

“Kate Hue Jism me Chain Kahan” “Can’t be in Peace with a Severed Limb”

Report of a Meeting in Anantnag, Kashmir, 20 Nov 2013

A meeting on 20 Nov 2013, with 16 senior teachers – Professors and Lecturers – at the District Institute of Educational Training (DIET) in Anantnag, Kashmir Valley, was most reassuring for the one looking for evidence for the possibility of recovery of Kashmir’s unique and famed culture of Muslim-Hindu symbiosis, in spite of its violent disruption caused by mass exodus of Kashmiri Pandits in 1989 and resultant politicization and communalization at the planes of social-political life of J&K, and of national politics.

The Issue and Back Ground:

The elder generation of Pandits and Muslims are not psychologically, emotionally severed from the memory of the history and tradition of their common culture, known as Kashmiriyat in spite of communalization. They all, irrespective of who they are and to which community or politics they belong in a day-to-day life of pragmatics, they have preserved in a secluded, unpolluted corner of their heart the image that gives them unique identity, the culture they have jointly built and cherished. But the real calamity is not the exodus *per se*. It did disorient their life and tradition, brought suffering, misery and uprooting; and poisoned relationships to a certain extent; it did not and still has not replaced them psychologically, emotionally and in terms of certain practices and association of symbols of that life, from the trajectory of Kashmir’s spiritual journey. The real cultural and historical calamity is the disruption in transference to the next generation of the heritage of this shared culture, its living experience, which was the dominant experience of life, which was all about social and cultural life. For the post-1990 generation, it is past. Their total experience of life is on a trajectory of cultural deracination caused by experience of terror, violence, communal divide, fear-suspicion, sense of deceit about the other community, an image of the other community built on the demonization of the other on the mixed up scale of communalism, patriotism and nationalism. The post 1990 generation, today’s youth of J&K have heard the stories but not lived that life. What they have lived and experienced is the reverse and the reversal of it. The Muslim youth of Valley don’t know what Pandits are like and the Pandit youth don’t know what the Muslims of the Valley are like. Both have perceptions and ideas about the other that only keep them away from each other, estranged and in a mode of conflicting aspirations in a political mould of conflicting interests and visions believed to be fundamental..

If this generation is not addressed and attended to, if the distances are not reduced, if their image of each other is not corrected, reformed and transformed, there is no way for lasting, integrating and unifying rapprochement, reconciliation and peace in J&K. The elders, leaders of all communities and ethnic groups, reasoned and even normal people are worried about this vitally important aspect of the peace prospects in J&K. It is true that the issue is much complex than it is believed to be as one between Muslims and Pandits. For, there are Gujars and Bakarwals, and the people of Laddakh who are often side lined. However, no one denies the political centrality of the Muslim-Pandit issue.

In this back ground the process of dialogues and interactions conducted by Swaraj Peeth over past three years have been well appreciated. So far we have conducted fifteen one-day and two-day dialogues / interactions / trainings of the following types,

1. Separately with the youth of Kashmir, and those of Jammu,
2. Dialogues between the youth leaders from both area,
3. Dialogues with leading Pandits and citizens of Jammu
4. Home-stay of Kashmir youth with Pandit families in Jammu and their interaction
5. Joint Statement of Common Concern by the youths leaders of both the sides

It was a mark of the development, maturity and training of these teams that a team of six from Jammu undertook a four-day conflict intervention in Kashtwar/ Doda/ Bhadarwah in September 2013.(see Kishtwar Report)

The youth groups in both the places have now identified them as Swaraj Peeth chapters/ teams.

Anantnag Interaction on Communal Rapprochement: (20 Nov 2013)

Once a great center of learning and scholarship, Anantnag holds a special place in the cultural history of Kashmir, and for that matter of the subcontinent.

My younger friend and member of Swarajpeeth Kashmir, Shabir Ahmad took me and Rameez Makhdoomi to the DIET in Anantnag. Shabir's is the only Drug De-Addiction center with ten beds, other than one run by the Army, built by him and his friends out of nothing and run through sheer guts, dedication and resolve. Rameez is a sharp, bright journalist, founder of World Media Report and Editor of Kashmir Scenario, part of independent non-commercial alternative media with large dedicated readership.

