

A New Focus, A New Vision

— Dr. Vijay K. Sazawal

THE October 1999 issue of the *Koshur Samachar* carried an interesting article by my good friend, Dr. Kashinath Pandita, giving an assessment of the displaced Kashmiri Pandit community 100 years from now. Perhaps it would be of equal interest to know what the displaced community was thinking a hundred years back. Indeed, the more this community wants to know about its future, the more it should look into its past. Like the endless cycle of life and rebirth ordained for the mortals, Kashmiri Pandits too are cursed by the fate to evolve from the valley only to find security and prosperity anywhere but in the valley. This cycle of birth and flight has become a paradigm, and unless the community is willing to adopt new ways of thinking, others will continue to decide its fate. Changing the paradigm will require a new vision, but passing days are bringing new burdens that may be difficult to surmount and the Pandit community could disappear altogether as a distinct cultural entity.

The centerpiece of the new vision is to shift the focus from the displaced community to those left behind. Time has come to feed our roots and nurture the source. Without the source, there will be no displaced community. Without a source there will be no culture. And without a culture there will be no identity. Even the community journals of today will be relegated into dustbins of history much like the community journals of the past.

Lessons from the past

Like today's *Koshur Samachar*, the community journals in 1890's were bursting with anxiety, hope and anticipation of the displaced community. The two principal publications then were *Mursala-i-Kashmir* (published from Lucknow in 1872) and *Safir-i-Kashmir* started in 1890. Discussing the displaced community's lack of unity following its migration from Kashmir, Shri Brij Mohan Dattatreya wrote in the *Safir* in 1891, "Leaving Kashmir was like leaving Eden. It was our downfall. We have made fortunes and become self-centered". Shri Autar

Kishen Agha, editor of the *Safir*, wrote in the same issue, "We do not have a nationality. We have lost our language and our customs. We have only the Kashmiri name". In a later issue (1892), Shri Shiv Narain Raina "Shamim" laments, "The Kashmiri Pandit follows all traditions for maximum protection Kashmiri, provincial, and local. The result is that nothing is his own." The *Mursala* highlighted social ills of the community. In 1872, for example, it spoke about two cliques evolving within the displaced community, one controlled by prior migrants ("Delhi group") and the other by freshly arrived migrants ("Kashmiri group"). A year later, in 1872, Shri Ratan Lal Lucknowi pleaded in the *Mursala*, "If the rich could be less exhibitivite in their social rituals and reduce expenses, the rest of the community would follow their model."

Therefore, one does not have to speculate on how the displaced community will fare a century hence. One can see it first hand today. The concern for the future shown by the displaced community today is very similar to that exhibited by the displaced community way back in 1740's when it resettled in (old) Delhi, or in Lucknow where Kashmiri Pandit emigres made their new home in 1782. A visit today to the Sita Ram Bazar in Delhi or to the Kashmiri Mohalla in Lucknow is a reflection of the times to come, good intentions and fervour notwithstanding. Indeed, the situation may be even more challenging now. Notice the cultural upheaval and demographic destruction in the latest bastion of resettled Pandit identity—Pamposh Enclave, New Delhi—all in one generation.

The reality of the situation is that Kashmiri identity does not exist outside of Kashmir. The Kashmiri flavour may be retained by expatriates for a generation or two, but the inevitable cannot be avoided. This is a historical fact. No matter how much the displaced Pandit community may try, no matter how many temples the community may duplicate outside of the valley, no matter how many rituals are followed faithfully in exile, there is no

stopping to eventual loss of Kashmiri identity in the displaced community. As Shri Agha noted correctly in 1891, we will be left eventually with only our Kashmiri names. Coming to terms with this reality is essential in defining a new vision for the future.

