



## A Brief Update on Swaraj Peeth in J&K

### Visit to Violence hit Kishtwar

September 6-12, 2013

*Jammu Youth Group Meeting 6th Sept 2013*



Over the past three years Swaraj Peeth has been able to consolidated youth groups in Kashmir and Jammu through series of meeting and dialogues followed by joint Jammu and Kashmir youth dialogues, in one of which in Jammu (Sept 2012) both the groups came up with a Joint Statement of Shared Concerns and Commitment. Now it was time to move one step forward, intervene as a group in a situation of violence; put in practice some of the common concerns the youth group of Jammu and that of Valley had committed themselves and to each-other in a A Joint Statement of Shared Concerns and Commitment.

This is a brief report of visit to communally hit Kishtwar by Swarajpeeth Jammu along with Rajiv Vora, and a press statement by Jammu group expressing their deep concern at the normal democratic deficit in the Valley. It was published prominently by Kashmir Times (12 Sept 2013) and other papers.



SP team visiting a family in curfew bound Kishtwar

### Nonviolent Intervention in Communal Violence in Kishtwar, 6-12 Sept 2013:

Communal clash hit Kishtwar on the very day of Eid, 9<sup>th</sup> August 2013



An ordinary motorcycle-hit –and-argument turned into a communal clash leaving 3 dead and more than two dozen wounded, shops were looted and burnt; for seven hours, it was alleged, security forces did not take any action. All it happened in the presence of the State Home Minister Mr Kichloo, who had to resign later. Hindus and Muslims, with a slightly higher Muslim population, have lived in an exemplary harmonious relationship for ages. No one, unless one knew the other, could distinguish who is Hindu and who Muslim.

**After a daylong meeting of the Jammu Youth Group on 6<sup>th</sup>, a team of six youth, Syed Azhar, Amjad Mushtaq Batt, Mohmmad Sardar Bhatti, Kamran Zafar, Akamat Wani**



**and Shahbaz Kazmi from Swaraj Peeth Trust Jammu Chapter accompanied by Shri Rajiv Vora visited Kishtwar, Doda and Bhadrwah to take a sense both of the damage caused to the receding state of famed harmonious communal co-living; and, the state of repressed popular quest for the recovery of the deeper plural social-communal culture presently under the clouds of fear, in order to plan and work for uniting the broken relationships and mitigating violence. People**



**fear communal divide more than militancy due to extremely complex mix of politics of violence, separatism and ethnicity compounded by its complex variants in Jammu and Kashmir**

**because of totally divergent politics of two regions. Swaraj peeth team met the cross section, leaders of both the communities. In absence of nonpartisan community leadership, political leadership has filled the space. The vacuum speaks loudly, as journalist Asif Iqbal Naik said that though until now so many joint meetings have been arranged, there has been no constructive outcome, mainly because every member is partisan. Leader of the Hindu community, State Secretary of BJP, youthful Sunil Sharma,**

35, interprets this violence in the background and continuation of 17 incidences of killings of Hindus by Militants, some of which most gruesome and in large numbers since 1991. He complains of transportation of separatism from the valley eased by a road that now connects Srinagar with Kashtwar via Anantnag. There is a spill-over of militancy from the Valley. According to him anti-Indian and pro-Pakistan slogans infuriated Hindus. Muslims deny there were any such slogans, while Administration is silent. In Bhadarwah, a town not very far, Communal harmony is maintained jointly by Anjuman-e-Islam and Sanatan Dharm Sabha, a Hindu religious body. Its Chairman, a retired Professor of Bioscience has a larger frame of history for his understanding of the problem. He has seen the time when Ramleela would not start until Muslim elders joined. The character of Sita was played by a Muslim boy and there was a Muslim gentleman who was an all accepted authority on the characters of Ramayana. The same about Islamic festivals, which were celebrated by Hindus as well. People walked into each-other's homes as family members would do. He has lived that time not long ago. He has seen the pre-militancy (pre-1989) politics, as he said, of 'Delhi Darbar'. He therefore



holds no Kashmiri – either Muslim or Hindu- responsible for its present state. He, like many from both the communities of his age, experience and political understanding hold Delhi responsible.