Principal's small, modest room was over packed. In order to keep the meeting informal we had informed the Vice-Principal, a good friend of Shabir, only an evening before. After an introduction by Shabir and Rameez, I briefly talked about our work and why and how we happened to come to Jammu and Kashmir and now to Anantnag.

Prof. Mohammad Shafi's initial cynicism and criticism about outsider's interest in J&K was honest and justified in its place for what he and many have experienced time and again, and in the background of his terrifying, traumatic and devastatingly experience of helplessness at the killing before his eyes of 46 innocent people at the time of Bill Klinton's visit to India. Why any hollow, seemingly one-time talk from an unknown untested person should involve him, much less interest him! "You have come 65 years late..." he continued," people from outside come here to pass time. ...They meet and talk only to the leaders, not to the youth and ordinary people like us at the grassroots, form and present one-sided picture of Kashmir, its politics, and not its other reality...as if we, Kashmiris are a communal people...Kashmir is a matter worth only the dustbin of history for India...Gandhi said he saw a ray of hope in Kashmir to allude us and keep us with India..."

Rameez gave some idea of how youths, both in Jammu and Kashmir have found a credible platform in Swarajpeeth; about dialogues between them and with Pandits; how their perceptions have changed. He told them further "After observing Rajivji and Niruji closely, testing them on various occasions me and many of my friends have joined them. Rajivji does not impose his own

frame work and world-view on us to understand us. His dialogue is based on understanding and respecting our world-view and our frame of mind; his is an unconditional dialogue and he encourages us to dialogue among us within our own framework of our culture, our understanding of ourselves, our stories, myths, history and dreams... we are leaning a lot from him and with him” Rameez told them how the home-stay with Pandit families in Jammu totally transformed his and others’ perception about Kashmiri Pandits, as for them they are totally cut off from Pandits .

At this point, Prof. Shafi pointed toward a teacher and said “Ask our colleague Roop Kishan, he is a Pandit, how come he did not leave his home.”

Shri Roop Kishan who lives in Mattan of Anantnag Dist, did not leave when in 1989 most of the Pandits fled Kashmir. 70% of Pandits from Anantnag District fled their home, 30% stayed back according to him.

Militancy has killed far greater number of Muslims than Hindus. More than a hundred thousand Muslims, while about five thousand Pandits have died in the course of Militancy (Kashmir valley has 2% Pandit population) I have heard similar views from many, including from some Pandits in Jammu, though they may not be in majority mainly because of the communalization of the issue.

At this point the discussion became engaging and animated once again. I witnessed, as I have often in Jammu, Kishtwar, Srinagar and other places, uninhibited, open-minded reference to the wrongs of their own community, as well as of the other’s in their presence without diffidence, fear of offending the other or being misunderstood. Both in Jammu side and in Kashmir side, though the relationships are supposed to be communalized, both Muslims and Hindus do not use “minority community” or “majority community” or “one of the communities” as used in the rest of India where to take name of an offender community is a taboo, an offense, a sign of communalizing. In J&K instead, they name the community in the presence of the people from that community with ease and normalcy without any shadow of offence, communal coloring or mental block. They voice complains about the other community without an iota of communalized otherness. They speak of the other with absence of discriminatory feel. Such interactions happen only when citizenship awareness is not communalized within the realm of religious-cultural consciousness, though politic may have. It is baffling that though, due to prolonged conflict, these are highly politicized and politically aware people, both of Jammu and Kashmir, they have not yet allowed their social-cultural consciousness to be over powered by survival need of the communal politics. Thus, when with goodwill, love, concern and credibility they are reminded of themselves, their unique and bright side, the layers of politicization, communalization and radicalization start peeling off, like the layers of winter clothing that one puts aside one by one with the shining of the bright Sun. My friend Shabir mockingly tells me “We in Kashmir do not know what people elsewhere talk about working for ‘communal harmony’! “We do not know what problem is that!”