It is impossible to develop strategies for the future if one cannot come to accept (and learn from) the past. Today's displaced community is yesterday's *Bhatta* community in the valley. And as natives of the valley, it was always in awe of the displaced community members near and far who made a big name for themselves in sciences, technology, business or the Indian administrative services. As pride filled the veins of the minority community in the valley, it always wondered why these famous and seemingly powerful expatriate Pandits did not do much for the community that was left behind. The natives not only needed individual help for employment, etc., but also institutional help to protect remnants of their culture, their faith and their dignity. Yet it never happened. No meaningful help or assistance was provided by the rich and powerful community members who excelled in their professional life as advisors to various Prime Ministers (and before that as advisors to Nawabs and English sahibs), or as owner of oil tanker super-ships, etc. The displaced community, whether in 1700's or in 1800's or in 1900's, and most likely in prior exodus the remaining community members who stayed put in the valley. Indeed at every exodus, the displaced community believed (incorrectly) that only a minuscule number were left behind in the valley, and those who did choose to do so out of their free will and hence needed neither help nor sympathy from the rest. Today's displaced generation, that was in the valley only a decade back and openly scornful of the expatriate Pandits who had forgotten their roots, is doing precisely what their predecessors did after fleeing from the valley. They have forgotten those left behind, and ignored their roots just like those that preceded them.

The history has come full circle. Perhaps sooner than expected, but to serious students of history it should not be a surprise. What is not surprising either is how quickly lessons from the past have been shelved to the farthest recesses of the mind. However,

time has come to bring this important issue to the fore and suggest ways to change the paradigm. In the bigger scheme of things, the timing also appears to be right in defining objectives and goals for the new vision.

After a decade in exile, the hope for a return to the valley appears more bleak than ever today. From a historical perspective, our community once having left the valley has rarely returned back to the valley. (Some may have returned in Zain-ul-Abdin's tenure, but those who stayed back in the Mangalore region exceeded that who returned to the valley by a large margin. There are other similar examples of token return in Pandit history). There is no shame in accepting this fact, because this phenomena is neither new nor have we seen the last of it. Kashmiri Pandit is like a special flower that germinates in one area and blooms in another. The displaced community today has shown remarkable resiliency to survive and thrive under the most unfavorable conditions. The same individuality that prevents Pandits from unifying as a community also gives them remarkable energy to overcome one barrier after the other. There is every reason and indeed a credible belief that the displaced community of 1989-1990 will eventually assimilate and excel just like the preceding generations of expatriates. Therefore, time has come to think about the true custodians of the Pandit identity—the ignored community and culture that was left behind in the valley.

The Task Ahead

The primary focus of the new initiative is to mitigate the sense of abandonment among the remaining valley Pandits, and assist them institutionally to invigorate their regeneration. At the same time, such an approach lends credibility to Kashmiri Pandit's stake in the valley and affirms their right to reclaim their ancestral possessions. Such an initiative will require numerous actions at many levels—internationally, nationally and locally.

In the international arena, the nefarious designs to wrest Kashmir from the rest of India must be challenged with renewed vigour as the pressures have increased substantially over the years. Kashmir's linkage to India is absolutely essential in

retaining the Kashmiri Pandit identity and in providing an "escape valve" that allows the community to bloom elsewhere in times of peril. Representations in the United Nations Human Rights Committees and related international fora must continue in order to secure and affirm Kashmiri Pandit identity, expose their suffering and highlight misdeeds of oppressors.

At the national level, the Pandit community must maintain and increase pressure on the central government to ensure safety, human rights and economic rights of Pandits *who are in the valley*. Towards that goal, the current central government has made numerous positive gestures, the two principal ones being the selection of Shri A.N. Vaishnavi as Associate Member of the Committee on Kashmiri Pandits in the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), and the induction of Shri V.K. Dar as a member of the National Commission for Minorities (NCM). Shri Vaishnavi and Shri Dar will both need unequivocal support from the *displaced community* in order to make a difference for Pandits in the valley or wishing to return. It behoves on the *leaders of the displaced community* to work closely with Shri Vaishnavi and Shri Dar and publicly throw support behind them so that the representatives may succeed. Otherwise, it will be one more self-fulfilling prophecy of doom and gloom.

