

**SOCIAL LIFE OF KASHMIR - SOME ASPECTS OF CASTE, CUSTOMS AND CEREMONIES
OF KASHMIRI PANDITS**

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Abstract

Like its scenic beauty, Kashmir valley is even famous for its cultural heritage. The valley of Kashmir is very rich as far as different aspects of its culture are concerned. Kashmiris though followed different religions; more or less belong to same stock. There are certain differences in the customs of birth, marriage and death in case of Muslims and pandits of the Kashmir. Therefore, many of their traditions, customs and ceremonies and even dresses bear many resemblances. And it is to be noted that the life of the people of Kashmiri was ruled by customs (Rewaj) and tradition. It was very difficult for the people to maintain a subsistence level when he had to spend expensively on occasions of marriage, birth, death and other religious and social ceremonies. Some of the ritualistic practices of the Kashmiri people have been inherited from the Aryans travelled to the state of Kashmir and settled there with the original inhabitants of Kashmir. Historical documents and scriptures reveal that the Kashmiri Pandits (Kashmiri Hindus) had already established their own system of ritualistic practice and customs. The influence of Aryans on the Kashmiri Bata's led them to incorporate some of the rituals of the race into their already prevalent customs. The rituals are still practiced by the people of the valley today. The present paper attempt to reveal some aspects of the caste, customs and ceremonies related to Birth, Marriage and Death among the Pandits / Hindus of Kashmir.

Key Words: Kashmiris, Pandits, Caste, Customs, Ceremonies, Tradition.

Introduction

The inhabitants of the Kashmir observed several customs and beliefs like that of which were followed by other people of the state. It must be explained that the customs vary according to the positions and wealth of families and that there is a difference between the observances of the city people and the villagers. But the chief incidents in birth, marriage and death are the same. It is not out of place to mention that there are many points of resemblance between the Muslim customs and the pandit customs¹. Although there are certain points of similarity, and the curious prominence of the walnut, salt, and the use of the *mehandi dye*, will be noticed. Besides the *mehnzrat*, or use of the *mehandli* dye, in both religions there is the *laganhir/santham* or fixing of the marriage day. *Phirsal*, the visit paid by the bridegroom to the bride's house after marriage: *Gulimiut*, the giving of money and jewels; the dress and the title of the bridegroom as *mahaaraz* and of the bride as *Maharani*. *Phirsal*, the visit paid by the bridegroom to the bride's house after marriage, *chudsu*, the giving of presents on the fourth day after death to the priest's etc².

Social Set Up

The social system and the organization of the Kashmir valley from the earliest times were rigid, conservative and orthodox. The arrangements of the setting up of a system sum up the human experiences gathered after the centuries of human knowledge and innate characteristics of humans to all times especially in pre-modern times when continually rather than change in every society characterized because of all time validity. The recent changes in technology and culture, the significance of their old philosophy has a multi-dimensional quality and has a deep philosophy embedded in them. Because of the human psychology and human nature there is an element of contradictions in these maxims and the system, which was registered, was followed by the succeeding generations. Thus, the society of Kashmir was divided into distinctive kindred groups based on ethnicity, caste and professional groups³.

Social organization or Stratification

A stratified society is one that is divided into two or more groups of people, and accordingly these groups are ranked high and low relative to one another. When the people in-group or strata are compared with those in other marked differences in privileges, rewards, restrictions and obligations

becomes apparent. Members of low ranked groups will tend to have fewer privileges than those of higher ranked groups. In addition, they tend not to be same degree and are denied equal to basic resources. In short, social stratifications and obligations amounts institutionalize inequality among the people themselves⁴.

Castes and Occupations in Hindu Community

Historical evidence confirms the fact that the population of the valley up to about the beginning of the fourteenth century comprised only the Hindu. Subsequently mass of the people were converted to Islam, through the efforts of Shah-i-Hamadan and his followers. Origin of the Kashmiri pandit community covers more than a period of five thousand years. Kashmiri pandits are called themselves as “Saraswat Brahmans”⁵. The majority of Hindus of Kashmir were Brahmans and it is said that the pandits of Kashmir were divided into 133 exogamous Gotras, who were named after the great sages from whom their families traced descent. But the fact is that only six Gotras were original, which were later on multiplied through inter-marriages with the Brahmans⁶. They are learned in their theology. The Indian Brahmans and pandits never eat meat but for a Kashmiri pandit meat is very essential. These pandits constitute a small community but are highly advanced in education. Their chief occupation is writing and reading. Number of them gets their living by their pen, they are best Persian and Nagri writers several of them are government servants. In the turmoil of 1989 most of the pandits migrated from the valley. Only a few are left here several numbers was settled in other parts of India while number of those have settled at Jammu⁷.

