

The Festivals of the Kashmiri Pandits

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Kashmir is known as the abode of Rishis because it has provided a calm and serene shelter to sages and savants for their penance. In the hoary past, it was inhabited by the Nagas as is vouched by Nila in his *Nilmat Purana* and Kalhana in his *Rajatarangini*. Nila, himself a naga, was the son of the illustrious Rishi, Kashyapa. The penance and the efforts of Kashyapa transformed the vast span of water called the 'Sati Sar' into a fertile valley fit for inhabitation and worship by the austere Rishis. It was he who helped these Rishis to get rid of the demon 'Jalodbhava'. These Rishis, finding the place secure for their 'Tapas', made it their home and gave it the name 'Kashyapa-mar' after the Rishi who founded it. This name, in due course became Kashmir.

These pious and compassionate Rishis did not neglect the *nagas* and *rakshasas* who were the original tribesmen living in this land. They made arrangements to satisfy their needs and requirements from time to time. This gave rise to certain peculiar customs and festivals, not prevalent in any other part of the country. These forest-dwelling tribes would usually demand food items during the winter months. It is because of this that most of these festivals are held in the month of 'Pausha' of the lunar calendar. Some of these are described below:

Monjaher taeher: Monjaher in Kashmiri means the lunar month of Marga Shirsha. *Taeher* means yellow cooked rice mixed with mustard. It is customary for Kashmiris to cook such rice on all auspicious days, and on Tuesdays and Saturdays, offer it to their chosen deity and then distribute it among neighbours, friends and relatives. But on the first day following the end of *Margashirsha*, that is the beginning of the Pausha month, such rice is specially cooked, offered to the *Griha devata* and *Grama devata* and then distributed. More often it is vowed that should a desire be fulfilled, like getting a son, obtaining employment or finding a suitable match, the household would prepare this rice regularly on this day every year. Coinciding with this is a very significant observance on this day called the *Matrika Pujan*. Since time immemorial there has been a belief that the sound is the Divine *Shabda Brahma* and that the language has originated from the sound produced by the Damru of Lord Shiva. These sounds, fourteen in number, are called *Maheshwara Sutrani*. These are divided into eight groups, one of vowels and seven of consonants. Each group has a deity who is propitiated on this day. Vowels begin with 'Aa' and the consonants with 'Ka', 'Ch', 'Ta', 'Ta', 'Pa', 'Ya' and 'Sha', respectively. So the prayer is offered to the relevant deities in this order. Amayay, Kamayay, Charvageyay, Tankadharyanyay, Tarayay, Parvatyay, Yakhshanyay and Shri Sharika Bhagavatayay. All that we know, this day might have been fixed to initiate a student to a school of learning and he was required to offer prayers before such initiation.

Gada Bhatta: This word literally means fish and cooked rice. On any Tuesday or Saturday of the dark fortnight in the lunar month of Pausha, except when there is *panchak*, fish is specially prepared and near ones are invited to the dinner. First of all a plateful of rice and fish is arranged and it is placed at a clean place in a room on the top floor, called *Kaeni*. This is meant for the deity of the house referred to as *Ghar Devata*. The plate is properly covered with an up-turned basket and nearby is placed a glass of water. Some house-holds even serve a raw fish. There are eye witness accounts that the next morning the food is found consumed and even the fish bones are found lying by the side of the empty plate. After placing the plate at the fixed place for the deity, a feast of rice and fish is held along with near and dear ones.

Khyachi Mavas: This is also known as *Yaksha amavasya*. In other words, the last day of the dark fortnight of 'Paush' dedicated to the 'Yaksha', which again appears to refer to some forest-dwelling tribe that lived there before the rishis. On this day a special dish of moong mixed with rice is prepared in the evening. It is served to the Yaksha on an improvised plate made of dry grass. The plate is placed on the top of the compound wall. The kitchen mortar is placed on a grass ring, worshipped as a symbol of the cosmos and decorated with *sindoor*, sandal, raw rice and flowers. Some households serve fish on this day also. During our childhood we were told that the *Yaksha* would be wearing a red cap while partaking of this *Khichdi* and whosoever is able to snatch away this cap will get riches. So all the children would be eager to get hold of this cap, which eluded everyone.