At the local level, a lot needs to be done. Since the state government cannot be trusted to protect the rights of Pandits in the valley, this work has to be done by others both inside and outside of the state. The displaced community currently living in the Jammu region should continue to improve its ties with political, social and economic leaders of the Jammu region in order to maintain peaceful relations between the two communities even under the gravest provocations. Together, they must join against hegemonic designs of the majority community and ensure that the Jammu region receives its fair share

of political and economic pay-offs. Together, they must fight for creation of the State-level minorities commission and support initiatives of value to the Jammu region.

Saving the Past

For the sake of the future, there must be a determined effort to protect and save the past. That means refurbishing temples and shrines in the valley that held special significance for Pandits. That means making a realistic head count and demographic analysis among the Pandits in the valley. That means identifying social leaders among the valley Pandits and start (modestly in the beginning) investing in social and cultural programmes *within the valley* that will raise hopes and aspirations amongst the Pandit community there. That means providing educational grants to valley Pandit youth in order to attend arts, sciences and agricultural colleges within the state, and prepare them for, Kashmir civil service administration. That means assisting Pandits run small businesses to open doors and create new opportunities for them within the State. That means utilizing the help of well connected displaced community members to secure jobs for Pandit youth in state and central institutions within the valley. That means a lot more has to be done, that nobody is thinking about today.

One might ask—could all this be done in the face of growing militancy in the State? Perhaps not yet, but then I am not proposing a programme that has to be implemented tomorrow. Developing such a programme will take time, but first we have to affirm a need for such a programme, and then build a consensus to plan for one. Kashmiri Pandits historically have not planned for the future, and this is perhaps that final test that will indicate whether the Pandit identity will eventually survive or die. □

(Note : The author gratefully acknowledges quoting from the historical research on Kashmiri Pandits done by Dr. Henny Sender).

SALES AND MARKETING EXECUTIVE

We are Business Associates of a multi-national company from UK and require fresh Science Graduates for sales and marketing of Process Equipments. Person should have pleasing personality and good communication skills, aptitude for sales is a must. Job requires extensive travelling in North India. Interested candidates may apply through K/SD Box 7296-4 with expected salary. Candidates with 1-2 years experience especially in Pharma industry may also apply.

A NEW FOCUS, A NEW VISION

Dr. Vijay K. Sazawal

The October 1999 issue of the *Koshur Samachar* carried an interesting article by my good friend, Dr. Kashinath Pandita, giving an assessment of the displaced Kashmiri Pandit community 100 years from now. Perhaps it would be of equal interest to know what the displaced community was thinking a hundred years back. Indeed, the more this community wants to know about its future, the more it should look into its past. Like the endless cycle of life and rebirth ordained for the mortals, Kashmiri Pandits too are cursed by the fate to evolve from the valley only to find security and prosperity anywhere but in the valley. This cycle of birth and flight has become a paradigm, and unless the community is willing to adopt new ways of thinking, others will continue to decide its fate. Changing the paradigm will require a new vision, but passing days are bringing new burdens that may be difficult to surmount and the Pandit community could disappear altogether as a distinct cultural entity.

The centerpiece of the new vision is to shift the focus from the displaced community to those left behind. Time has come to feed our roots and nurture the source. Without the source, there will be no displaced community. Without a source there will be no culture. And without a culture there will be no identity. Even the community journals of today will be relegated into dustbins of history much like the community journals of the past.

Like today's *Koshur Samachar*, the community journals in 1890's were bursting with anxiety, hope and anticipation of the displaced community. The two principal publications then were *Mursala-I-Kashmir* (published from Lucknow in 1872) and *Safir-I-Kashmir* started in 1890. Discussing the displaced community's lack of unity following its migration from Kashmir, Shri Brij Mohan Dattatreya wrote in the *Safir* in 1891, "Leaving Kashmir was like leaving Eden. It was our downfall. We have made fortunes and become self-centered". Shri Autar Kishen Agha, editor of the *Safir*, wrote in the same issue, "We do not have a nationality. We have lost our language and our customs. We have only the Kashmiri

