

The Illusion And The Reality - The Demise Of Kashmiri Pandit Culture

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“Walking down the fossilized time,
Crossing 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.”

- m.k.

We are looking at Kashmiri Pandit (KP) community and wondering how long will it survive, as we have known it. Several years ago the question of survival would not have arisen, as the community was well anchored in its ancestral land of thousands of years. Although, it had changed quite a bit from what it was a hundred years ago, but no upheaval was expected - it was going through the natural modifications due to the ascent of the industrialization of the humankind

and its socio-economic consequences. With the passage of the time there were also political perturbations in Kashmir strong enough to change a KP's position there from an indispensable intelligentsia in government service, education, culture, arts, and society to a second class citizenship, living on the circumference of these fields. But still he was in the land of his ancestors and the continuation of his culture seemed assured.

After the forced and substantial exodus of KP's in 1989 and beyond, the KP horizon trembled, and its future took a path of uncertainty. We are still on that shaky trajectory. What will happen to KP's as we have known them? This is a painfully significant question in the minds of the thinking people of KP community, whose answers are more often carelessly avoided than zealously focused on.

A community is a fine embroidery of history, culture, values, personality, myths, fantasies, and contradictions. A work of thousands of years of evolution and accident. When it is subjected to extreme pressure, it can start changing in some unknown directions. KP community experienced cataclysmic pressure in the political events of 1989 and beyond, such that its ongoing fragmentation is apparently hard to analyze, making it difficult to make a projection of its future. A withering impact suffered by a thousands of years old culture seems like a stellar collision in the outer space, where the shattered pieces of the stars, physically and chemically, can get modified to the extent of having no resemblance with their original character.

What the coerced and vast exodus of KP's from Kashmir unmistakably showed was that they had almost no political power there and they were and are sacrificial lambs when Government Of India (GOI) has a need to display its support for their arch nemesis Muslims. They also have had no economic clout for quite a while. The 1989 civil war was the tremendous explosion that shattered almost all the illusions that KP's had been harboring for decades about their security in Kashmir. For generations they thought that though they were a minority, they still were respected by Kashmiri Muslims (KM's), (the majority

community in Kashmir, with no love lost between them and KP's), and were independent enough to continue their legendary life in the fabled Valley. Any intelligent person could have discerned that their security was nothing but a thin veil of conventional politeness set up by KM's, ready to be cut asunder by them at a moment's notice. Why would an intelligent community like KP's fool themselves so long? The answer to this significant question lies in that human weaknesses can transcend reason. Human beings are often fooled by political and cultural realities, even though the concerned people possess good intelligence, because they do not want to accept the reality. KP's lived in a fool's paradise for a long time, thinking GOI would never forsake them. The lesson learned is that KP community intelligence is vulnerable like any other community's.

Since this KP diaspora has a high dimension and a finality to it, which makes it the most significant since the diaspora in the fourteenth century, under Sultan Sikander (1389-1413 C.E.), which was later reversed. What have the four hundred thousand refugees done since they were forced to leave their birthplace? Immediately after the exodus, most of them landed in Jammu Refugee Camps. At this point personal resources and the government allowance saw them through this period of great mental and physical anguish. Slowly, many of the refugees found jobs outside the state government, allowing them to quit the degrading camps. Over years, the camp population has dwindled to a few thousand. Many a young KP is said to be doing very well in his or her job outside the J & K Govt. Some KP youngsters were able to migrate to countries outside India. So, economically most of the refugees are doing all right, with good prospects for future growth. While the older KP "exiles" still suffer the pangs of separation from Mother Kashmir, youngsters, generally, do not feel the same way. This is because many of them had already fixed their dreams and goals away from Kashmir. In the decades before the civil war, the KP youngsters were already moving more and more out from the Valley, because of the limitations of the good professional jobs, unfairness of the Government, and the slow growth of the modernity. The civil war only gave a tremendous boost to the trend.

There are no more than 700,000 KP's in the world. Jammu has the highest KP population for one city. Not more than 30,000 live abroad. In most of the cities