The younger generation's understanding and appreciation of their society is severely restricted within the experience of violence and strife of past one generation, poisoned by the immediate present, though there are umpteen examples even today of the ever present goodness, love, mutual trust and care that the elder generation has experienced. Problem is: In which of the cycles of history one places oneself. If one breaks the barriers and places oneself in a

still larger cycle of history of the land rather than of the immediately close individualized cycle, one would reason differently and explore, develop and adopt different methods; the methods of all inclusive nonviolence, the vision of which includes and, at the same time, encompasses all the cycles of history, of experiences and of violence. It is symbolic of Kishtwar culture that Asif Iqbal Naik is a bosom friend of Mr Sunil Sharma, hard core Hindu nationalist. Politics has not hurt their friendship, although in the presence of Asif, Sunil could talk of his grudge against Muslims as a matter fact, without inhibition or guilt and so could Asif without the fear of losing a friend. There are competing overlaps of personal and the communal, the emotional-sentimental and the political.



However, increasing incidences of instigating communal divide are seen as an ominous sign. It creates in turn space for militancy and infiltration, and the whole cycle violence and counter violence, insurgency and anti-insurgency that Kashmiri society dreads.

People as individuals may seem to have given up, left to the various negative forces active variously, but a keen and perceptive mind can hear the silent cry of the collective cultural consciousness; an evidence of the fact that the forefathers of Kashmir, and Kashmir as a land of culture of its own, did not built its celebrated culture on a synthetic foundation of modern secular theory or its state craft. In fact among the religious and learned Muslims distrust of 'Western influence' is articulate, similar to which was common among many earlier Gandhians and socialist. Believing firmly that no single generation is maker or destroyer of a plural harmonious culture, and should not flaunt such self-destructive arrogance, neither should arrogate to oneself the right to redefine the social-communal relations, this group of youth dedicated themselves to carry the legacy of the good and own the responsibility to correct the bad. In a meeting of the larger group at Jammu Press Club on the day of 11 September (Birth Day of satyagraha), the team reported what they observed. They expressed also their deep concern for repression in Kashmir Valley of their legitimate, day-to-day democratic rights.

**Team's mindset** can best be understood from what the youngest among the team of seven, Akamat Wani, a graduate student, said when I asked them to compare their



observations the morning after meeting people in Kishtwar. He said about the Hindu political leader “His political background does not allow him to do what otherwise he would like to do. We should see the inner good self of him and not his politics if we wish to build a dialogue with him. We should not ignore his politics, but that is not all of him.” “ If there were people to talk a differently language, things can certainly change because the younger, school and college going generation is confused and is away from communalism and politics” according to Sardar Bhatti, while Azhar thinks that if there are nonviolent volunteers in each town, they would know who is a miscreant, who ignites communal passion, because there is no civil society except political parties.” “ we must recognize the pain and sufferings the other community has undergone. ” said Kamran Zafar, a Ph D scholar, part of this group. Old stereotype fixed in the minds of Hindu nationalists about Kashmiri Muslims and Pakistan need to be corrected, and so about the Muslims of Jammu region.

### **Response, Need and Expectations:**

The smaller (Kishtwar team) and the bigger Jammu group spent almost 6 days in one way or the other together understanding, discussing and doing something about increasing incidences of violence and communal flare-ups. The team said the entire experience was a unique training in intervention in violent situation and how to conduct oneself without fear and with love, understanding, patience, and an inclusive nonpartisanship. They said it changed them positively. The sincerity and openness of mind of each one of the group was beyond expectation. Their report to the larger group has inspired many new youth who kept on meeting Rajiv over the next day in Jammu.

#### ***The group articulated immediate concerns and needs :***

- 1. A joint (Jammu and Valley) training and action-planning camp** within the context of the above;
- 2. Follow up visit to Kishtwar, putting in place a local nonpartisan group for peace keeping;**
- 3. A meeting of the larger youth group from the Valley and Jammu with Jammu civil society, senior citizens’ group associated with Swaraj peeth for working out a joint peace initiative and action plan;**
- 4. Creation of a larger structured network of Shanti Sainiks, community based nonviolence and peace mediators starting from vulnerable areas of J&K , including LoC districts.(see the detail below)**

*Most of the members of the SP team come from different parts of Jammu division. They want now to identify in each of the districts similar youth they know, and involve them in this task. This is what other seniors like Gen. Dhar, one of the most respected elder of Jammu; and, Mansoor Siddiqi (member of SP J&K group, who has been appointed Additional Advocate General of J&K) also suggested besides many in the violence hit area we visited. It may be noted that*