The Brahmans (Kashmiri Hindus) of the Valley were commonly known as Kashmiri Pandits. Kashmiri pandits were divided into three classes, the astrologer clay (*Jotish*), the priest (Guru) and those who follow secular occupations (*Karkuns*). The vast majority of the Kashmiri pandits who belong to the *Karkun* category, were salaried state employs in the lower ranges of administration, while others practice agriculture and other related occupations. A small minority, primarily from the first two categories engage themselves in various religious occupations, such as astrology and performance of pandit rites and ceremonies⁸. The priest class does not inter-marry with the others. But the *jotish* and *karkun* classes are inter-marry between them. The astrologers (*jotish* pandits) were learned in the Shastras and expounded them, and they drew up the calendars in which prophecies were made regarding the future events. The priests performed the rites and ceremonies of the Hindu religion.

The vast majority of the Pandits belonged to the *Karkun* class.

One of the typical features of Hindu society of Kashmir is the absence of the non- Brahman castes, though it was not always thus as we find the mention of four -fold castes and outcastes in Rajatarangini and other sources. However at the turn of 16th century Islam replaced Hinduism as the mass religion of the valley. While all other castes and out castes embraced Islam the Hindu society of Kashmir was left to be represented by only one caste -Brahmans. There are traditions which affirm that the persecution and oppression of Hindus at the hands of Muslim rulers of Kashmir, was so keen that only eleven families of Hindus remained in the valley and their descendants were known as *Malmasi* and those who came from Deccan in the later times were known as *Banmasi*. Both these distinctive groups took to the study of Persian in addition to Sanskrit for the sake of jobs. Thus, those who studied Persian for the sake of jobs are called the *Karkuns*. And those who studies Sanskrit for the purpose of priesthood as a source of their livelihood or to study of scriptures and the performance of priestly duties came to be known as *Bachabats*⁹ or more simply the *Gor* (derived from the Sanskrit guru for guide or preceptor). The followers of secular occupation were called the *Karkun*. The *Karkuns* were numerically preponderant and economically better. They arrogated to themselves the higher position in the Pandit social hierarchy. The *Gor* was regarded as inauspicious, mean and greedy. Among the *Karkuns*, a class known as *Bhattarakas*, originated due to their association with the royal families. Still another class of *Razdanikas* came into existence out of the Kashmiri pandit nobility. The *Bachabats* were economically backward people as they accepted all types of charity whereas, the *Karkuns* refrained from this practice and considered it below their dignity. Moreover, the Kashmiri pandits were also engaged in trade and agriculture, though hated by the *Karkuns*. Then there was another class mostly known as *Legibat*, as their ancestors had eaten polluted food at the hands of Muslim cooks. One more section was in existence, known as *Wurun* or *Purbi*. It is said that they were the descendants of those Kashmiri widows who secretly married *Purbis* in the past in contravention of social laws¹⁰.

Besides, there was a Hindu minority group in Kashmir viz; *Bohras*. This was the only caste of Hindus found in Kashmir who were not Brahmins. The historical origin of this group is not yet clear. It is said they descended from the Khatri caste of Hindus and had come to the valley before the advent of Islam. *Bohras* are probably of Punjabi origin. They had been almost assimilated into pandit culture,

although they did not inter-dine or inter-marry with few exceptions here and there. Their principle profession was trade and shop keeping. In the former days, some of them were admitted to caste among the pandits who later on adopted the customs and rites of Brahmans. They were found only in urban areas of Kashmir valley. They married among themselves. *Purbies* whose traditional vocation was personal services were said to be the offshoots of the *Bohras* and were petty shopkeepers dealing with bidi and pan in Srinagar¹¹.

Rituals related to Birth, Marriage and Death

The customs and ceremonies connected with birth, marriage and death in Kashmir during the period of our study were elaborate and very expensive. In addition, it is to be noted that the life of the people of Kashmiri was ruled by customs (*Rewaj*) and tradition. It was very difficult for the people to maintain a subsistence level when he had to spend expensively on occasions of marriage, birth, death and other religious and social ceremonies¹².