they live in, in India and abroad, they have a community organization, which organizes some of their festivals, and promotes interaction among them. There is talk among the older members of the survival of the KP culture. The younger members do not feel as much heartbreak in the demise of Kashmiri culture. This is because they have not had a strong link with it. Culture is a dynamic experience – either you live it or you are not in it. With the younger KP's moving out of J & K State for quite a while, for the reasons indicated above, the requisite dynamic interaction has receded. People living in large metropolises acquire a new unnamed culture, which is cosmopolitan, modern, and practical. This culture is based on the modern notions of the individuality, freedom to choose among various equally valid lifestyles, and to a good extent on the scientific perspective of human life. The younger KP's do not know much about the high achievements of their forefathers thousands of years ago. They do not have a good knowledge of how Kashmir used to be a Hindu, and later a Buddhist center of learning. That in ~1-2 C.E. 4th Buddhist Council was held in Kundalvan (perhaps the present day Haravan), which was an international conference, with about five hundred participants from many different parts of the world. Also, it was from Kashmir, the scholars of Buddhism traveled to different parts of the world to spread its message. Such subjects were not a part of their curricula in schools or colleges. Pride in Kashmiri heritage is downplayed while a KP is living in Kashmir, it only takes high value when he is out of it. The core of a modern KP personality is that of a practical person, focused on survival, competition, and materialistic success. KP children jump on this worldly road much earlier than their fathers did, because of much higher competition and individual dynamism that exists now than in their times.

Another significant factor contributing to KP children's coolness toward Kashmiri culture is due to their not being taught Kashmiri at home. A good number of KP's unconsciously feel the inferiority of the old life back home, and so they do not feel compelled to teach their children their ancestral language. There is this contradictory double personality in a common KP: on one hand he is unconsciously proud of his heritage, on the other he wants to keep away from it. Consciously, a KP wants to be a practical person, living in this world, with his feet on the solid ground below, and during these times. His pride for the old Kashmir and its culture is purely a tapestry hanging around his history, but of no practical

value. A KP is not a dreamer or a preacher. He lives most of his time in the reality manifest by the material world. Young KP's generally take practical professions like engineering, business administration, medicine, and accounting, not professions in arts and research in various fields. They can not be called scholarly, philosophical, idealistic, or artistic in disposition. Surprising, even shocking, it may seem to many people to know that a good number of KP's are not truly religious. They possess a religiosity in some aspects of their lives, but they are not day to day practitioners of the classic Hinduism. Most of them do not understand Kashmiri Shavism. Modern KP's are almost true non-conformists. So, the bonds of young KP's with the traditional Kashmiri culture are tenuous - more a projection of their social responsibility, than an inspiration in their minds and a thud in their hearts. Some young KP's in U.S. wondered in one of the annual KP Camps (organized by KOA), if not knowing Kashmiri made it difficult or impossible for them to be KP's. Although we know, from the experience of other migrant communities, that the lack of knowledge of their ethnic language did not prevent them from becoming that ethnic. Language is the deepest channel of emotional communication between an object and a mind. So, the identification with a group is much easier with it. Also, the younger people, more than the older people, feel the obstacles that community boundaries make in their sense of belonging to the more inspiring and enlightening notion of belonging to the humankind and to the world.

No group of KP's is larger outside India than the KP's in US. It is estimated to be 2000 families large, which is about six thousand people. The organization that binds them together is Kashmir Overseas Association (KOA), that was founded about twenty-seven years ago. It is the richest KP organization in the world. KP's in US donate about \$ 75,000 annually to the destitute KP's, mostly in Jammu, mostly for the education of their school and college going children, and for the medical and economic calamities. Also, the fire in the bellies of US KP's for the plight of the KP refugees, and the propagation of some form of KP culture, is the strongest among all the KP groups in the world, including those in India. This has made KOA an organization to watch. GOI is aware of this, as is Pakistan Government. The KP groups within India lack the fire in their bellies and the cash in their pockets. From the much lauded Panun Kashmir group, based in Jammu, much was expected, as it was given the charge of influencing GOI to be more

helpful to KP's than it has been. But it has failed to unite KP's even in Jammu, not to speak of the rest of India, or rest of the world, to present to GOI a strong group, which has been ethnically cleansed, determined to fight for what is their due. Such a failure has been very discouraging for KP's worldwide. They do not believe GOI can give KP's the kind of security they need, to those who wished to return to their ancestral homes, for living or for a visit. Majority of the KP's believe that for all practical purposes they have lost their homeland, even though it continues to be a part of India. So, having lost faith both in GOI and KM's, KP's are fighting hard to adopt to their new surroundings. The fight for the survival of their culture only comes after their survival for life, and that too generally among the KP's fifty or older. For younger KP's cultural survival has a much lower priority.

Life for KP's after Sultan Shams'd Din started a long era of Muslim rule in Kashmir in 1339, had been difficult, at times perilous, not conducive for a group formation. Particularly the persecution of KP's under Sultan Sikander (1389-1413 CE) (when KP's had to pay Jazia -tax- for not being Muslims and when they could not use a tilak on their foreheads, etc.) , when they left the Valley in large numbers, to the extent that at one point only eleven families were left there. KP's have generally throughout their history, after Sikander's rule, been not good at being together on a sustained basis, to give their cruel rulers something to worry about. Most likely because of their numbers, lack of resources, and mental makeup, they could not group against their tyrant oppressors. KP's have more often tried to live with their problems (which can take a lot of character) than tried removing them. This sense of accommodation, right up to the modern Muslim rule in Kashmir, has not been helpful in their plight. No wonder, even today we find KP's hard to unite, to fight the common enemy together. Efforts to unite KP world over as a cultural group, so far have not succeeded. KP's see themselves more as individuals than a group. This personality dynamic is against the survival of their culture.