These are the festivals which apparently were held to satisfy the demands of the aborigines and tribesmen. There is yet another occasion during the bright fortnight of *Marga* or the dark fortnight of *Pausha*, which is described below:

Shishur: This literally means the winter. This is an exclusive occasion for the new born baby and the newly-wed bride. On this day a little lime powder is placed in a piece of 'Zarbaft' cloth and stitched into a small triangular shape. This is then fixed on the cap of the new born or on the side of the sari which covers the head of the bride. The rationale behind this custom is to ward off any evil eye and any ill omen. On this day yellow meat is specially cooked and this along with pan cakes is distributed among the relatives, friends and the neighbours. Scattering the lime powder during winter in order to get rid of the bacteria, insects and bad odour must have been the forerunner of this custom.

Gora-Trai: *Gora-Trai* or *Gauri Tritya* is celebrated on the third day of the bright fortnight of *Magha*. *Gauri* is the name of the Goddess *Saraswati*, the goddess of learning. On this day the family priest brings a portrait of the goddess, below which are printed some shlokas in praise of the goddess. Whenever a child is born or there has been an addition of a bride, the occasion is special and the family priest of the bride's parents also brings a specially decorated portrait and in return gets a handsome honorarium. This must have been the day of teaching the child the first alphabets after offering pooja to the goddess of learning. This is borne out by the fact that the following day is called *Shruka tsoram* or the *Shloka Chaturthi*. Obviously, on this day the child was taught the basic Sanskrit shlokas like '*Twameva Mata cha Pita twameva* - O Lord, you are my mother as also my father.' This *chaturthi* is also known as 'Tripura Chaturthi' as the goddess is worshipped on this day in her Tripura Sundari form. The goddess is regarded as the energy aspect of the Supreme Divine. It is this aspect of energy that activates the Divine undertake the five functions of creation, sustenance, destruction, providing cover and granting grace.

Kaw Punim: The full moon of the lunar month *Magha* is also known as *Purnima* of the crow. Two sticks are tied in the shape of a cross and on the open ends of the cross grass is woven to make a long handled flat spoon. Again after some pooja, yellow rice is served on this spoon to be offered to the crow. The children sing a melodious song while making the offering to the crow. The song loosely translated reads thus:

*O clever crow;
O, the lover of khichri, crow;
Come to our new house along with your spouse;
Be seated on the threshold of our roof –
And partake of the salty pudding.*

This festival is indicative of the love that the Kashmiris have had for the birds and the care they took of them. It may be worth mentioning that every Kashmiri household will scatter some cooked rice on a wooden shelf kept outside the house everyday before serving food to any member of the house. This shelf kept near the top right hand corner of the window is called *Kaw paet* - a shelf for the crow. Likewise every person keeps apart a little rice from his or her plate to be fed to the dogs. This is called *Hoonya myet* - the roll of rice for the dog. This shows the compassionate nature of the Kashmiris for the animal world. No doubt the Gita defines a Pandit as one who treats equally a well read Brahmin, a cow, an elephant, a dog and a downcast chandala who devours dog-flesh.

Teela Aetham: This is a festival held on the 8th day of the bright fortnight of Phalguna month of the lunar calendar. In effect it is the culmination of the Shivaratri festivities as also bidding adieu to the shivering winter. To begin with, pooja is offered at home and a number of lamps are lit. These lamps are taken to the river bank and floated on grass bases in the river after the prescribed pooja. Afterwards, old firepots, *Kangris*, are filled with grass. A long rope is tied to its handle and fire is lit in it. Then the kangri is moved round and round in circles rhythmically till the whole kangri bums down. Then it is hurled faraway into the waters of the flowing river. While doing so the children cry out, '*Jateen teen, Jateen teen*'; meaning that it is a flame, it is burning.

