

KOA Presidential Elections 2020

Dear KOA Biradari,

In 1977 I attended, what is considered now the first meeting of an organization that later was called Kashmir Overseas Association, at Surinder and Mohini Nath's residence in Washington D.C. There were about eight people in attendance. After the talk about the advantages of having an organization of KP's in U.S., it was resolved unanimously that we should go ahead with the practical steps to a launch it. It was only in 1983 that a full-fledged organization, called Kashmiri Overseas Organization, with legal registration, was set in motion. I guess the not-for-profit status, IRS 501(c)(3), was obtained by then. Rest is history as they say.

So, KOA is approximately forty years old, and has at this time a membership of 800 families. If we assume each family to comprise of four members, then we have about 3,200 members. But based on KOA Directory and other sources it is estimated that there are 1,500 KP families in U.S. That is, 700 families are not KOA members. The reason for that most likely for most of them is the payment of membership fees. Though the annual membership for a family for a year only costs \$50, and for senior members only \$25. Most of the KP's in U.S. are well off, holding professional jobs, placed in the upper middle class. I believe KOA has to reach these families and explain to them the benefits of a KOA membership, especially the participation in the cultural traditions of our community and the chance to be counted in the ongoing crusade over the forced KP diaspora.

But whatever the state of the membership of KOA and its financial health, it is the organization that helps us focus on our roots, civilization, ethos, and future. It is a precious citadel we all have built, brick by brick, over the last forty years. We want to not only keep it secure but also expand it and make it even better than what it is now. It is our inspiration, strength, and future.

During Shakunji's presidency (2017-20), which is just coming to an end, tremendous progress was made in wooing KP youth into KOA through many programs her administration launched. The present KP leadership, inside and outside KOA, comprises of many KP's who came to U.S. in 1960's, 1970's, and 1980's. So, they must be in their 60's, 70's, and 80's. Obviously, the future KOA leadership has to come from much younger segment of the community. KOAY, the KOA youth program has 800 followers in the country, two national directors, and ten zonal representatives. We have to continue to prepare our youth for the leadership roles that they sooner or later have to play.

Shakunji's administration also digitalized almost all of KOA operations. This was a lot of excellent work done, initiated substantially by her predecessor Sunilji Fotedar. Look at the KOA website, you cannot help but feel impressed. She also maintained good relationships with the different segments of the community, both here as well as in India. She also rose to the occasion during the 2019 A370 & 35 A revocations, which provoked Muslim community here. This was a tricky work for her as KOA is a not-for-profit organization. Most of the KOA operations ran smoothly under her tenure. The community should thank her for the excellent work she did. But the rub is that she cannot serve another term, as the KOA constitution forbids it. The two-term limit instituted during Mr. Suresh Raina's presidency is a talent-breaker. Which means that if a president has proven that he was talented in serving as a KOA president, and is keen to go for more terms, why should we stop him from doing that, as long as he is elected after every two years. There have been times in KOA's history when we have had shortage of people suitable for KOA presidency. This article must be removed from the KOA constitution.

Like many not-for-profit organizations, KOA gets short of revenues at times. We have to follow one of the well-known remedies for this problem: go to the wealthy KOA members for donations. Number of KP's in U.S. are doing well financially. KOA is well-organized and talented but unable to launch more desirable projects for want of funds.

The survival of KOA for the next decades depends on these three factors:

1. It should be able to attract the KP youth, as the older generation leaves the scene.
2. It should be able to keep its personality intact by holding on to KP civilization and ethos. Because that is our identity, and without that we cannot survive as a group, especially in a foreign country.
3. To address (2) indicated above, KOA has to keep its social, cultural, and religious programs going at full speed. So, it should be adequately funded. The present revenue generating systems have to be modified, if we want to survive.

This brings us now to the subject of who should we vote for the next president. We have two candidates running for the election. What should be the criteria for selecting one of them as the next president of KOA.

As I have indicated earlier our next president should be someone who is young, in about his or her 40's to 50's, at the most. The reason for that is the energy he or she will have to expend to perform as a KOA president, besides taking care of his or her regular job. But also due to his or her younger age he or she will connect better with the KP youth. As the older KP leaders, inside and outside KOA, are retiring, and as KP youth population will eventually topple over the older KP population in KOA, there is a solid rationale in selecting a younger person as the next KOA president, compared to what we have been selecting in the past.

Ashishji Raina, from Chicago, is not only in the right age range, but also his personality is in sync with the role he would have to play as a KOA president. He is intensely drawn to our KP civilization and ethos. I was very surprised to see this aspect of his personality, as generally younger KP's are not that much drawn to them. Furthermore, he has high ambitions in expanding KOA by bringing in many of the estimated 700 KP families stated above who are not currently KOA

members. He believes correctly that many of the KOA zones need chapter presidents or additional chapter presidents to run the full gamut of our cultural celebrations. He believes we can set up Whatsapp groups within zones for more effective communications. He, being an IT professional, thinks we can use computer technology to more effectively organize our work and programs. His other qualities are humility and unpretentiousness. Look at the excellent work he has done so far as a KOA volunteer and chapter president in KOA, Chicago area. Also, look at his vision of the future KOA:

1. <https://ashishrainaforkoapresident.com/pages/about-me>
2. <https://ashishrainaforkoapresident.com/pages/programs>

After going over the above links you will see that Ashishji is the person we would like to invest our hopes in for the future of KOA.

Maharaj Kaul, November 2, 2020; Rev. Nov. 3

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