Shiva Lingam*', offer prayers and start on my return journey. On my way back I would dig near a '*Chinar*' tree and take with me some quantity of the sacred clay. At home we would make a number of figures with this clay including that of Shiva, Parvati, Ganesha etc. These would be worshipped with devotion applying sandal paste, offering flowers and chanting hymns and '*Mantras*'. While in all parts of the country this day is celebrated as '*Raksha Bandhan*', we in Kashmir keep fast and worship Shiva on this day. It is on this day that the devotees have darshan of the famous ice-lingam at the pilgrim centre of Swami Amarnath cave.

Our beloved Kashmir is full of sacred shrines, temples and pilgrim centers. Every mountain peak is sacred, every spring is holy and every temple has a long history of its establishment and the tradition of worship. Within the capital city of Srinagar also there are a number of temples, each unique for one reason or the other. We have the famous Ganapati temple at Ganpatyar on the bank of the river Vitasta. People throng to this place to worship Ganesha every morning and on the special occasion of '*Ganesh Chaturdashi*'. Then we have the temple dedicated to the Moon at '*Somyar*' again on the riverbank near the second

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bridge. There is a special pooja in this temple on Mondays coinciding with 'Amavasya'. We have two temples for Shri Rama, one on the bank of the river called Raghunath Mandir and the other very near the famous Sri Pratap College called 'Rama Tsandrun'. Apart from daily prayers in these two temples people visit them in large numbers on 'Rama Navami' day, the birthday of Shri Rama.

These are some of the places imprinted on the canvas of my memory. There are many other spots sacred and pious, which are engraved in our hearts. These places are not only part of our culture but also part of our very existence. I for one, hailing as I do from Chhattabal, cannot forget my beloved Bhairav temple dedicated to 'Bokhataleshwar Bhairav', one of the eight Bhairavas. This temple has been the hub of all religious activities for the inhabitants of this area. It is here that we were taught 'Sandhya', 'Stotras' and various devotional 'shlokas'. It is here that we used to perform the annual Hawan. It is our bounden duty to give adequate information about these places to our children, who have not seen them. When the times change for better, when good sense prevails on those who are misguided, when the necessity for mutual trust, harmony and brotherhood dawns on people now on the path of exclusive-ism and fundamentalism and when the futility of wielding the gun is realized and we are able to go back to our beloved valley with honour and in safety, let our new generation not feel out of sorts to see these important places. Let them be well informed about them so that they find the atmosphere familiar and are able to own it straightway. 'Honge kamyab, ham honge kamyab ek din – we certainly shall be victorious one day and the day is not far off'.

5.0 OUR FAITH AND IDENTITY

We are Hindus by faith but we love, respect and adore all other beliefs and doctrines in equal measure. We believe in the existence of God and worship Him in our own way. We go to the temple and pray in front of an idol as a symbol that helps us in concentration and contemplation. We know that truth is not in these symbols but in the universe but we also believe that if through these symbols we are able to see the truth it will only strengthen our faith. We offer prayers to various deities like the Sun, whom we call 'Devatas', or the shining ones, knowing fully well that they are only the visible forces of God, who is unborn, beginning-less, eternal, formless, un-paralleled, unique and Supreme entity – a Universal Consciousness, Being and Bliss. We put oblations in the fire to purify the atmosphere polluted by our fellow beings and us. We follow certain rituals, which help us manifest the divinity in us. We celebrate the death anniversaries of our ancestors and offer oblations to them, only to remind ourselves of the debt we owe to them, which needs to be paid back by perpetuating the nobility shown by them in thought, word and deed. The intention behind all these activities of ours is to go from exoteric to esoteric, from mundane to spiritual, from gross to subtle and from a part to the whole.

Since we have been driven out of our land and since we have been living in forced exile for the last fifteen years now, it is all the more imperative for us to recall the important facets of our identity and then see how best we can retain them in the changed circumstances and the different environment that we live in. We may have to make a few changes here and there. We may have to compromise on some details but the basics must prevail so that our distinct identity as Kashmiri Pandits remains intact. We must remember that the external elements are not important but the intrinsic elements that are hallmarks of our identity are. We are, therefore, duty bound to ensure that our rich traditions and pious customs are carried forward. It is justifiably intended to recapitulate these traditions and reiterate the importance of preserving these, since we owe it to our progeny that we transmit to them what we have inherited from our forefathers who themselves nurtured this legacy so painstakingly.

5.1 Shiva Worship

The full-moon day of the month of Shravana is an important day for the Hindus throughout the country. It is called '*Raksha Bandan*'. On this day sisters tie '*Rakhi*' on the wrist of their brothers, take a vow from them that they will always protect their honour and strengthen the bondage of love between them. For us in Kashmir this day has an added significance. We observe this day as a day of worship of the Divine in His benign form of Shiva who gives peace and tranquility. Shiva is a concrete concept of the Divine, which has emerged by the amalgamation of the practices of worship prevailing in ancient India, the Rudra of the Vedas, the oval shape of the cosmos in the form of the Lingam and the unborn cause of the causal

chain of the entire creation. People all over the world throng to the cave of Swami Amarnath and worship the Ice Lingam, which increases and decreases in size along with the Moon. This cave is approachable from two sides. The pilgrims either take the route via Pahalgam and then walk through Chandanvari, Sheshnag, Vavjan, Panchtarni and then reach the holy shrine. This route is longer but less arduous and, therefore, more popular. Or they go via Sonamarg and Baltal and take a short cut direct to the cave. In spite of the official arrangements for medical aid and other help and the arrangements made by voluntary organizations for food, shelter and clothing the weather sometimes plays a spoilsport resulting in grave hardship to the pilgrims. The terrorists' threat over the last decade and a half has made the journey more risky.

On this day the devotees throng other Shiva temples in large numbers, prominent among these being the temple atop the hill of Shankaracharya (old name Gopadhari). People arrive at the foothill of this shrine known as '*Durganag*' or the spring of the Goddess Durga overnight. They take a dip there, offer prayers and then climb the hill. Some of them stay back and enjoy the nightlong singing of the hymns in the precincts of the shrine. On the hilltop also there are different groups with their musical instruments singing in praise of Lord Shiva in chorus. Early in the morning they enter the temple and have a glimpse of the Shiva-lingam. After the customary *pooja* and the circumambulation they embark on the return journey to their homes. Some of them collect the holy clay from near the Chinar tree a little distance from the temple. This clay is used to make clay-lingam of the Lord at home, called '*Partheeshwara*'. Every home has its own tradition about the number of idols to be prepared. It may be three, five, seven, eleven, one hundred and one or even one thousand and one. The head of the family performs *pooja* by offering water, milk, yogurt, honey, flowers, fruits and incense. Lamps are lighted, camphor is put to flame and '*Aarati*' is offered, after which everyone is given '*prashada*'. Fast is observed throughout the day and only one meal is taken.

Tilaka is an essential symbol of a Kashmiri Pandit. Whether at home in the traditional prayer room called '*Thokur Kuth*' or the room of the Lord, at the mohalla temple or at any pilgrim shrine, we always put a mark on our forehead just between the two eyebrows. It is made of sandalwood paste or saffron paste. Kashmiris do not have any division of Shaivaites and Vaishnavites as in the South. Since most of us are non-vegetarians we prepare meat dishes even on Shivaratri. Some of us who do not prepare non-vegetarian dishes on this occasion are, however, called Vaishnavas. In the South the Shaivites put tilaka on their forehead horizontally while the Vaishnavites put it vertically, sometimes even in a U-shape. We have no such distinguishing marks for the Vaishnavas in our community. All of us worship the Divine Brahman in his three forms of Shiva, Vishnu and Shakti.

5.2 Worship of the Mother Goddess

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An important seat of Mother Goddess in Kashmir is at Tula Mula. A small marble temple situated in a L-shaped spring in a picturesque landscape, full of Chinar trees and surrounded by the waterways of the great Sindhu is a popular place of worship. There are 'Dharmashalas' all over the place as also 'Yajna shalas'. Every eighth day of the bright fortnight of the lunar month the devotees assemble at this place. Some perform yajna. Some sing hymns. Some are busy circumambulating the spring and some are engaged in silent meditation. The morning and evening 'Aarati' is a treat to watch and participate in. It can turn any atheist into a staunch believer when thousands of devotees stand around the shrine, with plateful of lighted lamps in both hands, singing in praise of the consort of Shiva, 'Shiva-patni' 'Gaurim-ambam amburuh-akshim-aham eedey – I bow before the beautiful Mother-Goddess whose eyes are lotus-like.' It is customary to take a dip in the Sindhu canal before entering the precincts of the shrine. The place is reached by boat going down the Vitasta up to Shadipura and then entering into the Sindhu canal. In olden days people used to cross by boat through the Anchar Lake and then walk the remaining distance. Some would go by a horse carriage right up to the village, which has been replaced by buses and cars. To reach this pilgrim centre the devotees have to go through Vicharnag and Achar Lake. There is a symbolic meaning to both these places. In order to realize the Divine the seeker must cleanse his thoughts (Vichara in Sanskrit) and adopt a righteous conduct (Aachara in Sanskrit). By inference, therefore we are asked to be pure in thought and deed and then only the pilgrimage will be fruitful.

The shape of the spring at this shrine of Maharajna is also noteworthy. No doubt it is L-shaped but one end is pointed apex shaped. Knowledgeable people have said that the shape of the spring is that of the small bag in which the rosary is kept by the devotees while telling the beads for 'Mantra-japa'. The pointed apex denotes that one must strive to rise to the peak of spirituality in order to be one with the Divine. Another feature of this spring is that the colour of the water changes giving indication of the coming events. It is said that whenever the ruler of the state was nearing death or whenever the inhabitants were to face some calamity, the water would turn black. Apart from the usual floral offerings, the only other things that can be offered here are a lump of candy called 'Kand' and milk. Since the milk in Sanskrit is called 'Ksheer' the presiding deity of this shrine is also called 'Ksheer Bhawani'. It is believed that the deity was originally in Sri Lanka where non-vegetarian items were offered by the Rakshas worshippers. Goddess would not have it any more and so asked Hanuman to find an alternative abode for Her and Her pet snakes. He selected the village Tulamula because there was some marshy land adjoining the village where the snakes were comfortable. Thereafter he brought the deity here and it was desired that no non-vegetarian offerings would be made. The vendors are heard saying, 'Dodahan baeviv, tamisaet praeviv- offer milk at this shrine and you will achieve the desired'.

6.0 CUSTOMS RELATING TO MARRIAGE CEREMONY

A marriage in our Kashmiri community is a complex socio-religious affair. Generally marriages are arranged and within the community. Occasionally, however, these may be love marriages and/or outside the community, largely because of the greater exposure that our children have been getting being scattered all over the country and abroad. Match making is done through the middleman called '*Manzimyore*', who may be a '*Purohit*' or a professional matchmaker. He will get an extract of the horoscope called '*Tekin*', representing the configuration of the stars at the time of the birth of the prospective groom. This is matched with the '*Tekin*' of the girl to be married. Generally the family priest or an astrologer does the matching or tallying. Once he certifies that the two have compatible configuration of their stars, the two families make enquiries about each other. The groom's side sends a '*Kulawali*', a family tree giving the details about the near relations, to the bride's side. After making sure that the families are without any blemish and that they are acceptable on the basis of their status, social standing and financial position, the two sides enter into direct negotiations. These often include the hints of what dowry the groom's side expects. The bride's people will show their humility by saying that 'we are *safed posh* (literally people wearing white clothes implying a family of modest means) and shall send our daughter with *poshi dejhor*' (literally ornaments made of flowers), meaning that they are moderate financially and would be able to give a modest dowry. The groom's side will declare their expectations by saying, 'please give due regard to our *dastar*' (literally the turban symbolizing honour), meaning that the dowry and hospitality should be with due regard to their status so that their prestige is not impaired.

These unofficial negotiations are given a seal of confirmation during a function called '*Kath-bath*', meaning a dialogue. This dialogue is also popularly known as '*Kasam Driya*' or pledge and promise. The idea is to confirm formally that the two sides have agreed to enter into the relationship. On this occasion the girl's side invites the prominent men folk from the boy's side for a high tea or a feast. Formal introduction is exchanged and the eldest person from the girl's side offers a flower to the eldest person of the boy's side. This is symbolic of the request made by the bride's parents that their daughter is as delicate as a flower and needs to be treated gently. The boy's parents on their part promise to treat her kindly. They say that 'she is our daughter and was with you only for bringing up and now we are taking her back. So you need not entertain any misgivings about the treatment she is going to get in our home'.

This function is followed by another function known as '*Gandun*' or betrothal. This is celebrated on a grand scale. A feast is thrown for near and dear ones of the groom's family. This is largely a social function where the near relatives of the two parties are introduced to each other and a bond of affection is established. There is, however, a minor religious side to this in that '*Tilaka*' is applied to the prospective groom and bride. Nowadays, even rings are exchanged and the two are given some gold ornaments and a set or two of dresses, the boy's side gives it to the bride and the girl's side to the groom. In addition the girl's parents send sweets, fruits and dry fruits and pancakes etc. to the boy's people. Times have changed

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and now a number of electric and other gadgets are also sent along with these items. In fact this serves as an indication of the size of the dowry that is going to follow at the time of the marriage proper. This custom is the proverbial tip of an iceberg of the bad customs prevalent in our society, which have made the marriage a show business, ostentation, a deal and a commercial transaction in which boys and girls become a commodity to be traded in an auction.

The date and time of the marriage called '*Lagna*', or an auspicious moment is fixed in consultation with the family priest, with due regard to the Moon sign of the prospective couple. Two social functions precede the event proper and these are '*Saata livun* and *saata mas mutsrin*' or house cleaning and unlocking the hair of the bride on an auspicious moment. Then follow a series of feasts that are arranged by the near relatives on both sides separately. These are called '*Dapan Bata*' and on this occasion the parents of the bride and the groom invite their relatives formally and in return get some cash and dresses, depending upon the nearness of the relationship. In good old days invitation was given personally. Now that the community is scattered only nearest relations are invited in person. For others the formal invitation card is sent by post. These cards are mostly in English, sometimes in Hindi and rarely in Kashmiri. Lately some Kashmiris have given the lead in getting their invitation cards printed in Kashmiri also in addition to English and Hindi. This augurs well for the preservation and popularization of our mother tongue.

These feasts take a fortnight or so and during this time arrangements are made for the marriage function. Advance payment called '*Sai*' is made to vegetable-man, milkman, meat-seller, cook, baker and a host of other suppliers. In case the accommodation on the top floor of the house called '*kaeni*' is not sufficient a closed canopy is arranged in a nearby ground or else any neighbour with a large '*kaeni*' comes to the rescue. The actual function starts with formal '*livun*' or cleaning. From this day onwards singing sessions start and continue till midnights. Typical slow-rhythmic verses are also sung much like Samaveda mantras and these are specified for each occasion right from the formal housecleaning. This is called '*Vanavun*' and starts by invoking Lord Ganesh by the epithet '*Shuklam*' or the Bright One. The opening word is '*Henze*' an address to the ladies in the gathering to join in the singing. The function proper begins on '*Maenziraath*' or the night on which henna-paste is applied to the bride and the groom on their hands and feet. Decorative designs are drawn on the palm of the bride and other ladies, young and old also follow suit. Nightlong singing takes place to the accompaniment of '*Tumbakhnaer*' –an earthenware percussion musical instrument and a '*No't*' –an earthenware common pitcher. Improvised musical instruments like a bronze plate gently patted by a metal key to produce a sound or a tong with iron rings are also used. When the gathering is in high ecstasy some ladies dance donning different dresses of a washer-man or a boatman etc.

Then follows a purely religious ritual called '*Divagon*'. This is a small homa when three deities, the Sun, the Brihaspati and Indra are invoked to bless the bride and the groom. On this occasion itself the bride puts on all her ornaments including the famous '*Dejhor*', the symbol of marriage. The religious ritual is

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preceded by a bath called '*kani-shran*', when the groom and the bride are bathed with milk, yogurt, honey and water. This is done separately for the two in their respective places. It is on this day usually that the priest of the Bride's side arrives at the groom's house and invites them to come for the wedding with pomp and show. The formal invitation is in the form of a *Lagna-cheeri* giving the auspicious moment fixed for the marriage and invocation to the Almighty to make the wedlock a success and shower blessings on the couple. This ritual is the religious inauguration for the two to enter into wedlock. This wedlock is inseparable and there is no room for any divorce. Alas of late the number of divorces in our community has increased. Once the young men and women are told that their marriage is sacrosanct and unbreakable, they are sure to adjust and show greater patience and tact to make the marriage work to the satisfaction of both the partners as also their respective parents and near ones. The institution of marriage should not be taken lightly or else a trivial friction is bound to break the bonds due to intolerance and indiscretion.

Next comes the marriage proper called '*Lagan*' or the auspicious moment. This is determined by the priest with reference to the horoscopes of the two, the bride and the groom. The groom is received and ushered in after a pooja at the main entrance known as '*darapooza*'. Thereafter he is taken to '*Lagna mandap*'. Fire is lit and oblations are offered with Veda mantras. Then there is '*Saptapadi*' the traditional seven steps, which are in the nature of seven vows to be followed during the married life in their mutual relationship. The social aspect of the function is a grand and elaborate feast arranged by the girl's side for the '*Baraat*' or the relatives and friends of the boy. There are three major customs that are the distinctive feature of our way of wedding. The first is the custom in which the bride and the groom see each other in a mirror. In olden days this was the first time that the two would see each other. Nowadays when the girl and the boy have met a number of times, talked to each other and known each other well, this custom has been reduced to a mere ritual only. The second is called '*Dayi Bata*' or the divine feast, a custom according to which the two dine in the same plate and feed each other. This has the symbolic importance of creating a bond of love between the two. The third is the '*Posh pooza*' or the custom of showering a heap of flowers on the bride and the groom while the priest chants mantras. We in Kashmir treat the new couple as Shiva and Parvati and propitiate them with reverence and devotion. Flowers are showered on them first individually and then together by all present and thus they are literally worshipped.

In the marriage procession a small boy accompanies the groom gaily dressed. He is called, '*Po't maharaza*' or the back up groom. During the ceremony proper a boy and a girl are also called in and worshipped. They are respectively called, '*Layi-boy*' and '*Ganga-vyas*'. These perhaps represent deities, a god and a goddess and are worshipped so that they bless the newly weds. The bride goes to her new home with all the pomp and show. The two are received by the eldest lady in the family. A small water pot is hovered around, sweets are given to eat and lighted lamp in a plate is placed in front by way of auspicious greetings. Then the sister of the groom closes the door on them and opens only when she is paid adequately. This is called '*Zaem Braand*', and why not, after all her brother has brought a bride.

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When the groom leaves for the wedding from his house, when he reaches the in laws' place, when he leaves for his home along with the bride and when he reaches there with his newly wed, they are required to stand on a colourful circular diagram drawn on the floor called 'Vyug'. At this place also sweets are offered and lamps are lit. The same night the two go for a formal dinner to the girl's house. This is called 'Satraat', meaning the night of truth, the truth being that the two are now spiritually one and have to tread on the journey of their life together. They must strive for *Artha* or acquiring wealth and *Kama* or fulfilling their desires with due regard to *Dharma* or righteousness. On Tuesday or Saturday following the wedding there is a custom whereby large sized sweet pancakes called 'Roth' are sent by the parents of the girl to the groom's house and on the same day the bride comes to her father's house for a change. This is called 'Roth Khabar'. Then there is a feast exclusively for the groom and this is known as 'Phira Saal' or a feast on return. Every time the bride visits her parents she is sent off with 'Noon tsochi - Atagat' comprising salt, cakes and some money based on the self-imposed rate called 'Teth'. All these modest and symbolic customs have been thrown to the winds by our brethren over the years and huge and costly dowry has taken their place. We are uprooted right now and scattered all over the country and abroad. Let us look inwards and see for ourselves whether such bad customs behove a well read community such as ours. Let us ensure that a marriage remains an unbreakable spiritual bond between a bride and a groom, a social bond between the two families involving regard, respect and concern for each other and an event devoid of all evils, bad customs and avoidable ostentations.

7.0 MARRIAGES, OUTSIDE THE COMMUNITY

Ours is a very small community, a miniscule one, scattered all over the country and even abroad. We go by the nomenclature 'Kashmiri Pandits'. Prior to 1990 we were largely concentrated in the valley and those who were outside also had their roots in the valley. Of course there was a section of our society whose forefathers had migrated centuries back due to the then prevailing persecution in Kashmir and had settled in different parts of the country. It goes to their credit that most of them, almost without exception, would find match for their children from within the community even though they had to find that from distant places. Kashmiris in U.P. would hunt for brides and bridegrooms from distant states of Rajasthan, cities of Madhya Pradesh and the Punjab and vice versa. Those within the state would naturally join in relationship within the community itself. This kept our community largely in tact socially and culturally and ensured its distinct identity. Our tradition, rituals and customs were maintained with a very little variation, which together with hundred percent literacy gave this community a place of pride, prestige and dignity. The community produced many a stalwart in the fields of literature, law, medicine, education, politics, philosophy and the like. We are justifiably proud of this creditable past. Of late the number of our girls and boys marrying outside the community is on the rise. The number of divorce cases in the community has also increased substantially. This has resulted in broken families, single parents, disturbed lives, turmoil and stinking conditions. It is also threatening our distinct identity as a community causing concern among the elders and youngsters alike. Let us examine the causes of this sad state of affairs.

The causes for young boys and girls marrying outside their community are not far to seek. There may be stray causes for exceptional cases here and there but in general there are two major causes. Firstly there is the changed situation in which our young boys and girls have wider exposure. They come into contact with the young boys and girls of different religions, from different backgrounds, belonging to different castes and hailing from different states and ethnic groups. This inter-action creates proximity, attraction, infatuation and then results in courtship and marriage. This infatuation often makes them blind to the realities of life that they are going to face once they enter into wedlock and this blindness proves in many cases to be disastrous and devastating for the married life in course of time. Another major reason is dowry system (prevailing in most of the communities) and the resultant maltreatment of the brides. Once the children decide to marry out of caste, their parents are no longer obliged to follow the norms in vogue in their own community or those of the community in which the marriage takes place and thus they get rid of a sizeable expenditure which they were required to incur otherwise. This can hardly be treated as an acceptable reason for marriage even though in practice it is found to be expedient. That is why we come across parents who have no objection if their daughters marry out of caste but would prefer their sons to bring in brides of their own ethnic group. The term caste here is meant to convey a wider meaning covering the same ethnic group, speaking the same language and having the same traditional and cultural background. The caste in its real meaning has lost sense, in urban areas and major townships completely and in larger rural areas to a great extent. No doubt in small, remote and backward villages the caste

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system is still in practice though banned by law of the land. Social evils are eradicated by social reforms and social awareness more than by rules and laws and, therefore, take a long time to vanish.

Let us consider the consequences of marrying outside one's community. Before doing so let us not forget that a marriage generally and certainly in Indian tradition is not only a relationship between a man and a woman but also between their families as well. It is, therefore, of utmost importance for the bride and the groom to fit in the new environment. This assimilation and adjustment becomes difficult and sometimes even impossible when the new family, to which one is related as a result of this wedding, speaks a different language, has a different tradition of customs and rituals, a different set of festivals and a completely different way of celebrating them. Sitting among the members of this family one feels like an alien and miserable when during the conversation one is made to feel that one belongs to a different stock altogether. Their different food habits may fascinate initially but soon the food becomes unpalatable and a cause of dejection and aversion. The bride cannot relate to her in-laws to the extent and in the manner they would like her to relate with the result that she is miserable and often unwelcome. She may even have to suffer taunts like 'how can she know anything, coming as she does from a different background'. Her parents and other relations also are not kindly disposed towards her for breaking the family tradition and marrying in a different community. Consequently she loses the love and affection of her childhood and is not able to have it compensated by the love and respect of adulthood that she would certainly acquire had she married in her own community. The groom also has to face the wrath of his own family by bringing his bride from a different community. He too gets a scant regard from the family of his wife and thus is a loser on either side. Whenever there is a family gathering in his in-laws house he is conspicuous like a black sheep among the sheep with white wool on their bodies. The only way out is separation, which itself throws the couple into seclusion, alone sans relatives, sans help and assistance. Like the lone morning star without companions they feel forsaken and forlorn, in an unenviable position. That marriages are made in heaven is of little consolation in such situations.

This conjugal relationship boils down to a situation where the two, wife and husband are just by themselves, the two of them. In course of time they beget children. Now a new set of problems crops up, for the children and the parents. These children belong to the community of neither their father nor their mother. They may learn both the languages of their two parents but can claim no language as their mother tongue. They are successors of neither tradition and inheritors of neither culture. They belong to here nor there. They are misfit in the community of their mother as also of their father. It is often seen that such children adopt a third language without having any moorings in that and own no tradition as such except perhaps some common festivals like Holi and Deevali, without any special fervour or significance attached to these festivals in different communities. These children are a pathetic lot and when the occasion comes for them to find a life partner and marry, they can hunt for one neither in this community nor in that. Often they land up in yet another community, different from the communities of their father and mother. They remain without any roots, without any links with the tradition like a kite with strings cut, drifting in this and that direction. Certainly nobody would like to land himself in such a situation or

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see his children in a rootless state. After all man is a social animal and he cannot live in isolation. This isolation is best avoided by marrying within ones community as far as possible.

Some times people marry even outside their religion. Some so-called pragmatic and progressive persons hail it as a step in the right direction and appreciate it on the basis of equality and oneness of the mankind. On the face of it one may find it laudable but down to earth in real life it is fraught with disastrous consequences. All said and done, religions are not same, nor even similar. They are poles apart in their rituals, practices, methods of prayer, beliefs and even their attitude towards the adherents of other faiths. These differences make a man, who marries a woman belonging to a different religion, a misfit in the company of his in-laws. For the women it is simply disastrous and even conversion does not put her at ease. Then comes the question of what religion the children should follow. This becomes a bone of contention between the two and leads to breaking the marriage itself. There are some rigid faiths, the followers of which insist that whomsoever marries in their religion, whether a man or a woman, must first get converted. This insistence either leads to a friction before the nuptial knots are tied or forces the prospective couple to sever all connections with their respective families.

Not all arranged marriages are a success and not all love marriages are a failure. Similarly not all marriages within the community are always a success and not all marriages out of the community are necessarily a failure. Moreover, marriage is a personal matter for every man and woman and no body has any right to interfere, dictate or sermonize where this individual matter is involved. We cannot transgress this fundamental right of a person to choose his life-partner and force him to marry within his community. But alas! If only youth knew and age could. It is the paramount duty of the knowledgeable, the experienced and the learned parents and seniors to educate their youngsters and put them wise about such matters. They should be made aware of the pros and cons of marrying out of their community vis-à-vis marrying within their own and thereafter the decision should be left to them. Let them not, later in their life after facing the realities, accuse their elders of not guiding them at the proper time. It is imperative that all the children are soaked in the nectar of cultural richness and the grandeur of tradition so that they realize the importance and utility of these essential elements in the life of a community. From day one they should be made to develop love and pride for their values, their tradition and customs. This will, in course of time, create in them a firm resolve to find a life partner within their own community and the cases of marrying out of the community will be an exception rather than a rule. This timely education and ingrained values will take care of those cases where persons marry outside their community due to the increased exposure and contact with the persons of other communities in the fast changing scenario all over. This will also ensure that nobody takes a wrong decision due to ignorance and inadequate knowledge of the consequences that are likely to follow by marrying outside his own community.

The second cause has to be tackled collectively at social level. It is really a shame for any community if their girls are to be given in marriage to the boys of other communities not for any worthwhile consideration like the suitability or good qualities of the groom but merely to escape the expenditure on

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dowry and other such bad customs. Let us not trade in marriages, let us not commercialize this holy relationship and let us not auction our boys in the marriage market. Any other reason for marrying outside one's community, ethnic group, religion or biradari can be understood, reasoned out, rationalized and even justified. There is, however, no justification whatsoever for marrying on this consideration that the parents are spared the compulsory obligation of giving dowry or money that they can ill-afford. Ours is a well-educated, cultured and enlightened community with a glorious past. The scourge of dowry and other social evils and bad customs has crept in over the years and needs to be addressed on a war footing. Let us eradicate these drawbacks and create a healthy tradition so that we do not lose our talented girls to other communities. If we do we shall be poorer to that extent. No rules and no laws are going to see the end of this contagious disease. We need constant self-analysis, social awareness, meaningful education and vigilance. Already ours is a miniscule community; let us not turn it into a microscopic one by creating such conditions as force our children to marry outside our community. Today we are not reckoned because we are not politically important due to our small numbers. Our plight of forced exile from the valley is nobody's concern because we are not a political constituency. Let us make ourselves important enough to be counted (and not taken for granted) by the dint of our acumen, sagacity, scholarship and intelligence and by preserving our distinct identity. This goal can be achieved by ensuring that the number of marriages outside community is as low as possible and that too for good and justifiable reasons and not for ignorance or avoidance of dowry.

Thus we have seen that while marriage is a personal matter for every individual and there is no place for any coercion or dictation, there is a pressing need for creating conditions to ensure that they take place within one's community. The purpose is two-fold, one that the married couple does not find itself isolated and two that the distinct identity of a community, particularly that of a small community like Kashmiri Pandits, is preserved. There are two major reasons why our children tend to find their life partners outside the community. The first reason is that they are not aware of the consequences of such a marriage. Once they come into contact with the persons of other communities they get emotionally involved and without realizing the adverse consequences they enter into a matrimonial relationship. The second reason is the enormous avoidable expenditure involved in marrying within the community due to the prevailing bad and despicable customs like the dowry in cash and kind. Our children are vividly conscious of these bad customs and they do not want to be a burden on their parents. They want to ensure that their parents are saved from running into debt due to the expenditure involved and, therefore, go for a simpler marriage without incurring any sizeable expenditure. They go for a marriage into a different community and thereby avoid the bad customs of both the communities. If both these reasons are removed, there is no reason why the number of such marriages outside our community cannot be reduced greatly without encroaching on the personal liberty of the young ones. The first cause can be addressed by educating our children about the hard facts of a married life and the consequences of marrying outside one's community. The second cause will get eradicated automatically once the bad customs are removed from our community. These steps are a must if we want to keep our community alive as a well-knit community of intellectuals as we really are.

8.0 POLISHED EXPRESSIONS

One of my friends once said jocularly that the two things that one can express best only in one's mother tongue are blessings and scolding. He cited the example of a Punjabi gentleman who was embroiled in a scuffle with some Englishman in London. They exchanged some harsh words, which was rather unusual in that country. The Punjabi fellow used some biting epithets for the English fellow but did not stop at that. At the end he said in chaste Punjabi, '*Nale tu khote da puter hai* - and also you are the son of an ass'. This spontaneous abuse in his mother tongue gave him the utmost satisfaction and a sense of victory.

We in Kashmiri Pandit society are not used to any un-parliamentary words as such. Not that our elders were not angry and annoyed and consequently did not scold us. They did get angry and did scold by using some interesting phrases. These phrases either meant nothing or were blessings clothed in the garb of scolding. Take, for example, the following phrases of scolding: '*Tsa haba khakhas gatshun*', '*Tsa zeer gatshaen*', '*Tse paha lara phutni*' etc. All these are meaningless. Now consider these: '*Tse Mata Lakhmi yin*', '*Tse dushmanan prah gatshun*' '*Tse shatran afsus gatshun*' etc. All these are blessings but meant to be used as scolding. Even so there are some words and phrases used as direct indictment. These are mild, cultured and devoid of any vulgarity. Some of these are like this: '*Tse pyen rasar* - May hot water fall on you', '*Tse gatshaen eervaen nav* - May your boat float downwards', '*Tse gatshun prah* - May you be stunned'. This shows that the community has all along been cultured and civilized. They did not get vulgar or un-parliamentary even when provoked or even when in rage with anger. No wonder they are called *Batta* meaning exalted ones and *Pandit* meaning scholars. No wonder also that they are non-violent and peace loving. Any other community in a similar situation in which they are and facing the same turmoil as they have been facing for the last decade and a half would have taken to arms, violence and armed struggle.