Zetha aetham and Shravana punim: The eighth day of the bright fortnight of Jyeshtha and the full moon day of Shravana are both very auspicious days for the Kashmiri Pandits, the former is dedicated to the Goddess Maharajna and the latter to Lord Shiva. On the Jyeshtha Ashtami

devotees assemble at the shrine of Tula Mula. After taking a dip in the waters of the Sindhu, they enter the precincts of the shrine. The marble temple is situated in an L-shaped spring, the waters of which change colour, believed to be the change of the dress by the Mother Goddess. The whole area is full of huge Chinar trees and the stream skirts the area allowing the house boats to anchor there. After individual pooja and a collective *Aarati*, there are night long Bhajans and Kirtan. The refrain of the *Aarati* is *Gaurim-ambam amburuha-akshim-ahameedey* - I bow to my beautiful mother whose eyes resemble a lotus.' There are Dharmashalas for overnight stay and Yajnashtalas for sacrificial fire. Although this shrine is visited by the devotees every month on the eighth day of the bright fortnight, Jyeshtha Ashtami is a special festival for Maharajna, the Consort of Shiva.

On Shravana purnima, while the entire country celebrates 'Raksha Bandhan' in Kashmir we have the world famous pilgrimage to Swami Amarnath cave for the glimpse of the Ice-Lingam, which waxes and wanes along with the growth and decline of the moon. On this day the Kashmiri Pandits collect the holy clay from the Shankaracharya hill, mix mercury with it and make the required number of 'Partheshwaras' for a private *pooja*. They keep fast on this day and immerse the *Partheshwara* in the river waters in the evening. Pasting is an essential aspect of the spirituality of a Pandit. Amavasya, Purnima, Ekadashi, Ashtami are the monthly fasts and, besides, there are occasional ones like Chandan Shashti, Bhimsen Ekadashi, Kali Ashtami, Shiva Chaturdashi, Kumara Shashti and the like. The anniversary day of the parents as also of the sages like Alakheshwari and Rishi Peer are also observed as fast days.

Auspicious days of Ashada: There are four important days in the month of Ashada, called Haar in Kashmiri. The seventh day of the bright fortnight is called *Hara Satam*. On this day, the courtyard, the front door and the gallery called the *Vuz* are decorated with *Hara Mandul* - a round design made of multicolour powders. This is to greet the goddess who is expected to grace our houses by her presence. It may be recalled that similar designs are made on the occasion of the weddings and the yajnopavit to greet the bride and the groom and the children who have gone through the Upanayan *samskara*. The nomenclature is different. These are called the *Vyuga*. The decoration made on these occasions on the front gates is also picturesque and is known as Krule.

The Kashmiri community is predominantly Shaivite and, therefore, worship Shiva and Shakti. They are grouped into three groups according to their affiliation to three different forms of the Goddess, Maharajna, Sharika and jwala. The three shrines for them are situated at Tula Mula, Hari Parbat in Srinagar and the hill at the village Khrew respectively. It is noteworthy that all the three festivals for these forms of the Divine Mother are held in the month of Ashada. On ashtami is the festival of Tula Mula. On navami is the festival at Chakreshwara, Hari Parbat and on Chaturdashi it is at Khrew to worship Goddess jwala.

Vyatha Truvah: Vitasa or the River Jhelum holds an important position in our religious and cultural life. Most of our famous temples are situated on its banks, noteworthy being Ganesh temple, Mahakali shrine, Somayar - the temple of the Moon, Raghunath Mandir, Batayar, Bokhatakeswar Bhairav Temple etc. It is not surprising, therefore, that we celebrate the *Pracdurbhava divas* or the appearance days of this life line of Kashmir on the thirteenth day of the bright fortnight of Bhadrapada, for all the ghats of this holy river are sacred for us to perform *Sandhya*, to have a dip and to offer pooja. The river is worshipped by offering water, milk oblations vermilion, raw rice and flowers. People also go for pilgrimage to its source at 'Vyatha Votur' and Verinag. There used to be seven bridges (a couple of bridges have since been added) across river in Srinagar, from Amira Kadal to Safa Kadal. The banks of this river have been fortified with the huge stone slabs, carved and otherwise, obtained from the destroyed temples during the Muslim rule, particularly during the reign of Sultan Sikander, nicknamed as 'Butshikan', the iconoclast, in early fourteenth century.

