

KOA Visit to Jagti and Muthi Camps '23

By Shruti Jalali, KOA youth member, Houston (Zone 5)

For a long time, I have held onto a rather quiet curiosity about the Kashmiri Pandit community that has been living in refugee camps near Jammu after the events of 1990. Having seen pictures of the aftermath of Jan 19, 1990 and heard stories of the hardships, I wondered how the lives of these families went as time passed on, over the years. Recently, I had the unexpected opportunity to learn about a KOA visit being planned to the Jagti and Muthi camps during the weekend of Dec 2nd- 3rd, and my India visit plans coincidentally made it possible for me to join in the visit. I accompanied KOA President, Dr. Archana Kokroo on this visit.

Day 1 (Dec 2nd 2023) – Visit to Jagti Camp and Helpline Humanity

On **Day 1 (Dec 2nd)** we headed out to Jagti camp in the morning. I was rather surprised at the scale of welcome KOA received – there was a small group of 40-50 people and delegates, including leading members of local welfare organizations gathered there to recognize the work being done for the residents of Jagti. Among those in attendance were **Padamshri KN Pandita ji, Mr. Ratan Lal Shant ji, Mr. Kiran Wattal ji, Mr. Sushil Wattal ji, Mr. Jitender Kaw (KMECT), Mr. Hatash (author and writer), Mr. Pintoo ji Pandita** and more. It was great to learn about work also being done by local organizations and government aid to improve the conditions of the Jagti residents. This is also precisely where KOA complements the local efforts and adds focus to healthcare, family sustenance, and education.



KOA's Family Sustenance Program (FSP) was started in 2021, soon after the COVID-19 pandemic in India. The objective of this program is to help families who had lost their breadwinners and/or jobs, and the family members were thus suffering from financial hardship. KOA took this initiative, and the program so far has helped more than **65-70 families** and counting, thanks to the generous KOA donors in USA. Also included are families whose loved ones have been killed by terrorists in the valley. Some such families have also received assistance from the **FSP** and their children are enrolled in **SAC**. Through FSP, each family gets a one-time amount of **\$1000-3000** depending on their financial situation. This year (2023) we have **10-12** pending cases being evaluated and reviewed by the FSP directors. While it was apparent that many families were able to somehow make ends meet for themselves and their children, we did meet and hear that about 10% of the families living at Jagti are struggling and living below the poverty line.

I met a young lady, Parthi Dhar, who despite being visually impaired, was pursuing her Master's Degree with the support of her mother, and dreams of gaining a PhD as well as furthering her interest in music and singing. I was able to approach LVPEI (Specialty eye institute based in Hyderabad) to seek an initial teleconsultation for Parthi and her brother (both

visually impaired with some retina damage), based on which expert eye surgeons will be able to advise what treatment is possible and what financial aid LVPEI may provide based on the situation.

Some families, particularly women, approached Archana ji with requests for second opinion on their ailments and were guided to appropriate channels via KMECT. One young student was referred to submit an EAP application based on her father's recent demise. Yet other women were challenged with financial needs, and in this regard discussion around a Family care unit being set up were had – a facility where child-care can be provided for mothers who wish to / need to work. Vocational training is also being considered to help to upskill women and help them join the workforce.