The words and phrases used by way of blessings are also unique in our community. A granny, when happy, will bless by saying: '*Tsa haba lasun, basun ta haestis khasun* - May you live and live a long life full of riches and wealth (literally, may you ride an elephant). Sometimes she may say, '*Tse lagun Ruma reshyn aay* - May you have a long life, as long as that of the sage Ruma'. A kind mother, in reply to usual salutation of Namaskar, will shower these blessings: '*Tse aay ta thadan pay, tse orzu ta do'r ko'th* - May you live long and prosper, may you be healthy and strong'. When we respectfully salute an old lady she has a long list of blessings not only for us but also for the children of the world. '*Tsa kula kyan gulan san navun ta pholun* - May you grow and be invigorated along with the flowers (children) of the world'. '*Tse lagun amryatuk sag* - May you (as a sapling) be watered by nectar (so that you are immortalized)'. '*Tse Bhagavaan rut karun* - May God bless you and do good to you'. There are many other blessings, wherein God is invoked in His different forms to bless the recipient. '*Tse Maha Ganeesh syedtas ta madtas rozun* - May Lord Ganesha give you success and help'. '*Tse Maej Sharika saet saet rozen* - May Goddess Sharika ever remain with you'.

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When we meet, the usual way of salutation is to say hand folded 'Namaskar'. This Sanskrit word is very significant in that it indicates that we see the Divine in everyone and bow before Him in His that form. If the addressee is of the same level, he will reciprocate by saying 'Namaskar'. If he is elder we shall add a mark of respect and say '*Namaskar Mahara*' and he will give blessings by saying, '*Tse-hasa Orzu*- may you have good health'. Then he will enquire about the welfare of all, '*Kyasa tathya gari chhiva varay?*- Dear child, is everyone at home in good health?' And we shall reply, '*Ahan mahara tuhaenzi aahi saet*- yes all is well, with your blessings'.

For the last fifteen years our community has remained scattered all over the country and even abroad. Our children have had to learn English, Hindi and different other regional languages. Yet the atmosphere at home is purely Kashmiri. The salutations are Kashmiri, the scolding they get is in Kashmiri and the blessings are also in chaste Kashmiri. Our community has shown a remarkable capacity to adjust and adapt. Yet, when you enter a Kashmiri house there will be something that will show and give you a feeling that you are in a Kashmiri household. A photograph perhaps of Tula Mula, Shankaracharya, Hari Parbat, Khrew or Zeethyaer; A picture of Goddess Sharika, with eighteen arms holding different items of '*Bhay*' and '*Abhay*', fear and fearlessness. Here again there is a difference. The Mother Goddess is conceived as having eight arms generally all over the country but in Kashmir (and perhaps in Assam) She is depicted as having eighteen arms. We call Her '*Ashtadashabozi* - or having eighteen arms'. Wherever a Kashmiri family may be, in India or abroad, there will be occasions like '*Khetsi mavas*', '*Gada bata*', '*Pan Dyun*', '*Satya Narayan*', '*Roth*', '*Tahar*' and so on. There will be a strange aura, a particular flavour that will indicate that it is a Kashmiri family. There may or may not be a full-fledged '*Thokur Kuth*' or a prayer room, but there will be a small temple, or a small almirah or even a well decorated shelf that will have pictures of deities and some idols for the members of the family to pray. The most popular prayers will be '*Panchastavi*', '*Bhawani Sahasranam*', '*Shiva Mahimnastotra*', '*Gauri dashakam*', '*Bhairav stotra*' etc. besides Kashmiri Bhajans and Leelas.

9.0 BATANYA, AN APOSTLE OF WOMANHOOD

The epithet '*Batanya*' for a Kashmir Pandit lady connotes two different aspects of this apostle of womanhood. Before describing these two aspects let us trace the origin of this word. In Sanskrit dramas the king is always addressed as 'Bhatta' and the queen as 'Bhattini', both meaning exalted and honoured ones. These two titles are used for Kashmiri Pandits and Kashmiri Pandit ladies in the modified form of 'Bata' and 'Batanya', respectively. These titles show the respect and reverence they have been commanding all these centuries not because of their wealth or riches, which in any case they did not possess in any substantial measure, but because of their scholarship, piety, character, wisdom and compassion and concern for every one.

The first picture of the '*Batanya*' is that of an affectionate mother, 'Bhawani' of fair complexion wearing the traditional Kashmiri dress. She is wearing a coloured '*Pheran*' with a snow-white '*Potsh*' inside. The *pheran* is laced with a red border called '*dur*' on the neckline and the bottom-line. It has a printed attachment on both the sleeves known as '*Naervar*'. She has a woolen muffler like belt round her waist. This is called '*Loongya*', a corruption from Hindi '*Loongi*'. The headgear is a complex item. It comprises a cap on the head known as '*Kalapush*' round which is tied a white folded cloth in four or five layers, called '*Taranga*'. Thereafter there is a plastic sheet either milky white, when it is called '*Doda-lath*' or transparent like glass, when it is called '*Sheeshi-lath*'. Damsels, young in age would sometimes use a shining sheet with sparkles. This was known as '*Zitmi-lath*' – all the three names were true to their type and quality. On the back of this headgear there is a beautiful decorated covering of muslin called '*Zoojya*' about one foot long tugged inside the cloth-folds. On the top of it is another white covering with a long twisted tail dangling down the back almost touching the heels. This is called '*Poots*'. When she goes out she puts on a cotton cloth, '*Dupatta*' or a woolen cloth, '*Voda Pallav*', depending on the weather, tastefully placed over the head and firmly held in front below the chin with the help of a black-headed pin called '*Kaladar saetsan*'. Incidentally the Malay women in Southeast Asia wear a similar headgear, which they call '*Tudung*' not very different from Kashmiri '*Taranga*'.

An interesting digression would be to recall the anti-*Pheran* movement spearheaded by Pt. Kashyap Bandhu. He introduced Sari for Kashmiri women. Initially there was a stiff resistance from the ladies but eventually they took to Sari in a big way. During this movement there was a poetic exchange between Bandhu ji and the women-folk. Some famous lines are quoted here. Bandhu ji said, '*Poots zooj tai naervar, yim chhi shiksaek sardar, mala baerthaey gardan, travi pheran ta lolo* - the paraphernalia of *Poots*, *zooj* and *naervar* are the harbingers of untidiness, even the neck behind remains full of dirt. I implore you to shun this age-old dress *Pheran*'. To this the ladies had a retort, '*Tarachad-I- Bulbulo travu israr, aes na ba travoy zanh ti naervar*- Enough of your imploring Pt. Tara Chand Bulbul (TaraChand

was the original name of Bandhu ji and Bulbul was his pen name), we shall never give up our traditional dress symbolized by *Naervar*'.

A gold-chain in her neck, gold ornaments '*Ath, Atahore* and *Dejhore*' dangling from both ears is a must for this gracious lady, a mark of her being married and a loving respected mother. On festive occasions and when attending marriages or feasts in relationship she adds some more gold ornaments to her beautiful get up. A necklace or '*Honzur*' in the neck, earrings or '*Kana dur*' in her ears, '*Matshaband*', '*Katshakar*', '*Gunus*' on her wrists, '*Talaraz*', '*Chaphkael*', '*Tolsi*', '*Kantha-maal*' and umpteen different types of typically Kashmiri decorations adorn her personality.

This mother figure '*Batanya*' gets up early in the morning. After the usual morning-chores and personal cleaning she cleans the front porch with stairs as also the three sides of the front door with a white clay paste. This is called '*Brand-fash ta Dar livun*'. Then she sweeps and cleans with the same paste the main gallery called '*Vuz*' and the main stairs leading to the upper floors. Thereafter she goes to the Mohalla temple and performs pooja, does circumambulation and brings home some vermilion tilaka and holy water for other members of the family. On reaching home she sprinkles some water on all sides of the front door; this is considered auspicious. On her return journey from the temple, she sometimes purchases '*Hak*' (Sanskrit – Shaka) also. On the riverbank and in the temple she prays for the welfare, longevity and peace and prosperity of every one. '*Raja swasthi praja swasthi desha swasthi tathaivacha....*' Then she cleans the floor of the '*Thokur Kuth*' and places a pot, filled with fresh water there for the elder male member of the family to perform the daily pooja.

Now she enters her theatre of activities, the kitchen. She lights fire in the traditional '*daan*' with two or three cooking ranges. On one she cooks rice in a '*Degchi*' and on the remaining two choicest dishes of '*Hak*', '*Monja*', '*Nadaer*', '*Oluv*', '*Gogji*' and the like. While cooking, stirring the vessels and putting the firewood in order, she goes on chanting holy hymns like '*Indrakshi Namsa Devi*' or a hymn from Panchastavi like '*Maya Kunadalini kriya Madhumati*' or the favourite '*Bhawani Sahasranam*' and one gets the echo, '*Madhur madhu pibanti, kantakan bhakshyanti*' and so on and so forth. These hymns, stotras and mantras sung in the accompaniment of these daily chores add taste and flavour to these dishes and the food. This ensures longevity, health and prosperity of the members of her family. In between she prepares '*Mogael chai*', the typical Kashmiri black tea with cardamom, cinnamon, a couple of times and '*Sheerye chai*', tea with milk, salt and common soda in the afternoon. After a brief siesta in the afternoon, when the men folk are away at work, she cleans rice, washes clothes, grinds wheat and pounds chillies.

Spare time is utilized in interacting with neighbours and keeping abreast with the happenings in the families living in the vicinity. She lends a helping hand where it is needed and gives her advice where it is sought. She is a source of encouragement and a key figure in ensuring moral make-up in those that are in distress or faced with some problem. Her words, '*Narayan kari raetsrai* – God will be kind and

favorable' lift many a depressed person. Come guest and she will not leave him unfed or un-served. '*Ti banya, nyebokhui ma drakh* – How can it be that you will leave without having something to eat'? In the true spirit of Vedic dictum, 'Atithi Devo bhava – treat a guest like a god', she serves every guest, known and unknown, with respect, love and care. Her philosophy is '*Daan to't ta bar vo'th* – kitchen range always hot and ready to prepare food for the guest and the door wide open to welcome him'. If the guest is an elderly person she treats him or her like her father or mother. If he or she is of the same age as she, he gets the treatment of a brother or sister. If the guest is a youngster he is treated like a child with soothing love and a bundle of blessings. '*Tse aay ta thadan paay* – may you live long and ever prosper' is the oft repeated blessing on her lips.

She puts up with the carefree nature of her husband and careless attitude of her children smilingly. She will put their personal effects, books, papers, clothes and other such items at their proper places. Sometimes she will scold the youngsters but these utterances will either mean nothing or be in the nature of good wishes. She will burst out, '*Tse zeer gatshan*', '*Tse paha lara phutani*', '*Yi kyah sedyoy*', which amount to nothing as literally they mean 'may you get a push', 'may your borrowed ribs break' and 'what has straightened in you', respectively. On being wished and saluted she will shower basketful of blessings, to not only the person saluting but also to the entire world. To her own children she will wish, '*Gatsh kulakyan gulan saan phol ta nav* – May you blossom and prosper along with the children world over (literally, flowers)'. Sometimes she adopts another pious routine. She gets up early in the morning at wee hours and goes to Hari Parbat for circumambulation and offering prayers at 'Devi-aangan'. Here also she prays for the welfare of the entire mankind, even for the plants and animals, skies and waters, '*Sarve bhavantu sukhenah sarve santu niramaya sarve bhadrani pashyant, ma kaschid dukhabhag bhavet* – Let all be happy, let no one be worried, let every one be faced with good things and let no one be grief-stricken'.

This Bhawani- Maa is a pillar of strength. She has earthlike patience, ocean-like depth and sky-like vastness. She lends support and good counseling to the men-folk in the hour of crisis. She gives manners and imparts values, ethical and moral, to her children. She is at hand for relations, friends and neighbours to suggest solutions to their problems whenever they are faced with any, be it domestic, social or otherwise. She has advised many a daughter-in-law to try and adjust to the changed environment of her new home and try to endear herself to her in-laws. She has counseled many mothers-in-law to handle their new daughters-in-law with love, compassion and consideration and thus has contributed to the peace and harmony in their household. She is kind to the maid, the servant and the sweeper, who do all odd jobs for their family. She will feed them occasionally, serve them a hot cup of tea when it is cold and give them odd woolen items, clothing and other things of day to day use and thus subscribe to their comfort and fulfill their small needs.

Her compassion is exemplary. Whatever she cooks for the family, a portion of it is earmarked for the birds. This she puts on the shelf outside in a corner of the window frame, called '*Kaw paet*' or the shelf

for the crow. A portion of the cooked rice she puts in two small brass pots called '*Sanivaer*' and this eventually goes for the consumption of various insects when it is emptied every morning before being filled with fresh water. Before eating her food she keeps a portion outside her plate for the stray dog in the lane. This portion carefully shaped is rightly called '*Hunya Myet*' or a portion for the dog. On Tuesdays, Saturdays and other holy days she prepares yellow rice with turmeric and distributes it among her neighbours. She shares everything brought by her daughter-in-law from her father's house with her neighbours and relations. This includes walnuts on Shiva Ratri, yogurt on being in a family way, '*Tsochi*' or pancakes whenever she comes back after a longer stay there and so on.

The second picture of the '*Batanya*' that emerges on the horizon of imagination is that of a daring and daunting '*Lakshmi*'. She is beautiful and charming. She wears a sari with necessary paraphernalia of blouse, petticoat etc., a salwar-kameez or even a bell-bottom with top. She may or may not have the traditional Kashmiri ornaments like '*Dejhor*' and '*Atahor*' but she would certainly adorn a chain, a pair of ear rings, a couple of gold bangles and a ring. She is agile, quick and sharp. She may be dressed simply but she would be elegant and graceful. She would have don a little make up as well commensurate with the need of her environment as also social and official circle she moves in. Even in the attire common to the ladies of many other communities in our country, she would be conspicuous as a Kashmiri damsel because of her typically Kashmiri demeanour, mannerism and accent.

She is '*Lakshmi*' and adds to the family income by her earnings. She may be a Doctor, a Lawyer, a Banker or an Officer. She could be a Teacher, an employee in some government or private office, a Media person, an Engineer, an Architect or in any other profession. She gets up early in the morning. After usual cleaning and a bath, she attends to her kitchen. In a short period at her disposal she has served bed tea to all, given breakfast to young and old, packed lunch boxes for office going males and school going children, prepared children for school and left a couple of dishes in the refrigerator for senior members of the family to consume at lunch time. If she owns a car she drives up to her workplace. Otherwise she rushes to catch a chartered bus and reaches in time at her desk. Whatever her profession she is well versed, efficient and an accomplished expert in her field. She is popular among her co-workers. She is respected by juniors, loved by seniors and held in high esteem because of her expertise and usefulness to the establishment and the organization. She is quick to grasp, fast in taking a decision and lucid and firm in expressing her views. Her compassion and consideration stands her in good stead here also. She is soft and well mannered and careful about her respect, prestige and dignity.

In the evening when she comes back from her work she again attends to her usual household chores. Often she has to retire for the day late in the night. She looks after the needs of the elders, ensures that the children have done their homework, makes advance preparation for the following day and takes care of other household requirements. She not only adds to the family income and supplements the earnings of her husband but also manages the finances of the house efficiently. She does not like extravagance, wasteful expenditure and spending on un-necessary items. She saves money for the rainy day, for bigger

social events and for more pressing and desirable items of expenditure. Her efficient management of the household and family earnings makes it possible that sufficient funds are available for the higher education and professional training of children. She foresees the requirements for their marriage and goes on making due preparations round the year. Her kitchen store, pantry, wardrobe and the storeroom are always full with various items of need. If the guests arrive, neat and nice bedding, sheets and towels are ready for him in the guest room. Her refrigerator and the freezer therein are always full with items that may be needed should an unexpected guest come and stay for the dinner. She is a perfect host and knows the relative importance of each guest. She entertains him as per the norms set by the family tradition and social custom.

Her role in maintaining relationship is very vital. She has to keep good relationship with people on her father's side, people related to her husband, friends and neighbours as also those who come in their contact in the office, family business or otherwise. This good relationship gives the family happiness in celebrating important happy occasions and provides help and assistance in times of sorrow and grief. Why I call this picture of a 'Batanya' as 'Lakshmi' and not a 'Saraswati' or a 'Durga' is after giving a serious thought to her role in this form. 'Saraswati' is the goddess of knowledge but only theoretical knowledge. She represents Pure Science. 'Lakshmi' on the other hand is Applied Science and Knowledge in practice. She represents Technology. That is what a 'Batanya' is. She applies her wisdom, her knowledge and her discriminating abilities to the family matters as also in the official business in her workplace. As 'Durga' her looks would be fierce and scaring but she is soft, loving and mild. She can be a 'Durga' at times, and that is when her prestige and self-respect are threatened and she is forced to change her stance and adopt a different role to assert herself. In her normal posture she is a 'Lakshmi' and a 'Griha-lakshmi' at that. She brings fortune and good luck to her family. In Kashmiri idiom when a girl is born in a family she is always referred to as a 'Lakshmi' or a harbinger of good fortune. Likewise when a son in the family is married his bride is called '*Branda kaen*' or the foundation stone of the main entrance porch of the house. In other words she is considered to be the pillar on which the entire edifice of the family is resting.

It is very important to note that this 'Batanya' in the form of a 'Lakshmi' is multi-faceted. She is an obedient and caring daughter to the elders. She is a loving mother who contributes substantially in shaping the life of her children, gives them the basic teaching and lays a firm foundation of their future life. She is an active life partner to her husband and remains with him in thick and thin, against all odds. She is a cementing force who keeps the bonds of relationship in tact under all circumstances. With all these multifarious activities she attends to other social calls as well. She will be at hand in mourning or marriage. She will participate in all rituals, private or collective. If there is a cultural programme she will be there. If there is a common 'Yajna' she will be present at the 'Purna-aahuti' if not earlier. If there is a demonstration against any atrocity on the community she is at the vanguard. Her contribution to the family, the community and indeed to the country is enormous, invaluable and indispensable.

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This 'Batanya' has tolerated the proverbial 'neelavath' under the cooked rice in her plate when she appeared in the form of Lal Ded. She has withstood smilingly the taunts of her mother-in-law on finding the rice pudding insufficient when she came as Roop Bhawani. She bore the cruelty and infidelity of her husband when she was born as Arni Maal and asserted in no uncertain terms, '*Shayi yaar aestan ta tuthitan pardyan, toti chham ardyan vondasaey sath* – Let him be kind to others, so long as I have the belief that he is mine I couldn't care less'. She was robbed of her precious gold ornaments by her unfaithful husband and she lamented, '*Matshi thaph ditsnam nyendrihatsi matsi, matshi matshaband sanith gom. So'n nyunam ratsi ratsi, vunyub karith gom, vanta vyes vonya kus kas patsi* - I was in deep slumber when he caught hold of my wrist. The bangle bruised the flesh of my arm. He robbed me of the gold and left me crust-fallen; who is there now to be trusted?' When she appeared as Raets Ded she compared harsh words with lashing of a whip in these lines, '*Kamcha prath chhu maazas laha kharan, mokha prath chhu karan aedjyan soor* – lashing of a whip leaves scars on the flesh whereas scolding breaks the very bones'. As Bhawani Pandit Bhagyavan Ded she again lamented, '*Pananyan rudukh dur pardyan hovuth noor*- you kept distance from your own people but showered light on strangers'. Unmindful of the treatment she received from her mother-in-law, sister-in-law and others in the new home she has adapted and adjusted to the changed environment and new atmosphere. She has contributed to the prosperity, well-being, honour and prestige of the family. Service and sacrifice have remained her motto always and she has given her best in recognizing and fulfilling her duties. There is hardly any work that she has shirked to do. If need arises she does shopping of daily items. If the servant is not available she cooks, washes, irons and attends to cleaning. All this she does smilingly, carefully and willingly. For this role that she performs and for the contribution she makes to her family, the society and the country at large she deserves accolades, praise and appreciation.

Her role on important occasions like marriages, yajnopavits is full of affection, love and delicate emotions. She draws the 'Vyug', a type of drawing resembling 'rangoli' for his brother and his bride on their marriage and on the occasion of the former's upanayana. She is prominent in dancing on this circular drawing on the ground called '*Veegya natsun*' and sings '*Mye chham bailalaen satha ratha vanday malinyo* I have full faith in my brother, I give my blood for my father's house'. She has to decorate the front gate on these happy occasions. This is called '*Krul kharun*'. She has to light a special cooking range on yajnopavit with multiple outlets and cook rice in small earthen pots for the auspicious pooja, '*Varidaan*'. She applies '*Mehndi*', henna to her brothers and sisters on the occasion of yajnopavit and their marriage. She is the first to welcome the bride and the groom at the front door. She ties '*Rakhi*' on the wrist of his brother on 'Raksha Bandan' and applies 'Tilaka' on his forehead on 'Bhaiduj'. On the death of his father or mother the daughter has to perform a special ritual called '*Noona-shrada*- shraddha performed using salt in the ritual'.

Professionally also she is exemplary. In the medical profession she excels in both diagnosis and treatment. In teaching she is a patient instructor, facilitator and inspirer. In legal field she is forceful in her arguments and specific in details. As an engineer she is innovative. As a poetess and writer she is lyrical, musical and full of human emotions. As a journalist she is investigative and unfolds news behind news. In

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every walk of life she is a bold leader and a faithful follower. She lends a delicate touch to anything she undertakes, handles everything with care and concern and ensures finesse, charm and beauty in the end result. She uses her head all right but the element of heart in all her activities is more prominent and pronounced. And why not, after all that is what womanhood is all about. We must appreciate and acclaim the role being played by her and the contribution made by her as a continuing process. Let us not forget what Manu Smriti says about women, '*Yatra naryastu poojyante ramante tatra devata-* gods like to stay at those places where women folk are given due respect and regard'.

10.0 RELATING TO THE NATURE

There is a 'Mantra' in Atharva Veda which reads '*Mata bhumi, putro'ham prathivyam*' meaning the good earth is my mother and I am her son. This Mantra could very well have been conceived by a person from Kashmir. For Kashmiris by nature have related to nature in a variety of ways for the last so many centuries. It is our tradition not only to revel in nature but also to care for it. Come spring and we are out in the gardens, on the banks of the springs, under the shade of blossoming trees or in a boat on the calm and serene waters of the lakes. We want a simple excuse, religious like '*Vaishaekh*' or '*Rama Navami*', social like '*Zanga trai*' or traditional like '*Navreh*' and we rush out carrying a basketful of eatables along with the members of our families, young and old. The colourful almond blossom at Hari Parvat, dancing fountains in the Mogul gardens, running brooks in breezy villages and the green velvet-like turf of the meadows attract us and do not let us remain indoors for long. We go and enjoy ourselves in the nature for we are told to perceive divinity in every aspect of the beauties of nature. In addition to '*Satyam*', the Truth and '*Shivam*', the Benevolent another name by which we identify God is '*Sundaram*', the Beautiful. According to the Kashmir Shaiva philosophy also when we realize ourselves and remain firm in that state of mind, we are able to undergo a unique aesthetic experience. So it is natural for us to seek this eternal beauty in nature.

During these outings and picnics we worship in the nearby temples, pray at the holy shrines, take a dip in the waters, sing hymns and '*Bhajans*' in praise of our deities and then enjoy special preparations. The most popular items during these outings are '*Nadermonja*', a savoury made of lotus-stem, '*Gaery*' or water-nuts, '*Loochi*', a thin fried pancake made of wheat-flour, '*halva*', or sweet pudding and a variety of other sweets and savoury items. Every single person, young and old enjoys these items along with the black Kashmiri tea called '*mogael chai*'-a decoction of special tealeaves with cinnamon, cardamom and almonds added for flavour. Some people also like to take a variety of bakery items like '*tsot*', '*katalama*', '*telwor*', '*kulcha*', '*takhtaech*' – all made of wheat-flour in an oven by an expert baker. Of course in that case there has to be the choice salt tea known as '*Sheerya chai*' to sip along with these items.

We relate to nature not only for our enjoyment but also because we have care and concern for nature in all its aspects. Take for example our age-old custom of keeping aside three portions of rice from our plate before we eat lunch or dinner. These portions are called '*Honya Myet*' or the dog's share. Obviously we care for the stray dog and make necessary provision for its feed. Again let us give a close look to our houses, particularly the ground floors, where we live in winters. We find a small wooden shelf just above the window frame at the extreme end. This is called '*Kaw paet*' or the shelf for a crow. As soon as the food is ready and before it is served to any member of the family, the lady of the house places a portion of cooked rice with a little of the cooked vegetables on this shelf so that the winged beings can eat the same to their fill before we consume our meals. Kashmir abounds in a variety of birds, which include crows,

sparrows, pigeons, cuckoos, parrots, mynas, bulbul, '*poshnool*' and a host of others that sing, hop and chirp. We care for these birds and keep a portion of the food separate for them to eat.

Then we have interesting festivals that speak volumes about our care and compassion for the animals and birds. To illustrate let us take two of these festivals, '*Kaw punim*', and '*Khetsi-mavas*'. On the occasion of the former we fabricate a plate with a long handle. This is made of two strong twigs kept one over the other like a plus sign. Thereafter grass strings are woven on them starting from their meeting point towards the edges to make an improvised plate. A special dish of yellow rice is prepared and a plateful is kept outside the window for the crows and other birds to eat. A typical folk song is sung to invite the crow to have the feast. The first lines of this song are, '*Kaw batta kawo, khetsaeri kawo kaw ta kaewin saeti hyeth. volaba sane nave lare, varey bata khe-* O nice crow come and bring along your family members to our house and enjoy the feast of the rice pudding'. On the latter festival a round grass plate is made to serve a dish of pulse and rice mixed to a mythical figure called '*Yachh*'. This plateful of the special dish is kept on top of the compound wall and left there overnight, obviously for birds and animals to have a sumptuous feast. In addition we have a habit of feeding raw rice to the fishes in the springs, baked bread pieces to stray dogs, fresh grass to cows, calves and bulls, grains to the pigeons and raw meat-sinews to kites and vultures on various occasions.

We are so concerned about clean environment that we worship the rivers that provide us with valuable water for a variety of purposes including agriculture. We have '*Vyetha truvah*', a day dedicated to worshipping river Jehlum called '*Vyeth*', the lifeline of Kashmir. We celebrate '*Ganga-aetham*', a day dedicated to worshipping the Ganges, the river held holy and auspicious by all the Hindus throughout the world. We are so involved in the love of nature, the flora and fauna and the crops that we celebrate the new crop of not only the paddy, which is our staple food but also of different vegetables. We have '*Alanov*' and '*vanganov*', to celebrate when the bottle gourd or the brinjal of the new crop is cooked for the first time in the season. We also celebrate the first snowfall by wishing each other well and in turn get a sumptuous feast of partridge or pheasant.

Nature fascinates us so much that the children vie with each other in being first to walk on the white carpet of fresh fallen snow early in the morning. Then they roll the snow and put these rolls one over the other to form a snowman, with charcoal eyes and red chilly tongue and improvised hair and a cap on the top. The children also engage in a mock fight throwing snowballs at each other. This is called '*Sheenajung*' or the snow-fight. To bid adieu to the winter we have a day called '*Teela-aetham*'. In the evening people assemble on the riverbanks. They stuff the outer cane-cover of the firepot '*Kangaer*' with dry grass, tie a long rope to the handle and then set it on fire. With the help of the long rope the burning firepot is hurled round and round shouting '*Jataentaen, jataentaen*' (Lo, the rising flames) till it burns completely.

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We seek joy in nature, we seek companionship in nature and we seek ourselves in nature. We have found our deities, the symbols of the Supreme Brahman, on mountain peaks, in caves and at the confluence of the waters. We have the world-famous Ice-Lingam at Amarnath in a cave. We have the temples of Lord Shiva on Shankaracharya hill and Mother Sharika on Hari Parvat. We have the holy Prayag at Shadipore, where the Sindhu and Vitasta meet. We have innumerable holy shrines and temples either on the bank of a river or atop a mountain-peak or in a spring like that of Maha Rajna at Tula Mula. The perception of the Divine in every aspect of nature and our relating to it has fashioned our lives. It has made us God-fearing, humble and peace loving. It has taught us to surrender to the Divine will, follow the tenets of our faith, i.e. 'Sanatana Dharma' and respect the tenets of all other faiths. We believe in diversity. Just as the nature is diverse and multi-faceted, the paths leading to the ultimate Truth are also diverse and varied. Our morning prayers seek peace for every facet of nature, all creatures and the entire humankind. It is a prayer for the well being of the ruler and the ruled, the priest and the householder, the devotees and the seekers.

Obviously the geographical situation of Kashmir, the lofty mountain peaks, the gushing waters, dancing brooks and the holy springs, the valleys and the meadows are responsible for our love for nature. We live in this enchantingly beautiful environment. We imbibe strong aesthetic values and develop closeness to nature because of these surroundings. This rich nature has affected our way of life, our philosophy, our customs and our thinking. No wonder, therefore, that our poetry is full of compositions describing the beauty of nature, praising the benevolent nature and perceiving the eternal truth and immortal divinity in it. This is how Master Zinda Kaul has described the nature:

'Nyul makhmal tala go'n sabzaro, neelam chhata pyeth no'n aakash

Pardiyuv nag zan tsalavun su aaro, sonth chhavne balayaro ner.

Saqi pholan aasi hyeth samavaro, garmavi mehfil kahvuk mai,

Aela dalcheen travi mushkaenidaro, sonth chhavane bala yaro ner'.

'The thick turf on the ground is like a green carpet and the sky over the roof is sapphire blue. The mountain brook moves zigzag with its mercurial melted lead like water. Dear friend, this is the time to go out and enjoy the spring'.

'The cupbearer would be in a happy mood with a 'samovar' in his hand. The gathering will be enjoying the wine of black tea. The flavour of cinnamon and cardamom would be emitting a soothing odour. This is the time dear friend, to go out and enjoy the spring.'

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Nature follows its own ways but we in Kashmir enjoy it in all its grandeur. We are fascinated to see a sapling popping from somewhere, a mountain brook gushing forth from nowhere. The lakes attract us and the birds enthrall us. The spontaneity of the nature and the artistic creativity at the back of it give us a glimpse of the divinity and we as a community learn to be humble in spite of our knowledge and scholarship and be ever prepared to surrender before the Supreme in spite of our acumen and expertise for success, satisfaction and lasting happiness.

11.0 TRADITION OF FAITH AND RELIGION

There are two broad categories of religions in the world. One believes in proselytizing and the other does not. One believes in multiplicity of faiths and the other believes in its own superiority. One holds only itself as valid and the other respects all faiths. One believes in co-existence and the other in exclusivity. One believes in conversion through coercion and the other believes in mutual acceptance. Even so I had often wondered why in the process of spreading and propagating a faith, the centers of worship of other faith should be destroyed and desecrated. One plausible reason often advanced is that the invading rulers were lured by the enormous wealth stock-piled in the temples of India. Some even say that the '*Devadasi*' system prevalent in India had made people here complacent enough to resist the onslaught. But then these things should have invited loot and plunder only, may be even desecration but not demolition. The real reason is that the invaders being of different faith wanted to wipe out the culture of the indigenous people. And the temples were the centers of culture and had, therefore, to bear the brunt of this destruction.