It must be explained that the customs vary according to the positions and wealth of families and that there is a difference between the observances of the city people and the villagers. However, the chief incidents in birth, marriage and death are the same. It is not out of place to mention that there are many points of resemblance between the Muslim customs and the pandit customs, and the curious prominence of the walnut, salt, and the use of the *mehandi* dye, will be noticed. Besides the *mehnzrat*, or use of the *mehandli* dye, in both religions there is the *laganhir/santham* or fixing of the marriage day. *Phirsal*, the visit paid by the bridegroom to the bride's house after marriage: *Gulimiut*, the, the giving of money and jewels; the dress and the title of the bridegroom as *Mahaaraz* and of the bride as *Maharani*, *Chudsu*, the giving of presents on the fourth day after death to the priest's etc¹³.

Birth Ceremonies of Pandits/Hindus

The birth ceremony of a Hindu is an elaborate one, with mystic figures chalked on the floor, fire, pots and pestle being worshipped. The family astrologer carefully notes the exact time and date of birth. A Hindu child used to escort into the world on a bed of soft straw of the grass, which has been rendered holy by perfumes and by the utterance of Sanskrit mantras, the birth-bed is known as *Hur* and near the bed was placed an earthen vessel known as *Hurlej*. Close to the vessel, the floor was carefully swept and a mystic figure was traced on it in chalk and on this figure is placed a stone pestle,

which was worshiped by some girls of the house¹⁴. The mother is known as *losa*. On the fourth day of the child's birth, a special feast composed of sesame, walnuts and sugar fried in oil, is prepared and sent to relatives and friends. It is called *Teil Panjiri*. On the same day mother's parents send some special food to their daughter's house. On the sixth day after delivery the mother used to have a warm bath, bathing is commonly believed to remove all impurities attendant upon child-birth¹⁵. The water being mixed with certain drugs having medicinal, quality, and the mother's relatives pay her visits. This ceremony is called *Sundar Sran*. During the first eleven days the visitors were not allowed to eat or drink in the house with the exemption of the very near relatives, as the house is considered infectious and unclean. On the eleventh day *Kahanethar* ceremony was held and on this day the mother used to wear new clothes, made for her husband. The newborn baby is given its name¹⁶. If it is a male child, the priest used to bring his horoscope and receives a good tip. The horoscope is a scroll of paper showing the planets that are favourable or unfavourable to the baby.

The *Yagupaveet* or scared thread ceremony is one of the most important ceremonies in the life of the pandit. When the boy has attained the age of seven years or before he reaches his thirteen year, he must done the scared thread and become a true Brahman. The astrologer fixes an auspicious day, five days before the date relatives are invited to the boy's house, there is constant feasting, and the women sing and make cheery. The maternal uncle presents gifts and the day before the scared thread is the family priest performs put on the rites of Devgun. *Devgun* is another ceremony when the protection of sixty-four deities called yognis is invoked. The day following the main ceremony, a *Kushalhoma* is performed to make the safe and pleasant termination of this important event, and the guests returned to their homes, after money is distributed among them¹⁷.

It appears from the sources that the universal practice of delivery was to have it affected on the floor. However, now a days he mother gives birth to a child in a Hospital or in the home where she sleeps in a cosy bed. Hence, nothing of the past practice is observed now a day.

Marriage Ceremonies of Pandits/Hindus

Marriages have always been the most important celebration in all religions, areas, communities and castes. The essence of the marriage remains the same with the only difference in the rituals and the customs by which the marriage ceremony is performed. To Kashmiri pandits as in case of other Hindus, marriage is a union between the spouses. It is not a civil contract as it is in case of

Muslims. As mentioned earlier that there was not much difference between the Muslim customs and the Pandit customs. We have discussed the different elements of marriage in the topic Muslim marriage. Let me recall those elements in the perspective of pandit marriage. The pandit's maintain that marriage is one of the rituals for the spiritual good of the human body. A series of rites performed constituted the ritual marriage. Most of the rites were of Sanskrit origin¹⁸. In pandit families, marriage was decided after matching the horoscope of the prospective bride and the groom. The caste, standard, backgrounds of the families are also matched to fix a perfect match. The matrimony time and date is then fixed in consultation with the priest, who announces the auspicious date according to best *mahurat*.