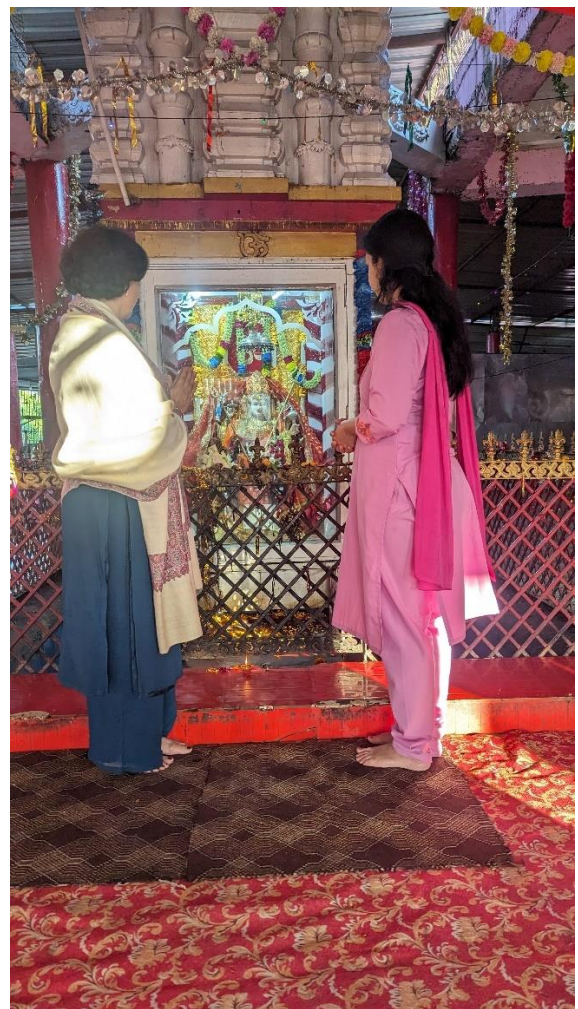
I was surprised to learn about families from Udhampur or parts of Kashmir moving to Jammu even in recent times due to hardship conditions, and at least one such family is living on rent at Jagti and awaiting allotment of quarters. This provided insight on the ground-level nuances affecting some families differently.

Dr. Kokroo evaluated each case and noted their info which will be passed to the FSP team (**about 20-25 families**).

I had the opportunity to meet two youth afterwards and chat with them about their aspirations and challenges. I learnt that job opportunities in Jammu were limited in their career paths (one of them was pursuing digital marketing), and that the idea of leaving home & family for work was a real source of anxiety. We briefly discussed the importance of developing inner strength and taking care of our health being a foundation stone to making progress towards our life goals and dreams.

Our attention was brought to the profound fact that Jagti does not have a vehicle to carry their deceased loved ones on their final journey to the Shamshan Ghat which is about 1-2 kms away. This proves to be a logistical nightmare when the weather is bad and the residents have to carry their deceased loved ones on their shoulders. In this regard, KOA was approached by Jagti residents for help in procuring a van and this matter is being brought to the KOA Board for consideration.

Before leaving Jagti camp we paid obeisance to the beautiful and peaceful Kheer Bhawani Mata Ragnya present on the premises.