Take the case of Kashmir. It is often stated that this land had no tradition of art, craft, music and the like. The alien rulers are credited with having introduced these essential features of culture. This is a sinister move with a dubious design to prove that culturally Kashmir was closer to Middle East and not to the rest of the country. In Kashmir even over the past half a century, the traces of Hindu past are sought to be obliterated by changing the names of places and presenting dubious results of so called research. Can there be anything more atrocious and obnoxious than a 'scholar' stating that Lal Ded was a lunatic and Arnimal never existed? It is perhaps believed by these gentlemen of preconceived ideologies that if the falsehood is repeated ad nauseam, people world over will begin to take it as the truth. Even the writings of Persian scholars in this regard are ignored and conveniently bypassed.

Take the case of music. A monumental work on Music and dramaturgy is considered to be Bharata's '*Natya Shastra*'. Most of the early commentators of this work hail from Kashmir and are referred to as '*Shastra-Shilpin*' or expert exponents or formulators of Sciences. Some people even believe that Bharata also was a Kashmiri Brahmin. And all this dates back to between 500 and 100 B.C. Another monumental work on Music is considered to be '*Sangita Ratnakara*' written by Sharangadeva in 1247 A.D. His grand father was Bhaskara, a learned Brahmin from Kashmir, who had migrated from Kashmir to Maharashtra. This speaks volumes about the rich cultural heritage of Kashmiris encompassing all its elements. Yet it is claimed that there was no tradition of music in Kashmir and whatever there is, is the gift of alien invaders and rulers. It is very clear that by the acts like destruction of temples and shrines, which were centers of music and dance, the indigenous culture was wiped out and any traces that may be there are sought to be erased by design in a planned and systematic manner.

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This onslaught on culture was in the hoary past violent, abrupt and destructive. In the present day, it is subtle, calculated, pre-meditated and sinister. Who can deny that Lal Ded was a yogini, seeped into the nectar of spirituality and at an exalted position of spiritual heights? There has been interpolation in her Vakhs and some of these have been affected so far as their originality and purity are concerned. Most of the Vakhs require a spiritual interpretation in order to understand their real purport. All the prominent Sufi poets of Kashmiri language have benefited from her Vakhs, acknowledged her spiritual heights and offered poetical tributes to her. As regards Arnimal, she is an acclaimed poetess of very high order as also an expert in music. Late Mohd. Abdullah Tibetbaqal once told me that the ragas of the Sufiana Kalam, called Maqam prevalent these days are those rearranged by Arnimal. In fact that she was well versed in music is borne out by the lyricism, rhyme scheme, rhythm and musicality of her compositions. That she was the wife of the great Persian poet Pt. Bhawani Das Kachroo, the creator of '*Bahar Taweel*', is historically proved and, therefore, denying her existence is denying the existence of the Sun unless of course one is an ostrich.

One of the casualties of this murky game has been our mother tongue. When Late Shri B.V. Keskar was the Union Minister of Information and Broad Casting, news documentaries in Kashmiri language were started to our delight. The script used to be written by Umesh Kaul, the well-known short story writer and filmmaker Shri Bankey Bihari (Prof. Pushp's brother) lent his voice to these documentaries. To our astonishment and horror, these documentaries were aborted very soon thereafter. When we made enquires in the Ministry, we were told that the Government of Kashmir had asked to stop these as these were not popular and instead documentary in Urdu should be started. No wonder Kashmiri language was not taught in the schools and colleges although there has been a department of Kashmiri in the University of Kashmir and the language is included in the eighth schedule of the Constitution of India - A typical example of cutting the roots and watering the leaves. History is being repeated now. When the Nagri script was decided to be accepted as an alternative script for this language, the idea was to benefit the language by making it accessible to a wider Kashmiri speaking population, which is not conversant with the Persio-Arabic script. The move is being opposed by the State Government because it does not want the language to flourish and this stand of theirs exposes their communal and parochial frame of mind. After all this language is a repository of the Hindu past and the cultural heritage of Kashmiris and they do not want that this fact should be known to future generations.

That Kashmir was always linked with rest of the country culturally and otherwise is also desired to be kept back from the younger generations so that the alienation is perpetuated and the clever reap the harvest. We need not despair nor panic at these moves. Let us continue to write in our mother tongue and patronize the Devanagari script and thereby enrich it and preserve our cultural heritage. There have been large-scale migrations in the past also. Because of the absence of a script, the populace that migrated from Kashmir in the past could not hold on to the language with the result that a sizeable number of Kashmiris today do not speak their mother tongue. That was because the prevalent Sharada script was killed by design even then. Taking a lesson from the history it is of paramount importance for us to continue with our mother tongue, in either script. Let those who know Nastalik write and read in that script and others

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who do not know it use the alternative Devanagari script so that the language does not become extinct. Writers like Prakash Pandit did a yeoman's service to Urdu language when they brought out volumes after volumes of Urdu poetry and prose in Devanagari with suitable footnotes. The result is that the popularity of Urdu remains intact. What is of primary importance is that the Devanagari script is used for our language in addition to the Nastalikh; the official recognition is of secondary importance. Goethe has rightly observed, 'Things which matter most must never be at the mercy of things which matter least'.

Kashmiri Pandits are 'Saraswat' Brahmins. Mythologically they are believed to have lived on the bank of the river Saraswati, now non-existent. Saraswati is the goddess of learning. Since, however, this community has been well read, knowledgeable and intellectually exalted, 'Saraswat' (literally sons of the goddess of learning) may be an epithet given to them for these qualities. This community comprises practising Brahmins called 'Gor' or Guru, the exalted one, non-practising Brahmins called 'Yazman' or Yajman, the householder performing 'Yajna' or sacrificial fire ritual and a small number of traders called 'Buhurya', a predominantly business class. Most of them are non-vegetarians but even among these non-vegetarians there is a section, which does not allow meat preparations on auspicious festivals like Shivaratri. The entire community refrains from eating non-vegetarian dishes on auspicious days like Ashtami, ekadashi and Purnamasi, eighth, eleventh and full moon day of the bright fortnight. In olden days hen-eggs, onions, garlic and even tomatoes were taboos. People did not consume these items.

The community is highly religious. Unlike elsewhere in India, there is no division in the form of Shaivas and Vaishnavas, on the basis of the worshipped deities. In fact the Kashmiris worship Vishnu in all his incarnations like Rama, Krishna etc; Shiva as the Supreme Brahman and Bhagavati, the mother Goddess, not only as the consort of Shiva but also as the energy aspect of the Divine in her different forms of Sharika, Maharajna, Mahakali, Jwala, Tripura and so on. In addition they also worship Lord Ganesha as the principle deity, Hanuman as an embodiment of Knowledge, devotion and service, Laxmi as the goddess of wealth, Saraswati as the goddess of Learning and other deities like Kumar Kartikeya etc.

We have innumerable temples, shrines and pilgrimage spots scattered all over in the length and breadth of Kashmir. Every hilltop is sacred and every spring is pious. There are shrines atop the mountain peaks, in the caves, by the side of the rivers and rivulets and at the confluence of the rivers. The Ganesh temple at Ganapatyar, the Rama temples at Raghunath Mandir and across the Barbarshah bridge, the Hanuman temple at Amira Kadal, the Kali temple at Fateh Kadal, the Shiva temple atop the Shankaracharya hill, the temples of Sharika, Maha Rajna, and Jwala at Hari Parvat, Tula Mula and Khrew respectively, the temples of eight Bhairavs in and around Srinagar, the temple of Zishta Bhagavati at Zeethyaer are some of the more important religious centers with which our emotions are connected. Of course we have, on the top of all these, the Ice Lingam of Swami Amarnath in a cave at Amravati and the world famous shrine of Sharada on the bank of the river Krishna Ganga (now under Pakistan occupation). We are so obsessed and enamoured about our allegiance towards this or that deity that traditionally each family has one special

goddess-deity as its chosen deity, either Sharika or Maha Rajna or Jwala. Colloquially this is described as a family 'facing a particular deity' out of these three as its chosen deity.

11.1 Our Religion

Religion is an important factor in the tradition of a community. So it is for the Kashmiri Pandits as well. This tradition has come down to us through the medium of three channels, priests, sages and saint-poets. Priests have played a remarkable role in preserving and perpetuating our rituals, *Yajnas* and *Homas*, rituals connected with births and deaths, *Kahanethar*, *Mekhal*, *kriya karma* and *Shradha* and the ritual of marriage. We need to ensure that this important channel of our tradition does not dry up by default. This is all the more important when we know that the rituals followed by us in Kashmir are those formulated by the Sage Logaksh, while those followed in rest of the country are as formulated by the Sage Katyana. We have, therefore, to see that the lost glory of our family priests is not only restored but also enhanced and arrangements are made to teach the '*Karma Kanda*' to our youngsters. Let it be made clear that audiotapes are no substitute for a learned priest, who needs to be revered and respected and encouraged adequately to transmit his knowledge to his progeny. The tapes can at best be temporary makeshift arrangements. These learned priests have preserved the tenets of '*Karma marga*' of our tradition.

Second important channel is that of sages. It was Vasugupta who resurrected in the 8th century through his penance, the philosophy propounded by Rishi Durvasas. A galaxy of sages followed with profound treatises and commentaries on this philosophy called Kashmir Shaiva Darshan. These included Utpala Deva, Kallat, Somananda, Abhinav Gupta, and Kshemaraja et al. In this lineage we have had Ishwara-swaroop Swami Laxman Joo. These sages have propagated and announced the various aspects of '*Jnana marga*' of our spiritual heritage. This doctrine has not only shaped our lives over these centuries but also has permeated into our thinking and attitude.

The third and equally important channel is of devotion brought to us by the great saint poets like Parmanand, Krishna Joo Razdan, Prakash Ram, Master Zinda Kaul and a host of other saints and savants, who have sung in praise of Ishwara, the master of the cosmos and propounded the virtues of devotion and faith. They have shown us the path of '*Bhakti*', in which we are required to surrender before the Divine. If we do that we shall fearlessly live our lives, rejoicing and celebrating the festivals related to our deities like '*Ganesh Chaturdashi*', or to our sages like '*Sahib Saptami*' or the rituals like *yajnas* and *homas* or those connected with our ancestors called '*Shradha*'. This unwavering faith has given meaning to our lives, made us humble and God-fearing and given us inspiration to live a pious, pure and truthful life.

11.2 Idol Worship

We, the Kashmiris are by and large idol worshippers. Early in the morning we go to a temple and pour water and/or milk on the Shiva-Lingam. Then we have idols of Ganesha, Laxmi, Saraswati, Shri Rama, Shri Krishna, Shri Hanuman Ji, Durga, Maha Kali and other gods and goddesses in our temples and at our homes, which we worship with flowers, incense, sweets, fruits and other offerings. We are idol worshippers no doubt but do we believe that these idols are real gods, who when worshipped can shower their grace on us and favour us by granting our wishes? This question can be answered in two ways. One that if God is omnipresent then definitely He is there in these idols as well, present all the time and two that out of our love and devotion for the Divine we have conceived a form for that formless God and these idols are merely symbols. These symbols help us concentrate in meditation in order to rise spiritually from the mundane to the esoteric.

These symbols help us concentrate while we are meditating on the Divine and also enable us to put our otherwise turbulent and fickle mind under our control while worshipping or carrying out any spiritual exercise in pursuit of the Truth. We are all the time conscious that these idols are only symbols and means towards achieving the ultimate goal. Look at the famous shrine of Mahakali between the second and the third bridges on the river Vitasta. The alien zealots and marauders desecrated and demolished the centuries-old shrine, where our ancestors used to pray and worship. They raised a shrine in the name of a Sufi, who had escaped from his native place and taken shelter in Kashmir and later became an important instrument of mass conversion of Pandits to Islam. What did the hapless Pandits do? They earmarked a stone slab on the riverbank and smeared it with vermilion. This became the new symbol of Goddess Maha Kali, the Eternal Time and prayers began to be offered on Kali-ashtami and other days at this spot. Now that more than three lakh Pandits have been driven out of their hearth and home, what have we done to preserve our heritage? We have constructed replicas of Tulamula shrine at Bhawani Nagar Jammu, of Hari Parbat at Faridabad. We have brought the sacred relics of Alakheshwari Roop Bhawani, Reshi Peer, Bhagavaan Gopi Nath Ji and other saints and sages and installed them at various places for the devotees to offer prayers and engage in spiritual pursuit. In Kashmir there was only one Aashram each for our revered saints like Ishwar-swaroop Swami Laxman Joo and Jagadguru Bhagavaan Gopi Nath. Now there are a number of such Aashrams and centers of devotion all over India and abroad. This is the intrinsic strength of our faith. All of us may not don 'Tyok' (Sandal or Saffron mark on forehead), 'Naervan'(Sacred thread round the wrist) and 'Aetpan'(Waste-band of cotton thread). Many of us may not even be wearing the 'Yajnopavit' but we do retain the basic character that makes us stand apart as Kashmiri Pandits endowed with faith and piety.

It is our paramount duty to retain our distinguishing marks so that our cultural tradition is preserved and we do not get disconnected with our roots, while all along allowing our culture to evolve in the fresh air of modern times. We do not want our ladies to revert to 'Pheran' and 'Poots-taranga' nor our gents to 'Pheran-potsh' and 'Dastar'. But they must carry forward the characteristics of scholarship, modesty,

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respect for ethics and morality, love for our language and culture, observance of rites and rituals and the firm belief in our Sanatana Dharma, which encompasses all shades of philosophy, mythology, mysticism and devotion. We have to take care that the rich contribution made by Kashmir to the treasure of Philosophy in the form of Kashmir Shaiva Darshan is not allowed to get stagnated or get extinct and that sufficient encouragement is available to young scholars to study, research upon and add to various scholarly works of our ancestors in the fields of metaphysics, theosophy, poetics, aesthetics, prosody, rhetoric, dramaturgy and other branches of knowledge. This is what we owe to our progeny and this is what shall keep us alive as a community in spite of all odds.

An important sect in Gujarat believes that there are four inter-related spheres that form a structure for the apprehension of the manifestation of God in the religion. These are theanthropic sphere, which is the identification of the physical form with one or more of the divine beings, the cosmological sphere, which provides the conceptualization of the heavenly states or abodes of the gods, the devotional sphere, which charts the development of the individual towards release and the iconographic sphere of the images in the temple. Sometimes because of our idol worship we are labeled as infidels. This should not bother us. Infidel means a non-believer, which we are not and its Arabic equivalent 'Kafir' means one who hides the truth and truth is the cornerstone of our faith. The first instruction given to a graduate after he has completed his studies is '*Satyam vada* or speak the truth'. The Upanishad makes it clear that it is the truth that triumphs ultimately, '*Satyam-eva jayate*'. No body can, therefore, justifiably call us infidels. These icons that we outwardly worship are in effect paths to spirituality and spirituality is an inseparable aspect of our community life. Some thinker has rightly stated that spirituality is being awake, getting rid of illusions and not being at the mercy of an event, thing or person. Religion is intended to lead us to spirituality and when life becomes prayer, spirituality overflows into our actions. Let our life become prayer so that divinity and spirituality manifest in our thought, word and deed.

Human life comprises four vital aspects, physical, emotional, mental and spiritual. The physical aspect is our physical body and includes our ability to survive and thrive and Kashmiris have shown this ability in a great measure. The emotional aspect is our ability to experience life deeply and to relate to one another and the world on a feeling level. The mental aspect enables us to think and reason and develops our faculties of beliefs, values and attitudes. The spiritual aspect is the essence of our existence and it is that part of ours, which exists beyond time and space and connects us with the Supreme. We as a community must strive to develop all these aspects. Our various socio-religious organizations, cultural societies, Sabhas and Sansthas can and must play a vital role in this task. Let the political bodies fight on the political front with our whole-hearted support and let us simultaneously implement plans and programmes of preserving our identity so that we continue to exist as a distinguished community with a distinct character.

12.0 TOLERANCE AND ADAPTABILITY

Kashmiri Pandits as a community have many traits. They are highly religious and God-fearing. They are intellectually advanced and cultured. The greatest traits exhibited by them over the centuries are their tolerance and adaptability. They have survived as a community in spite of tyranny, persecution and as many as seven major exoduses from their homeland. They have tolerated whatever treatment they got from the alien rulers and their governors including payment of taxes for belonging to a different religion. They have adapted to the changed circumstances whenever the need arose. They have carved a niche for themselves in any environment they had to live in, in any profession they had to take up and in any trade that was their fate.

During the hay days of Hindu period in the history of Kashmir, when great kings like Lalitaditya Mukhtapida and Avanti Verman ruled, this community produced great thinkers, writers and philosophers, whose works in Sanskrit are monumental. Take any subject, Philosophy, Literature, Poetics, Aesthetics, Astrology, History, Folklore and you will come across an original work, a treatise or a commentary written by a Kashmiri Pandit, which to date is quoted as an authoritative work. During those days scholars used to visit Kashmir for studies, to seek guidance from the local scholars, to consult books and manuscripts preserved in the centers of study and to get their own works approved by Kashmiri Scholars. No wonder that not only Kashmir '*Shaiva Darshan*' and not only Kalhana's '*Raja Tarangini*' but also the School of Suggestion '*Dhvanya*' and works like '*Kavya Prakash*', and '*Natya Shastra*' have earned a great name for the enlightened members of this community. Most of these scholars were versatile in as much as they excelled in more than one discipline and produced authoritative works on different subjects. It is believed that '*Shaivagamas*' and '*Vaishnavagamas*', which revolutionized the religious belief and social structure of Indians, have both originated from Kashmir. It is also believed that Sarswat Brahmins of Karnataka and other places in the country originally hailed from Kashmir.

During the days when Buddhism was at its peak Kashmir became an important centre of Buddhist studies. The fourth conference of Buddhists was held in Kashmir and the deliberations during this conference gave a new turn to this ideology. Mahayana branch of Buddhist thought was developed, which made it more realistic and pragmatic. The Buddhist scholars of Kashmir carried this doctrine to far off places in Tibet, China and the Far East. Kashmiri Pandits wrote extensively on this theology and their works are still extant in their translation into Tibetan and Chinese languages.

With the establishment of Muslim rule in Kashmir the Persian language replaced Sanskrit and became the official language of the state. Kashmiri Pandits did not lag behind. They devised short cut methods like bi-lingual verses to learn the new language. An example would show the ingenuity in this matter. One of the verses was: '*Roni lagni Zongla bastan, Natsun Raqsidan ast, banda paether Modami Raqas, Sonth*

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Aamad Bahar – this verse gave Persian equivalents to these terms: tying the anklets, dancing, male dancer and the spring'. Slowly the Pandits mastered the language so much so that not only did they write devotional poetry in this new language, like the one written by Krishna Kar, but also produced original writings of very high standard, including the famous '*Bahar-i-taweel*' written by Pandit Bhawanidas Kachroo, the husband of the great romantic lyricist and musicologist Arnimaal.

The periodical exodus from Kashmir necessitated by the tyranny and persecution in the valley brought these hapless Pandits to the plains of the country. A new language had developed here, which though written in Persian script had drawn its roots and vocabulary from both Sanskrit and Persian. This new language was called Urdu, which literally means an army or group, signifying that it was an amalgam of many languages. Kashmiri Pandits mastered this language too. The community produced a galaxy of writers and thinkers who gave expression to their rich thought in Urdu both in prose and poetry. In this category we have great names like Rattan Nath Sarshar, Brij Narayan Chakbast, Daya Shanker Nasim, Kaifi Dattatreya, Anand Narayan Mulla, Krishna Chandra, Mahendra Nath etc.

The tolerance of a Kashmiri Pandit is axiomatic. He withstood the troubles and tribulations caused by this forced migration. He bore the rigours of the heat and vagaries of the weather, which he was not used to. He eschewed the insults showered on him as a '*Kafir*' back home and the discrimination in the matter of seeking admission in professional institutions and employment in government offices. His temples were desecrated. There was large-scale encroachment on the temple property and even on cremation grounds. There was hindrance in the performance of his rituals. There was deliberate attempt to obliterate his past by changing the names of important places, by negating important facts and personalities and by distorting history. He tolerated all this even though he was grieved and his psyche was badly bruised. He observed patiently, perhaps helplessly the re-demarcation of constituencies and re-arrangement of areas so that none of these remains a Hindu majority area. He remained un-represented in all the forums like the legislature and assembly and submitted meekly to all such humiliations. He remained contented, patient and calm perhaps considering all this as the result of his past deeds.

Along with this dogged tolerance we observe this Kashmiri Pandit adapting to every change, every situation and every environment. He had to look for greener pastures, where he could get employment and recognition for his merit. He had to look for better places, where he could get admission for his children in professional courses and secure their future. He willingly spread in every nook and corner of the country and even abroad. He learnt the local language and communicated with the people in their own idiom. He adopted their customs and rituals and celebrated their festivals with the same fervour and zest as he observed in the local populace. He danced with the locals in their joy and shared their grief and thus endeared himself to every one around, both socially and professionally. These two traits of tolerance and adaptability have helped him survive in the face of all odds. It goes to his credit that in all these adverse circumstances he has preserved his distinct identity as a Kashmiri Pandit.

13.0 SHRINES AND TEMPLES

Kashmir is a place of temples, shrines and pilgrimage centers. Some are common temples with known idols and deities. Some are strange and unique. Some are full of miracles. These temples are on the banks of the rivers, by the side of the lakes, on hills and in caves. People throng to these places on specified days and auspicious occasions. In my childhood my mother described to me a very fascinating pilgrimage that she had undertaken along with her father who had been a religious man in his right. They had gone to a place called 'Swayam' meaning 'by itself' or 'Automatically'. She told me that there was a small earthen hillock at that place and a temple. The pilgrims would assemble there on a specified day, offer pooja and then dig a hearth on the hillock. A pot full of rice and water would be placed on the top and the rice would get cooked without any fire being lit in the fireplace. Because the rice got cooked by itself the place was aptly called 'Swayam'. This cooked rice was distributed as 'Prashada' and consumed with reverence. This narration often made me curious to know more and more about various prominent places of worship of the Kashmiri Pandits. As I grew I came to know of innumerable sacred places in my homeland Kashmir where people went for pilgrimage on specific dates of the year; On Jyeshtha Ashtami to Maharajna Temple at Tula Mula, On Ashada Navami to Shri Sharika Bhagavati at Hari Parbat in Srinagar, on Ashada Chaturdashi to Jwala ji at Village Khrew, on Ananata Chaturdashi to Nagabal at Anantnag, on Vyetha Truvah to Verinag, on Surya Saptami to Martand and so on and so forth. In due course of time I also got to know about many a shrine and sacred place throughout the length and breadth of the country where pilgrims go to offer prayers or take a dip in holy waters on different days of the Hindu calendar; Kumbha at Haridwara and other places, Sangam at Allahabad, Sabrimala and Guruvayur in Kerala, Tirumala at Tirupati, Natha Dwara in Rajasthan, Twelve Jyotirlingas at Varanasi, Ujjain and other cities, Jagannath at Puri, Gaya in Bihar, Maha Kali at Kolkata, Kamakhya in Assam, Golden Temple at Amritsar, Badrinath & Kedarnath at Uttaranchal, Kalka ji in Himachal, Hardwar and Prayag in Uttar Pradesh, Vaishno Devi in Jammu & Kashmir state, Siddhi Vinayak at Mumbai, Dwarka in Gujarat, Rameshwaram in Tamilnadu, different sacred rivers, various age-old shrines and countless spots of faith and belief. The question about the rationale and efficacy of these pilgrimages continued to haunt me and I was prompted to ponder over these aspects.

Pilgrim Centres are called '**Teertha**' in Sanskrit. It literally means a holy shrine on the bank of a river, spring or any other water resource. No wonder, therefore, that most of the shrines are situated on the banks of the important rivers, springs and on the seashore in addition to mountain-peaks, caves and hilltops. Incidentally the holy water referred to by us as '*Tsarnamret* or nectar from the sacred feet of the Lord' is called '*Teertha*' in Tamil. The importance of 'Teertha' as holy water can be gauged by the fact that during the daily 'Sandhya' as a part of 'Snana-vidhi' we are required to take handful of water and chant this mantra: '*Ganga, Prayaga, Gaya, Naimish, Pushkara- adi teerthani yani Bhuvi santi Hare-prasadat aayaantu tani kar-padma-pute madeeye prakshalayantu vadanasya nisha kalankam* – may the

holy waters of Ganga, Prayaga, Gaya, Naimish and Pushkar etc come into my palm by the grace of God and wash off the impurities of my face got overnight.'

Pilgrimage in Sanskrit is called '**Teerthayatra**' or simply '**Yatra**'. It can be defined on the pattern of the definition of education given in the scriptures. Education is defined thus: '**Sa vidya ya vimuktaye** – education is that which liberates us (from ignorance)'. Likewise pilgrimage may be defined as '**Sa yatra ya trayate**- pilgrimage is that which saves and protects us (from vice and sin)'. Swami Vivekananda desired that every one of us should rise from animality to divinity so that divinity is manifest in all our thoughts, words and deeds. It is precisely this that the pilgrimages help us to achieve. We approach these places of worship with humility and surrender before the Divine. We return with a resolve to shun the path of vice and tread the path of virtue. Millions of people pious, virtuous and noble have had visited these pilgrim spots before. The vibrations of their noble thoughts have rendered these places celestial and sacred. That lends added sanctity to these sacred spots and justifies our pilgrimage to these places. The atmosphere at these places is rendered celestial and serene and it affects our thinking, our intentions, our resolve and our actions. It is not said for nothing that '*Sataam sadbhih sanghah katham-api hi punyena bhavati*- It is the result of one's good deeds that one has association with good and noble persons.' The same is true of the pilgrimages. It is the result of our good deeds that we get an opportunity to visit such pilgrimage centres. There is a saying that we are able to undertake these pilgrimages only if and when the presiding deity of the shrine concerned so wills. I have a vivid experience of this myself. I was working in an organization where visiting Tirupati was within the sphere of my duties. Soon on my taking over charge there I made tour programmes three or four times to visit the institution at Tirupati. Every time the tour had to be cancelled due to the exigencies of the services and the need for me to be present at the headquarters for some more important engagements. Eventually when the tour did materialize I was, by some strange coincidence, able to remain at the feet of Balaji Venkateshwara for more than thirty-five minutes from 7 p.m. onwards, which by any standards is very uncommon as even V.I.P's are able to spend a few minutes only at that place. I felt more than compensated for the earlier cancellations of the trips.

I have spent my younger days in Srinagar and had my education there. I know from my own experience that it was a daily routine for most of the Kashmiris to get up early in the morning and after usual cleaning go to Hari Parbat for circumambulation. This was a daily pilgrimage to the shrine of Sharika Bhagavati, the presiding deity of Kashmir. Many of them would spend the Saturday night every week at '*Tsakrishwar*' in singing hymns, Bhajans and Leelas in praise of the Goddess fondly called '*Maej Haer*'. People would also undertake pilgrimage to '*Maha Rajna*' shrine at Tulamula on the eighth day of the bright fortnight of every lunar month. Then there were pilgrimages to various holy places scattered all over the valley on the days specified by custom and tradition. These included Khrew, Mattan, Gupta Ganga, Vicharnag, Zeethyaer, Sumbal, Varamul and umpteen other places. Every ten or twelve years there would be an important pilgrimage to Prayag at Shadipur. This is called 'Dashahar' and is referred to as '*Dahi vahaer dashahar* – or the pilgrimage that takes place after ten long years. There is a saying in Kashmiri, which goes thus: '*Trisandhya, Rudrasandhya, Pawanasandhya kaerze adai maerze toti*

kentshah. Haershwar, Tsaershwar Mahadeev kaerze adai maerze toti kentshah – It would be wonderful if one were to die after undertaking pilgrimage to the three sacred springs of Trisandhya, Rudrasandhya and Pawansandhya or to the three holy mountain-peaks of Haershwar, Tsaershwar and Mahadev'. This popular saying indicates the importance that we attach to these shrines and to the pilgrimage to these holy places.

Blessed is this land of ours where every spring is pious, every river is holy and every mountain peak is sacred. There is hardly any village that does not have a shrine held sacred from hoary past. A date is fixed for the annual pilgrimage to every such shrine. Having a glimpse of the deity in the temple, cave or atop a hill is the prime motive of these pilgrimages but at many places having a dip in the holy water is also included in the tradition. Surprisingly at many pilgrim-centres water oozes in the springs only on these specified dates and there is dry sand on the remaining days of the year. There is an anecdote that once the great saint of Kashmir, Reshi Peer happened to visit Trisandhya on a date different from the one specified for the pilgrimage. There was no water in the holy spring for him and his disciples to take a dip. Reshi Peer wrote a complaint in Persian on a piece of paper and asked his disciple to drop it at the site of the spring, '*Chi kudrat Sonda Braeri ra na ayad ba istiqbal-e- Shahahshahi Reshi* – What a surprise that the beautiful damsel *Sandhya* has not come to greet the King of sages, Reshi Peer' and lo and behold the water came gushing and the sage and his companions had a dip in the holy shrine. That the Kashmiris were used to undertake pilgrimages very often is corroborated by another anecdote from the life of the great Reshi Peer. It is said that someone in his neighbourhood was planning to go on a pilgrimage to Gangaji. When his mother heard it she expressed a desire to undertake the pilgrimage herself and visit the holy river. Peer Pandit Padshah, as he was fondly called, was aware that it was not possible because of her old age and failing health. He promised her that he would make necessary arrangements. He asked her to remove her gold bangle and handed over the same to the person going on the pilgrimage with instructions to drop the bangle in the holy water of the Ganges on the appointed day. The days passed and the appointed day, viz; 'Ganga ashtami' arrived. Early morning the sage escorted his mother to the bank of the river Vitasta and asked her to take a dip. As the old lady entered the water her gold bangle came floating down the river, proving beyond any doubt that the holy water of the Ganges had flown down the river Vitasta and the sacred wish of the mother had been fulfilled.

There is another important aspect to be noted about the holy places in Kashmir. The '**Sangam**' at Allahabad may be a popular pilgrimage spot. We have our own **Prayag** where the two rivers Sindhu and Vitasta converge. There is a small island in the middle there with a mahogany Chinar tree and a temple. We are told that this island never gets drowned even when the rivers inundate and overflow their banks. We have our own Ganga starting from 'Ganga Jatan', another pilgrim's paradise. There is the Sun Temple Martand at Muttan, MahaKali shrine in Srinagar on the bank of the Vitasta, Jwalaji at village Khrew. All these are, in a way, parallel shrines to their counterparts in other parts of the country, Konarka, Kolkata and Himachal. Probably the Kashmiris had to establish these in order to avoid undertaking arduous journeys to the planes because the valley is surrounded by high mountains, which were difficult to cross during those days with no means of transportation. Above all we have Swami Amarnath, serene

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in His cave, up in the mountains, pilgrimage to which is an annual feature on Shravana Purnima. This is no less important than the twelve 'Jyotir-lingas' at Varanasi and other places. We have separate shrines for the eight Bhairavas. Apart from these we have also sacred places where our great saints and sages lived like Vaskur, Manigam, Lalatrag, Ishabaer etc. We have the great **Sharada** shrine on the banks of the Krishna Ganga, but alas! It is now in the Pak occupied Kashmir.

These pilgrim centres are an important component of our five millennia old culture. They form an essential part of our rich and varied heritage and a symbol of our distinct identity. They lend meaning to our existence as a community of magnificent and glorious past. They are eloquent landmarks of our history, our spiritual inclinations, our faith and belief and a pointer to the heights and attainments of our ancestors as also their contribution to our distinct way of living. They have, therefore, enormous socio-religious importance for our community as Kashmiris.