Pan Dyun: '*Ryetav manza ryethah, Baedearpyethah, Venayka Tsoram to Aathvar*'- The month is Bhadrapada, the day fourth day of the bright fortnight and hopefully a Sunday. This is the festival known all over the country as Ganesh Chaturthi and celebrated in Kashmir in a unique way. Early morning a metal pot is cleaned and placed at a suitable clean place, with some water filled in it. The ladies of the house prepare a sweet pancake called 'Roth'. Poppy seeds are fixed over these on both the sides. The family members sit near the pot and the lady of the house narrates a story of *Beeb garaz Maej*. This story has a moral that by performing *pooja* of Shri Ganesh on this day, preparing sweet pancake and offering the same to the deity, poverty and the miseries of the person are removed and one lives a pious life full of comfort. The story is very similar to the one narrated on

the occasion of the *Satya Narayana Pooja*. After listening to the story, all the members fill the pot with flowers and a specific variety of green grass, which they hold in their hands throughout the narration of the story. The sweet pancake prepared on this day becomes the *prashada* and is distributed among relatives, friends and neighbours. Distribution of such things as *Tahaer*, *Roth*, *Yogurt*, cakes, walnuts is a common feature of the Kashmiri life and helps make it a close-knit community bound by love, concern and care for each other.

The Sanatan Dharma allows, in addition to the prescribed rituals in accordance with the tenets of the Vedas, observance of additional customs called *Lokachar*, *Deshachar* or *Gramachar* peculiar to the place and environment one may be living in. This prescription has made marriage, *yajnopavit* and other ceremonies different for different groups of people in point of detail. Two such customs which are distinct in our community are briefly explained below:

Divagone: Every marriage ceremony and *yajnopavit* ceremony is preceded by a ritual called *Divagone*. This is to propitiate Surya, Chandra and Brihaspati Devatas to bless the bride or groom to be or the child who is going to adopt the Yoni or the *yajnopavit*. On this occasion, only the bride is asked to wear various gold ornaments including the *Dejhore* which for Kashmiri women is the symbol of marriage. In other parts of our country, the married ladies are identified by red vermilion in the parting of their hair, Mangalsutra, or the little toe rings. In Kashmir *Dejhore* is the symbol. It is worn in both the ears and there is an attachment to it which is called the *Atahore* made of gold or golden or silver thread made into a specific shape. Before the ritual proper, the bride, groom or the child is given a bath with milk, yoghurt, honey and other such things mixed with water, to the accompaniment of the chanting of Veda-mantras.

Posh puza: At the end of the ritual of marriage, *saptapadi* etc. the bride and the groom are made to sit in a comfortable posture. A red cloth is placed on their heads, and then all the people around offer them flowers in accompaniment of Veda mantras. This is called worshipping the couple with flowers. The rationale behind this custom is that the couple is considered to be Shiva and Parvati and the two are duly worshipped. First there are mantras for the bride and the groom separately followed by those meant for the two jointly. In contrast to this, the newly-weds in the south are required to touch the feet of all the elderly couples present. We are, however, of the view that marriage is a spiritual union between a boy and a girl and they have to live this life of *Artha* (wealth) and *Kama* (desires) with due regard to *Dharma* (righteousness) and aspire for *Moksha* (Emancipation). The four together are called *Purusharthas*. That is why the newly-weds are treated as Shiva and Parvati and worshipped as such at the time of the Posh Puza.

Dodh: Literally it means milk but what is implied is yoghurt. Whenever a lady is in the family way, she needs to inform her in-laws so that due care is taken of her health, diet and other comforts. It was difficult for her to convey this news to her in-laws with the same ease with which she could to her mother or sister in her parental home. Therefore, after her parents get the information, she was asked to carry two *gadvis* (metal pots) full of yoghurt and place one each in front of her father-in-law and mother-in-law. This was meant to be a signal to them that now is the time to take extra care of their daughter-in-law. Alas! this custom has lost its original significance and has turned into a bad social custom. A huge quantity of yoghurt is now-a-days expected to be received from the parents of the girl, which is distributed among the relatives as if to give publicity to the event. A gala feast is also organised by the family and the lady concerned comes from her parents' home with new dresses and other costly gifts.