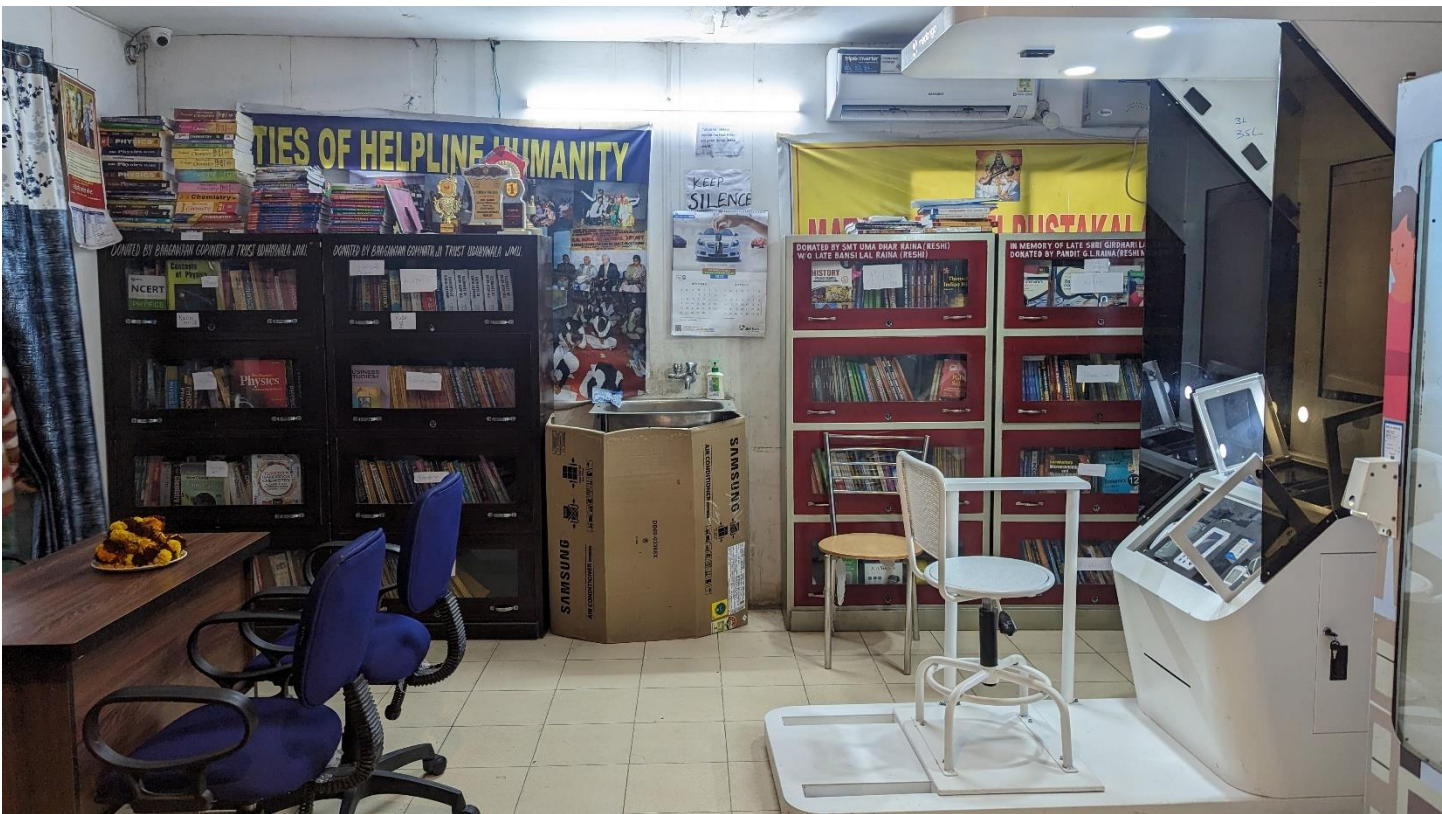
Our next stop was **Helpline Humanity's Mata Saraswati Pustakalay** (educational library) that was next door to the camp. It was heartening to learn about the growth of the library from a small room to two buildings, aided by the government grant of one building. They have attracted donations in the form of books, bookshelves and other infrastructure. This second building has been set up in large part with KOA's assistance towards their computer library & study room facilities. There are about 20 study cubicles in all and a water cooler on premise, with the quiet environment being very conducive for studying. Per our conversation with Mr. Bhat, about 100 children are presently availing computer library. One child qualified NEET; others are availing of online courses provided to them, and the available educational resources are growing. The youth studying there told me they were using the facilities in order to study for bank jobs, civil services / IAS among other career paths.

Helpline Humanity is now moving on to their next phase, with a plan to increase the number of study cubicles and computer equipment. Discussion in this regard with KOA is to be brought to the KOA Board as well.





What was the most amazing discovery on this visit, I must say, was **the telemedicine facility** and the demo thereof that we got to see live – very exciting that **300-350 tele-consultations** have taken place **in 3 months** thanks to the presence of a Kashmiri pandit youth named **Vikas Sharma** who has picked up the smooth operation of the telemedicine booth, equipment and medicine vending machine, which he keeps stocked with up to 88 medicines, funded by the company providing the equipment. While this has been set up outside the KOA assistance, this type of facility has tremendous potential and we discussed how it would be great for the network of doctors to be expanded, as well as a similar setup to be provided to Muthi camp.