These shrines were looked after, managed and administered in the past either by the Dharmarth Trust or by the locally constituted management bodies. Offerings of the devotees were the main source of income. Some shrines had landed property attached to them, the yield from which earned some revenue as well. From this income was met the expenditure on their maintenance and salary of the priests, wherever required. Some shrines had commercial premises let out and the rentals so obtained also supplemented the income. May be in the past during Dogra rule some grant was given by the government also. The situation changed after 1947, when the so-called popular rule was established. Most of the shrines remained under threat from the majority community. The Bhairav Temple at Chhattabal is a classic case as it has remained closed since 1975, the main door nailed down with wooden planks. There were large-scale encroachments on the premises of the shrines including those of the important cremation grounds. The year 1986 was a turning point in that the shrines in South Kashmir in almost all the villages were attacked, desecrated and partially destroyed. The Governments at the state level and at the centre were moot witnesses to this vandalism. No tear was shed and no concern was shown. After 1990 the situation has worsened because of the forced exile of the Hindu community. No body knows in what condition these shrines are, particularly those in remote places. There is none to care or look after them. We have made replicas of Tulamula at Jammu, of Hari Parbat at Faridabad and established Ashrams of saints and savants at different places, where their sacred relics have been preserved, but the state of the original shrines and holy places back home is very much a matter of anxiety and concern for the entire community. We are told that some prominent persons in the state government employ, who move to Srinagar during the summer and a few who are still in the valley having providentially escaped the wrath of zealots, have been taking care of some prominent shrines to the extent possible. While their effort is laudable, much more is required to be done for the maintenance and upkeep of these shrines and to safeguard their sanctity.

The problem is enormous, the task stupendous and the solutions are arduous. Yet the need of the hour is that we assess the situation, chalk out a programme and plan our actions. All this needs to be done before

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it is too late lest these places of religious and cultural importance should be lost to our progeny. Now that we are scattered all over and there is no prospect of our immediate return to our homes, we must address this problem in all the seriousness that it deserves. The following actions are suggested for the consideration of our community and various nodal organizations concerned about this grave problem:

There is a large-scale encroachment on important shrines like the one at Hari Parbat. This shrine has mythological, historical and cultural importance for us. This hillock is said to be the magnified form of the pebble brought by the Goddess in the form of a myna (Sarika in Sanskrit) in its beak to shut in the demon Jalodbhava in his cave so that he is not a source of nuisance to the sages engaged in their penance. This and such other shrines must be declared monuments of national importance and brought under the control of the Archaeological Survey of India. This question needs to be taken up with the Government of India so that necessary orders are issued in this regard. This will ensure that the encroachment is vacated and regular maintenance is undertaken to restore their pristine glory.

We need to constitute a body '**Teertha Prabhandha Samiti**' (Committee for the management of shrines). This body should have dedicated and committed representatives from the Kashmiris living in Kashmir and outside Kashmir. They should plan a visit to all the major centres of pilgrimage, examine their present status and then assess the expenditure needed to restore them to their original position. This has to be a three-tier organization having village level committees, area level committees and a central committee.

An endowment will have to be formed with the help of liberal donations from the members of the community, business houses and NRIs to create a Corpus Fund so that the interest earned from this is spent on the repairs and maintenance of the important shrines.

In the villages and townships where some Hindu families still live, local sub-committees can be formed to oversee management of the local shrines. The shrines situated in such places where there are no Hindus at present can be entrusted to the care of the Area Committees.

In order to initiate these actions to begin with a Review Committee will have to be formed to organize an overall inspection of at least major and prominent shrines to make an assessment of the task involved. Other actions suggested above can be planned on the basis of their report with due regard to their recommendations.

Annual pilgrimages should be organized to important shrines. These pilgrimages should be undertaken collectively by groups of Kashmiri Pandits and can start from important cities where Kashmiris are at

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present in large numbers, like Jammu, Delhi, Bombay, Calcutta, Lucknow etc. This programme can continue till we are not in a position to go back to our homeland with safety and honour.

We need to bring out small pamphlets about prominent pilgrim spots. These pamphlets will carry pictures of the shrines, their brief historical and mythological description and their religious significance. They can be published in Hindi and English and can contain the most famous 'Stotras' or hymns sung at those shrines on the auspicious occasions and annual pilgrimage.

With the help of the members of our community in the film sector, we may also bring out documentaries on important pilgrim spots of Kashmir with commentaries in Hindi and/or English. These documentaries can eventually be transferred on to Video Cassettes and CD's for a wide circulation.

These steps are particularly important lest our holy places meet with the same fate as was met by the ancient places of worship. It would be pertinent to quote here what has been recorded in the Persian chronicle called, '*Baharistani Shahi*' :

“The temples of idol-worshippers, which had been destroyed and razed to the ground by the religious minded and justice-loving Sultan Sikander, had been rebuilt and rehabilitated by Zainulabidin. He had permitted idolators and polytheists to revive the practices of infidelity and they had propagated heresy and false religion. With the support of some more kings, the infidels had flourished day after day. But with the support and authority of Malik Musa Raina, Amir Shams-ud-Din Muhammad undertook a wholesale destruction of all those idol houses as well as the total ruination of the very foundation of infidelity and disbelief. On the site of every idol house he destroyed, he ordered the construction of a mosque for offering prayers after the Islamic manner”.

14.0 'LAER', A TYPICAL KASHMIRI HOUSE

Enter the courtyard, with or without a gate, of any house anywhere in Kashmir and you will see an open rectangular or square space kept as neat as the weather permits. This is called '*Aangun*'. On the far off corner there will be a small dry toilet and somewhere in the middle of a side there will be a brick enclosure, '*Hoze*' with a tap for cleaning, washing and drawing water. You should not be surprised if you find a stone mortar and a large wooden pestle, used for crushing dried chillies and other spices, called '*Kanz ta Muhul*'. Then you will find a stone platform with two or three steps on either side at the front door. The platform is known as '*Brand*' and the front door as '*Daar*'. This door leads to a passage, which divides the house into two halves. This is referred to as '*Vuz*'. On either side of this passage there are two big rooms, each called '*Vo't*'. These are in effect sitting rooms used during winters. They are covered with grass mats, '*Vaguv*' over which are spread floor coverings, '*Satrand*', '*Namda*' or '*Gabba*'. A portion of this room is partitioned and made into a traditional kitchen, '*Choka*'. It has cooking ranges, big '*Daan*' and small '*Oksore*', '*Hahkole*'. There are storage spaces for kitchen items, utensils and fuel and charcoal. There is also a wooden shelf, '*Garavanja*', meant to hold pitchers of water for use in the kitchen. The size of these rooms depends on the number of windows there are on the front elevation of the house. The houses are usually either '*Sath-taakh*', in which case there will be three windows in each room or '*Paentsh-taakh*', in which case these two rooms will have two windows each. At the end of the passage there is a self-closing door called '*Thasa-bar*', which opens into the staircase leading to the upper stories. The space below the circular bend of the staircase is gainfully used as a bathroom or washroom.

Climb the staircase and you are on the first floor. In a typical house there will be two rooms on either side and a small room in the middle on the front side. This small room is very important and sacred. It is called, '*Thokur Kuth*' or the room for worship. It houses a small temple with a variety of idols of different deities. The rooms on either side would be bedrooms for different members of the family or study cum bedrooms for the youngsters. These are tastefully decorated with pictures and photos and wall hangings and furnished with carpets spread over grass-mats and floor coverings. In some traditional houses one or two rooms out of these four rooms may be used as store rooms called, '*Bana-kuth*' for grains, spices, pulses etc; and '*Baeth-kuth*' for fuel, dried cow-dung, charcoal etc. The former will have large pitchers, '*Machi*' or big but short ones, '*Math*' made of earthenware to store various items of household. At the onset of the winter these '*Maths*' will be filled with potatoes, turnips, radish and knoll-khol to be consumed during winter months, when there is scarcity of such items due to snow, frost and cold.

Once again you can go up the next staircase and reach the second floor. There may be three or four rooms on this floor of varying sizes. One of them will have an anteroom, '*Shansheen*'. One on the front or on the side may have a small balcony extended out, either round or rectangular in shape. It will have either ordinary windows opening outside or three or four windowpanes one over the other, which are lifted and

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stacked one after the other on a support in the upper portion of the window. This is known as '*Vuroosi*' and is usually made of wooden panels beautifully carved with floral designs. One of the rooms may have all its walls plastered with white cement, '*gachh*'. This room would be earmarked as the bedroom for the head of the family. All these rooms will have double-panelled windows. One set made of thick wooden plank will open towards inside. The other set made of criss-cross carved wooden mesh, called '*Panjra*' will open outside and would be resting on two hooks. These can easily be removed from the hooks so that paper is pasted on them to block the draught of wind during winter months. The ceiling of the rooms will be rather low and tastefully woven with small wooden pieces of varying designs. This is called, '*Khutumband taalav*' and is exquisitely beautiful. The floors may be of clay resting on wooden girders and sleepers. These are cleaned and smeared with clay-paste and covered with grass mats '*Vaguv*', '*Satrand*' and carpets or Kashmiri '*Namdas*' and '*Gabbas*'. In some rooms you may find a wooden pole hanging by the ropes on either end from the ceiling. This is called '*Villinj*' and is used to hang clothes, sheets and floor coverings, towels etc.

Another flight of stairs and you are on the third floor, '*Kaani*'. It is a huge hall covering the entire space. In the entire length of the front side there is a projected balcony overlooking the courtyard below. It has beautifully carved wooden poles supporting the typical window-series and separating the '*Vuroosi*' system. The ceiling is of wooden planks below the huge wooden girders and beams. Over this there is a V-shaped roof '*Pash*', either covered with corrugated tin sheets or wooden shingle or of mud-phuska over birch sheets that make it waterproof. The space between the roof and the ceiling is called '*Brari-Kaani*' and is used for stacking cut-wood fuel. In some houses small study rooms are made out on the corner sides known as '*Gable*'. The hall is used as a living room in summer months as it is airy and pleasant and for serving meals to a large number of guests on important occasions like marriages betrothals etc. It has a kitchen and a storeroom on either side of the stair door. Those houses, which do not have taps on this top floor, have a strong wooden wall bracket, '*Garvanja*' to hold earthen pitchers for storage of water. A servant is engaged to fetch water from the taps below and fill these pitchers for use in the kitchen and for drinking purposes.

During the winter, when there is a heavy snowfall a thick layer of snow settles on the rooftop. If the roof is made of tin sheets or shingle, the snow melts in due course and slips from the slanting roof. If, however, the roof is made of mud, some labour is employed to push the snow from above lest the roof gives way under the weight of the snow. This is done with huge wooden ore-like blades called '*Phyuh*'. During the summer people leave chillies, paddy, pickle and '*Kaanz*' (fermented drink) on the roof in the open sunshine. There is a small covered opening in the middle of the roof where the two slopes meet. It has a small door used to climb on to the roof whenever needed. On auspicious days people climb the roof through this opening along with a plateful of raw meat pieces and hurl them above their heads for hovering kites to grab and take away. On the flatter roofs even paddy is spread on grass mats to dry in open sunshine.

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A typical Kashmiri house is built on a raised stone plinth. The ground floor is often built in stone blocks neatly chiseled. The remaining floors are built with baked bricks of varying sizes. Small sized bricks '*Maharaji Seri*' give a beautiful look to the construction from outside. These are usually painted brick red or deep crimson. After every floor wooden beams are placed on the bricklayers and interlocked at the four corners. These help the walls to stand firm and secure. The roof is built over huge and straight wooden logs, usually from the poplar tree, and wooden girders. There is no plaster from outside but the inner walls are plastered with fine powdered clay mixed with chaff or tree-wool. Ceilings are low and so are windows so that the rooms remain warm in winter months. Just above the window on the extreme right in the ground floor there is a small wooden shelf on the outside. Cooked rice and other eatables are left on this shelf for birds of sorts, which are there in plenty. Similarly on the top floor just outside the projected balcony there is again a wooden shelf for the same purpose.

People generally sit on the floor on a carpeted surface leaning on large-sized bolsters kept along the walls. It is also customary to sleep on the floor on mattresses stuffed with cotton and take similarly stuffed quilts as coverings. During the day these beddings are neatly folded and stacked in one corner either on top of a table or a huge tin box. While toilets are always outside, bathrooms can be either inside or in the corner of the courtyard adjacent to the water-tap. These houses are living monuments to the culture of Kashmir. The galleries on all the floors are used not only as approaches to different floors but also to leave the shoes behind, as these are not taken inside the rooms. Kitchens are demarcated by wooden partitions in order to maintain their sacred purity. Every house has a small room for offering worship. Kashmiri Pandits are deeply religious and God fearing. It is customary for them to offer daily pooja, perform rituals on important occasions and observe a fortnight-long celebration on Shivaratri. They sit, sleep and eat normally on the floor and for that keep their houses neat, clean and pure. A portion of all that is cooked is left for dogs, birds and the guests are received with an open heart.

15.0 UNIQUE FEATURES OF A KASHMIRI PANDIT

From time immemorial there have been two main things that have symbolized a Kashmiri Pandit, the mark on his forehead and a pen in his pocket. He used to go to a neighbourhood temple or for circumambulation to Hari Parbat or offer his daily prayers at his own house in a small prayer-room called 'Thokur Kuth', earmarked for the purpose. He would put a mark made of sandalwood paste or saffron paste on his forehead in between his brows at these places just before saying his prayers. This mark is called 'Tyok', which is the corrupt form of Sanskrit word 'Tilakam'. Along with goes the holy thread, red, white and saffron in colour, tied round his wrist called 'Naervan'. From a distance one could spot a Kashmiri Pandit by this distinct mark. This mark shows his character, attitude and temperament. He is deeply religious and inclined to lead a pious and truthful life. He has firm faith and belief in the Supreme Lord and sees everything about his life being governed by His will and dispensation. He is peace loving and non-violent. He does not use vulgar or indecent language nor does he swear. He is polished, well mannered and of polite demeanour. He can be firm in his conviction but never offensive towards persons holding a different view. The 'Thokur Kuth' is the place where he offers his daily prayers. He keeps small idols of Vishnu called 'Saligram', of Shiva called 'Shiva-linga' a coin depicting 'Rama-panchayatan', Shri Rama, Goddess Sita, Laxman, Bharata and Hanuman. He bathes them, clothes them, puts sandal paste on them, garlands them with choicest flowers and lights a lamp of purified butter before them. He keeps a round stone slab called 'Tekya kaen' and a piece of sandalwood. He makes a paste by rubbing the sandalwood on the wet slab. He applies this paste on his idols and on his own forehead. Sometimes he mixes saffron paste also with it and after the tilaka is put on the forehead, it dazzles with pious radiance.

In olden times there used to be another distinguishing mark, a tuft of hair at the back of his head in the centre, called 'Tshog'. He would wash it while taking a bath and then tie it in a knot chanting mantras. With the passage of time the practice of growing this tuft of hair has gone in disuse, partly because even otherwise most of them keep long hair in line with the fashion of the day. I remember as young boys whenever we went for a haircut we used to direct the barber to take care that this tuft is left intact. Sometimes the barber would tease us by saying that he would trim it or shave it off and we used to get annoyed and warned him that God would be angry with him and punish him if he did any such thing.

A pen can very easily be considered to be the hallmark of a Kashmiri Pandit. He has a flair for writing in any language. He is an expert at all types of bureaucratic jobs and keeps himself abreast with the latest rules and regulations relevant to his assignment. It is not for nothing that the great Sanskrit satirist Kshemendra has given him the title of 'Brahman-Kayastha'. By this description he has acknowledged that the members of this community are Brahmins, i.e. intellectuals no doubt but they take to government jobs, which ordinarily is the forte of the community called *Kayastha*. In performing these jobs he has always been loyal and faithful to the authorities. He has been meticulously impartial in executing his duties but has always tried to find ways and means to help the needy. There may have been occasions

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when, because of the paltry amount he got by way of salary, he was prone to accepting gratification but he has never misused his position to exploit the innocent. On the contrary he has always helped the poor materially and financially with the result that quite a few poor families would be substantially dependent on him, in return for which they would undertake odd jobs for his family like cleaning and washing etc.

Kashmiri Pandit's loyalty to the job he holds, loyalty to the boss he works for and loyalty to the cause he holds dear are well known. Often his fellow community members accuse him that he is not helpful to them, by which statement they mean that he is not biased in their favour or partial to them. True it is so because he is loyal and obedient to the institution he works for and this does not allow him to be partial or biased, even when his own community member is involved. He will show the method, the way or the manner in which the desired can be achieved but he will never commit an irregularity or bend a rule even if his own relative is affected. In executing his job he is, therefore, impartial, unbiased and meticulously governed by the rules and procedures. He is so engrossed in his work that the office and official matters are always uppermost in his mind. He does not hesitate carry the office work to his home and burn his midnight oil to dispose the pending cases, unmindful of his comfort and health, his duties towards his family and incurring annoyance of his family members. This has virtually become his character.

A Kashmiri Pandit is a trusted member of an organization he works in, irrespective of the position he may be holding. He strives for excellence in the execution of his work. He is dependable and keeps the secrets of the office well guarded. Whatever be the level at which he is positioned, he is indispensable because of the knowledge he has and because of the sound suggestions he makes for the development and progress of the organization. Wherever he is, he creates a niche for himself. Even alien rulers recognized his utility and worth, sometimes belatedly, when Kashmir was swept by Pathan and Mughal rule. On his part he discharged his duties honestly, diligently and faithfully. He adapted to different court languages at different times in order to be efficient, effective and indispensable. When Sanskrit was the court language he excelled in it. When Persian replaced Sanskrit he mastered it. Eventually when Urdu became the official language he gained a good command over it. Wherever English or Hindi is prevalent for official use he has acquired the capability to use these freely and lucidly. Sometimes out of prejudice against this community it is alleged that he would exploit others. The fact of the matter is that he is the one who has been exploited by others. His expertise, loyalty, deftness and hard work have been exploited by those who ruled the state. In fact his services were always purchased for a proverbial tupence.

16.0 SUPERSTITIONS

As is the case with any other community, the Kashmiri community is also prone to a number of superstitions. These are engrained and so deep rooted that even people with a rational mind fall prey to these, unwittingly though. The day for a Kashmiri Pandit begins by getting out of his cozy quilt and the first thing he would like to look at is a picture of some deity, Mother Goddess, Shiva, Shri Krishna or Shri Rama. He feels that by this act he ensures that the day would pass peacefully both at home and in his work place. Even then he is choosy about the first person that he chances to see in the morning. This person should be a proven one whose appearance in the morning heralds good luck. In order to avoid chance seeing of an undesirable person, some people assign this duty to a young child of the family to show his face to them early in the morning so that the day is favourable to them in all respects. This in Kashmiri language is called '*Buth havun*' or showing the face.

After the morning routine, the daily prayer and the early meal when he starts from his house for his office, shop or other workplace, a Kashmiri Pandit wants that someone who would usher in good omen should come from the opposite side on his right. He would avoid a cat, a cow, a woman, a priest, a person with some infirmity or a person who by his own past experience brings bad luck. He prefers a smiling child, a sweeper, a water-carrier, a milkman, a person carrying an auspicious object like yogurt, milk or rice, as he is sure that if one of them passes by him, his day will be fruitful. In fact more often he watches to see if a favourable omen is approaching and then only he starts his journey. In this connection there is a custom prevalent in the community that someone in the family itself is asked to come from the opposite side with a metal pot or a tumbler filled with water, when one steps out of one's home for any work, routine or special. This custom is called (*Zangi yun*) or passing by on the right side of a person. If the day turns out to be fruitful he proclaims that '*Raets zang*' or good omen had passed by him, but if the day has not been eventful or some untoward happening has taken place, it is said that '*kharab zang*' or bad omen had passed by while starting off from the home.

While starting off for the work place utmost care is taken about two things. One that nobody should call this person from behind, and two that no person should sneeze particularly from behind or on the left side. These two things are considered to be highly inauspicious. Members of the family and youngsters in particular, are advised to be careful in this regard. Even so if by chance someone does sneeze, as it cannot be controlled, the person about to go out retreats into his house, takes something like a candy, a cardamom or an almond, puts it in his mouth and then restarts his journey. This way an attempt is made to ward off the bad effect of the sneeze.

Every Kashmiri Pandit ensures that a detailed horoscope is prepared for the child soon after his birth. The family priest or an astrologer is asked to read it and predict about his future. Sometimes the priest finds

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some planets or stars in an unfavourable position and advises the family to have a special locket prepared for the child to wear. In this locket a diagram on a piece of paper, with some alphabets written therein and duly sanctified by some *mantras* is concealed. This locket is called '*Raechh*' or a talisman or an amulet. The Kashmiri word for this talisman literally means something that protects. It is believed that this will ward off or at least minimize the bad effect of the unfavourable stars. Small children are made to wear tooth of a boar, a silver locket depicting 'OM' or a crescent or a gem recommended by an astrologer with reference to the stars in his horoscope.

Kashmir abounds in a variety of birds. There are common birds like crows, sparrows, pigeons, kites, mynas, parrots, bulbuls and doves. There are some rare birds also, which are seen in particular season only or which are found only in forests. Whenever a crow sits on the edge of a window and crows it is considered to be a forerunner of the visit of a guest. If a group of mynas make noise and chirp violently, they are driven away as otherwise it is felt that there will be a quarrel in the family. Similarly cats and stray dogs are also abundant everywhere. If a street dog makes a strange noise- a shrill long howl, it is considered to be a bad omen and a message that something ill is going to befall. Similarly if there is a howl of a jackal or of a house cat, that is not considered to auger well for the family. It is a bad omen and is despised as '*Wungun*' or howling.

Another strong yet misplaced belief is about an evil eye. This belief is based on a very common human trait of envy and coveting. Some people rejoice in other's prosperity but there are some who envy and feel jealous. If, therefore, someone is gifted with a child and that too a male one, if he purchases a costly item like an electronic gadget or a car or if the lady fortune smiles on him in any other way, he is very apprehensive that somebody's evil eye may not befall him. This is called '*Aechh lagaen*'. People either hide their newly acquired costly possessions or try to play it down by referring to these as trifles. As for the children a black mark is placed behind their ears to ward off the ill effect of such an evil eye. A black string is tied round his wrists, ankles and the neck, often with a talisman.

Throbbing of the left eye '*Aechh Phorean*', is also considered a bad omen and so are frightening dreams regarded as indicators of something ill to befall. If one sneezes other than due to cold, it is felt that some dear one has remembered him. If there is an itching in the right palm it is believed that some money is likely to be received. Eclipses of the Moon or the Sun are also considered to have bad effect particularly on persons with specified zodiac signs. If a lady is in a family way she is advised to remain indoors lest she should chance to see the eclipse, which will have an adverse effect on the child she is carrying in her womb. Some people believe that there is a scientific basis for this notion and practice prevalent among the Kashmiris.

There are many other superstitious customs that appear to have scientific basis. For example fish and milk are not consumed in combination as it causes leucoderma. Similarly on certain specified days lime

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powder is scattered all around the house perhaps because it kills germs and insects that grow in that season. A piece of cloth containing lime powder, called '*Shishar gor*' is stitched on the headgear of the newborn and the newlywed bride for the same reason on a specific day. On a fasting day small quantities of water are consumed thrice before starting the proper meal perhaps to clear the passage lest there should be any choking in the throat. This is called '*Atsman*'. Again at the end of the meal small quantity of water is gulped down to push the food for better digestion.

Similarly there are some superstitions that have a bearing on the conduct of a person. For example it is said that if a pair of shoes is left in a haphazard manner there is bound to be a quarrel. The idea perhaps is to inculcate a good habit in the youngsters to leave their belongings in a proper way. Again it is said that if a book is left open one loses one's knowledge of the subject as the evil spirits begin to read the book. This is to create a habit in the children to treat their books with care and reverence, as these are a source of knowledge and must, therefore, be respected.

17.0 KASHMIRI CUISINE

Kashmiri cuisine is well known world over. However what is often spoken about is that, which the Muslim cooks prepare on marriages and other occasions and in the hotels, generally called 'Wazawan'. These include 'Goshtaba' something akin to Hungarian Golash, 'Rista', 'Tabakh maaz', 'Kabab' etc. The cuisine of the Kashmiri Pandits is also special, tasty and varied. We have our own specialties both in vegetarian and non-vegetarian dishes.

In the non-vegetarian dishes the 'Rogan-josh' tops the table. This is a dish of goat-meat or mutton that is fried first and then cooked red with chilly powder and other spices. Then we have, 'Yakhaen', meat prepared with yogurt, 'Kaliya', yellow meat prepared with turmeric, 'Matsh', or the minced meat made into balls and prepared either red with chilly-powder, white with yogurt called 'Shyaemi' or yellow with turmeric. Sometimes nuts or dried plums are stuffed into minced meatballs before cooking. This gives added taste to this dish. Again we have 'Tsok tsarvan', liver pieces cooked sour with tamarind or any other souring ingredient, 'kabargah', meat marinated in milk and then roasted in purified butter and 'Tabakh naat', meat marinated and cooked in sealed earthenware plates called 'Tabaech'. In addition fish is also cooked in a variety of ways and so is partridge and other varieties of fowls. Chicken was a taboo but now this also has found its way into our cuisine.

Kashmiri Pandits have a variety of vegetarian dishes also. The most famous item is 'Dam oluv' – a dish of uncut potato boiled, fried and then cooked in a closed vessel. This dish is very common in restaurants and is called 'Aaloo Dam'. Knol Khol is available in abundance in Kashmir. This vegetable is cooked in many ways, either with or without leaves. Small lumps of the vegetable without leaves are cooked with turmeric and the dish is called 'Monji Kaliya'. When bigger lumps are fried and then cooked using chilly powder, the dish is called 'Dam monji'. 'Gobi dam' a red dish of cauliflower is also prepared likewise. Lotus stem is also grown aplenty because of lakes and other waterways. This item is also cooked in a variety of ways, either singly or in combination with other vegetables like potato, brinjal. 'Nudaer yakhean' is a dish of lotus stem cut into round pieces and cooked in yogurt and is considered a nice dish. 'Yakhaen' is also made from bottle gourd by cutting it into thick rectangular pieces. This is known as 'Ala yakhaen'. Small pieces of lotus stem cut lengthwise are fried in oil and a crisp dish called 'Nadaer churma' is prepared. Similar dish is made of potato as well by cutting these into fine long strips. Choicest dishes are made of a variety of mushrooms, the best one is called 'Maaz-khel' or a lump of flesh. But on the top of the table is a delicacy of a rare variety of yellow dried mushrooms known as 'Kanagaechh'. It is cooked with yogurt and turmeric both.

Kashmiris prepare vegetarian and non-vegetarian dishes by mixing various items in different permutations and combinations. Potato is cooked with lotus stem, brinjal, cauliflower, knoll khol, peas,

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beans and meat. Lotus stem is cooked in combination with partridge, mutton and other vegetables. Sometimes a number of vegetables are mixed and cooked together. It is called '*Kadavbuddi*'. Pickle and chutney are also served along with other dishes. Pickle is made of Knol Khol, radish, lotus stem, turnip and chutney is made of walnuts, radish, lotus stem, and items like that. Mixing powdered pudina with yogurt makes another variety of chutney. This is called '*Buraeni*'. Among sweet dishes '*Kheer*', prepared from rice, milk and sugar and '*Halwa*', prepared from Suji, sugar and purified butter are very popular. A sweet dish is also made by mixing a variety of nuts and raisin in syrup, which is known as '*Shufta*'.

Kashmiris are rice eaters and '*Pulav*' and '*Biryani*' are cooked with interest. Vegetable *pulav* is generally sweet and *biryani* is prepared with pieces of meat or cheese and peas and other vegetables. Cheese is also prepared into different dishes, either red when fried or yellow when cooked with turmeric. Cheese rolls, potato rolls and '*Pakorisi*' made of vegetables mixed with gram flour or rice flour and then deep-fried are also common nick-knacks.

Kashmiris use a lot of spices in their cooking. They use mustard oil for frying. The common spices are dried ginger, fennel seed, turmeric, pepper, asafetida, cinnamon, cardamom, tamarind and the like. The choicest of all is the world-famous saffron. It is added to delicacies for special flavour. These spices are added to various preparations in different combinations and in different proportions and give different tastes and aroma in different dishes. Kashmiris are very hospitable and these dishes are prepared not only on important occasions like marriages, yajnopavit etc; but also whenever guests drop in or a feast is arranged in honour of relatives and friends. Apart from big occasions like betrothal and marriage even small occasions are good enough for inviting people for lunch or dinner. Birthdays, success in examination, getting an order for employment, getting a child and other occasions, big or small are celebrated by arranging a feast. If the number of guests is manageable the ladies of the house do the cooking but if the guest list is big, cooks are hired to do the job.

Special dishes are also prepared when season's first crop of selected vegetables is in the market and the vegetable like bottle gourd or brinjal are cooked for the first time. This is known as '*Ala-nov*' and '*wangan-nov*'. When there is the first snowfall of the season, a little snow is clandestinely passed on in the hands of the father in law by the new bride or vice versa and the occasion calls for a grand feast when partridge is prepared. In short the Kashmiris are very fond of their cuisine and they are on the look out for an occasion to prepare the choicest dishes for themselves and their guests.

18.0 MUSIC AND SONGS OF KASHMIR

Kashmiri Pandit community has its own tradition of music. The community has produced a number of musicians of repute, both vocalists and instrumentalists. As elsewhere, we have a rich tradition of classical and folk music. While I was working for the All India Radio, Kashmir station (Popularly known as Radio Kashmir) I had the privilege of coming into contact with a number of Kashmiri musicians. I remember Mohammad Abdullah Tibetbaqal saying once that the Ragas, which are prevalent in Kashmiri Classical music called 'Sufiana Kalam' have been rearranged in their present form by the great Kashmiri poetess Arnimaal. That shows the amount of interest in music shown by the community. While no distinct classical music of this community is extant at present, there is a living tradition of folk music.

This folk music can broadly be classified into four groups, '*Vanavun*', '*Veegi natsun*', '*Bhajan-Keertan*' and '*Gyavun*'. The first group '*Vanavun*' is a style of singing on various occasions connected with the '*Yajnopavit*' ceremony and the marriage ceremony. A close look at the singing will show that it is a slow elongated chanting of verses similar to the recension of Sama Veda. Although the Kashmiris are said to belong to Paippalada Shakha of the Atharva Veda, the effect on festive singing appears to be that of the Sama Veda. May be in the hoary past Sama Veda was also very popular among them. After addressing the ladies in the gathering by the word '*Henze*', Lord Ganesha is invoked to shower his blessing for the ceremony to proceed unhindered. Thereafter verses appropriate to the occasion like cleaning the house, applying henna-paste to bride and the groom, giving a holy bath to them, leaving for the marriage ceremony at the bride's place, returning with the bride and so on and so forth are sung melodiously in chorus. Usually an elderly knowledgeable lady leads the singing. In these verses all the members of the household and near relatives and friends are showered blessings and prayed for.

The second group called '*Veegi Natsun*' is a very peculiar style of dancing while singing. When the groom leaves for the bride's place for the marriage ceremony he is made to stand on a circular diagram drawn with a number of coloured-powders in the courtyard. The eldest lady of the house waves a plateful of lighted lamps round his head, shows around a small container with water to ward off evil effect and makes him bite at a piece of candy while he is standing there facing the East invoking the blessings of the Sun. After he has left the ladies, groom's mother, grand mother, aunts, sisters and sisters in law all go round and round this circular pattern called '*Vyug*' and sing small pithy couplets showing their love for the groom and his parents and congratulating and blessing each other. These verses are meaningful and depict not only the close family bonds but also give vent to expectations and aspirations of the participants. Similarly after the holy thread ceremony is over and the boys are about to be taken to the temple and the river for seeking blessings, they are also required to stand on a similar diagram. After they have left the gathering of the ladies engages in a similar dance cum singing. The ladies take turns to stand in the centre, while the rest of them go round singing and showering flower petals on her.