Recently, the KOA presidential election in US got so sordid because of accusations and counter accusations of the two dominant groups (West Coast KP's and East Coast KP's) that it was with sheer luck that KOA survived. Many

people in the groups did not care for the survival of KOA but only for their egos and images. Similar things happened to Panun Kashmir in Jammu, resulting in a multi-group split, which obviously weakened the community. Fights within KP groups in some other cities of India and other countries of the world are not uncommon. All these organizations are poorly resourced and basically only serve the role of organizing the two cherished KP religious festivals of Shivratri and Diwali annually, and providing their members the opportunities of networking. So, what do the people fight on? Their interests, their egos, their images. If KP's do not have a group personality how can they fight GOI for fairer treatment of the KP refugees and more concessions for them and how can they carry on their traditional culture, both enterprises heavily exhorted by their leaders to work on? Conditioned by hundreds of years of persecution of the Muslim and Pathan rule, KP's ancient personality has warped, such that it does not trust a fellow KP in a group structure. KP's also generally lack leadership qualities. Both these lacks come from the high lack of the psychological security - a basic quality that is not easy to acquire and repair, as it needs sustained corrective actions, over time

Some KP's compare themselves with Jewish people, when considering their tribulations, fight for survival, and perpetuation of culture. Jewish people are lot more tenacious in fighting for their causes, have more resources, and are more in numbers than KP's, making them better in both survival and perpetuation of their culture. KP's are only three quarters of a million, while Jewish people about eight million. They are far, far richer than KP's. They have a tremendous group identity and have been fighting very hard for what they believe is theirs. We can not say the same things for KP's.

All communities in the world are changing because of the tremendous success of science and technology, big strides in political life, and economic globalization. The world is turning to a global village. The old concept of a community is changing. Man's self image is changing. The incredible demands on the energy and time of modern man has forced him to abandon some of the old notions of family, work, society, and self. In the flow of change, KP's can not afford to be behind other people. They neither have a political base nor an economic base, and the worldly cultural base they have, they are not sure if that can carry them

through the world. But the spiritual base they have, they are more confident about it. To carry it on needs conviction, work, and resources, which they have a dearth of. Because of this, with time, their culture will effectively attenuate, leaving only its wrapper, when the gift within it has withered away. Community organizations can not hold the tide of change, unless they are committed, resourceful, active, and forward looking. Essentially, the cultural preservation must be a deeply held emotion among the people, for it to be effective. If the emotion is weak or missing, no amount of resources and community organization work will be able to maintain the culture.

The question is what will KP culture be like a hundred years from now? Some of the last names, after modifications, may survive in the KP world outside India, but the first names will be replaced with foreign names in most of the cases. Kashmiri language will not be spoken anywhere except in a few places in India (chiefly in Kashmir). Shivratri will be celebrated in foreign countries where KP's live, though with modifications. In India it will survive well, as it is also celebrated by other Indian communities. Kashmiri calendar will not be used abroad, but in India it may be used on a meager scale. Minor festivals will disappear. KP music will slowly fade away among the KP's living abroad. KP artistes will go for non-Kashmiri Indian music, while the Kashmiri music from the KP's and the KM's in Kashmir will be heard by a small number of KP listeners. Kashmiri Shavism will perhaps survive because of its philosophical appeal to some people in the world. Time will gradually kill many KP myths and much folklore, as it will change many social customs. A hundred years from now KP's will be integrated with the non-KP Hindus of India. In fact, KP's will call themselves Hindus, except for a small number of them still clinging to the name KP.

Einstein defined education as something that remains, when everything one learns at college is forgotten. Same could be said of culture. It is something that remains, when traditions, customs, festivals, and language of a group of people change. So, even after a hundred years from now, a person of Kashmiri origin may retain certain philosophical inclinations, social behavior, and tastes in arts, etc., as his forefathers did. But for all practical purposes most of the KP's after a hundred years will not be possessing the KP culture as we know it now. Some of

the other groups like Muslims and Jewish people have made strong efforts to retain their cultures and the results show their success. If KP's were more in numbers, had more resources than they have, and had greater ambition than they have, KP culture would continue, although in a modified form.

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

-m.k.