

Kashmiri Pandits' Rendezvous with Destiny

Kashmiri Pandits' civilizational pinnacle receded, perhaps, a thousand years ago, by the end of Utpala Dynasty (855 - 1003). Their glory has been especially in steady decline since the advent of Sultanate in 1339. As they became a minority after volitional and forced conversion to Islam, their life became one long road of survival, even though they were still prized for their intellectual powers in high government circles. This psychology of survival became a permanent feature of their personality. They became individuals first and community members later. An outline chronology of Kashmir history has been attached as a ready reference.

Some Kashmiri Pandits (KPs) were shocked in 2014 by the withdrawal of the Modi government's project of creating three composite cities in Kashmir to rehabilitate them. Some wonder what their future is going to be. But here is the irony: even if Modi plan had been implemented how many KPs would have been its takers? Very few. But why are they crest-fallen about the project's death? It is because they still fantasize about returning to their ancestral land of 5,000 years and living their myths and mythologies about it and their lives in it. Once the inner-music is broken the world looks meaningless.

Even if Article 370 were lifted and the life in Kashmir would consequently change significantly, more conducive to KPs living there, they would still not return to their homeland in significant numbers. This is because the dream of returning to their paradise has been shattered. What has shattered it? Their experience. The 1989 experience of death, forced exodus, destruction, cruelty, humiliation, and threats to their lives has damaged the fabric of their love of and belonging to their land. Their dreams and myths about their lives have died, so there would be no point in returning.

The exodus of KPs was already under way in form of their new college graduates

wanting to work outside Kashmir. But this process was natural and did not cut the umbilical cord with it. Overall, the younger generation of KPs (under 30's or so) were in the process of slowly drifting away from Kashmir because of the economic and political conditions in it. They wanted to work in modern companies, generally technology companies, who paid a decent salary, and live in a friendly environment, which were unavailable at home.

KPs have with fortitude and grace met their ordeal. The die of their new life has been cast but their wounds have not yet healed. Now that KPs are not the inhabitants of Kashmir, will they survive? Of course, they will survive. Human history is replete with migrations, both planned and forced ones. How should they live as a community now? While the economic forces have scattered them round the world but India will continue to be their bastion. To keep their ethos alive is their greatest challenge. Efforts are under way in India and different parts of the world in that direction. Gaining political power is essential to their community survival. But they are not very political people, even though they have the mental tools to understand politics very well. Also, their meager vote-bank is against them.

Over years, since India's independence, KPs did not cultivate a political network in New Delhi. The reason being their inaptitude for it. Politics requires consolidation of a group's assets and willingness to strike mutually advantageous compromises with other groups. But these are areas they are not good at. They have always wanted to live in their cocoon, negligent in paying proper attention to the political forces outside it. KPs, equipped with their intelligence and intellect, could have created some political influence during the long stretch of time since the advent of Islamic rule in Kashmir in 1339. This apathy to face reality outside their homes in full-blooded manner made their lives more miserable than they were.

In different parts of the world efforts have been made and are being made to keep alive the KP ethos, or a reasonable semblance of it, but every year it has become harder to do that. This is because KPs are single-harnessed horses, they do not

move in tandem. They are essentially not community-minded people but a concatenation of individuals. They are good and sharp people but not revolutionaries and dreamers. Whatever success that has been achieved so far in keeping the KP ethos alive is due to the work of some highly motivated people, and not with the help of the community at large.

An emigrated people have to learn to live with the people, culture, and the place they migrate to. That is what some 700,000 (the estimated world-wide population of KPs) KPs are presently doing. It will take generations before they will get absorbed in their new world. And in the process they will inevitably lose their KP-soul and create a new one. This is the price you pay for migrating, especially the forced one, from your milieu to a foreign place. There is nothing you can do about it.

Take the case of young people who were born outside Kashmir, who neither know Kashmiri or have visited Kashmir or know the KP ethos. How can we call them Kashmiris? But, they will nevertheless call themselves so, because there is a psychological need in human beings to have a connection with their roots. But in spite of this there would still be a lot of KPs living in Kashmir had the political turbulence in Kashmir not enlarged as much as it did.

Some people have suggested that KPs should change their name to Kashmiri Hindus. I believe that would be a mistake. While the name change would accrue the benefit of being part of a much larger community, thereby diluting their image of aloofness and cursedness, but the loss of their special identity would detract something invaluable from their soul. On the practical plane it would be insignificant.

According to Henny Sender, as described in his book *The Kashmiri Pandit: A Study of Cultural Choice in North India*, (Published in 1990 by Oxford University Press), a Kashmiri *Bhatta* (as Kashmiri Hindus were called until then), Jialal

Bhan, proposed to then Mogul emperor Farrkhsiyar (reigned 1713 - 1719), in his court, that *bhattas* be called Pandits because of their distinct identity. The emperor accepted his suggestion and thenceforth they were called Pandits.

KPs have been dealt with a bad hand by destiny but they are doing the best they can do with it. So, in a few decades from now, there will remain a KP community in the world, but it will be very different from the one we have known. But civilizations have changed with time and we cannot fight time, although in case of KPs it was forced to change prematurely.

But on the bright side of the situation younger KPs are excelling in their vocations and with their ingrained resilience their future is sanguine.

As Soren Kierkegaard said, "Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards," let us look at the future of KPs with imagination but supported with earnestness.

Walking down the fossilized time,
Revisiting high pinnacles and green lakes
Of spirituality and learning,
Today the old native of Kashmir,
Kicked out of his natural habitat,
Wanders the far corners of the world -
To start a new life, a new community,
To heal his wounds, to follow the old light.

Cut off from its spiritual center,
The community wanders in silent grief,
To find a mooring,
To revive the luminosity that once brightened its universe,
To rekindle the fire that bound it together,
But unable to be reborn,
It gradually drifts into the unnamed universal melting pot,
Turning its hallowed past into history,
Its vision into unborn hopes.

(Anguish of Kashmiri Pandits by Maharaj Kaul, 10.14.2010)

Note: This article has been adapted from my article, Future of Kashmiri Pandits, May13, 2015.

An Outline Chronology of Kashmir History

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