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Kashmiri Pandits are a religious lot and are soaked in devotion. There is a rich tradition in Kashmiri literature of devotional poetry called '*Leela*' or hymns in praise of the Lord. Paramanand, Krishna Razdan, Master Zinda Kaul and a host of other poets have contributed to this rich tradition in a great measure. These songs are sung in chorus to the accompaniment of Harmonium, clay pitcher and some improvised musical instruments. These singings take place at pilgrimage centers, in temples and other holy places as also in private gatherings. These devotional sessions run nightlong at places like Hari Parvat, Pokhribal, Durganag, Tulamula and many other places of worship. These songs and hymns are sung in praise of Shri Rama, Shri Krishna, Mother Goddess, Lord Ganesha, and Lord Shiva. The groups that sing these devotional songs are called '*Bhajan Mandali*' or '*Keertan Mandali*'. These religious songs have a generic name '*Bhajan*' or devotional song and these are sung with zest, fervour and ecstasy. Solo singing of these devotional songs in private in front of the idols and pictures of deities is also very common in Kashmiri Pandit homes.

The fourth and equally popular music is called '*Gyavun*' or singing. At any social gathering, religious ritual, popular function and picnic mirth people join in chorus and sing choicest songs. These songs are either folk songs or popular melodies of some known poets. These include social and political satires, humourous compositions and songs in praise of the rich nature for which the land is famous world over. The most popular session of this song is on the occasion of '*Mehndi-raat*', the night when henna paste is applied to the bride, groom or the boy who has to be initiated by grant of the holy thread, '*Yajnopavit*'. Another important occasion to have such chorus singing is when people hire a big boat called '*Doonga*' and go for picnic to Dal Lake and Moghul gardens or for pilgrimage to Tulamula and Shadipore sangam. These boats reverberate with the melodious songs sung by young and old alike. Similarly on the occasion of the almond blossom when people assemble at the foothill of Hari Parbat they join in this singing forgetting all the troubles and tribulation that they are otherwise faced with in their life.

19.0 CELEBRATIONS ROUND A TYPICAL YEAR

Kashmiri Pandits have socio-religious festivals galore. These are celebrated round the year with fervour and gaiety. I wish to give a glimpse of these celebrations monthwise. I have chosen to start with the month of April, as it is during this month in this particular year that the Kashmiri New Year was celebrated.

19.1 April

Human existence is a complex affair. There is a lot about this existence, which is visible and there is a lot more which is not. Even about the sound, an important ingredient of our overall existence, it is said that there is '*Aahat Nada*' or that sound, which can be heard and '*Anaahat Nada*' that sound, which is silent and is not audible - not even remotely. It is this inaudible mute sound that is sought after and concentrated upon in the Yoga, practised since time immemorial. Whatever we utter or express is preceded by a thought. The thought is deep rooted and in a way dormant in the subtlest corners of our mind. In spiritual parlance this position is called '*Para avastha*' or the subtle state. This in due course crystallizes into '*Vichara*' or thinking. Incidentally April begins with a pilgrimage to the holy spring of '*Vicharnag*' or the spring of contemplation and thought. I remember in my childhood days we used to go to this township on the previous night, stay for the night in the house of a relative there and then take a dip and have *darshan* in the temple early morning, before starting the return journey. This pilgrimage symbolizes the need to keep our thoughts clean, clear and pure.

On the following day, the 2nd April we shall celebrate the beginning of the New Year according to the lunar calendar that we have been following. We call it '*Navreh*'. It is the day of resolve for us to take a pledge that we shall remain pure and pious in thought, word and deed. It is not for nothing that we pray, '*Tan-me manah shiva sankalpam-astu* – May my mind be of noble resolve'. Let me quote the first verse of my poem written on '*Navreh*'. It goes like this: '*Navi varyuk pyav az partav tai, talai dyedi tsa ti vo'th danas pyav tai* – The new year's Sun has risen in the East, Granny get up and light the kitchen fire'. Yes, this New Year's Day is a day to kindle new fire in our life so that we live with zeal, zest and fortitude. It is the day for us to ponder over the bygone year with all the successes and failures, to make fresh plans for the future and live the present with determination and commitment for the causes considered sacred by us. Let us remember what Voltaire has said, 'Perfection is attained by slow degrees – it requires the hand of time'.

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Having resolved for purity and piety it follows that our deeds also will be noble. This needs, in addition to our efforts in right direction, Divine grace as well. For this we have to invoke the blessings of the Divine. We shall, therefore, celebrate '*Durga Ashtami*' on 10th April and worship the Mother Goddess as the Energy aspect of the Divine. We shall request Her to help and guide us in the right direction. On the 11th April we shall celebrate '*Rama Navami*', the birthday of the seventh incarnation of Lord Vishnu. Again we shall seek the grace of the Divine to steer the boat of our life so that divinity manifests in all that we think, speak and do. Perhaps it is for this reason that Shri Ram is referred to as '*Maryada Purushottama* – An excellent Person observing all the norms of decent behaviour'. We are required to emulate the good qualities of this incarnation of the Divine as a person, a dutiful son, a responsible ruler and a dispenser of justice.

In a great measure we shall also require the blessings of sages and saints, who have given guidance to us, regulated our lives and given us inspiration to lead a good and pious life, spiritually and morally. Of the sages of olden times the '*Nirvana Divas*' of Reshi Peer falls on 21st. Of the contemporary saints, the birthday of Swami Laxman Joo falls on 28th. Both these days shall be celebrated with reverence and devotion so that these sages and saints bless us to remain firm in our resolve to lead a noble life full of '*sadhana*', seeking the truth and '*seva*', service unto humanity. Reshi Peer was a mysterious saint, who performed a number of miracles because of which he was called '*Peer Pandit Padshah* – a king among the saints and the learned'. These miracles are a pointer to the spiritual powers that he possessed and the height of the spiritual position that he had touched. Swami Laxman Joo, on the other hand, was a great saint-scholar in the lineage of the galaxy of Shaivacharyas from Vasugupta to Abhinavaguptapada. He has given spiritual enlightenment to many a disciple.

Another important feature of our existence is that we relate to the nature. There are many festivals related to the nature that we observe. One such festival is '*Vaishakhya*' or Baisakhi, which falls on 14th April. On this day, apart from the usual religious observance, we enjoy the beauty of the nature, the flowers, the almond-blossom, the dancing fountains and the singing brooks. We go to the gardens, the temples and the foothills and make merry in the soothing company of the Mother Nature. Park Benjamin has rightly observed that 'Beauty and Grace command the world'. It is this beauty and grace that our women folk seek on '*Zanga trai*' (5th April) when they go to their father's house and join the family of their birth to take delight from the grandeur of the nature. They get a sumptuous feast there and return to their in-laws with customary '*Noon, tsochi ta atagat*', salt, bakery-bread and some cash. These items are symbolic of the faith, the responsibility for sustenance and contribution towards the prosperity of her family that form the duty of a woman. All this adds up to the happiness that we seek, for according to Oscar Levant 'Happiness isn't something you experience – it's something you remember'. Let us all cherish and remember the happiness that we derive from our rituals and festivals, which give us our distinct identity as Kashmiri Pandits.

19.2 May

The other day I was asked to address a group of young students on the tradition and heritage of Kashmiri Pandits with special reference to our rituals. It was a challenging task, for it involved coming down to their level of understanding and then speaking on this subject in an idiom best suited to them. I spoke for about three quarters of an hour, followed by a brief session of questions and answers. What amazed me and indeed delighted me was the type of questions put by these young minds. They were eager and inquisitive to know in detail about our culture even though most of them were born outside Kashmir and had never seen the birthplace of our rich tradition. This gave me a hope that if we the elders and the parents fulfill our duty of transmitting the high points of our culture to our progeny properly, it will not be difficult to keep our distinct identity intact.

By giving these children information about our tradition we do not intend to restrict the area of their knowledge. In fact we should strive to groom them to become worthy world citizens. That reminds me of the May Day, which will be celebrated as World Labour Day on 1st May. In our own tradition three H's have been given supreme importance. The first H represents Head, the epicentre of knowledge, *Jnana*'. The second H denotes Heart, the seat of devotion and dedication, *Bhakti*'. The third H signifies Hands, the instruments of our deeds, *'Karma*'. Our scriptures have emphasized the importance of action and it has been clarified that we cannot cease to act even for a fraction of a second. Action could be by thought, word or deed and in any form it should be noble for the good of mankind.

On 4th we have '*Parashurama Jayanti*' and on 12th '*Narada Ekadashi*'. The message from the life of Parashurama, the sixth incarnation of Vishnu wielding an axe, is that even a Brahmin should take to arms if the righteousness, truth and justice are at stake and under attack from the forces of evil, falsehood and injustice. Narada is a legendary god who is an ardent devotee of Narayana, whose name he chants all the time. Often he shows us the right path of righteousness but sometimes puts some hurdles in our way in order to test our sincerity, perseverance and eagerness to know the truth and know the Divine. Once he is assured of our zeal, he renders all possible help enabling us to achieve our goal. On 4th is '*Akhshay Tritiya*' – '*Akhshay*' means indestructible. This day reminds us of the basic concept of our faith that the essence of everything is indestructible, immortal and eternal. It is this eternal character of our self that we should endeavour to explore and realize. That will be possible only if we undergo a strict spiritual exercise best suited to our acumen and temperament.

This spiritual exercise has to be initiated, preferably under the guidance of a preceptor, by invoking the blessings of Lord Ganesha and Mother Goddess. On 15th we shall celebrate '*Gana Tsodah*' or Ganesh Chaturdashi. This is the day when we offer prayers at the famous Ganapatyar temple on the banks of the river Vitasta. Ganesh is '*Siddhidata*', giver of accomplishments and '*Vigna-harta*', remover of obstacles. So he must be propitiated and his blessings must be invoked. On 20th is '*Jyeshtha Devi yajna*' and on 26th

'*BhadraKali Jayanti*'. These are the two forms of the Mother Goddess, the energy of the Divine. By offering prayers to her we shall achieve our spiritual joy and worldly pleasure in no time, unhindered and in good measure. The temple of '*Jyeshtha Devi*' is situated on a hillock at Zeethyaer in the outskirts of Srinagar. Devotees throng at this shrine on this auspicious day with their offerings. There is nightlong singing of '*Bhajans*' and '*Leelas*' and other devotional music. This gives them solace and peace of mind and also inspires them to live a life full of '*Dharma*' with full faith in the Divine.

Let us not forget 31st May, the day dedicated to '*Nand Kishore*', the beloved mount of Lord Shiva. He has direct access to the Lord. He is close to Him. He is very dear to Him. It was at his instance and in reply to his queries that the Lord revealed the popular '*Bhawani Sahasranama-stotra*', the thousand names of the Mother Goddess for our benefit. If we invoke his blessings the Lord is sure to be pleased and will grant us fulfillment of all our desires.

One question remains to be answered and that is the relevance of following these religious traditions. In his book on 'Swaminarayana Hinduism' Raymond Brady Williams has explained that 'four interrelated spheres form a structure for the apprehension of the manifestation of God in the religion. These are 1. The Theanthropic sphere which is the identification of the physical form with one or more of the divine beings. 2. The Cosmological sphere, which provides the conceptualization of the heavenly states or abodes of the gods. 3. The Devotional sphere, which charts the stages of development of the individual towards release and 4. The Iconographic sphere of the images in the temple.' He has further added that '*Bhakti*' or devotion and worship is the heart of the religion and '*Dharma*' or the discipline of moral conduct gives it shape. Tradition, he says, is derived from the Latin Verb 'Tradere' meaning to give away or to transmit. It can be concluded from this succinct explanation that we have not only to safeguard the essence and the form of our culture and faith but also to transmit it to our younger generations in its pristine purity so that our rich culture keeps on evolving and sustaining our society.

19.3 June

Just as the physical body, mind, intellect and the soul, in their totality, form an individual, the language, culture, rituals, religion, tradition, habits and the way of life, in their totality, form a society or a community. Luckily, we the Kashmiri Pandits have inherited all these aspects in a good measure. Our language is sweet and rich. Our culture is very old yet all the time evolving. Our religion is broad-based, free and all embracing. Our tradition is vibrant and we have a praise-worthy capacity to adapt to any circumstances so far as our habits and the way of life are concerned. Another important aspect of our existence as a community is our ethnicity. This includes self-identity, ascribed ethnic identity, cultural identity, racial identity, our nationality and our descent. All this has been in danger because of the peculiar position in which we are placed due to the historical reasons over the past many centuries.

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'Jyeshtha Ashtami' on 8th June brings to our mind nostalgic memories of our pilgrimage to the shrine of goddess *Rajna* at Tulamula. Most of us would like to go there on this auspicious day, take a dip in the Sindh canal, perform pooja, circumambulate around the holy spring, participate in the common Arti and derive spiritual bliss by listening to nightlong '*Bhajan-Keertan*', the devotional singing of hymns in praise of the goddess there. Every place of pilgrimage has a story, a legend, which has come down to us from time immemorial. We are told that the goddess of Tulamula was originally stationed in Sri Lanka. She was offered things she did not like. She was annoyed with the people worshipping her there and wanted to migrate elsewhere. She summoned Hanuman and asked him to find a new abode for her and her pet snakes. The village of Tulamula was selected, where the marshy sands could give shelter to the snakes and the goddess herself would adorn the holy spring. She desired that only milk be offered to her. This gave her the name '*Kheer Bhawani*', '*Khsheer*' in Sanskrit means milk and so the name. She is referred to as '*Shiva patni*' or the consort of Lord Shiva. In '*Saankhya*' she is given the name of '*Prakriti*' or the nature of the infinite '*Purusha*', the Divine. Our intellect gets defeated when we try to visualize the reality, which is non-mediate related to the universe and yet is not the same as universe. But we are devotees. We are not bothered about logic and reasoning of the intellect. We place ourselves at the lotus-feet of the Mother Goddess and pray to her for our material prosperity and spiritual advancement.

We have faith and belief in her incarnation. We are told that the great saint of the 17th century, Pandit Madhav Joo Dhar requested Goddess Sharika to take birth as his daughter. She obliged him and took the human form on the '*Purnima*', the full moon day of the month of Jyeshtha (14th June) as Roop Bhawani. She was, therefore called '*Sharika ansha-roopa*- part incarnation of Sharika. This fact can be appreciated better when we realize that the projecting power is predominant in the Divine. He is conscious of His free state and hence is untouched by the concealing power. According to Swami Shivananda a '*Jiva*' labours under the ignorance of its true nature, owing to the predominance of the concealing power and the absence of the projecting power or the cosmic power. The Divine is the fountainhead of the religion '*Satyam*', ethics '*Shivam*' and aesthetics '*Sundaram*'. While ethics and aesthetics can be explained and understood easily even though some amount of subjectivity may come into play here also, religion is a different cup of tea altogether, a complex one at that. Huston Smith has rightly remarked that 'talking about religion is a voyage in space and time and eternity. The places are often distant, the times remote, the themes beyond space and time altogether. Words to be used are foreign. We describe states of consciousness that words can only hint at. We use logic to try to corner insights that laugh at our attempts'.

But there is a way out and that is the way of faith, for it is the faith that succeeds where reasoning and logic fail. Our religion expects of us to remember, adore and respect our sages and follow their advice. That is why we celebrate the commemorative days of the sages who have graced our birthplace Kashmir. During the month of June we shall remember Jagat Guru Bhagavaan Gopi Nath Ji and Swami Shankar Razdan on their '*Nirvana*' days falling on 2nd and 8th respectively. Both of them had reached such a

spiritual state where they could act in such a way that these acts appeared to be miracles. Bhagavaan Ji delayed death, cured ailments and enabled some chosen ones to have a glimpse of the Mother Goddess. Shankar Razdan would take upon himself fever and other clinical symptoms of others to relieve them of pain. Such acts were actually performed to alleviate suffering of the devotees. On 9th we shall celebrate the birthday of another great saint, Siddha Bab. He has also given solace to many a suffering person. Sitting before him itself would bring peace and tranquility to the minds of those present. Let us continue to carry forward these traditions with faith, dedication and devotion. Let us carry forward our rich tradition wherever we may be so that our distinct identity remains intact.

19.4 July

Of late the word religion is being uttered with disgust and contempt. The reason is not far to seek. Firstly we see what the adherents of one religion do to the believers of other religions. Secondly we see what people professing to be religious do in practice and thirdly we also see what is being done in the name of religion. It is because of this that organizations, which are engaged in genuine religious activities and would be proud to be known as religious organizations, prefer to call themselves as spiritual organizations. Now there is a difference between religion and spirituality. Spirituality is single dimensional while religion has two dimensions. In spirituality we are concerned with only the spirit, knowing it, its uplift and advancement towards a spiritual goal, say emancipation or liberation. Religion has two aspects, one is spiritual and relates to our relationship with God and the second is ethical and moral and relates to our relationship with fellow beings. The first is a private exercise and does not affect others. The second is behavioural and does concern everyone else with whom we come into contact. Since neither of these is institutionalized, we in India prefer to call it '*Dharma*' or our duty, unto ourselves as the first aspect and unto others as the second aspect. We owe it to ourselves to strive for our spiritual uplift and we owe it to our fellow beings to be good citizens. The first duty is fulfilled by engaging in '*Sadhana*' or spiritual discipline. The second is fulfilled by '*Sadachar, Sahyog, Seva*', good behaviour, cooperation with fellow beings and service unto mankind.

There are many elements in the spiritual aspect of our existence, devotion, worship, meditation, performing rituals, fasting and so on. One such element is pilgrimage. During the month of July there are quite a few dates earmarked for pilgrimage to various holy places. On 6th July it is '*Hara Satam*' – the day we go on pilgrimage to Matan. On 7th is '*Hara aetham*' - a day of pilgrimage to the shrine of Maha Rajna at Tulamula. On 8th is the day of pilgrimage to Sharika Bhagavati at Hari Parvat, '*Hara Navam*'. On 11th it is '*Hara Bah*', when there will be pilgrimage to Luka Bhavan. Again on 12th it is '*Hara tsodah*', another day of pilgrimage to Jwala Ji at Khrev. All these pilgrim centers are holy and sacred to us. We may have established some replicas of some of these shrines here and there – no doubt they have their significance as they give us some solace – but the importance of the original shrines is so much that they are in our hearts and we long to go there on pilgrimage as we used to before we were forced out of the

valley. Here in Diaspora we celebrate these holy days by keeping fast, performing traditional rituals and offering pooja in the prescribed manner. On '*Hara Satam*' it is customary for us to draw colourful drawings called '*Hara Mandul*' in the gallery, on the platform at the front entrance and in the courtyard. This circular drawing with a variety of patterns is tastefully decorated with colours of different hues. Perhaps this decoration is to welcome the goddess of wealth and prosperity into our household.

Another important day in the month of July is the '*Guru Purnima*' on the 13th. We all know that every ritual, every *pooja* starts with the benediction to Lord Ganesha, followed by '*Guru Vandana*'. Our preceptor is so important to us that after Ganesha and before propitiating any other deity we offer our benediction to our preceptor. This day is also known as '*Vyasa Purnima*'. Vyasa represents all those sages who have perceived the scriptures for us, the Vedas et al. We remember them and offer our salutations to them as our gratitude to the fund of knowledge they have left for us. They have brought to us the divine message and shown us the way to attain the Truth.

Blessed is the land of Kashmir that has produced a galaxy of saints and sages. We as grateful followers of these emancipated souls celebrate their birthdays and '*Nirvana*' days with devotion and reverence. During the month of July also we shall celebrate the commemorative days of the following sages: Swayamananda Ji, Ananda Ji, Bhagavaan Gopi Nath Ji, Pushkar Nath Ji, Vidyadhar Ji, Lal Ji and Grata Bab. We reverentially address them as '*Swami*', our Master, '*Bab*', our caring Father, '*Mahatma*', the Great Soul, or '*Bhagavaan Ji*', God incarnate. Since they are realized souls who have merged with the Supreme, since they control our souls and guide us on the path of devotion and meditation and since they care for us and relieve us from pain and suffering all these epithets for them are appropriate and befitting. This tradition as also many other such things are to be kept alive as they are inseparable aspects of our identity as a noble, religious and peace-loving community of Kashmiri Pandits.

19.5 August

This year August is truly an august month. The last day of this month is '*Vinayaka Tsoram*' and many Kashmiri families will propitiate Ganesha by performing what is known as '*Pan*'. The eldest woman of the household shall narrate the fable of '*Beeb garaz ma'j*', a story with a moral that we must live a pious life. Sweetbread called '*Roth*' shall be offered as offering to the Lord and then distributed among friends and relatives. Right in the start on 3rd we shall celebrate '*Naga Panchami*' and feed milk to snakes. This is a reminder to us that once Nagas lived in our holy land and as a truce with them we would feed them and cater to their needs. In the middle of the month there are three important holy days, '*Rakhsha Bandhan*' on 12th, '*Chandan Shashti*' on 17th and '*Shri Krishna Janmashtami*' on 19th.

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Throughout the country Rakhsha Bandhan will be celebrated as the day when brothers take a vow to protect their sisters and their honour. We in Kashmir celebrate it as the day of worshipping Shiva, in whom the universe gets absorbed ultimately. The famous Amarnath pilgrimage takes place on this day and people from far and wide throng the cave temple to have a glimpse of the Ice-lingam there. In the city, devotees go for worshipping Shiva in different temples, particularly in the one atop the Shankaracharya Hill. People also make '*Partheshwara*' of the holy clay at home, worship it during the day and in the evening immerse it in the waters of Vitasta. This is the high point of yoga, where we perceive our beloved deity with a particular shape and form and then get merged with Him. On Chandan Shashti a paste of red sandal-wood is prepared and smeared on the forehead. While it has a medicinal value, the day is also earmarked for worshipping Narayana, the sustainer of the universe. Janmashtami is celebrated as the birthday of Shri Krishna, the Lord who gave the divine discourse in the form of the Bhagavad Geeta. It is the sacred duty of every one of us to read the Gita, not necessarily as a religious text but as a guide for living a purposeful life and imbibing the divine attributes. The procession that used to wade through the streets of Srinagar on this day would carry '*Veda Bhagavan*' with all His grandeur on a chariot and those in the procession would sing hymns and Bhajans in praise of the Lord. We must strive to ensure that in the near future these holy voices reverberate and echo in the valley once again to bring back the lost glory of our motherland.

There are two more days very special during this month, 9th '*Shravana Bah*' and 27th '*Kusha- amavasya*'. The former is the day of '*Shradha*' at Shopian. The latter is also known as '*Darbimavas*', the day to remember the dead and pray for the peace to their souls. On 27th there will be a huge congregation of devotees at Nasik as it is '*Kumbha*' on that day and people will take a holy dip and offer pooja on the riverbank. This is a reminder that our civilization has flourished and developed on the banks of various rivers. That is why these rivers, Ganga, Yamuna, Godavari, Satluj, Krishna, Brahmaputra, Cauvery and Vitasta etc. are all sacred to us. The only intriguing day is the 25th shown in our almanac as '*Kaliyug Janma*', birth of the present Kali-age. The first day of the bright fortnight of Chaitra is our New-Year day and is also called '*Yugabda*' or the beginning of the Yugas. That being so, how come Kali-janma is shown in this month of Bhadra? The only explanation could be that while the other three Yugas, Satya, Dwapara and Treta had started on Chaitra-Shudi Pratipada Kaliyug began on Bhadra-Vadi Trayodashi. This is a question for further research by our Pandits proficient in Astronomy and Jyotish Shastra.

Of course we have 15th August our National Day, the day we were free from the yoke of foreign rule, the day we had tryst with destiny, the day that gave India freedom and ushered in a period of freedom for all those states, which were under colonial rule. Unfortunately this was the day when our country was divided and the seeds of hatred and animosity were sown, the worst affected being the state of Jammu and Kashmir and the worst sufferers being the Kashmiri Pandits. This is the day when we should pledge to work for creating an atmosphere of love and harmony and defeat the forces of violence, hatred and mistrust.

On the last day of the month there is a strange coincidence in as much as it is the birthday of the great Bhakti poet Krishna joo Razdan and the Nirvana day of an equally great spiritual poet Paramananda. Their compositions full of Jnana, Bhakti and love and wisdom are a treasure that we must preserve and be proud of. The Nirvana day of Swami Govind Kaul falls on 11th and that of Swami Gana Kak Ji on 12th. Their followers and disciples shall perform Yajnas on these days and remember them with reverence. They shall also recount the time spent at their feet and the message given by them from time to time for the worldly welfare and spiritual attainment, for their good and the good of mankind at large. We offer our salutations to the memory of these noble saints and sages.

19.6 September

As the weather gets better and cooler by sporadic rains we begin the month of September by celebrating the birthday of Lalleshwari on 3rd of the month. This Valmiki of the Kashmiri language has left behind a corpus of Vakhs that give us lessons in morality, good conduct and spirituality. She has underscored the immortality and eternal character of the soul and has implored that we search the truth within ourselves. She has struck down the ostentatious ritualistic approach and has emphasized the efficacy of true search with patience and forbearance. Our ancestors have always recognized the importance of rivers in our mundane and spiritual life. Our civilization has grown and flourished on the banks of the great rivers of our motherland. No wonder, therefore, that we propitiate these rivers and celebrate their appearance, '*Ganga Aetham*' on 3rd dedicated to the river Ganges and '*Vyatha Truvah*' on 8th dedicated to the river Vitasta. For centuries we have had agrarian economy and that has added to the importance of these rivers, our lifeline. In our religious life also these rivers are important for '*Snana, Sandhya and Tarpan*', or bath, prayer and oblation.

Of the trinity of *Brahma, Vishnu* and *Shiva* devotional cults have developed for Vishnu and Shiva. Vishnu is the sustainer who has a thousand names. One of the names given to Him is '*Ananta*', meaning without an end or eternal. '*Ananta*' is also the name given to '*Sheshanag*' on whom He is ever resting. We have '*Ananta Chaturdashi*' on 9th when we go for pilgrimage to Anantanag where we have a holy spring named after the eternal Divine. I remember during my childhood days our family priest used to bring an ornamental woven thread, yellow or saffron coloured on this day, which would be worn by the ladies as a good omen. My mother used to have a similar ornament made of gold, as had many other ladies in our neighbourhood and relations. This was called '*Anath*' a corrupt form of Sanskrit '*Ananta*'.

The fortnight-long '*Pitra-paksha*' will start on 11th and we shall remember our ancestors with reverence on the respective days of their death and perform '*Shraddha*' in their name. We also give food, clothes, fruits and money in charity on these days. This fortnight will culminate on 25th, which is called '*Pitra-*

amavasya'. In between we shall commemorate the '*Shraddha*' of Roop Bhawani on 17th by observing a fast and remembering her, who was an incarnation of Goddess Sharika. On 19th we celebrate the day dedicated to Goddess Laxmi. Goddess Saraswati represents the Pure Sciences whereas Goddess Laxmi is the Goddess of applied Sciences and Technology, which generate wealth so important in our life.

'*Kashmiri Pandit Balidan Divas*' is on 14th. This is the day when we remember all those martyrs who have laid their lives for the honour and dignity of the Pandit community. This is the day of resolve to fight against the tyranny perpetuated on our peace-loving brethren. This is the day of pooling all our resources to fight for our survival, our identity and our heritage. With this renewed hope we shall march on to the 26th of September and start 'Nine-days' of the worship of Goddess Durga for the good of the mankind.

19.7 October

The first and the last week of October are both celebration weeks. In the first week we have '*Durga Ashtami*' on 3rd, '*Maha Navami*' on 4th and '*Dassehra*' on 5th. We believe in the grace of Goddess, who is inseparable energy aspect of Lord Shiva. We have full faith in Her and are confident that She will shower Her grace on us and pull our community out of the worst turmoil that it has been facing for nearly a decade and a half now. By nature and by tradition we are deeply religious and spirituality is a part of our existence and an indelible aspect of our identity. It is not surprising, therefore, that on the first two days, as always, we shall propitiate the Mother, fondly called by us as '*Shakti*', '*Durga*', '*Maharajna*', '*Sharika*', '*Parvati*' and many such names. Some of us will keep a fast on these days and most of us will go to temples, offer flowers and fruits, light lamps and chant '*Mantras*', '*Stotras*' and '*Bhajans*'. God activates all His faculties of creating, sustaining, destroying, concealing and revealing through His Energy aspect only and this is what we propitiate as '*Shakti*'. Kashmir Shaiva Darshan recognizes four different systems of '*Pratyabhijna*', '*Kula*', '*Krama*' and '*Spanda*'. In the system of '*Pratyabhijna*' we strive to recognize our true self. In the system of '*Kula*' we have to merge ourselves with the Universal Consciousness. In the '*Krama*' system we have to realize the Divine in stages, step by step. In the '*Spanda*' system we have to perceive movement in everything, which is the essence of life. It is this movement, the essence of life, that we have given the name '*Maha Shakti*' and it is this '*Spanda*' that we seek to understand, realize and be one with. On these nine days of '*Nav Durga*' Goddess is worshipped in her nine different forms with nine different names.

These auspicious days dedicated to the worship of Goddess will be followed by '*Vijay Dashmi*' on 5th. It was on this day that Shri Rama killed Ravana. Rama is the symbol of truth, justice and righteousness and Ravana represents falsehood, injustice and sinful living. The day is celebrated by burning the effigies of Ravana. It may be symbolic but there is a lesson in these celebrations that we should rise from animality, imbibe the qualities of divinity and be righteous in thought, word and deed. During the Dogra rule the

function was state sponsored. The Maharaja would arrive in all his majesty at the Chandmari ground and set the effigies of Ravana, Kumbhakarna and Meghanada on fire. As small children we would watch the function with excitement. Now that the times have changed these functions are organized by private organizations, Ramalila committees and Citizen's Welfare Associations. It is all the more imperative for us to understand the significance of such functions as part of our tradition now that these have become celebrations of the masses. If these functions inspire us to live a pious life the purpose of celebrating these auspicious days would have been served.

During the last week on 25th we will celebrate 'Deepavali', the festival of lamps. It is said that after killing the demon king Ravana and completing the period of fourteen years of forest dwelling, it was on this day that Shri Rama returned to Ayodhya. The day is, therefore, marked by jubilation, lighting, fire works etc. We in Kashmir celebrate this day as the day of Lakshmi, the Goddess of Wealth. Perhaps the return of a benevolent and a just King like Rama to his throne and kingdom augurs well for the wealth and welfare of a nation. Let us pray that the rulers of the day rise above petty squabbles and work for the betterment of the nation so that the festival of lights is celebrated with all the more zeal and fervour. On 27th there is another festival of a great social significance known as 'Bhai Dooj'. On this day sisters shower their love and affection on their brothers. They put a vermilion mark on their forehead, feed them with sweets and wish them a long and illustrious life. The day is one of love, bondage and closeness of relations. It is this relationship of love, bondage and closeness that must permeate into the society. We must shun all our ego and self-aggrandizement and work in unison for the progress and prosperity of our community. The need of the hour is unity, mutual respect, care and concern for the common good. All this coupled with hard work and the right direction shall sure see us out of the present turmoil. Let us remember what our revered Lal Ded has said, 'Sa'ri samahan, yeth razi lamahan, ada kyazi ravihe kahan gav' – If all of us unite and hold on to this rope together we shall not lose the proverbial cow of eleven masters.

19.8 November

The Kashmiri Samiti, Panchkula has recently brought out the Annual Number of their journal 'Panchtarni'. It had the theme of the dignity and role of Kashmiri women. I had also the privilege of contributing a paper to this Special Number. The Editor has been gracious to introduce me with some kind words. I was particularly elated to read this piece of my introduction: '... one cannot think of the Koshur Samachar without the column 'Anamika' written by Kundan.' This statement assured me that our community is eager to know about our culture and tradition, preserve these and make their children proud of their rich heritage. This is heartening for me that my small contribution towards this direction does not go waste. There is another point about this column that has been raised by some of the readers. They feel that it would be better if information about our festivals falling during the ensuing month were given in advance so that we know about these festivals before hand. Others want me to continue with the present

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practice of giving the background of these festivals in the same month in which they occur. They argue that the purpose of this column should not be that of the Jantri but to try and give cultural and religious rationale of our customs, traditions and festivals. These are better given in the same month in which the festivals fall. In any case I shall take a final decision in this regard only after I get a feed back from the enlightened readers.