name". In a later issue (1892), Shri Shiv Narain Raina "Shamim" laments, "The Kashmiri Pandit follows all traditions for maximum protection, Kashmiri, provincial, and local. The result is that nothing is his own." The *Mursala* highlighted social ills of the community. In 1872, for example, it spoke about two cliques evolving within the displaced community, one controlled by prior migrants ("Delhi group") and the other by freshly arrived migrants ("Kashmiri group"). A year later, in 1872, Shri Ratan Lal Lucknowi pleaded in the *Mursala*, "If the rich could be less exhibitivite in their social rituals and reduce expenses, the rest of the community would follow their model."

Therefore one does not have to speculate on how the displaced community will fare a century hence. One can see it first hand today. The concern for the future shown by the displaced community today is very similar to that exhibited by the displaced community way back in 1740's when it resettled in (old) Delhi, or in Lucknow where Kashmiri Pandit émigrés made their new home in 1782. A visit today to the Sita Ram Bazar in Delhi or to the Kashmiri Mohalla in Lucknow is a reflection of the times to come, good intentions and fervor notwithstanding. Indeed, the situation may be even more challenging now. Notice the cultural upheaval and demographic destruction in the latest bastion of resettled Pandit identity – Pamposh Enclave, New Delhi – all in one generation.

The reality of the situation is that Kashmiri identity does not exist outside of Kashmir. The Kashmiri flavor may be retained by expatriates for a generation or two, but the inevitable can not be avoided. This is a historical fact. No matter how much the displaced Pandit community may try, no matter how many temples the community may duplicate outside of the valley, no matter how many rituals are followed faithfully in exile, there is no stopping to eventual loss of Kashmiri identity in the displaced community. As Shri Agha noted correctly in 1891, we will be left eventually with only our Kashmiri names. Coming to terms with this reality is essential in defining a new vision for the future.

It is impossible to develop strategies for the future if one can not come to accept (and learn from) the past. Today's displaced community is yesterday's *Bhatta* community in the valley. And as natives of the valley, it was always in awe of the displaced community members near and far who made a big name for themselves in sciences, technology, business or the Indian administrative services. As pride filled the veins of the minority community in the valley, it always wondered why these famous and seemingly powerful expatriate Pandits did not do much for the community that was left behind. The natives not only needed individual help for employment, etc., but also institutional help to protect remnants of their culture, their faith and their dignity. Yet it never happened. No meaningful help or assistance was provided by the rich and powerful

community members who excelled in their professional life as advisors to various Prime Ministers (and before that as advisors to Nawabs and English sahibs), or as owner of oil tanker super-ships, etc. The displaced community, whether in 1700's or in 1800's or in 1900's, and most likely in prior exodus cycles, was too involved in its own woes and affairs to worry about the remaining community members who stayed put in the valley. Indeed at every exodus, the displaced community believed (incorrectly) that only a miniscule number were left behind in the valley, and those who did chose to do so out of their free will and hence needed neither help nor sympathy from the rest. Today's displaced generation, that was in the valley only a decade back and openly scornful of the expatriate Pandits who had forgotten their roots, is doing precisely what their predecessors did after fleeing from the valley. They have forgotten those left behind, and ignored their roots just like those that preceded them.

The history has come full circle. Perhaps sooner than expected, but to serious students of history it should not be a surprise. What is not surprising either is how quickly lessons from the past have been shelved to the farthest recesses of the mind. However, time has come to bring this important issue to the fore and suggest ways to change the paradigm. In the bigger scheme of things, the timing also appears to be right in defining objectives and goals for the new vision.