Sonder: On the eleventh day of the delivery or on any other suitable date, ladies of the neighbourhood, near relatives and ladies in the house collect in the morning. The mother and the baby are properly bathed and suitably dressed. Thereafter small pieces of *bhojpatra* bark are burnt and lighted barks moved round the heads of the two by turns. A specific folk song is chanted, perhaps to ward off the bad omens and to wish a further safe delivery in due time. This has its origin in the *Punaswan sanskara*, one of the sixteen prescribed in the rule book. These pieces of the bark are then dipped into the water kept in a pot nearby. This is called *Burza Myet*.

Sonth, Navreh and Zanga trai: Sonth heralds the Spring season and the Navreh the New Lunar Year. Both these days are important in our calendar. A unique custom on these two days is to fill a plate overnight with rice, yoghurt, milk, nuts, cake, flower, pen, gold coin, picture of a deity or the goddess, and the new *panchang* (only on Navreh). This is kept covered for the night and early in

the morning every member of the family sees this plate and the nice items placed in it, first thing after getting up from the bed. Thereafter people go to the river bank, take a dip and throw these nuts in the water. Then they wear new clothes and offer pooja at home and in the temples. Outings are also organised to the gardens to enjoy the beauty of the almond blossoms. Sweets, savouries and the famous decoction, 'Chai', is served with gaiety and happiness all round. On the third day from the Navreh, ladies go to their parents' house and dine there. From there they go to the temples and gardens with their kiths and return in the evening with new dresses and the customary *Noon*, *Tsocha* and *Atagat* i.e., salt, cakes and some cash. These three items are a must to be given to the married daughters, whenever they come to their parents' house, at the time of their return to their home.

Apart from these customs, rituals and festivals which are peculiar to our community, there are other festivals which are celebrated more or less in the same way as in other parts of the country. Whatever difference there is, is because of geographical reasons and availability of the required items. For example, in our rituals walnuts, rice and local vegetables are used whereas in other places coconut, banana, banana-leaf and other locally available items are put in use for these rituals. Likewise, due to the intense cold we have *Sandhya* only once in the morning instead of three times elsewhere. Wearing a dhoti or making offerings and pooja bare-bodied also is not enforced in Kashmir for the same reason.

Shivaratri: Any account of the customs and rituals of our community, without a mention of the Shivaratri festival, would be incomplete. This is the crown of our festivals, and is spread over a full fortnight of the Phalguna month. It is a socio-religious function that is the very part of our life. On the first day of the dark fortnight, called *Hurya Okdoh* the wholesale cleaning of the house, painting and decorating begins with gusto. The *pooja* room called *Thokur Kuth* and the front door called *Dar* are specially cleaned, one for the pooja and the other to welcome Shiva and Parvati, whose communion is the real essence of Shivaratri. The first week up to the *Hurya Satam*, is busy time for washing, cleaning and collecting the required items. The eighth day called *Hurya Aetham* is the day of the presiding deity of the valley, Maa Sharika. On this day we have Havan at Hari Parbat and night long Keertan. This is followed by *Hurya Navam*, *Dyara Daham*, and *Gada Kah*. On these days apart from usual pooja, prescribed items of vegetables and/or fish and meat are cooked according to the custom of every home. Ladies go to their parents' house for bathing and washing and return to their own homes with new clothes, a new *Kangri* (fire-pot) with a silver *tsalan* dangling behind it. Twelfth day is known as *Vager Bah* and it is customary to have *Vager* pooja on that day, which is the first formal pooja of the Shivaratri. The thirteenth day called *Herach Truvah* is the day of the main pooja. The eldest member of the family keeps fast for the day. *Vatuk* is brought by the potter which comprises a 'No't', *Resh Dul*, *Dul*, *Saniwaer*, *Macha Waer*, *Dhupu Zur*, *Sani Potul*, assortment of *Parva* and *Taekya*. These are cleaned, filled with water and then arranged in the prescribed order in the pooja room. *Nariwan* and garlands are tied round these items. The *No't* representing the *Kalasha* and some other pots are also filled with walnuts. The actual pooja begins in the night when all the family members assemble in the pooja room for the purpose. The *Vatuk*, representing various *Devatas* and *Bhairavas*, is worshipped under the directions of the *Kula-Purohita* (the family priest). This is an elaborate pooja for a good three hours and is followed by a sumptuous feast. All the items cooked are first offered to the *Vatak Nath*. Next comes *Shiva Chaturdashi*. This is popularly called 'Salaam'. Perhaps because on this day friends from the Muslim community would come to felicitate Kashmiri Pandits. Also beggars, bards and street dancers would come to take their due on this festive occasion, and salute the head of the family with the words 'Salaam'. On this day children receive *Heraech Kharch* the pocket allowance for their enjoyment. The usual pastime is a game of shells which creates a lot of enthusiasm. On the *Amavasya* day the culminating pooja of the festival is held and the entire paraphernalia of *Vatuk* is taken off from its place. In the evening a very interesting event is observed. It is called *Dub Dub* or knock knock. Actually one member of the family goes out and returns with a glass of water. The door is shut on him and when he knocks at the door a conversation takes place. He is asked who he is. He replies that he is *Ram bror* and has come with wealth, riches, good wishes for health and happiness, food and means of livelihood and all the good things. Then the door is opened. The walnuts are broken to take the kernel out and along with cakes made of rice flour are first offered to the deity and then taken as *prashada*. From the next day begins an arduous task of distributing the walnuts among friends, relatives and neighbours. The closer the relationship the larger is the number of walnuts given to them. The highest number, in hundreds, goes to the in-laws of the newlywed daughters. The only thing that remains is the disposal of the residual material i.e.; grass seats of the *Vatuk*, the flowers and *Naervan* tied round these pots and other such things. These are dropped into the river on the *Tila Ashtami*, and this marks the grand finale to this great festival. It is believed that every Kashmiri girl