November 4th is '*Haribodhini Ekadashi*'. It is believed that a set exercise of meditation or penance undertaken as per the guidance of an accomplished preceptor culminating on this day results in the seeker realizing the Divine. It is because of this that this eleventh day of the bright fortnight of Kartika month is named as the day of realizing *Hari*. Kartik is the month when saffron blossoms in Kashmir. Saffron is sacred for it represents the fragrance of the rich culture that we have inherited. That is why we give it a place on our forehead in the form of *Tilaka*' in between our eyebrows, the centre of our intellect and perception. Smearing saffron paste on the forehead sharpens our intellect and thus our prayer, '*Dhiyo yo nah prachodayat* – May my intellect be sharpened' is heard and fulfilled.

The next important day is '*Kartika Purnima*' on 8th November. It is an auspicious day as the culmination of a month-long prayer and worshipping. It also happens to be the birthday of Guru Nanak Dev Ji. His life has been full of miracles, a life dedicated to the spiritual uplift of the mankind and a voice of wisdom, knowledge and enlightenment. He identified God with ultimate Truth when he said '*Ad sat jugat sat, Nanak hai bhi sach hosi bhi sach* – He is the Primary Truth and the Eternal Truth. He is the reality now and shall be the reality in future as well'. About God and His creation he says: '*Awwal Allah Noor Upaya, Qudrat de sab bande, ek noor te sab jag upja, kaun bhale kaun mande* – In the beginning only God existed and the light and shine emerging from Him caused the creation. All are His subjects and none is good or bad'. In three crisp lines he has prescribed how a human being should conduct himself. Says he, '*Nam japo, kirat karo, vand ke chhako* – Recite the name of the Lord, do good deeds and share your things with others'; This is bound to bring in spiritual enlightenment and material gain for the good of the individual as also of the society. To him the name of the Divine was such that its intoxication would never leave the seeker. He revealed this to Emperor Babur in these words: '*Charas bhang afyun sab utarjat prabhat, nam khumari Nanaka chadi rahe din raat* – If you consume a drugs like marijuana, cannabis or opium etc. the hang over will last till morning but the intoxication of the Divine name remains with you day and night, all the time'.

The sacred month of Marga begins on 9th. So sacred is this month that Lord Krishna has proclaimed in the Gita, '*Masanam Margasheersho'ham* – Of the months of the year I am the month of Margasheersha'. This month is very soothing weather-wise and best suited for penance and for meditation. It is also very congenial for concentration, worldly and spiritual both. On 17th is the '*Mahakala Bhairav ashtami*'. Our seers of yore have picturised the death as the great time '*Maha-kala*' and it is propitiated as one of the eight '*Bhairavas*' of Lord Shiva. They were of the view that the death is not something to be dreaded. The great Abhinavgupta shouts at the death in these words: '*Antaka mam prati ma drishyam-enam* – O death!

do not look to me in this way'. On 23rd is the birthday of another great saint of our times, Satya Sai Baba. This saint of Putaparti is very popular and preaches service with love, inculcation of values among the youth and devotion to God. Many educational and professional institutions are run under his guidance and his devotees have adopted a number of villages throughout the length and breadth of the country and are engaged in the development work of these villages.

Birthdays and Nirvana days of many saints of Kashmir fall during this month. Notable among these are the birthdays of Sharika Ji on 25th and Vidyadhar Ji on 26th. These sacred days are celebrated by keeping fasts, performing *yajnas*, chanting *Bhajans* and charity. We renew our pledge to raise ourselves spiritually so that divinity manifests in our thought, word and deed and we justify our existence as human beings.

19.9 December

Kashmiri Pandits follow a lunar calendar and there are various dates earmarked for important days and important festivals. These days and festivals are important for a variety of reasons. Some are related to religious occasions, some to age-old customs, some to seasons and some to the powers of nature. In the month of December the most important day, in my view is the 4th December because it is '*Gita Jayanti*' on that day. The Gita is the quintessence of the Upanishads, which in turn are the part of the Vedic literature dealing with knowledge. In 1828 Humboldt wrote, 'I read the Indian poem (the Gita) for the first time in the country in Silesia and my constant feeling while doing so was my gratitude to fate for having permitted me to live long enough to become acquainted with the book'. He goes on to add that 'the episode of the Mahabharata is the most beautiful, nay perhaps even the only truly philosophical poem which we can find in all the literatures known to us'. R.W.Emerson has recorded that 'the rapture of prayer and ecstasy of devotion lose all being in One Being. This tendency finds its highest expression in the religious writings of the East and chiefly in the Indian scriptures – in the Vedas, the Bhagavad Gita and the Vishnu Purana'. Not that the holy Gita needs any certificate from foreign scholars, but I have quoted them only to emphasise that when these persons have benefited from this fund of knowledge why we the inheritors of this rich tradition should not engage in studying this profound literature both for material gain and spiritual uplift.

The next important day is 9th December, the day for '*Matrika Pujan*'. In the system of Kashmir Shaiva philosophy '*Matrika*' represents the alphabet from 'Aa' to 'Ha' which add up to '*Aham*', the Supreme 'I'. By propitiating this Divine Sound we are in effect worshipping the Divine, which manifests itself in the form of the creation. To reach this Divine one has to rise from the gross element of the earth, traverse through all the thirty-six elements and realize the Supreme 'I', the '*Parama Shiva tattva*'. On the 18th we shall celebrate '*Mahakali Jayanti*'. After the great temple dedicated to the Goddess of eternal time at Srinagar was destroyed and a mosque built on it by the Muslim invaders, the Pandits resorted to

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worshipping the Goddess at the river bank, treating the place as the foundation of the pious shrine. On this day devotees throng to this place and worship the Goddess representing the most powerful aspect of the Divine, the time that controls the entire cosmos. Once we realize the importance of this divine energy we shall cease to think only of ourselves. We shall ever remain eager to do good to others and feel the thrill of life. Elizabeth Barrett Browning has rightly observed, ' what frightens me is that men are content with what is not life at all'. Let us not, therefore, live for ourselves alone. Let us seek pleasure in giving and not in demanding and thereby feel the romance of true life.

Talking of giving one is reminded of another interesting festival prevalent in Kashmir since hoary past, namely '*Khetsi mavas*'. This '*Amavasya*' in winter is favourite as on this day '*Khichdi*' (rice mixed with dal) is prepared in every home, pooja is held late in the evening and then a plateful of the dish is kept on the wall of the courtyard for '*Yakhsha*' to devour. No authentic account of this custom is available but it appears that to keep original inhabitants of the valley like Pishachas, Nagas and Yakhshas in good humour some special dishes were prepared and offered to them occasionally. This special preparation is one such feast along with fish and rice on the occasion of '*Gada Bhata*' that is offered to these people. Even though there is no trace of such tribes now but the custom is still prevalent and still we prepare the special dish, offer it to the '*Yakhsha*', perform pooja and enjoy the dish. Incidentally '*Yakhsh*' is the hero of Kalidasa's famous '*Meghadootam*'. Does it mean that this great Sanskrit poet was also a Kashmirian?

On 7th is the '*Dattatreya Jayanti*', one of the sages after whom various '*gotras*' of the Kashmiri Pandits are named. These sages are either our ancestors or our ancestors were their pupils and they got their education and training in the gurukulas run by them. They are, therefore special to us and deserve to be remembered, revered and followed so far as their message is concerned for our mundane life and spiritual uplift. Then we have 18th December, dedicated to the worship of '*Anandeshwara Bhairava*', one of the eight chief Bhairavas of Lord Shiva. In Kashmir we have different shrines for different '*Bhairavas*' at different places. The prominent among them are Vaital in Rainawari, Nandakeshwar at Sumbal, Bahukhatakeshwara at Chhattabal and Torshkraza at Karan Nagar. We believe that by propitiating them our access to the Lord will be smooth and easier.

Let us remember that the greatness of our Sanatana Dharma is that we are free to evaluate the pronouncements made in our scriptures and the tradition that is inherited by us. Even though faith triumphs where reason and logic fail we can accept what appeals to us as beneficial and good. We are not taught to think that those who do not agree with our belief are wrong. We are not advised to be arrogant to feel certain of our knowledge. We are asked to respect all other faiths and accept them as valid and true. So we shall celebrate the Christmas on 25th along with our Christian friends with reverence towards Jesus, the apostle of love and compassion. May there be peace in the world and may good sense prevail and may those who tread on the wrong path come to realize their folly.

19.10 January

January month is very important for the entire nation. During this month we celebrate our Republic day on 26th, the day we gave ourselves the constitution and pledged to work for peace and prosperity. Of late it is observed that there has been a sharp decline of morality in public life. What Iqbal has said of democracy is turning out to be true. Quoting a Western scholar he says, '*Jamhooriyat ik tarze hakumat hai ki jismein, bandon ko gina karte hain tola nahin karte-* democracy is a form of governance in which heads are counted but not weighed'. But then, as some other scholar has observed, it is better to count heads rather than break them as happens in anarchy and mobocracy. Therefore on this republic day we must pledge to restore morality and ethical values in all walks of life, which have been the hallmark of our Indian tradition. According to Niti Paul Mehta morality is a practical philosophy of life mirrored in a person's everyday behaviour and social interaction. It simply means being cultured, gentle, unselfish, noble and liberal in dealing with others.

Being liberal involves accepting the plurality of views, faiths, life-styles, and other aspects of human existence. It is this non-acceptance of plurality of faiths and the arrogant approach of self-righteousness that lead to ethnic cleansing of our community from Kashmir and resulted in mass exodus of the minority community. We are, therefore, justified in observing 19th January as '*Nishkasan divas*', the day we were hounded out from our hearth and home. Observing this day means our firm resolve to win back our rightful place in the land of our birth, where our civilization blossomed over many millennia and re-establish our identity as Kashmiri Pandits enjoying the same rights and privileges as are given to the majority community.

Our identity has many facets; the festivals we observe, the rituals we perform and the days we commemorate remind us all the time that we have a rich heritage to boast of, to preserve and to perpetuate. On 14th January we have '*Sahib Saptami*', the Nirvana day of Alakheeshwari Roop Bhawani. She points to the essence of our existence and to all pervading Brahman when she says '*Tset vimarsha deeptimaan Bhagavano* – If you explore the depths of your consciousness you will find the dazzling light of the Supreme Lord there'. She is held to be an incarnation of Goddess Sharika and, therefore, is worshipped as such. This is the day of not only fasting and performing *yajnas* but also endeavouring to realize self as the ultimate goal of spiritual seeking.

We worship Shiva as the Supreme Lord and as such the '*Shiva Chaturdashi*' on 20th is very auspicious for us. The Shiva Lingam represents the cosmos and we propitiate it as a symbol of His manifestation. Then there are three important consecutive days, '*Gauri tritiya*' on 24th, '*Tripura Chaturthi*' on 25th and '*Vasant Panchami*' on 26th. Gauri Tiritiya is the day of worshipping Saraswati, the goddess of knowledge and awakening. Tripura Chaturthi is the day of worshipping Mother Goddess and is also known as '*Shruk tsoram*' or the day when a student is initiated by teaching him shlokas. It is logical as well since after

worshipping the Goddess of knowledge the seeker must engage in serious study of the spiritual knowledge. Basant Panchami heralds the spring season, which ushers in new life, fresh resolve and renewed effort for the betterment, progress and prosperity all round.

We have been worshippers of the Sun as well. We regard the Sun as the '*Pratyaksha Devata*' or the visible deity. This is borne out by the existence of the Sun temple at Martand and the hill feature called '*Aeta gaej*' - a corrupt form of the Sanskrit '*Aditya Guha*' meaning the cave of the Sun. The Sun is regarded to be riding a chariot driven by seven horses, representing the seven colours of its rays. It is not surprising that we worship the Sun on the seventh day of the lunar calendar (28th January) and call it '*Surya saptami*', perhaps denoting the seven primary colours of the rainbow. This is the day when the devotees go to Matan for pilgrimage and perform '*Shraddha*' for their ancestors. On the following day on 29th is '*Bhishma Ashtami*', the day on which the great Bhishma finally gave up his mortal frame. He is a legendary figure of firm resolve and is, therefore, well known for his '*Bhishma Pratijna*'. We also need a similar dauntless resolve to fight for our rights and privileges as the original inhabitants of Kashmir and the loyal citizens of our great country, India. However, our efforts have to be '*Anasakta*' or detached. According to Swami Krishnananda 'the highest form of detachment is not a sundering of oneself from anything existent but the raising of oneself to a consciousness of pervasive character of the Reality that exists equally in the subject and the object, as well as in between the two.' If we strive in a detached manner with a firm resolve it should not be difficult for us to attain our goal sooner than one could expect.

19.11 February

With the *Magha Purnima* called '*Kaw-punim*' by Kashmiris observed on 6th February, the pious month of Magha referred as '*Punya Magha Masa*' will come to an end. The ritual on this day is to feed crows on an improvised plate made of twigs and grass and also to take a holy dip in the holy rivers. This is indicative of our concern for the lesser species like birds. On 7th will start the dark fortnight of Phalguna with '*Hurya Okdoh*' and preparations will begin for the big event of our beloved '*Herath*'. That we are Shaivites is undoubted although we are not rigid in our attitude towards religious practices. We worship equally reverentially other forms of Brahman, Lord Krishna, Lord Rama and others. We are, however, devoted to Mother Goddess, the cosmic energy, which is behind the creation and sustenance of the entire universe. And why not, after all Parvati was the beloved daughter of Himalayas, under the shadows of which our civilization has grown and our culture has evolved.

According to the scholars Shaivism has its origin in prehistoric period. To quote Sir John Marshall, 'Among the many revelations that Mohenjadar and Harappa have in store for us, none perhaps is more remarkable than this discovery that Shaivism has a history going back to the Chalcolithic age or perhaps even further still'. This faith is based on *Shaivagamas*, which carry precedence for us. Tirumoolar, the

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well-known Tamil saint has said that the Vedas are of general importance and Agamas are of special importance to Shaivas. This faith has taken varieties of forms like Veer Shaiva, Lingayata, Siddhanta Shaiva, Pashupat etc. We in Kashmir have a blend of Shaiva and Shakta by which we worship the absolute and the primordial, the two aspects of the same Supreme.

Although from 7th to 20th all days are very important yet there are some days which are auspicious and of greater significance. For example 13th is '*Hurya Aetham*', the day on which Sharika Bhagawati is propitiated. There is nightlong singing of hymns at '*Chakreshwara*' atop the Hari Parbat. On 17th is '*Vager bah*' - some of us fill earthen pots called '*Vagur*' with water and chant mantras while offering rice and other items of food to these. The following 18th is the '*Herats truvah*' when there will be '*Vatak pooja*' in every house in accordance with the prescribed procedure. Dishes, vegetarian or non-vegetarian will be prepared as per the individual family tradition. The Bhairvas and other deities as also '*Sanipotul*' or the golden image of Lord Shiva are propitiated with utmost devotion and reverence. The sequence of the propitiation is first to invoke them to be present, then wash their feet, decorate them with flowers, sandal paste and other items, offer tilaka, flowers, incense and light, offer them a variety of dishes, milk, candy etc; sing hymns in their praise and chant mantras. Thereafter a small homa is also performed after which the deities are requested to leave for their respective abodes fully satisfied with our devotion and worship. The residual from the food and other dishes offered to the '*Vatak Raza*' is taken by all the members of the household as '*Prashada*'.

On 20th is '*Doonya Mavas*'. On this day the walnuts are taken out from the earthen pitchers, sanctified by mantras and then distributed to near and dear ones. The ritual on this day is called '*Duba duba*' or knock knock. One of the members carrying a pot filled with water knocks at the door. The people inside ask him certain set question as to who he is, wherefrom he has come and what he has brought. He assures them that he is a divine messenger who has brought prosperity, wealth, employment and good luck for the family. Then he is let in. A pooja follows where prashada is made of walnut and cakes made of rice flour. On '*Teela aetham*' (28th) is the finale of the Shivaratri festival, when the last ritual is performed. Oil lamps are lighted. These are put afloat on grass mats or mats made of leaves, in the flowing river. The old Kangris are filled with grass, put on fire and with the help of long ropes hurled round and round till they get burnt fully and are thrown into the waters. While doing so the hilarious children cry aloud, '*Jataen taen- jataen taen*' meaning 'here it goes in flames'. This is formally bidding adieu to the winter.

During this month of February also there are quite a few days dedicated to the memory of the great sages either because it is their birthday or their '*Mahanirvana*'. We remember them with reverence and gratitude for the noble path shown by them. On 22nd is the birthday of Shri Ramakrishna Paramhansa. This great sage reinterpreted the Non-dualist philosophy of Adi Shankara and emphasized its relevance for all and sundry. His worship of the Divine mother helped awaken the mother power that had remained dormant for a long time although it was at its zenith during the Vedic period. On the same day is the birthday of the great Hindi poet Surdas, the immortal bard who sang the glories of Lord Krishna's childhood in his

classic work, 'Sursagar'. His intimate and delicate handling of the description of the Lord's childhood pranks, his innocent queries and his playful tantrums is a marvel for the ordinary and the devout alike. To quote a few lines suffice these as illustrations: *Mayya main nahin makhan khayo, Mayya kabahin badegi choti, Daavoo mujhe bahuta khijayo* – O Mother, I have not consumed the butter, O Mother, when shall the tuft on my head grow, My elder brother teases me a lot.' His description is so vivid that everything appears to be taking place now and here, in front of our eyes.

19.12 March

One of the things that fascinates our children and certainly fascinated me when I was a child, is the ritual called '*Thal barun*' or the practice of filling a plate with choicest things, keeping it filled overnight and then seeing it reverentially first thing on the following morning. This takes place on two occasions in a year, '*Sonth*' (literally the spring) falling on 14th March and '*Navreh*', the New Year falling on 2nd April. The plate is filled with rice and over it are decorated these items tastefully: a pen, some nuts of walnut and almonds, milk and yogurt, a coin and some gold item, a baked bread, a flower, some cooked rice and a portrait of a deity. On the New Year the new almanac is also kept in the plate in addition to the earlier mentioned items. '*Sonth*' heralds the spring, which represents new life, new awakening and new zest. '*Navreh*' heralds New Year, which represents new chapter in our lives, new pledges, new resolves and new aspirations. Both these days need to begin on an auspicious note and what more auspicious there can be than these items that fulfill our needs and give us pleasure. Apart from that these items are symbolic as well. The pen represents '*Saraswati*', the goddess of learning and sciences. The bread, rice cooked and uncooked represent '*Annapura*', the goddess who provides us with food and thereby sustains us. Coin and gold items represent '*Laxmi*', the goddess of wealth and technology. The flower and the nuts represent '*Prakriti*' or the nature and its bounties. All these deities are essential for our existence, welfare, longevity and happiness and we invoke their grace and blessings on these days through this unique ritual. Children vie with each other to be the first to get up early in the morning and carry the plate to every member of the family for the first glimpse. They get some money from their elders for this auspicious act.

Another holy day, which occurs twice in a year, is what we call '*Sumri mavas*' or '*Soma-Amavasya*'. This year it coincides with '*Doonya mavas*' or the final pooja of Shiva Ratri on 3rd March, when the walnuts are taken out from the '*Vatuk*' and readied for being distributed as '*Prashada*'. This is the day when '*Amavasya*' falls on a Monday. On this day the Moon is propitiated and back home we used to offer prayers at '*Somyar*' temple near the second bridge in Srinagar. The culmination of the Shivaratri pooja and celebration, however, is the '*Teela-aetham*' or '*Tila Ashtami*' (11th March). This is yet another festival eagerly waited for by youngsters. Apart from the ritual of immersing the residual paraphernalia of Shivaratri and floating the lamps in the river Vitasta, there is fun and frolic attached to it. This is called '*Jatein tein*'. Old '*Kangris*' are filled with dry grass and a rope is tied to its handle. The grass is put to fire and then the Kangri is hurled round and round and up goes the flame. The kids shout, '*Jatein tein*' till the

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entire grass and the willow weaving of the kangri is completed gutted. This is perhaps bidding adieu to the winter and ushering in a warmer season of zest, hard work and fortitude. In Kashmir '*Teela aetham*' incidentally is the last holy day of the year according to our lunar almanac. This accounts for the saying, '*Sari baed doh gayi ta von ruz teela aetham* – All the holy days are over and the only holy day that remains is Tila Ashtami'. This saying is used as sarcasm towards some body that poses big and important.

Holi (17th March) is again a festival of fun and merry-making. This is celebrated throughout the country in varying degrees but with special gusto in the Bruj-dham, the place where Shri Krishna spent his childhood among the Cowherds and Gopis, who were devotion, love and dedication personified. Coloured Gulal is smeared and coloured water sprinkled on each other in a spirit of love, affection and brotherhood. Sweets are distributed and on the previous night there is a bonfire symbolizing the burning of 'Holika'. She represents evil and Prahlad, whom she wanted to kill by fire, represents righteousness. Triumph of truth and righteousness over falsehood and arrogance is sought to be depicted by this symbolic bonfire. '*Mujhe holika chali jalane khud he bhusm ho gayi abhagan* – Holika wanted to burn me and in the bargain was reduced to ashes herself'. The moral is loud and clear that truth and piety always triumph. These festivals and rituals give meaning to our lives. They help us stand out with our distinct identity. They remind us of our rich and pious heritage and inspire us to live a life of faith, devotion and divinity.

Sometime people question the very wisdom of following the age-old practice of having these rituals or celebrations on such festivals. They consider these as waste of time. These views are erroneous to say the least. After all what in brief is the aim of life. At the spiritual level it is to know the self and at the mundane level it is to maximize our joy and happiness. If we ponder over the rationale of observing these holy days we will realize that they not only help us derive a lot of pleasure and give us happiness and joy but also act as a stepping stone for us to seek self-realization. Their observance induces us to lead our lives on the right track of righteousness and steers the boat of our lives in the right direction towards truth and piety. It brings us to a state of mind where we adopt spirituality as our very nature and consequently divinity is manifest in our thought, word and deed. This may be a small step in itself but it is nonetheless very important. For every long journey must start with a small step taken in the right direction.

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20.0 PERSECUTION FACED BY THE COMMUNITY

People have linked Kashmiri Pandits genetically with the Jews. There are scholars who believe that the two communities hail from the same stock, which according to them accounts for the similarity in their colour and features. Whether or not that is so may be debatable but one thing is certain that the two communities have suffered persecution and have had to get uprooted due to the threat to their existence and identity as a distinct ethnic group. Kalhan's 'Rajatarangini' as an authentic historical document and the legends and fables of whatever historical significance that have come down to us vouch for a glorious period up to the fourteenth century during which the Kashmiri Pandits as a community flourished in scholarship in a variety of disciplines. They turned Kashmir into a living university of excellence. Maximum number of Sanskrit scholars and litterateurs in India hailed from this beautiful land. They were original thinkers and talented creative artists. Research scholars from all over the country visited this land to consult books and manuscripts and to interact with local scholars and seek their guidance. Scholars from other parts of the country presented their works to Kashmiri scholars for evaluation, comments and approval.

The fourteenth century ushered in the Muslim period in the history of Kashmir and spelt doom for this community. There was large-scale conversion by force and by coercion. Not that the Muslim rulers alone had to be blamed; even the neo-converts played a prominent part in this tyranny perpetuated for centuries of Moghul and Pathan rule with occasional respite during the period of some exceptional benign rulers and governors. Also some Sufis, who escaped from Persia and other Muslim countries due to the persecution faced by them became perpetrators of tyranny on Kashmiri Pandits, perhaps to make themselves acceptable to the rulers. Many of these hapless Pandits got converted, many fled the land and many were brutally killed. In between, these Kashmiris labeled as infidels had to pay a special tax called '*Jazia*' for being non-Muslims.

There are some poignant legends about this large-scale persecution faced by this community. Some of these are even recorded in the memoirs and travelogues of some foreign travelers including Muslim chroniclers, who have recorded these events in Persian language. Some illustrative examples are given below:

Animal bones were forcibly thrust into the mouths of these Brahmins in order to humiliate them into surrendering to get converted.

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The sacred thread called 'Yoni' worn by them was snatched from their necks and several maunds (one maund is equal to about eighty odd pounds) of these were set on fire in public view to frighten them and force them to change their religion.

Three alternatives were placed before them, 'Raliv, Tsaliv, Galiv' asking them either to get converted to Islam, or to run away from the valley or to face annihilation. As a result of this many Kashmiri Pandits were forced to resort to mass exodus and many preferred death. Those who ran away escaped via a place called Batote or 'Batta-vath' meaning the passage of the Kashmiri Pandits.

Those who defied were put into sacs and with stones tied they were drowned in the famous Dal Lake. This part of the lake is to date called 'Bata mazar' or the burial ground of Battas meaning Kashmiri Pandits. An anecdote says that this practice went on till one day a Pandit was put into a sac. Fearing that he would be killed, his wife went to a saint named Shakar Shah and requested him to save her husband. The saint wrote an order in Persian on some plate and asked the lady to drop it over a bridge underneath which the boat carrying her husband in a sac was to pass. The order read, 'Gar chi hukm-I-qaza ast ba hukm-I- Shakar Shah Mastana nav garq shaved, huma Brahman bar aayad – even if the death sentence has been passed on the Brahmin, by the order of Shakar Shah, the saint the boat carrying him should drown and he should come on to the shores'. The lady dropped the plate from the bridge and as soon as the boat passed that side, it sank, the policemen carrying him got drowned but the Brahmin in the sac came on to the shore. The same night Shakar Shah visited the governor riding a lion and threatened him with dire consequences if he did not withdraw these draconian orders. And thus the tyranny was stopped. It is reported that only eleven families of the Kashmiri Pandits were left in the valley and this 'Eleven Families' has since become a proverb in the local lingua denoting scant availability of good families.

One of the known tyrant governors during the Pathan rule was Jabbar (incidentally the literal meaning of his name is also a tyrant). He came to know that the Kashmiri Pandits worshipped Lord Shiva in the month of 'Phalgun' (February-March) on the festival of Shivaratri and considered it very auspicious if it snowed on that day. He ordered that they should observe this festival and offer worship in the month of June instead. Unable to defy the official orders they observed the festival and worshipped Lord Shiva in hot summer and to the astonishment of all and in particular of the tyrant governor himself, the clouds gathered towards evening and just at the time of actual ritual it snowed briefly.

During the reign of Amir Shams-ud-Din Muhammad, Malik Musa Rain forcibly converted twenty-four thousand families of Kashmiri Pandits to the Islamic faith. All the temples originally destroyed by Sikander and rebuilt during the rule of Zainul Abidin were again razed to the ground and on their sites mosques were constructed. This has been lucidly recorded in the Persian chronicle, 'Baharistani Shahi'.

There were of course some exceptions when governors like Ali Mardan Khan came to respect them after being convinced about the validity of their faith. He is reported to have had a glimpse of Lord Shiva in his

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dream and then he composed his famous Persian poem, '*Huma asle Maheshwar bood shab shahe ki man deedam* - He was in realty Lord Shiva whom I saw during the night'.

Post 1947 started yet another difficult period for Kashmiri Pandits but this time with a difference. They were blatantly discriminated against, denied admissions into professional colleges and debarred from getting government jobs. This forced them to move to the plains and a slow but systematic exodus started.

1986 upheaval signaled danger for this miniscule community that was once the only ethnic group living safely with honour and dignity in the valley for centuries on end. In Southern parts of the valley they were attacked and their religious places were ransacked and desecrated. The belief of Gandhi Ji that he saw a ray of hope in Kashmir was rudely shaken and shattered. And then came the doomsday in the winter of 1990, when the community was again given the same three choices of conversion, exile or death. Announcements to this effect were made on the loudspeakers from the mosques. Pandits were placed on hit lists and thereby hounded out. Some very prominent persons, social activists, jurists, broadcasters, human-rights exponents, intellectuals and teachers were done to death. Exodus en mass ensued and the community took shelter in camps, shanties, tenements and tents at Jammu, Delhi and other cities of the country and thus Kashmiris became refugees in their own country – a unique phenomenon indeed. This situation continues even now after nearly one and a half decade of the sad event.

21.0 INFIDLE-AN UNJUST EPITHET

I am a Kashmiri Pandit and my faith is 'Sanatana Dharma', the eternal law. I have been living in this land, Kashmir for so many millennia. In spite of the fact that lofty mountains kissing the sky surround the valley, I had regular and sustained contact with the people of the neighbouring areas and also interaction with the inhabitants of the far off places. I have been culturally close to rest of the country, which has been a living example of unity in diversity. The Vedas, the Upanishads and the Epics have been sacred to my people as to the people living elsewhere in the country. When the Buddhist thought developed in this sub-continent my area could not remain unaffected. The result was that my land produced a number of scholars preaching this doctrine, contributed significantly to the rise of the 'Mahayana' branch of this theology and was instrumental in its spread to far off places including Tibet, China, Japan and Cambodia. Around the 8th century the scholars and sages of this place conceived a unique non-dualistic philosophy, which in due course influenced the life of a common man here. This philosophy prevailed and grew even though many other ideologies, disciplines and ways of worship originated from here, notably 'Vaishnav-agamas' and 'Shaiv-agamas'.

It was in the 14th century that Islam came to Kashmir and this brought a number of Sufis to this place from Middle East because of the persecution there. They were attracted to the philosophy prevailing here and the result was that an attractive and popular 'Rishi cult' came into existence that suited the Muslims and Hindus alike. These Hindu Rishis and Muslim Sufis preached a life of piety, purity, contentment, love and firm belief in God, attainable by love, devotion and penance. I am a Hindu by faith but I love, respect and adore all these sages and Sufis in equal measure. I believe in the existence of God and worship Him in my own way. I go to the temple and pray in front of an idol as a symbol that helps me in concentration and contemplation. I know that truth is not in these symbols but in the universe but I also believe that if through these symbols I am able to see the truth it will only strengthen my faith. I offer prayers to various deities like the Sun, whom I call 'Devatas', or the shining ones, knowing fully well that they are only the visible forces of God, who is unborn, beginning-less, eternal, formless un-paralleled unique supreme entity – a Universal Consciousness, Being and Bliss. I put oblations in the fire to purify the atmosphere polluted by my fellow beings and me. I follow certain rituals, which helps me manifest the divinity in me. I celebrate the death anniversaries of my ancestors and offer oblations to them, only to remind myself of the debt I owe to them, which needs to be paid back by perpetuating the nobility shown by them in thought, word and deed. The intention behind all these activities of mine is to go from exoteric to esoteric, from mundane to spiritual, from gross to subtle and from a part to the whole.

Unfortunately I was branded an infidel, a 'Kafir', hated, persecuted troubled and discriminated against. Infidel means one who has no belief in a faith, an unbeliever. That is not the case with me. I am a firm believer in my faith. In my view religion deals with two aspects of our existence, one our relationship with the Divine and two our relationship with fellow beings. I believe in God and also in multiple ways of

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attaining Him. I respect all faiths as valid and relevant and am a staunch advocate of universal brotherhood, peace, non-violence and co-operation. 'Kafir' is an Arabic word, which means one who hides truth as opposed to 'Mumin', one who disseminates truth. I give supreme importance to Truth, both at mundane and spiritual levels. I am no votary of falsehood. My scriptures advise me, *Satyam vada nanritam* – speak the truth and not untruth', *'Satyam-eva jayate* – Truth alone triumphs', *'Setuns-tara, satyena asatyam* – cross the ocean of falsehood by truth' and so on. This being so it is unfair to brand me a 'Kafir'. There can be three reasons why I am branded as such. Either these people, who call me so do not know the correct meaning of the term 'Kafir' and are ignorant about the basic tenets of my faith, or by 'Kafir' they mean all those who do not follow their faith. Or they know all these facts fully well but call me a 'Kafir' deliberately as a matter of some political expediency and part of a bigger global game plan. Let me make it clear to them that if they believe in one God as the Supreme Divine, so do I. If they believe in worshipping Him, so do I. If their faith preaches piety and purity, so does my faith. There may be some differences in perception, rituals and attitudes but that does not mean I stand for falsehood and untruth and can, therefore, be labeled as a 'Kafir'. I do not subscribe to the doctrine of exclusiveness of faith for the Vedas proclaim, *'Ekam sat viprah bahudha vadanti* – Truth is one and the wise describe it in many ways'. Had I stated that my faith alone is valid, I would have been a fundamentalist. Had I subscribed to a view that my faith alone being valid, persons holding different views and belonging to different faiths have no right to exist on this planet, I would have been an extremist. I am neither. I respect all faiths as valid and relevant for different people at different times and at different stages of spiritual quest.