*Gen Dhar, who initially was very skeptical and had said that nothing would change even if we took 500 youth with us, was so moved after listening to the team and seeing how some of the best youth had gathered and were positively motivated under SP banner, asked Rajiv in one-to-one meeting at his home that this work needs to be speeded up. Both he, and Mr Kuldeep Pandita, a leader of the Kashmiri Pandit community told Rajiv they would want to organize a larger public meeting in support of this work. Similarly, Shri Prabodh Jamval and Smt Anuradha, a leading journalist duo, owner, Publisher and Editor of Kashmir Times, discussed in detail the need and possibility of building a peace movement in J&K. Shri Sohail Kazmi, Chairman of the Press Club of Jammu and owner/publisher/editor of Urdu paper Taskeen asked Rajiv why he has not used the press so far and that he is all support for this work. He instructed his people to help arrange the Press conf. and meeting of the group in the Press Club premises. Earlier, Shri Yasin Malik, Chairman of JKLF who has renounced the gun and advocates nonviolence, had suggested that Swaraj Peeth should organize a bigger conference on the issue of rapprochement between Kashmiri Pandits and Kashmiri Muslims. Some of the leading Kashmiri Pandits(KP), who are in this process, have been in support of this proposition. Last October, in a conference between Kashmiri Muslim intellectuals and displaced KPs, participants from both the sides were of the opinion that there is an urgent need to encourage and arrange interaction between the youth of the two communities to contribute in the process of restoration of mutual trust. Shri S K Koul, a well known non-partisan community leader, a displaced Pandit and an intellectual leader engaged in the process of reconciliation, wrote on 22nd October: "Since I was also invited to the meeting, I felt elated, as we have already initiated activities in this direction under the banner of Swaraj Peeth Trust, J&K*

#### **Conclusion: What Ahead:**

**In seven days Rajiv Vora met a number of people in Kishtwar, Doda Bhadrwah and Jammu. What emerges is an urgent need, a larger plan of action for the defense of social harmony. Across all communities and groups there is a deeper fear that disturbance to communal-social harmony in J&K makes space for militancy and infiltration of anti-national, divisive violent forces. Communal divide therefore is feared more than militancy. If J&K falls to communalism it will make radical deterioration for any prospects for peace.** Absence of civil society, nonpartisan people and forums further facilitates weakening of social harmony and strengthening of violent forces. VDCs (Village Defense Committees, arming of civilian villagers with gun for defense against militants) created by the Govt has become controversial due both to its heavily Hindu composition; and, secondly due to unaccountable, largely, said to be unrecorded distribution of guns) The idea that J&K needs different type of active defenders – defenders of social harmony and plural culture in each village and towns, appealed everyone.

There are youth, common people with deep cultural reservoir as peace assets, let it not be wasted by default. It is receding. Alarm bell must ring when people start talking of their own culture, norms and ethos in terms of past. However, there is a palpable unease among all communities about silencing of their culture.

Swaraj peeth's experiment demonstrates on a very small, even insignificant scale that youth and citizens can be mobilized for nonviolent action for recovery of harmonious culture, their cultural Self.

**Following scheme has emerged out of the deliberations:**

**Building a trained community based nonviolent peace keepers as defenders of social harmony and plural culture on the following line:**

- Deployment of 10 nonviolent peace keepers in each of the 10 Districts of Jammu division and two each in 10 dist of Kashmir division, Total of 120 initially, phase wise;
- Peace Keepers would come from their respective districts, towns, villages;
- They will be located mainly in areas where there is fear of communal spill-over and fear;
- Peace keepers would
  - Acquaint themselves with each and every house hold and locality of their region; each of the leaders of the region, journalist and officials;
  - keep tab on any possibility, apprehension and fear of violence; provide early warning;
  - contain rumours and bring out positive stories; verify rumours, bring right facts to the notice of the concerned authorities and use them in a way to contain rumours, mistrust, doubt and fear;
  - Organize civil society around for constructive thinking and collective action when circumstances so demand;
  - Identify prospective peace keepers and recruited them for training in nonviolence and social harmony;
  - Will work as peace keeper in the time of violence and fulfill those duties as stipulated in the Gandhi Shanti Sainik Manual of SP; before, during and in post violence situation;
  - Peace keepers will involve in activities that enhance confidence-building among local population, all the religious and ethnic communities;
  - Community Peace Keepers from both the sides – Jammu and Kashmir-will meet regularly in order to learn from each other and enhance their perspective, will deliberate on common issues and needs;
  - On the basis of their experience, their training needs will be identified and training will be so designed and arranged by SP;
  - The 'Dos' and 'Don'ts' will be worked out in joint sessions of Community Peace Keepers;
- We may perhaps adopt the name Community Harmony Keepers/ or Defenders of Social Harmony in place of 'Peace Keepers' for two reasons: one, Harmony denotes the actual need; and, two, the term 'Peace' is a doubtful currency in J&K.

We need to enroll participants in this task, who would like to make financial contribution in support of this work.

*Rajiv Vora, 18 Sept 2013*

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