is a Parvati and is wedded to Shiva. The Shivaratri symbolises the wedding of the two, and on this occasion the Bhairavas and other Ganas accompanying Lord Shiva are fed with choicest dishes up to the fill and to their satisfaction. That is what is known as Vatuk poojan.

This tradition of customs, rituals and festivals gives a distinct identity to the Kashmiri Pandit community and needs to be preserved and nurtured alongwith other important facets of our community life and our beloved mother tongue, Kashmiri, which has been enriched by the writings of Lal Ded and Nunda Rishi, Habba Khatoon and Arnimal, Parmanand and Shamas Faquir, Masterji, Mehjoor, Azad, Nadim and scores of other poets, writers and thinkers.

These festivals, rituals and customs have had relevance in the past, these are relevant today and they shall remain relevant for all times to come. The relevance is manifold. Firstly, they give us a distinct identity as Kashmiri Pandits. We know about various festivals which are associated with different communities. Durga Puja is for Bengalis what Ganesh Puja is for Maharashtrians. Ayyapa Puja in the south, Holi in the Braja Dham and Jagannath festival in Orissa are very well known. We, in Kashmir, are proud of our socio-religious festival of Shivaratri and other local rituals. Every spring is holy for us, every village has produced a Mahatma of repute and every mountain peak is sacred for us. These festivals and rituals have spiritualised our community for centuries. They have made us god-fearing, non-violent, pious and religious. With all the advancement in science and the technological development, we cannot discard the spiritual aspect of human existence.

After all, our existence is not confined to our gross body alone. These age-old customs of ours help in character building by creating a sense of care and compassion in us. They make us realise our responsibility towards environment, animal world and birds, besides our fellow human beings. These are important props to give us self-confidence, courage to face all eventualities and dynamism in our approach. It is of paramount importance, therefore, for us to preserve and perpetuate these festivals. Their meaning and significance has to be explained to our younger generation in their idiom, cogently and convincingly so that they realise their importance. Carrying forward these traditions is an answer, to a great extent, to our present day problems of stress, strain and tension at the individual level and at the social level of many ills including inter-caste and inter-religious marriages, etc. However, we should not forget that many of these customs are losing their importance because we do not know their underlying significance and the rationale of their observance. This calls for a concentrated effort in the field of research for which our scholars and the knowledgeable should come forward before it is too late and before some meaningful and useful customs get extinct because of non-observance and disuse. This rich tradition of ours is an indescribable 'Radiance', which is self-illuminating, self-satisfying, independent, self-supporting, self-creating, self-rooted and this radiance has to be perceived, realised and then drawn into the depths of ourselves.

Excerpts from:

Kashmiri Pandits: Looking to the Future

Kashmir Education, Culture and Science Society (Regd.)

New Delhi - 48