According to Wilfred Cantwell Smith 'nowadays religion is spoken of as the human search for God. Islam, like Judaism and Christianity, rejects this view. God takes the initiative. Humanity's business is not a quest but a response'. Comparing the scriptures of different religions, Huston Smith has observed, 'Koran, unlike the Upanishads, is not explicitly metaphysical. It does not ground its theology in dramatic narratives as the Indian epics do, nor is God revealed in Human form as in the Bhagavad Gita. Old and new testaments are directly historical and indirectly doctrinal. Koran is directly doctrinal and indirectly historical'. These observations may point to some basic differences between the content of my faith and their religion, yet I cannot be called a 'Kafir' for I do not hide truth but the very aim of my life is quest for truth. And then does not the holy Koran say unequivocally, *'Lakum dinka wa li ad Din* – to you your religion, to me mine'. Besides, God neither belongs exclusively to any group nor needs defence from anyone. He is unaffected even if someone questions His very existence. How then is it justified to treat me a 'Kafir' and deny me the right to exist when I am a believer in God, seeker of Truth and respectful to all faiths?

I embrace persons of all faiths and respect them. I have accepted even heterodox philosophies of Buddhists and Jains and have held both Gautama Buddha and Vardhaman Mahavira in high esteem and reverence. I have equal regard for Zoroastrian, Jewish, Christian and Muslim faiths. I have been taught to treat the entire world as one family, *'Vasudhaiva kutumbakam*'. I am in the habit of praying for the welfare of all, *'Sarve bhavantu sukhinah*'. I beg of the Divine to fill my mind with noble resolves, *'Tanme*

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manah shiva sankalpam-astu. I always desire peace on earth, in the sky and in the elements, '*Om dhyou shantih, antarikhshagun shantih, prithivi shantih, aapah shantih...*'. It is, therefore, unfortunate and unjustified that I am referred to as a 'Kafir'. If at all I am to be faulted it should be for my reluctance to thrust my faith and views on others. I have never believed in coercion, conversion or confrontation. I made my land an abode for every one to live in peace and harmony in the true Vedic sense, '*Yatra vishvam bhavati eke needam* – a situation where the entire world becomes a nest giving shelter to all'. My doors have always remained open for people of all faiths. I have welcomed everyone and given equal treatment to all. Tagore has beautifully expressed this fact in these lines: '*Hethaya arjo hethaya anarjo hethaya dravida cheen, eka deha halo leen* – whether it was Aryan or non-Aryan, Dravidian or a Chinese, all became one in this land'. My Lal Ded has said, '*Shiv chhui thali thali rozan, mozan Bhatta ta Musalman* – Shiva pervades everything and, therefore, do not discriminate between a Pandit and a Muslim'. She gave the essence of our faith when she said, '*Asi aesi tai asi aasav asi dore kaeri patavath* – we only were in the past and we only shall be in the future. It is we only who have been coming and going from time immemorial'. My Gita tells me, '*Vidya vinaya-sampanne brahmane gavi hastini, shuni chaiva shvapake cha panditah samadarshinah* – men of knowledge view all alike, a Brahmin endowed with learning and demeanour, a cow, an elephant, a dog and an outcaste eating dog meat'.

Firm believer in the Divine dispensation as I am, I am convinced that very soon people of all faiths shall not only respect each other's view point but also hold all faiths valid and relevant. They will learn to co-exist with fellow humans and contribute their mite in creating an atmosphere of love, harmony and brotherhood. There will be no ethnic cleansing of the type Jews faced or my own community was prey to only a decade back. They will realize that if peace and tranquility is ensured, the result will be prosperity and progress. They will accept the love preached by Christ, surrender unto God prescribed by Prophet Mohammed, non-violence taught by Mahavira, good conduct enjoined upon by Buddha, God-remembrance underscored by Guru Nanak, self-less service praised by the saints and sages and the world-view established by Sanatana Dharma. No body will then dare call anyone else an infidel or a 'Kafir' and I, the unfortunate Kashmiri Pandit, forcibly evicted from my home, may find congenial atmosphere to return to my roots to the land of Vasugupta, Abhinavgupta, Lal Ded, Nunda Reshi, Roop Bhawani, Reshi Peer, Paramananda, Shams Faqir, Ahad Zargar, Swami Laxman Joo, Bhagavaan Gopi Nath and a galaxy of other saints and savants, who have guided and shaped my life over the centuries.

22.0 PROFESSIONAL PROFILE

Kashmiri Pandits are professionally no doubt predominantly office workers and bureaucrats but they can be found in any profession barring menial jobs like scavenging, washing, sweeping etc. No wonder in Sanskrit works they are referred to as '*Brahman Kayastha*', which indicates that they did office work in spite of being Barahmins. Commercialization of life and consumerism were never their cup of tea. Majority of them lived from hand to mouth and accumulation of wealth was not in their nature. They would cut expenditure on any item of necessity but made it certain that their children got good education. Even a person of modest means would make it possible for his children to get at least a degree level education. They would be contented to have '*Haakh-batta*' or two meals of rice with usual vegetable of greens, to make it happen. In order to understand and know the broad contours of their professional life we have to study the villagers and those living in urban areas and bigger townships separately.

Kashmiri Pandits living in villages were either landowners or landless persons. After the land-to-tiller policy adopted by the National Conference government immediately on assuming power after 1947, the absentee landlordism was abolished. The majority of the Pandits lost ownership of their land, that too without compensation, but some families did retain small segments of land which they cultivated themselves with the help of hired labour at the time of sowing and harvesting. Some of them developed fruit orchards and earned their living by the sale of the fruits, mainly apple. The landless ones were petty shopkeepers who sold merchandise of day-to-day use. These shops were multi-purpose shops selling anything from cloth to grocery, crockery to confectionery and other useful items brought from the wholesalers in the city. A small section of these village folk would perfect the art of cooking and would either serve as cooks in affluent families or do contractual jobs of cooking during bigger occasions of marriages, yajnopavits, sacrificial fire rituals and other social and religious functions when feasts are arranged and large-scale cooking is involved. The position has largely changed during the past half a century. More and more people from the villages have also gone for degree level and higher education, which has given them openings in various jobs.

The urban Kashmiri Pandit was particular about sending his children to school and see that they study at least up to the degree level. Prior to 1947 there was no university in the state of Jammu and Kashmir. The students had to sit for the examinations conducted by the then Panjab University of Lahore and obtain a degree therefrom. People would obtain the degree and aspire to get a clerical or an equivalent job in the state government, the most attractive post being in the Accountant General's office, which was considered to be prestigious. Those who could afford to send their children for higher studies would select a suitable course for them in the Punjab or the then United Province, particularly Lucknow or Allahabad. These courses would include Master's degree that would enable them to go in for a lecturer's job in a college, a medical degree for taking up medical profession, an engineering degree or diploma for joining the Public works Department or a degree in law to take up the legal profession. Whatever profession these young

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men of the community adopted they excelled in that invariably as they had a dogged diligent and sustained attitude towards their work. Besides these, many Pandits were petty shopkeepers or employed with contractors, businessmen and transporters. None of them, however, took to art and craft or any type of handicraft although Kashmir has been a seat of excellence in woodcarving, carpet weaving, embroidery, shawl weaving, paper-machie, cane-work and other such crafts.

Kashmiri Pandits had to face discrimination and even humiliation at times. Certain bad customs and social evils like dowry system also had crept in this society. This gave rise to agitation and uprising from time to time, which in turn produced some political and social leaders of no mean caliber. During the reign of Maharaja Pratap Singh one Pandit Har Gopal Kaul espoused the cause of the Pandits. This was not liked by the majority community. They composed songs against him, for example: '*Rad os Hara kon bad Karin kar, Janaki hyeth karon peeron par* – Har Gopal is a bad person doing bad deeds. We shall throw him on the other side of the mountain range of Peer Panchal along with his brother Janaki'. Har Gopal would reply in a dignified manner, '*Janaki hyeth yimova baghi savaar*- I will come riding a horse carriage along with my brother, Janaki'. He was followed by a galaxy of political leaders like Shiv Narayan Fotedar, Jia Lal Kilam, Prem Nath Bazaz, and social reformers like Kashyap Bandhu, Gopi Nath and others. These leaders were associated with various organizations, prominent being Kashmiri Pandit Sanatana Dharma Sabha, Yuvak Sabha. They contributed their columns in the daily Martand and other prominent papers and the movement was launched from the premises of Sheetal Nath at Sathoo Barbar Shah.

Kashyap Bandhu was an advocate of change in the dress of the Kashmiri Pandit women, from traditional '*Pheran*' with its paraphernalia to a simple Sari involving very little adjuncts. There was a heated exchange between him and the ladies opting for the conventional dress. They would sing, '*Tarachand bulbulo travu israr, aes nasa travoy zanh ti naervar* – Tara Chand Bulbul! Give up your insistence; we shall never give up our age-old dress'. (Tara Chand was Bandhu Ji's maiden name and he wrote under the pen name, Bulbul). He would point out the deficiencies of the old dress and insist to give it up, '*Poots, zooj tai naervar, yim chhi shiksaek sardar, mala baerthaey gardan, travi pheran ta lolo* – All the paraphernalia attached to the old dress make you inert, lazy and shabby, even the neck behind is often full of dirt. Pray give it up'.

There were other occasions when Pandits had to take to streets for saving their places of worship like Durganag, getting fair treatment and saving the honour of their women. One prominent movement was when a Pandit girl was abducted in 1967 and forced to marry a Muslim. Some persons had to sacrifice their lives while protesting against such high-handedness. The 1989-90 upheaval also took a heavy toll of some prominent leaders like Tika Lal Taploo, Sarwanand Premi, Wanchoo and others.

A sizeable number of Kashmiri Pandit families lived outside the state as their ancestors had migrated to the states of Punjab, Rajasthan, United Province and Central Province. They thrived in legal and medical

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professions and also got responsible positions in the bureaucratic set up of the government in position. The community produced a number of luminaries in the legal profession and in the field of literature besides other walks of life. Many of them joined the struggle for Indian Independence, were jailed by the British but continued their peaceful struggle till the country was freed from the yoke of the alien rule in 1947. In post independence period they contributed in nation building and the development of the country in a big way. Those who lived in the state also made a niche and name in different spheres within the limitations of the avenues available in the state. The majority Muslim community did not show equal interest and keenness in educating their children. They took to trade, craft and other such vocations where being un-lettered was no impediment. The Dogras of Jammu also were comparatively less educated and the Buddhists of Ladakh too were largely backward. It goes to the credit of Maharaja Hari Singh, the last ruler of the state, that he introduced compulsory primary education for all in Kashmir. These primary schools were nicknamed '*Jabri-school*' or schools where children would be admitted forcibly. The broad division of professions at one time in Kashmir was that Dogras were in the army and the police force, Muslims and Buddhists were engaged in trading activities, with Muslims taking to art and craft also, and the Pandits were manning the government offices.

Soon after India's independence and Kashmir's accession to India, the political set up in the state changed. Under the new dispensation, laws favouring the majority community were framed and understandably preference was given to them in employment. This policy, in due time, became highly discriminatory with the result that Pandits were denied even their due share of admissions in the professional colleges and in the government and Public sector jobs. They had no other alternative but to move out to seek opportunities elsewhere in the country and in the wide world. This proved a blessing in disguise. Kashmiri Pandits not only found a variety of professional avenues for themselves but also realized their own potential to compete in various disciplines and show their mettle. Today you name a profession or a discipline and you will find a Kashmiri Pandit there, important, indispensable, involved and innovative. He is ever shining and excels in his vocation.

There is, however, a section of this displaced community which is still languishing in camps and shanties, living in sub-human conditions not having been able to find proper openings for a decent livelihood. It is here that the community in general, its well meaning leaders and various associations in particular can play a prominent role to help them get rehabilitated. It is heartening to note that there are organizations both in the country and abroad who are active in this area of community activity and service to the needy. But this help has to be provided in a systematic way and discreetly without hurting the self-respect of the persons affected. An old Chinese saying has to be kept in mind and that is, 'you give a fish to a hungry man and you feed him once but you teach him angling and you feed him for ever'. We have to support them not by doles and relief but by providing them proper and adequate means that will sustain them and be a source of regular and permanent income.

23.0 DISTINCTIVE FEATURES

There is a saying that it is not important where you live but it is important how you live. Kashmiri Pandits have had to leave their hearth and home seven times en mass and several times in a slow stream over the last seven centuries. Most of the times in the past this exodus has been to save their life and honour and in the post 1947 period, during the last half a century, it has been for purposes of education and training and to seek livelihood. It goes to their credit that even if they were driven out of Kashmir, Kashmir could not be erased from their mind and heart, In the foreword to Ranjit Pandit's translation of Kalhana's *Rajatarangini*, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru has given expression to the feelings of a Kashmiri Pandit forced to leave his place in the following words: 'I have read this story of olden times with interest because I am a lover of Kashmir and all its entrancing beauty, because perhaps, deep down within me and almost forgotten by me, there is something which stirs at the call of the old homeland from whence we came long, long ago; because I cannot answer that call as I would, I had to content myself with dreams and fantasies and I revisit the glorious valley girt by the Himalayan snows through books and cold print... Where dawn first appears with a golden radiance on the eternal snows and, in the evening, the daylight renders homage to the peaks of the towering mountains; where in the valley below, the lazy sleepy *Vitasta* winds slowly through smiling fields and richly laden fruit trees, and creeps under the lordly *Chinars*, and passes through still lakes covered with lotus blooms.' The result of their intense feeling is that their life style, habits and manners have remained intact with very little but essential modifications and variations. So wherever they reside and live, they live in their distinct Kashmiri Pandit style. Even so, many things have gone in disuse because of the changed environment, changed circumstances and changed situations. New customs and new ways have been adopted and why not; after all the culture of a society should be ever evolving. It has to be pragmatic and dynamic and not static and outmoded.

In spite of these changes and in spite of many customs going out of use when we meet a Kashmiri Pandit or enter a Kashmiri Pandit household we can feel and realize that we are in the company of a distinct and unique entity. Let us first consider some of the customs, which are either extinct or near extinct in the changed environment. In the typical Kashmiri house there used to be a platform in front of the main door with a couple of steps to climb. This was called '*Brand*'. Early in the morning the lady of the house would apply a thin mud paste on the mud plaster of this platform, which was called '*Brand-fush*'. She would also apply similar mud paste on the mud plaster on the three sides of the door, left, right and the top. This was called '*Dar-livun*'. With the change in the construction technique and cement plaster having replaced the mud plaster, this practice is no longer in vogue, nor is it needed.

There used to be two small brass pots filled with water, kept either in a corner of the kitchen or in the prayer room. These pots were called '*Saniwari*'. Early in the morning the lady would empty them, clean them and then fill them with fresh water. This was called '*Saniwaer-baraen*'. Later in the morning when the meals were ready the lady would put a little cooked rice and vegetables in these pots, before serving

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members of the family. Every house would have a small shelf over a window from the outside. This was known as '*Kaw-paet*' or crow's shelf. A little portion of whatever was cooked would be left on this shelf for the birds to consume. Similarly before starting a lunch or dinner two or three rice balls were kept outside the plate to be fed to the stray dogs. These were called '*Hoonya myet*' or dog's share. Changed living conditions, living in flats and highly urbanized way of life have given a good bye to all these practices.

Just after sunset, the time of dusk was very important. The lady would light a *lamp* and place it on the edge of a window facing the East, simultaneously praying for the peace, prosperity and well being of all. This practice was known as '*Sandhya tsong zalun*' or lighting the lamp at the dusk. Light by electricity has put a full stop to this custom and has driven out poor lamp like a good coin put out of circulation. But even then the lady will have a glittering '*Bindi*' on her forehead between the eyebrows, '*Dejhor*' and '*Atahor*', the two gold ornaments dangling from her ears on both sides, as a mark of being married, and some other typically Kashmiri gold ornaments. The men folk used to have a tilaka of sandal paste and/or saffron paste on their forehead. This may not be common within the valley and may not be in vogue at all outside Kashmir but the religiosity and spirituality that it denoted is still apparent from their appearance, gaze and manners. Yajnopavit is by and large still in vogue, '*Narivan*', the wrist band is very much there but the '*Aetipan*' or the thread worn round the waist has completely disappeared.

The typical floor covering in a Kashmiri family would comprise grass mats '*Vaguv*' covered with coloured cotton thick sheets, '*Sataraend*' with beautiful Kashmiri woolen carpets on the top. At the back would be bolsters '*Takia*' to lean upon. In the changed set up carpets and bolsters are still there but on wooden settees or '*Takhat*'. On the wall behind there will be a picture of Goddess Sharika in a gorgeous Kashmiri Attire with eighteen arms carrying different weapons and things or a picture of the holy spring of Tula Mula with marble temple of Goddess Rajna in the middle of the water laden with flowers, petals and leaves. On the other wall there will be a picture of the Shiva temple atop the Shankaracharya hill or of the Ice lingam at Swami Amarnath. In the showcase there will be a '*Kangri*', a '*Samovar*' a '*Khose*' and an assortment of items of walnut wood-carving and papier machie like a shikara, a table lamp, a jewel box, a small tray etc.

Daily prayer is a must for a Kashmiri Pandit. He will either go to a nearby temple and offer his prayers there or he will have a room earmarked for this purpose in his own house. This is called '*Thokur Kuth*' or the Deity's room. Now that he lives in small flats he cannot afford to have a separate room for his daily prayer. Yet he will keep a small cupboard or a replica temple in one corner of his kitchen or in one of the bedrooms. There will be a few pictures of the deities, a small Shiva Lingam and a couple of small stone or metal figures of Ganesh, Laxmi, Saraswati or other deities. There will be other paraphernalia of a lamp, an incense-stand, a small brass bell, joss sticks, camphor, purified butter for the lamp and a conch. There will be an assortment of flowers to be offered to the deities every morning. As a community also the Kashmiris have constructed collectively some important shrines of Kashmir at some places outside

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Kashmir, notably Tula Mula and Hari Parvat. They have established Aashrams in the name of some prominent sages like Swami Laxman Joo and Bhagavaan Gopi Nath Ji. They have also established centers of meditation and worship devoted to Alakheshwari Roop Bhawani and Peer Pandit Padshah. This way they are living Kashmir outside Kashmir.

24.0 COMMON AILMENTS AND THEIR TREATMENT

Kashmir is a valley surrounded by the western ranges of Himalayas. Although it is a plain area but because of the mountain features it has a severe winter, when it snows heavily making the climate extremely cold. During summer there is a strong sunshine that makes the open areas rather uncomfortable but under the shade it is very pleasant. The valley gets a good share of rains also with the result that there are distinct six seasons of two months each as described in Sanskrit classics, (*Vasant, Greeshma, Varsha, Sharad, Hemant and Shishir*). This type of climatic conditions has made certain diseases very common among the inhabitants of the valley, both Muslims and Hindus. Headache, common cold, tummy upset, toothache, cough and such other minor ailments are frequently seen among the young and old. Along with the allopathic system of treatment there used to be two other systems prevalent in Kashmir, Ayurvedic and Unani. Homeopathic treatment was not common in this part of the country. For major diseases a patient would either consult a doctor for allopathic treatment or a Vaidya for Ayurvedic medicine or a Hakeem for Unani decoction called '*Sharbat*'. As elsewhere in the country, the age-old system of Ayurvedic treatment was in vogue from time immemorial. Unani system was introduced after the advent of Muslim rule and the allopathic system came as a result of Western influence. There is a famous historical story about the King Zainulabdin who was taken ill and could not be cured by his royal Unani Hakeem. The king was eventually cured of his illness by a Kashmiri Pandit Vaidya, Sahaz Bhat, with the help of Ayurvedic medicines. This gladdened the king as a result of which he called back the Pandits who had fled due to the tyranny of his father, Sikander. He also gave places of honour to distinguished scholars from the Kashmiri Pandit community.

For minor treatments there used to be some household medicines, some items of daily use consumed or used in a specific prescribed manner. Take the case of a headache. A paste of dried ginger powder, used otherwise as a spice in cooking, would be applied on the forehead and after sometime the headache would be gone, sometimes it would go just by the time the paste dried up on the thin skin of the forehead. Hot water was frequently used for cough and cold. Hot water would be gulped down the throat and also a pinch of salt would be added to it and then it would be used for gargling to clear the throat. Black tea would be prepared with tealeaves, cinnamon and '*Shangaer*', a ginger like root (Incidentally Extract Glycerhiza Liquid, a medicine for cough in allopathic system, is made from this very root). This tea was considered an elixir in cough and cold. Should a small baby vomit similar black tea would be prepared with cardamom and a spoonful of the tea would be fed to the baby and the vomiting would be cured. Tummy cramps, a common ailment of great discomfiture for babies, had a unique remedy. A thick paste of asafetida would be applied to the navel region of his tummy and his pain would go in no time.

Tummy upset is a common ailment particularly after a heavy meal or a sumptuous feast. Kashmiris have two ways to deal with it, preventive and curative. Kashmiri Pandits are used to keeping fast on '*Ashtami, amavasya, purnamasi*' etc; when only one meal is taken. This meal is usually heavy and the person

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fasting takes his favourite salt-tea after the meal. This tea is made from special green tea leaves, salt, milk and common soda and is topped with a layer of fresh cream taken from boiled milk. This tea works as a digestive agent and any tummy upset is prevented. Should, however, there be some stomach upset or heaviness after a heavy meal or a big feast, the same tea made with the same ingredients minus the milk is taken as a medicine. This is known as '*Noona tyoth*'.

Early in the morning, if you go on to a road by the side of a canal or bordering a big ground, with high poplar trees on either side, you will observe people either jogging or having a morning walk in the cool breeze. Some of them will have a bottle of sea green liquid in their hands. You will find them taking a sip after every short distance. If you want to know the secret of this, well you can be sure that they are diabetic and the liquid they consume is the waste water after taking out cheese from the milk. This is called '*Mana vonya*' and is said to be very useful in such cases. These patients having diabetes also consume dried water nut either whole or ground into powder. The preparation of this nut called '*Gaer*' in Kashmiri Language, is often consumed on the fasting day of '*Ekadashi*' and '*Janmashtami*' etc.

For toothache either a little clove oil is applied to the affected tooth or a piece of clove is held between the teeth and the pain goes. Frost burn of the feet called '*Shooh*' in Kashmiri is another common trouble faced during winter, particularly by the children. In this case the child would be taken to a cowherd's house and his feet would be dipped in a pot containing the urine of the cows. This would bring a great relief to the child. Sometimes the tip of a finger or the thumb of a child or an adult would be swollen. In local language it is called '*Dyog*' and is very painful. In this case a gall bladder of a lamb would be placed on the swollen part and a bandage tied around it. The swelling would increase leading to the bursting of the wound and the person would be relieved of the pain.

25.0 DEMEANOR & ETIQUETTE

A Kashmiri Pandit is a good companion and a good conversationalist. He can engage you in a lively discussion on any topic, religious, political, philosophical or relating to literature. He will be forceful in putting forth his viewpoint, at times somewhat rigid also but never disrespectful. The meeting may end on a note of 'we agree to disagree' but there will be no bitterness. He is well read and well informed. He invariably reads the morning paper from cover to cover and between the lines. In good old days, we would find a Kashmiri Pandit sipping his morning tea '*Moga-el-chai*' by a window and talking to his neighbour. The usual conversation would veer round this oft repeated query, '*Kyasa chhu Pandit Nohar vanan az* - What is the statement of Pandit Nehru today?' He cannot be disrespectful towards his companion or even to his adversary or opponent. From his childhood he has been groomed in good manners and decent conduct. Once Prof. Al Ahmad Saroor, a well-known critic in Urdu delivered a lecture on Dr. Iqbal in the S.P.College hall and the function was presided over by Pandit Jia Lal Kilam, the renowned lawyer and political leader. After the lecture was over, questions and comments from the audience were invited. Mr. Rehman Rahi, the poet raised certain objections and while making his observations on his speech, told Mr. Saroor, 'You are wrong in saying so'. Mr Kilam objected to this and when Mr. Rahi insisted that he wanted to tell the speaker that he was wrong, he said 'You cannot tell him that he is wrong; you must reword your statement and say that he is not right'. Such are the details in manners that a Kashmiri Pandit is trained to take note of.

We live by and large in a joint family and are naturally required to take due care in conducting ourselves among young and old, ladies and gents. Our language has to be polished, respectful and decent and we are required to be soft-spoken. Special care has to be taken to address our elders. If there is a grandfather in the house, he is addressed as '*Bab*', the grand one. The grandmother is fondly called '*Ded*', grand lady. Father is called '*Tathi*', the dear one and the mother '*Kakaen*', the intelligent lady. The elder uncle in the family is usually addressed as '*Lala Saeb*' or simply '*Lala*', the respected one. The younger uncle is called '*Baisaeb*', exalted brother or '*Baijigur*', the dear brother. The elder brother gets the epithet of '*Baijan*' or '*bairaj*' or '*baitoth*', or '*Baigash*', the dear, the senior, the beloved or the bright brother. The aunts are addressed in a variety of ways, more commonly as '*Jigaer*', '*Bended*', '*Benjigir*', the affectionate and loving ones, depending upon their seniority. The elder sisters would be called '*Benigaesh*', '*Benitaeth*' or simply '*Taethi*', the sister dear, the bright sister or the loving one. If the number of uncles and aunts is too large a very interesting way of finding so many titles of address is evolved. For males '*Toth*' is added to their individual shortened names and for females '*Jigaer*' is added. As a result Gopinath will be called '*Gupatoth*', Bansilal '*Bantoth*' and Dwarikanath '*Daritoth*'. Shanta Ji will be called '*Shantajigaer*', Kamlaji '*Kamajigaer*' and so on.

Uncles and aunts, particularly the elder ones would never be referred or addressed as such. All the uncles were fathers and all the aunts, mothers. There was no hypocrisy in this practice. It actually ensured

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cohesiveness, togetherness, sense of belonging and an atmosphere of love and harmony. A son was everybody's son in the family and his health and education would be taken care of by one and all. The elders in the family would tolerate even his tantrums. In fact it was considered bashful if his real parents owned him publicly. There is a famous story by Prem Nath Pardesi titled '*Jhunjhuna*', where the father had brought a rattle for his small child and given it to him secretly but when the child reveals it in front of the elders, the father had to hang his head in shame for this 'shameless act'. Similarly a daughter was everybody's daughter and the family would jointly meet all her requirements including the expenditure on her marriage. It was, therefore a taboo to refer to any person by the actual relationship of an uncle or an aunt.

The sons in the family would invariably be called '*Nika*' or the little ones and the daughters as '*Nich*', or the small girl. As the times changed and the external influences prevailed and the Kashmiris were exposed to the interaction with other ethnic groups and communities, the addresses also changed. Fathers began to be called Papa and Daddy as also '*Pitaji*'. Mothers got addressed as Mummy, Maa or '*Mataji*'. Bhabhis were no longer '*Kakaenjiger*' but '*Bari Bhabhi*' or '*Chhoti Bhabhi*'. Brother became '*Bhaiyya*' and sister '*Didi*' or '*Jiji*'. The worst hit relations were those of uncles. They came to be called '*Chacha*', '*Mausa*' or '*Phupha*' and their spouses, '*Chachi*', '*Mausi*' or '*Bua*'. With the disintegration of the joint family, this change was inevitable. Spaces shrunk, flats replaced palatial houses and the children became worldly wise sooner than before. This brought home to them the reality of relationship and the so-called hypocrisy vanished. The havoc that it wrought on mutual love, affection, understanding and demeanour was nobody's concern.

We cannot put back the clock nor can the changed times be put into reverse gear. What we can do, however, is to retain the good things of our age-old tradition and custom and put them in practice with due regard to the changed circumstances. We must stick to our roots but keep the ventilators open for the fresh air of the modern times to give our tradition a new life, for the culture of a community thrives only so long as it keeps on evolving. Once it stagnates, it dies its natural death. Let our children address the elders by new titles. Let them adopt new terminology but let there not be any change in our approach. Let there be redoubled respect for our elders. Let us adore them, give them due regard, care and consideration. Let money and wealth not evaluate relationships and let the love and affection do that. Let us benefit from the experience and advice of the elders. Let us deserve and earn their blessings and let us run to them for guidance and direction. Those of the elders, who are too old or ailing and infirm must be loved, served and comforted. We owe it to our lofty tradition and rich cultural heritage that we care for them, show compassion towards them and spend some time with them and give them company so that they are happy and satisfied in the autumn of their life.

26.0 PARALLELS & PARADOXES

There are many communities and groups of people who have suffered and faced persecution at the hands of tyrant rulers, hostile neighbours and intolerant religious groups. All of them have found my country, India a safe haven, where they were able to live in peace. Zoroastrians faced persecution in Persia, Jews faced death and destruction in European countries, Sufis were tortured in the Middle East, Tibetans were suppressed in Tibet, Bangladeshis are terrorized in Bangladesh and all of them have sought shelter in India. They were treated well, given freedom of religion and allowed to engage in the trade of their choice. Most of them accepted the citizenship of this country with love and pride and contributed to the prosperity of this land. Some of them, however, misused the local hospitality and spread their religion by coercion, persecution and other unethical means.

One of the major groups of such settlers is the Jews. The other day I came across a pamphlet titled 'Kerala and her Jews'. It says that the Jews settled in the port city of Kerala called Shingly and established an independent principality between 5th and 15th Century. The Jews were the first aliens to settle in India and it was as a result of the generosity and tolerance shown to the Jews by the successive Hindu rulers of South India that India first earned the name as the land of tolerance and understanding of all religions. It is recorded that Menasseh ben Israel added weight to his petition to Oliver Cromwell before 1655 for the settlement of the Jews in England from where they were expelled in 1290, by referring to the happiness and tolerance enjoyed by the Jews of Cochin under Hindu ruler.

On his first visit to the Synagogue in March 1949, the then king of Cochin H.H.Rama Varma assured the community with these words: 'Of course your community is small but its historic importance is really great. I assure you that all the legitimate interests of the minorities will always be scrupulously be safeguarded and will never be sacrificed for the selfish ends of the majority.' On the 400th anniversary of the synagogue in 1968 the Government of India issued a special commemorative stamp and the first day cover. On this occasion this is what the Prime Minister of India, Shrimati Indira Gandhi had to say, 'Every visit of mine to this ancient synagogue ia a reminder of the long history of this country with which the Jews were associated and also to the tradition of religious and cultural tolerance which is our great heritage'.

In 1947 there was wide spread disturbance all over Northern India and communal strife and violence left hundreds dead, homeless and plundered. The state of Kashmir was largely unaffected till the tribals of North-Western frontier, aided and abetted by the Pakistan army, invaded the state. That is why Gandhi ji saw a ray of hope in this part of the country. Alas eventually this ray, in stead of developing into a beacon light, faded away and gave way to worst kind of communal frenzy and ethnic cleansing. Gun culture replaced the docile peaceful character of this valley and the worst sufferers were the Kashmiri Pandits.