Day 2 (Dec 3rd 2023) – Visit to Sharika Foundation and Muthi Camp

On **Day 2 (Dec 3rd)**, we set forth towards Sharika Foundation near Muthi camp, where we met **Mr. Sunil Thussu ji, Mr. Sanjay ji and Ankita** who manage the smooth running of the center where several of our **SAC** and **EAP** sponsored youth come for holistic development. Their academic needs as well as all-round value-system development is covered by Sharika Foundation including prayers, meditation, etc. Several students received their annual **EAP** cheques from KOA by hand during our visit, some parents in attendance as well and the entire day was brightened by the cheerful energy of Ankita, the youth volunteer who is the front-runner and leads much of the ground-level activities at the center. I was delighted by the positivity resonating in every person there. Sharika Foundation operates on two fronts – education assistance via programs such as the **SAP & EAP**, as well as healthcare assistance via the **KMECT**.

In 2022, KOA sponsored 458 SAC students, 30 of whom came from the Kashmir valley. In 2023, KOA has sponsored 458 students again, 26 of whom are from the Kashmir valley. Each SAP student gets a scholarship of \$300 from KOA per annum.

In 2022, 210 EAP students were sponsored by KOA. This year, 2023, the EAP program has not been closed. So far 115 have been sponsored and the program is still continuing. Each student gets \$600 annually under this scholarship, thanks to the donors who make this program possible and viable.

During some side conversations over Kehwa, I also heard a couple of youth stationed in **Mattan, Kashmir** share their reports about a KP family, at the time comprising unfortunately a mentally unwell father with two teenage girls who had stopped going to school, and the local neighbors appeared to be obstructing any help from Sharika foundation, preventing it from reaching them. I was very disturbed to hear of KP families experiencing such circumstances even today, and pray that help can reach them in time either via the local government and/or Sharika Foundation.

During our visit we also met with **Mr. Jitender Kaw, Dr. Chand ji Bhan, Dr. Mam, Dr. Sopory and Dr. Neeru** who work very closely with KMECT and the possibility of the set up of a telemedicine consultation facility similar to that we saw in Jagti was also discussed.









Visit to Muthi Camp

Finally, we walked over from Sharika Foundation to **Muthi camp**, and honestly to me it felt like Muthi needed more effort and focus between the two camps I'd visited that weekend. Indeed, the focus of discussions at Muthi were to add a library and study facilities like what we saw at Jagti, as well as aspire to have one of those excellent tele-consultation facilities made available on premise too.

We also saw the **freshwater pipes** that were laid via the sponsorship of KOA in the year **2022**. We met the ladies who had hand-stitched the taranga's for last year's KOA camp (2022). The idea of them stitching pherans for 2024 was discussed and they are considering taking up this project for KOA.

Overall, for someone in my generation, the entire weekend was packed with information overload, and that too **100% in our Kashmiri language** for at least 6 hours each day which was a fantastic experience. I do not exaggerate when I say that I've never felt more immersed in a Kashmiri pandit community that's not my immediate family, than I did that weekend, and it gave me a glimpse of what a KP community may have been like decades ago in Kashmir. I am glad that these communities exist and are gaining strength over the years. I wish for them to thrive and achieve greater heights in education, health, and local administration in the years to come. To paraphrase some wise words spoken by Sushil ji at Jagti – **"every bit of help from every single person counts – no action of help is small or large – do what you can"**.

I feel heartened by the work being done by KOA in these camps and elsewhere, supported by the local volunteers in Jammu. I can see the operations on the ground-level are carried out with a lot of care being taken to ensure the assistance reaches in the exact hands that need it and in the right form. We need to maintain the diligence and possibly increase the measure of impact to help our KP community once again reach the strengths it has reached in its prime. The FSP, SAC, EAP

and medical funding activities continue to benefit many families in need. **As a youth, I highly recommend other curious youth to visit these camps the next time they are in Jammu and witness the community work taking place there. Over time, these visits may spark more good ideas that can help our community.**