After a decade in exile, the hope for a return to the valley appears more bleak than ever today. From a historical perspective, our community once having left the valley has rarely returned back to the valley. (Some may have returned in Zain-ul-Abdin's tenure, but those who stayed back in the Mangalore region exceeded that who returned to the valley by a large margin. There are other similar examples of token return in the Pandit history.) There is no shame in accepting this fact, because this phenomena is neither new nor have we seen the last of it. Kashmiri Pandit is like a special flower that germinates in one area and blooms in another. The displaced community today has shown remarkable resiliency to survive and thrive under the most unfavorable conditions. The same individuality that prevents Pandits from unifying as a community also gives them remarkable energy to overcome one barrier after the other. There is every reason and indeed a credible belief that the displaced community of 1989-1990 will eventually assimilate and excel just like the preceding generations of expatriates. Therefore, time has come to think about the true custodians of the Pandit identity – the ignored community and culture that was left behind in the valley.

The primary focus of the new initiative is to mitigate the sense of abandonment among the remaining valley Pandits, and assist them institutionally to invigorate their regeneration. At the same time, such

an approach lends credibility to Kashmiri Pandit's stake in the valley and affirms their right to reclaim their ancestral possessions. Such an initiative will require numerous actions at many levels - internationally, nationally and locally.

In the international arena, the nefarious designs to wrest Kashmir from the rest of India must be challenged with renewed vigor as the pressures have increased substantially over the years. Kashmir's linkage to India is absolutely essential in retaining the Kashmiri Pandit identity and in providing an "escape valve" that allows the community to bloom elsewhere in times of peril. Representations in the United Nations Human Rights Committees and related international fora must continue in order to secure and affirm Kashmiri Pandit identity, expose their suffering and highlight misdeeds of oppressors.

At the national level, the Pandit community must maintain and increase pressure on the central government to ensure safety, human rights and economic rights of Pandits *who are in the valley*. Towards that goal, the current central government has made numerous positive gestures, the two principal ones being the selection of Shri A. N. Vaishnavi as Associate Member of the Committee on Kashmiri Pandits in the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), and the induction of Shri V. K. Dar as a member of the National Commission for Minorities (NCM). Shri Vaishnavi and Shri Dar will both need unequivocal support from the *displaced community* in order to make a difference for Pandits in the valley or wishing to return. It behooves on the *leaders of the displaced community* to work closely with Shri Vaishnavi and Shri Dar and publicly throw support behind them so that the representatives may succeed. Otherwise, it will be one more self-fulfilling prophecy of doom and gloom.

At the local level, a lot needs to be done. Since the state government can not be trusted to protect the rights of Pandits in the valley, this work has to be done by others both inside and outside of the state. The displaced community currently living in the Jammu region should continue to improve its ties with political, social and economic leaders of the Jammu region in order to maintain peaceful relations between the two communities even under the gravest provocations. Together, they must join against hegemonic designs of the majority community and ensure that the Jammu region receives its fair share of political and economic pay-offs. Together, they must fight for creation of the State-level minorities commission and support initiatives of value to the Jammu region.

For the sake of the future, there must be a determined effort to protect and save the past. That means refurbishing temples and shrines in the valley that held special significance for Pandits. That means making a

realistic head count and demographic analysis among the Pandits in the valley. That means identifying social leaders among the valley Pandits and start (modestly in the beginning) investing in social and cultural programs *within the valley* that will raise hopes and aspirations among the Pandit community there. That means providing educational grants to valley Pandit youth in order to attend arts, sciences and agricultural colleges within the state, and prepare them for Kashmir civil service administration. That means assisting Pandit run small businesses to open doors and create new opportunities for them within the State. That means utilizing the help of well connected displaced community members to secure jobs for Pandit youth in state and central institutions within the valley. That means a lot more has to be done, that nobody is thinking about today.

One might ask – could all this be done in face of growing militancy in the State? Perhaps not yet, but then I am not proposing a program that has to be implemented tomorrow. Developing such a program will take time, but first we have to affirm a need for such a program, and then build a consensus to plan for one. Kashmiri Pandits historically have not planned for the future, and this is perhaps the final test that will indicate whether the Pandit identity will eventually survive or die.

January 16, 2000.

(NOTE: The author gratefully acknowledges quoting from the historical research on Kashmiri Pandits done by Dr. Henny Sender.)

XXXXXXXXXX