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They had to leave their hearth and home to save their lives and safeguard their dignity and their distinct identity. They became refugees in their own home and the great country, India lost its reputation as a land of cultural and religious tolerance. The mutual trust between the majority and the minority communities has been shattered and the psyche of the miniscule Pandits has been badly bruised. It is high time that after one and a half decade of this animality something is done by the authorities that be, to cleanse this tarnished image of this great nation. On their part the Kashmiri Pandit community has to remain united, firm and resolute to achieve the goal of going back to their encestoral homes in safety, with dignity and with honour, unblemished.

27.0 SOME INTERESTING ANECDOTES

There are some interesting anecdotes, which throw light on certain interesting aspects of the life and people in Kashmir. I have not read about these nor am I sure whether they are recorded in some chronicles or some literature relating to this land. I have heard them from elders and, therefore, have no reason to doubt the voracity of these incidents. I would like to share these with my readers and request them to draw their own conclusions from them. Some of these anecdotes are mysterious and may not appeal to the reason and logic of the human mind. Some of these depict the extra-ordinary spiritual powers that the concerned persons possessed and some are simply awe-inspiring.

Haramukh is a famous mountain in Kashmir known as an abode of Shiva. There was a sage who was desirous of climbing this peak in order to see Shiva face to face. The ascent was arduous but his resolve was firm and strong. He would start the climb in the wee hours of the morning and continue his journey throughout the day till it was dark. Then he would find some makeshift shelter to rest for the night. Those days there were no modern day equipments for climbing or for sustaining the mountaineer during nights, avalanches and other impediments. Next day to the dismay of the sage, known as '*Gosonya*' or Goswami, he would find himself again at the bottom of the mountain. Yet he did not give up and with the calm composure he would again start the climb afresh. Next morning again he would find himself at the starting point. Day in and day out the same phenomenon repeated and the sage continued with his effort. This story has given rise to a local proverb, '*Haramokhuk gosonya* – the sage of Haramukh and whenever someone is back to square one he is given this name. Of course the story has a happy ending in that the Lord was pleased with the dogged resilience of the sage and appeared before him at the foothill itself. His effort did not go in vain. After all every sincere effort does bear a fruit.

One of the greatest exponents of Kashmir Shaiva philosophy was Abhinav Guptapada. His monumental works like *Tantralok*, *Paramarthasara* and his commentaries on Shaiva texts and the *Bhagavad Gita* are valuable treasures. He was a multifaceted scholar and a sage of supreme spiritual powers. He had a host of his disciples whom he guided and trained in the true tradition of Kashmir's scholarship. It is said that when he wished to give up his mortal frame, he summoned a number of his disciples and led them into a cave chanting his famous *Bhairav-stotra*, a hymn in praise of Lord Shiva and never returned from there. The *stotra* begins with the words, '*Vyapta charachara* – He pervades movable and immovable both'. It is in this hymn that he has challenged the angel of death in these words: '*Antaka, mam prati ma drisham-enam, krodha karala-tamam vidadhihi, Shankar sevana chintana dheero, bheeshana bhairava shaktimayo-asmi* – O Yama, do not look to me with these eyes full of rage. I am engrossed in the thought of service unto the Lord, which has given me an unconquerable strength of a *Bhairava* and thus your rage cannot frighten me a bit'.

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It is said that Pandit Madhav Joo Dhar, father of Alakheshwari Roopa Bhawani used to walk over the water-surface of the flowing river Vitasta and cross to the other side to meet a Muslim saint. This should not surprise any one as such a feat was shown more recently by Shri Rama Krishna Paramhansa as well. It is also said that when the Goddess Sharika appeared before him he begged of her to bless him with a daughter just like herself. To meet his request the Goddess took birth in the form of Roopa Bhawani . She had a nephew, who served her devotedly and in the process had no schooling. When he grew to be a young man, his father approached her to do something for him as unlettered he would get no employment. Bhawani asked him to take a pen and paper and lo and behold he could read and write with full command on the Persian language. His father took him along on a horseback to find some opening for him. On the way he slept under the shade of a tree, while the horse was let to graze in the field. Presently an Afghan passed by and asked the lad to write a reply to a letter he had received from his home in Kabul. He neither stated who had written the letter nor what reply was to be sent. While the Afghan was searching the letter from his belongings, the young man wrote a reply. The Afghan was perplexed when he informed him what he had written to his brother. That was exactly what he wanted to convey. He was convinced that the lad had spiritual powers. He volunteered to take him along to Kabul and give him a high-ranking position in the King's court there, which he eventually did.

Alakheeshwari, Roopa Bhawani, who was considered an incarnation of Goddess Sharika was seen by a Muslim saint strolling on the bank of a small river in a village. He was spiritually exalted and recognizing her addressed her in these words, 'Ropi (O' silver!), come to my side of the bank and I will convert you into So'n (gold)'. She smiled and replied, 'Why don't you come to my side and I will convert you into mo'khta (pearl)'. There is a pun on this word. It also means that I will liberate you. It is said that he agreed and instantaneously a boat was seen crossing the river. Shiva and Parvati were seated in the middle and the Muslim saint was rowing the boat. Bhawani sent him back and told him that that way was not the right way. He went back and after a while saw the same boat ferrying towards him with Shiva and Parvati and to his astonishment he saw that Roopa Bhawani was seated by the side of Shiva as his consort.

King Zainulabdin – a fifteenth century king of Kashmir became so popular because of his fair treatment of the Hindus unlike his father, Sikander iconoclast that he came to be known as 'Badshah' or the great king. Labourers and workers would sing dirges of his name, while on their difficult jobs. Even the boatmen would take his name while rowing boats with heavy cargo. Sometime during Pathan rule there lived a sage by the name Krishna Kar. Once he was passing by a field where he saw a miracle. A pair of bullocks yoked to a ploughshare was ploughing the field without any person at the driving rod. He looked around and spotted a young man relaxing in a carefree mood under the shade of a tree. He was quick to conclude that this lad must be the power behind this miracle and he must be having spiritual powers. He carried this lad, named Misha with him. Soon he was popular among god-fearing masses and people looked to him in reverence. Once Misha was sitting on the bank of a river when some boatmen were rowing the boat with a load of various items. As the load was heavy they were rowing it with great effort and were anchoring it shouting, 'Badshah *Padshah* – in the name of the king Badshah'. Suddenly the boat got stuck and would not budge an inch. The boatmen rushed to the sage Krishna Kar for help. During his

enquiries he came to know that Misha was watching them rowing their cargo-laden boat. He realized that the obstacle must be of his making. He directed the boatmen to chant, '*Misha Padshah* – in the name of the king Misha'. As soon as they shouted '*Misha Padshah*', the boat moved on with ease, to their pleasant surprise.

There are many miraculous anecdotes relating to another great saint, Peer Pandit Padshah, who lived during the Pathan rule in Kashmir. His aged mother expressed a desire of going to the holy Ganges for a dip on the auspicious day of Ganga Ashtami. He was aware that at her age it was not possible for her to travel and undertake the pilgrimage. So he asked her to part with her gold bangle, gave that to a gentleman, who was leaving for the pilgrimage and requested him to drop it in the holy waters of the Ganges on the auspicious day. On the pilgrimage day he took his mother to the bank of the river Vitasta just near his house and asked her to take a dip. As soon as she took a dip, the gold bangle came floating into her hands. He demonstrated to her that the holy waters of the Ganges had flown in the local river for her to take a holy bath. Adi Shankaracharya also had the course of the river Kalady in Kerala changed for the sake of his mother. During his itinerary in Kashmir, it is said that Reshi Peer, as he was fondly called, arrived at the holy spring of Trisandhya along with his disciples. He asked one of them to see if there was any water in the spring for them to bathe. Since it was not the time for the spring to have any water, as only a specific day was fixed for it, when people would come for pilgrimage, he found the spring dry and empty. When he reported to his Guru, he wrote these lines in Persian on a piece of paper and had it dropped in the dry spring, '*Chi kudrat sondabraeri ra na aayad ba isteqbali Shahanshahi Reshi* – It is surprising that the damsel, the deity of the spring did not come to greet the emperor of sages'. As soon as the paper was dropped therein the water came gushing forth in torrents and he along with his disciples had a holy bath.

The great sage Krishna Kar was ordained by the Goddess to take Reshi Peer under his tutelage. He went to his house had a puff at the hubble-bubble and left instructions that no body should throw away the half smoked tobacco till Reshi Peer returned. When he returned he too had a puff of the semi-smoked tobacco of the hubble-bubble and the spiritual message was transmitted to him. No wonder the preceptor of Shri Rama Krishna also was sent by Goddess to guide him in his spiritual pursuit. During the tyrannous rule of a Pathan Governor Kashmiri Pandits were put in sacs, stones tied with the sac and drowned in the Dal Lake. The spot is even now called 'Bata Mazar' or the burial place of the Hindus. On one such occasion a lady rushed to a saint by the name of Shakar Shah and begged of him to come to her rescue as her husband was being taken for drowning. The saint wrote these lines on a broken earthenware piece, '*Gar chi hukmi qaza ast, ba hukmi Shakar Shah Mastana nav garaq shaved, huma Brahman bar aayad* – Even if death sentence has been passed, by the order of Shakar Shah Mastana the boat should capsize and the Brahmin should get saved'. He asked her to drop this in the canal through which the boat carrying the victim was to pass and wait patiently. The lady carried out the instructions and as soon as the boat reached the spot it capsized and her husband was thrown over to the bank. The same night the governor saw the saint enter his bedroom riding a lion, when he ordered him to stop this cruel practice.

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There lived a poor Kashmiri Brahmin couple in a village. They had a young son, their only child. It was customary for the Brahmin to offer milk to their deity in the special worship room called 'Thokur Kuth', or the God's room, earmarked in the house early in the morning before they had anything to eat for themselves. This practice was called feeding milk to Lord Krishna. One day the father had to go to the city on some assignment for a few days. He directed his young son to feed the Lord every morning before consuming anything himself. He left and the next morning his mother gave the boy some milk in a glass tumbler to be offered to the deity. The boy went into the room and asked Lord Krishna to drink the milk. Innocent as he was, he was under the impression that the Lord will drink the milk in person. This did not happen and then he began to cry. Seeing the boy cry Krishna in His mercy appeared as a boy and began to drink the milk. The boy asked him to leave some milk for him to consume. This procedure continued on all days during which the father was away. When he returned the boy narrated the whole story to him. He could not believe his ears. Next morning he asked his son to feed the deity in his presence. For some time the Lord did not appear. The boy was about to cry and in His grace Krishna appeared, drank some milk and left some of it for the boy to drink. The father could not see Him. The boy did and all that the father observed was the glass tumbler tilted in the air as if held in hand by some one. The family consumed the left over milk with gratitude. No doubt the children are nearer to God by the dint of their sin-free innocence.

Kashmir has had cruel and tyrannical governors during Pathan and Mughal period. There were some exceptions though. The Muslim governor of Kashmir, Ali Mardan Khan was one such exception. He was blessed by God by appearing before him in his dream and then he wrote those immortal lines in Persian, '*Huma asle Maheshwar bud shab shahe ki man deedam* - He was in reality Lord Shiva, whom I saw during night.' In my own locality, where I lived all my childhood, there was a cowherd Muslim family owning more than a hundred cows. Because of the size of their business in milk they were referred to as 'Baed gurya' or 'Big milk-men'. It is said that their grand father had come across a small Shiva lingam in the cow shed, which he preserved with reverence. He pledged not to dilute the milk by adding water and was known for selling pure unadulterated milk. In course of time his third generation grand children broke the vow and started adding water to the milk yielded from the cows. Immediately thereafter the Shiva lingam vanished mysteriously from the place where it was kept wrapped in a red cloth.

There is this legendry story about a shopkeeper by the name Sudha who was called 'So'dyavonya' in local language. His shop was near a foothill and daily some shepherds who used to take sheep for grazing would bring beautiful stones to him and exchange them for some sugar or candy. One day they gave him a shining Shiva lingam and he was tempted to ask for the source. These poor shepherds described a person sitting on a bull, smeared with white ash and covered with a deerskin. The shopkeeper identified him as Shiva and accompanied them the next day. The Lord was visible to the shepherds and not to him but with their help he caught hold of the bull's tail and got dragged after the Lord. Eventually He had to appear before him. A Sufi poet of repute has written these lines about another Sufi Sheikh Sanah by name,

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'*Rama Rama pareyov Sheikh Sanahan tai, hyendi mo'kha lo'b taem yaar* – Sheikh Sanah chanted the name of Rama with the result that he saw the Divine in the form of a Hindu God' (in the form conceived by the Hindus).

Amrit Vagbhavacharya, a saint of great spiritual standing visited Kashmir from Delhi along with some of his close confidants. He was camping in a village and had expressed a desire to stay there only for a couple of days. The disciples were surprised that even after many days he would not move out of the village. One day somebody brought a book written in Sharada to the saint. As he could not read the script, one Shri Nath Tikku was called to see the book and throw light on the subject dealt with therein. Swami Ji opened the book at a random page, Shri Nath read it and the sentence read conveyed this message: 'I Sharada, Goddess of knowledge appear in the form of three mynas of three different colours, grey, brown and crimson'. The saint jumped with joy. He revealed to his disciples that he had come to this village of Kashmir only to have a glimpse of Sharada, daily after morning prayer on the bank of the river he would see three mynas of the same description and that little did he know that this was the glimpse he was eager to have. Next day the camp was packed off and the group moved on to other places.

'Panchastavi' is a collection of five devotional hymns to the Mother Goddess, which is chanted by every Kashmiri Pandit at home, in a temple and at a pilgrim-place. The most common place where one can find this hymn being chanted is at the foothills of Hari Parbat, called '*Devi-aangan*' or the courtyard of the goddess. One of the stanzas of one of these five hymns starts with these words: '*Maya Kundalini, kriya madhumati kali kala malini*'. It was this Sanskrit shloka that was being chanted by Amrit Vagbhavacharya at the same place, while a Kashmiri Pandit was listening behind him. When he completed the reading, the Pandit asked him whether he knew its meaning. The Acharya translated it for him at which he simply nodded his head. The Acharya felt that his translation was not up to the mark and offered to go to his house to understand its meaning better. The time and place in the interior of the city were fixed. The Pandit gave his name as Shivji. Next day at the appointed time he called him by his name. He was ushered in to the top floor of a three-storeyed house. There he was asked to sit cross-legged and recite the shloka. He did and in a moment got '*Samadhi*', supreme trance, the apex of meditation. The following year during his next visit the Acharya came to the same house with a view to calling on his host of the earlier meeting. He was surprised not to get any answer to his call. He was further shocked when he was informed by a neighbour that the house had been un-occupied for the previous so many years. He must have pondered whether it was Lord Shiva who had guided him on the previous occasion or some Kashmiri Pandit with amazing spiritual powers.

My uncle, Shri Rama Chandra was a teacher posted in a village. He was informed that a saint had come to visit the village and was camping in a house. The students wanted to go to see the saint. He allowed them and after having the school closed himself also went to see him. On seeing him, the saint addressed the gathering in these words: 'You may please leave, now that Rama has arrived because I have come only for his sake here.' Thereafter he took him as his spiritual disciple. My elder brother once went to the

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Ishabaer Ashram of Swami Laxman Joo, the great Shaiva saint of our times, along with his brother-in-law, a disciple of the saint. While entering he realized that since he was having a bad cough he should have postponed his visit to that place. Having come all the way there was no going back now. When he entered and bowed before the saint, he asked him to fetch a glass from the nearby teapoy. Swami Ji poured some fresh cream on his palm from the glass and added some sugar to it and then said, 'Please have it so that there is no coughing any more'. My brother was simply amazed.

Bhagavaan Gopi Nath ji was a saint of few words. He lived from 1898 to 1968. He was a frequent visitor to Goddess Maharajna at Tula Mula and Sharika at Hari Parbat. Once he invited a friend of his to accompany him to Hari Parbat. The friend agreed on the condition that he makes him have a glimpse of the mother Goddess there. The two went to the holy hill, did a circumambulation of it and offered prayers at various important spots. While they were resting at one place they saw a small pretty girl. Bhagavaan Ji asked his friend to purchase '*Nadermonji*' – a savoury made of lotus stem. They offered these to the girl who accepted it with a smile. The trip over, the two started on the return journey. On the way his friend complained that he had not kept his promise of making him see the Goddess. The saint chuckled and said, 'Did you not see her in the form of the small girl and feed her the savouries?' The friend was speechless as he was caught unawares or else he would have touched her feet.

28.0 KASHMIRI PANDITS, THEN AND NOW

Civilizations evolve over the centuries. They cannot remain static. Societies also undergo changes over a period of time. These also cannot remain static because stagnation breeds decay. Even so the roots and the basic character of prominent societies remain intact. Where a society gets disconnected or disjointed from its roots or if it loses its basic character, the society is lost in the oblivion of history. Kashmiri Pandit community has faced turmoil and upheaval over the last seven hundred years. It has evolved, changed and adapted to new environments and faced very tedious challenges, with the result that many new dimensions have got added to this society and some old character has been jettisoned. It goes to the credit of this miniscule community that in spite of all these changes it has retained its basic character and stuck to its roots. This has enabled it to keep its entity intact with honour and dignity. The community has shown heroic fortitude, patient perseverance, dexterity and wisdom in facing all the odds.

Changes have come about in the dresses worn by both ladies and gentlemen. Among ladies '*Pheran, poots, taranga, loongya, naervaar*' (long robe with a lining, head-gear, waist belt and decorative cuffs of the robe) have been replaced by blouse, petticoat and sari or a '*Shalvar Kameez with a chunni*' without any head dress. There was a vehement resistance from the ladies when Kashyap Bandhu first introduced saris for Kashmiri women but in course of time it became unavoidable to adopt this dress. The men folk have adopted the western trousers and a jacket in place of tight pyjamas and a closed collar coat or an old-time male '*Pheran*' -a long robe with a turban. '*Toofol*' - a typical collar joining mechanism has given way to a vertical row of buttons. Sleeping on the floor has per necessity been given up and people now prefer to sleep on beds, '*Palang* or '*Charpai*'. In olden days we used to eat sitting on the floor. The plate would be placed either on the floor cleaned by applying purified mud paste, or on a woolen sheet earmarked for the purpose or on a small specially designed wooden plank called '*Chookya*'. For community feasts on auspicious occasions like 'Homa' sometime meals would be served on fresh green lotus-pods just as our South-Indian brethren serve meals on green leaves of banana-tree. Now the practice is to eat at the dining table, where the number of diners is large, buffet system is adopted in place of rows of collective eating on the floor. Self-service is the order of the day and not a row of volunteers serving different dishes, one after the other, as was the practice earlier.

Kashmiri cuisine has remained by and large unchanged, both vegetarian and non-vegetarian. New dishes have got added to our menu but the old ones have been retained. People have stuck to their mother tongue, even the diaspora speak Kashmiri in addition to English, Hindi and the local regional languages. Instances have been seen that the Kashmiri children living abroad with their parents speak only two languages, English and Kashmiri. Writing in Kashmiri and corresponding in Kashmiri is not in vogue largely because the official Persian script has not been popular among Hindus in general and ladies in particular. Lately a Devanagiri computer friendly script was devised with least number of modifiers, by some experts,

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so that it could serve as an alternative in order to make the language accessible to larger population. For political reasons sanction to this script has been kept in cold storage by the Government.

In olden times paddy was husked at home in large sized stone mortars called '*Kanz*' with the help of big wooden pestles called '*Muhul*'. The exercise had three stages, '*Dan-dal*, '*manz-dal*, '*tomla-dal*' initial paddy-husking, middle husking and the final husking. I had heard about this practice from my elders but later as a child witnessed it when Kashmir was invaded by tribal marauders supported by the Pakistan army and the only power house at Mohura near Uri, supplying electricity to Srinagar city was damaged with the result that the rice-mills were shut down and the job had to be done manually. Nowadays people prefer to purchase rice bags. Even the small sized pestles and mortars called '*Vo'khul*, '*Kajavath*' have gone out of use and in stead mixies, juicers and electric grinders adorn the Kashmiri Kitchen. Similarly prominent vegetables like potatoes, knol-khol, turnips and radish used to be stored under ground in carefully designed pits for use in winter months. These pits were called '*Khaev*'. These pits were so made and designed that water could not seep in and the vegetables would remain fresh. An opening would be provided to withdraw these as and when required. Now that the vegetables are available round the year, thanks to a reliable transport system, there is no necessity for such storage. All types of vegetables are in the market any time of the year and reasonable quantities are kept in domestic refrigerators.

People would prepare choicest pickles at home and a sour drink called '*Saedra kaenz*' that was fermented in hot Sun. Not many people take the trouble of making these things at home now, when these things can be purchased ready-made and bottled from the market; who has the time or even the inclination to go through the paraphernalia required in making these items of taste? Of course making of chutney is still very common, particularly of chilies, mint, walnut, radish or the like. Floor coverings, bedding items, kitchen utensils and other items have undergone a sea change. Choicest '*Namdas*', '*Gabbas*' and embroidered sheets as also silk carpets adorn drawing rooms as wall- hangings. Replicas of '*Samavar*', '*Khos*', '*Kangaer*', '*Pulhore*' and '*Khrav*' (Samovar, alloy-cup, fire-pot, grass and wooden sandals) are now decoration pieces in the showcases. There are no '*Deecha*', '*Ledgi*', '*Bohgun*' and these have been replaced by rice-cookers, pressure-cookers, and a variety of non-stick pans. '*Mogael Chai*', the black tea and '*Sheerya Chai*', the salted tea with milk added are, however, still in vogue. These are served in cups and saucers and not in traditional metal cups, '*Khos*'.

Although '*Yoni*', the sacred thread is still worn by majority of our brethren, the '*Aetpan*', a thread worn round the waist has gone out of use completely and the sandal or saffron mark on the fore-head called '*Tyok*' is also on its way out. A very insignificant percentage of men use it now. But the '*Aastha*', '*Shraddha*', faith and belief in religious practices are there. Worship of deities, God or Mother Goddess is a must in our families. Religious festivals and auspicious days of '*Ashtami*', '*Ekadashi*', '*Purnamasi*' (Eighth, eleventh and fifteenth day of the bright fortnight) are celebrated by keeping fasts and offering pooja. These symbolic practices together with our way of life help us preserve our distinct character and identity as a peaceful, God-fearing community called '*Batta*', the exalted one.

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29.0 CALCULATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

I am very optimistic about the future of my community not only because by nature I happen to be an optimist but also because I am vividly aware of the intelligence, adaptability and resilience of my fellow Kashmiri Pandits. Even a cursory look at the history will bear me out that our community has bravely withstood turmoils, tribulations and frequent exoduses from their homeland. They have commendably retained their traditions, maintained their customs and safeguarded their distinct character and identity. They have very successfully adapted to the new environment, changed circumstances and alien conditions. The only casualty in the past has been our mother tongue, correspondence in which could not be carried out, as the age-old Sharada script was lost because of religious bias and demographic changes.

There has been a sea change in the conditions faced by us in post independence era. Soon after 1947 with the advent of popular rule, the community members who owned land were divested from its ownership without any compensation, under the 'Land to the Tiller' scheme. Recruitment to the government jobs was almost stopped for us so much so that in the initial government notifications it was clearly stated that 'Kashmiri Pandits need not apply'. An interesting joke did rounds those days, which roughly went like this: 'The secretary to Late Kashyap Bandhu entered his room along with a Muslim gentleman and informed him that he was sent by Mr. Afzal Beg for being appointed in their office. Bandhu ji enquired whether the fellow could sign his name. On being told that he could, he consented to his being appointed. Subsequently Mr. Beg talked to him on telephone. Pandit Kashyap Bandhu replied humourously, 'Yes your man did report to me and has duly been appointed after ensuring that he could sign his name. After all he has to sign the acquittance roll of the pay bill; work is no problem, there are a few Pandits in the office to take care of that. Later on when the Pandits protested, the government notifications were amended to read that Pandits with B.A. degree and Muslim matriculates can apply but Pandit applicants were seldom selected.

In course of time training colleges and other professional institutes were set up in Kashmir but Pandit boys and girls were mostly denied admissions. There was, therefore, a voluntary exodus for two reasons, one educated youth seeking employment and two, career conscious young men going in for technical and professional education. They came out from an atmosphere of suffocation into a wide world of immense possibilities. And thanks to their doggedness and perseverance, they made their mark and carved a niche for themselves in whatever sphere they chose. The community thus produced doctors, engineers, managers, lawyers, creative artists, professors and specialists in other disciplines, who distinguished themselves commendably. All these people retained their roots in Kashmir in the form of their parents, relatives and friends. They not only visited Kashmir frequently on vacation and to attend marriages and other functions of their dear and near ones but also performed most of their functions like yajnopavit, Kahanethaer and marriages in Kashmir. Their children had to learn local languages but they got grooming

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in their mother tongue at home. They could not, however, learn the official nastalik script because of which Devanagari script had to be used widely.

Then came the disturbance of 1986 when there were attacks on Kashmiri Pandits in the southern parts of Kashmir, and large-scale desecration of our temples and shrines. Let us admit that we failed to read the writing on the wall with the result that the ethnic cleansing took place in 1989-90 in a planned manner, which we had not anticipated. Gems of the community were killed, even ladies were brutally murdered and an estimated three-lakh people had to leave their hearth and home. This became the worst turmoil faced by the community as compared to half a dozen exoduses that have taken place in the past. The events that followed recreated the scars of the history inflicted by acts like drowning of Kashmiri Pandits at Bata Mazar in the Dal lake, burning of quintals of holy thread, yajnopavit, thrusting of animal bones forcibly in the mouths of hapless Pandits escaping via Batote (from Bata-vath, the path taken by Batas for their escape) and other ways of persecution at the hands of Muslim rulers. There was a difference though. Previously alien rulers abetted by some Mullahs wreaked havoc and this time it was planned by our hostile neighbouring country but was carried out by our fellow Kashmiris, whom we had mistaken as our own. All along we had been fooling ourselves by referring to composite culture, inherent tolerance and docile nature of the Kashmiris over centuries. Little had we realized that paper tigers could one day turn to be ferocious wild animals.

It is now a decade and a half that we have been facing this situation of becoming shelter-less refugees in our own country. We have paid a heavy price for being patriotic to the chore and we have rudely been disillusioned to see indifference and apathy from all quarters in the state and outside the state. People from other parts of the country go for pilgrimage to Vaishno Devi and make a statement that the conditions in Kashmir are back to normal. People talk of so many formulae including the one relating to soft border in order to enable disintegrated families to have social inter action. Little do they know that Kashmiri Muslims have no affinity with people on the other side, who are Muslims all right but belong to a different ethnic lot altogether. Ignorance about the ground realities in this state is so rampant in the country that even our elected Parliamentarians know very little about its geography, history and demography. We have witnessed all this, tolerated all this and faced the situation bravely.

Let us take stock of the present position in order to make calculations for the future. Today this displaced community can be examined in four different groups. The first group is of those who, with the dint of their toil and hard work have been successful in re-establishing themselves in and around Delhi and other prominent cities. They are either themselves in service or their children are employed or they have started a modest business concern of their own. Some of them have their own dwelling houses. The second group is of those who are employees of the State government. They are either tossed from one corner to the other or are getting paid without any work, which in any case is a misery and torture. The third group is of those unfortunate people who are languishing still in camps, tattered tents and sub-human tenements. They have left behind their establishments, orchards or small landed properties and are living in the hope

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that they will one day go back and regain their belongings. Their position is very pitiable. The fourth group is of those few thousand persons, who have remained back for some reason or the other and are living under the shadow of the gun.

We are a miniscule community and our biggest drawback is our small number, which makes us politically dispensable. Late Giri Lal Jain, the well known journalist once candidly advised a gathering of Kashmiri Pandits not to count on any political party because the community is not a vote bank. In spite of this we can make our voice heard. A Persian poet has said, '*Nawa ra talkhtar me zan chu zoke nagma kam yabi* - You must raise the pitch of your voice should people show scant interest in your song'. We have to raise our voice in all forums with all the strength at our command. We must speak with one voice and keep our goal all the time in focus. The goal is our right to go back to our place with dignity and honour and in safe and congenial atmosphere.

Our future is bright provided we carry out our fight on three fronts. The first front is political where we have to fight for our rights united, with one voice, under one banner and led by able and selfless leaders. Personal aggrandizement and one-upmanship are to be shunned if we have to achieve our goal. We have to be focussed all the time. The second front is economic. Here we have to identify those in need of help and pool all our resources to meet their needs. A lot has been done in this sphere but a lot more needs to be done. Helping those in need of jobs, seats in educational and technical institutions and healthcare as also those in dire need of financial assistance is the combined duty of all of us and must be carried out with compassion and due care so that the dignity of those helped is safeguarded. The third front is cultural. The fight on this front is to be subtle, continuous and sustained. We have to preserve our identity, our rich cultural heritage, our tradition, our language and literature and our faith. The various Kashmiri Sabhas and Samiti-s will be well advised to encourage and sponsor research and publication, organize seminars and workshops and promote study of Kashmiri language, master-pieces in Sanskrit written by Kashmirian scholars, and the texts on Kashmir Shaiva philosophy. Let no one deny the existence of our great poets and writers, let no one raise doubts on the authorship of literature produced by Kashmiri Pandits and let no one be allowed to falsify the facts of history. This too is a big fight and we have to win it if we are to exist as an enlightened community. It is a well known fact of history that both Shaivagamas and Vaishnavagamas have originated from Kashmir, that the scholars all over the country used to show their works to Kashmirian scholars of Sanskrit language for comments and approval and that authentic manuscripts of Classics were available in Kashmir so much so that even the great Ramanujacharya obtained a copy of Brahmasutra from there in order to write his commentary on it, which eventually gave birth to an important school of philosophy called Vishishtadvaita or qualified monism and paved way for Vaishnava devotional cult.

As I said at the outset, I am optimistic about the future of my community. Let us all be optimistic and work for the desired goal. The future is bright and let us be sanguine about it, and contribute our mite in

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whatever way we can, in whatever position we are, '*Sokhne, kadme, dirame* - by giving sound advice, by executing schemes and by funding various projects' for the common good and benefit of our biradari.

30.0 PROFILE



Sh. T. N. Dhar 'Kundan'

Sh. T. N. Dhar 'Kundan' has written exclusively on Kashmir, its political scenario and religious practices of its original inhabitants, the Kashmiri Pandits, and has authored several books on a variety of socio-cultural topics. For a number of years, he served as an editor to [Koshur Samachar](#), a tri-lingual publication of Kashmir Samiti, New Delhi. We at KNN are indebted to him for sharing some of his articles with our readers.

List of books written by T.N. Dhar

English

1. A Portrait of Indian Culture published by Rashtriya Sanskrit Sansthan.
2. A Window on Kashmir
3. Bhagavad Gita, the Elixir of Life
4. Exploring the Mysterious
5. Understanding Education
6. Philosophy of a Common Man
7. Saints and Sages of Kashmir
8. The Saint Extra-Ordinary, Bhagavaan Gopinath

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Serial No. 2,3 and 4 published by Mittal Publishers, Ansari Road, Darya Gunj New Delhi.
Serial No. 5 and 6 published by Rajat Publishers, Ansari Road, Darya Gunj, New Delhi. No.7
published by Bhagavaan Gopinath Trust and No 8 by A.P.H. Publishing Corporation, Ansari
Road, New Delhi.

Hindi

1. Main Pyasa Hun (I am Thirsty) - A collection of Hindi Poems
2. Main Samudra Hun (I am an Ocean) - A collection of Hindi Poems
3. Guru Se Samvad (Dialogue with a Preceptor)

Kashmiri

1. Swapna ta Sonch (A Dream and a Thought) - A collection of Kashmiri Poems.

In addition two more books in English, 'Kashmiri Pandit Community- a Profile' and 'On the Path of Spirituality' are under print being published by the Mittal Publishers, Ansari Road, New Delhi.