In this group of seventeen there were two Pandits and one Sikh – Prof Rajender Pal Singh, Head of Dept of Zoology, from Poonch. He invited me to Poonch the LOC area.

Prof Kausar Habib, Vice Principal Prof Khaki and all the rest started pouring out their hearts, when Prof Roop Kishan and Shri Dilip Kumar Pandit talked about their resolve to stay back in

1989, because their Muslim neighborhood ensured their safety, though no one was safe then. Prof Ruheed Gul, who made many important points in the discussion, almost became emotional when he said “I want to tell all of you my most cherished dream. I have never talked about it before. I want to say it today.”” I am waiting for a day.. I am dreaming for a day when we all will be lined up with flowers, garlands and sweets on both the sides of Jammu road to welcome our Pandit brothers and sisters returning back to their homes, to their own people....I have that dream and I am praying for its fulfillment. If we genuinely work for it we can certainly do that”

“Yes, frightening communal slogans were raised in the parts of the valley, but that was not the entire reality... I pray our Pandit brothers and sisters not become judgemental. Said Prof Kausar.

“There is no conflict between us. The main problem is that there is no communication between us and the Pandits in Jammu, no nonpartisan credible platform where we can meet amicably ...”

Prof Shafi who was so very critical initially of outsiders and people from Delhi, poured out his pain after two hours when the lingering air of unfamiliarity and doubts about ‘outsider’s level of understanding, honesty and commitment were somewhat subsided.. He said to us “I have only one request to you. Please tell our Pandit brothers that we pray to you, please return; we are waiting for you. We will lay down our lives for you... We are incomplete without you. *Aap hamare jisam ka hissa ho... Aap se alag ho kar ham chain se nahi jee sakte* You are part of our body and soul. We cannot be at peace with ourselves without you.”

The group also talked with concern about the condition of Pandits living in camps; the undesirability of creating separate localities for Pandits; the urgent need to re-stitch the broken social-cultural fabric as the foundation of lasting peace; the issue of post 1989 generation in their twenties and thirties who have no idea of Kashmir’s age-old social culture and who have only seen communal, religious, regional and ethnic divide, violence, antagonism, and communal and sectarian radicalization. It was also pointed out that unlike in some parts of Kashmir, the properties of Pandits are still intact in Anantnag District.

Prof Gul made telling comment as we moved towards conclusion, “We come from all over the district. We are all socially-politically aware and concerned people. We have been conducting courses for which teachers from all over the district come here, but it is for the first time that we have discussed something so close to our hearts and important to us. Now we must not leave it at this point only.”

Decision:

The group concluded that this was a small but very important meeting. They must now organize a much larger meeting for people from all over the district. They asked me to give a date before the winter vacation starts, meaning within the next ten days only! That was not possible as I should be in Bihar by then.

Month of March was decided. They asked me to bring leading Pandits from Jammu and facilitate, mediate a dialogue with them. Prof Ruheed Gul, Prof Kausar Habib, Prof S A Khakhi, Shri Roop Kishan and Prof Mohamad Shafi took the responsibility.

It would be much meaningful, our Srinagar team thought, to first bring a group from Anantnag to meet Pandits in Jammu. At least a two-day meeting, which should also include members of our youth group from Kashmir and Jammu. This initial preparatory dialogue should then be followed up, within a month of it, by the type of dialogue Anantnag group wants .

Importance:

The politics of KashmirPandit--Kashmiri Muslim rapprochement dialogue and Pandits' homecoming is complex and vexatious ; and, there are many stake holders and parties playing their roles and some their cards. It is also true that many Pandits may like to go back to their vacant houses, their natural home land, provided they get a welcoming environment, and sense of security and safety. Thus, what is important about this proposed steps is that it will help in a significant way clear the communalized air; send out positive signals and reduce the increasing chances of communalization in the region; help transform the mutually antagonistic perceptions among the youthful generation; and create a positive, constructive social environment between two estranged pivotal communities and two estranged regions of the same state and same people. It will help explore a nonviolent answer to latent violence.