Marriage is possible only between those families, which have had no kinship for seven generation on the paternal side, and four generations on the maternal side. Once the boy and the girl consent to join as man and wife in a lifelong bond, their parents meet in a temple in a company of the middle-man (if there is any) and some selected family members from both the sides to vow that they would join the two families in a new bond of kinship. This is known as *Kasamdrly* ceremony (agreement for marriage). This is followed by a formal engagement ceremony (*Taakh*) in which some members of the grooms family and relatives visit the brides place to partake of a rich feast. The party brings a Saree and some ornaments, which the bride is made to wear by her, would be sister in law. During this ceremony, the two parties exchanged flowers and vow to join the two families through wedlock¹⁹. After this ceremony, the two families began to prepare for the marriage ceremony. Several rituals are associated with marriage whose observance being nearly a week before the wedding day. The bride's family begins with what is known as *Garlnavai* (literally get made-up) when the hair of the bride let loose. Another ritual Maenziraat follows this. It is the ritual, where the doors of the houses of both the bride and the groom are decorated by their relatives (aunts) after which the bride takes a holy bath and is applied with designed *Heena* on her hands and feet. The *Mehandi* or the *Heena* is applied on the hands of the Kashmiri pandit groom and the bride also, as a sign of purity and blessing by the elders. Meanwhile women, girls and boys sing traditional duties as well as popular songs appropriate to the occasion on both the respective houses²⁰.

While the singing, and henna pasting is on the bride as well as the groom are given a through bath (*Kani Shraan*) by aunts and sister in law to prepare them for *Devgun*. This is the ceremony, which

marks the transformation of the bride and the groom from their brahamcharya life to the *grahast* life. In this ritual, they worship the idols of gods Shiv and Parvati to seek their blessings for their happy marriage life. The ritual is practiced in the respective homes of the bride and the groom, the priest performs the customs. In addition, the gifts to be given to the bride in her marriage are placed before the sacred fire²¹. A gold ornament called *dejaharu* along with other gold ornaments is gifted to the bride signifying the stage that she is ready for her marriage.

On the wedding day, the grooms wear a colourful dress with a saffron-coloured turban on his head. He is made to stand on a beautifully made rangoli (*vyug*) in the front compound of the house, where parents, relatives and friends put garlands made of fresh plucked flowers of cardamom and currency notes round the groom's neck. Conch shells are blown, ditties are sung and the groom's party moves towards the brides place usually in cars and other modes of transport²², where the bride's family welcomes him in a grand manner. The mother and the other elder female members of the bride's family welcome the groom and his relatives with a traditional *arti* and blowing off the conch shells. Meanwhile the bride and the groom are seated in a beautifully decorated room for a series of rituals and ceremonies amidst changing of Sanskrit mantras for several hours while little breaks in between. The purohits of the two families recite mantras and make the bride, groom and their parents to perform a number of rituals with fire (*agni*) as the witness. The boy and the girl take seven rounds *agni kund* of the „spring of fire“ and vow to live together in prosperity and adversity, in joy as well as in sorrow, till they are separated by death. This ceremony is called *Lagan*, followed by another ceremony *Posh Puja*, in which the bride and the groom were 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 mantras²³. The rationale behind this custom is that the couple is considered Shiva and Parvati and the two are duly worshiped. This marks the completion of the marriage after which the dinner is served.

The bride after changing the Saree and jewellery moves towards her husband's house, where she receives an enormous welcome by her family. *Gar Atchun* is a formal reception given after the marriage. By the bride's family, where the both the bride and the groom are given gifts and sweets and a vast non-vegetarian meal was prepared for the guests after which the couple moves towards their house for leading a happy married life²⁴. After the couple of days later depending upon the mahurat

(auspicious day), the newly married couple visits the wife's parents. This visit is known as Satrath of Phirsaal. Upon reaching the wife's parents place, the man and the wife are welcomed with *aalath*- a thali with water, rice, coins and flowers.

Types of Hindu marriage

Among Kashmiri pandits three types of marriages are prevalent. In the first type of marriage dowery-ornaments, clothes, domestic utensils and other gifts in cash and kind are presented to the in-laws of the bride. This type of marriage is ideal and common. The second type is the incidence of the reciprocal marriage involving the exchange of brides and gifts, called *Andyut*, which is very rarely followed, in the region. In the third type the bridegroom's parents pay some cash or kind to the parents of the bride as a consideration for matrimonial for their daughter. This type of marriage is occasionally performed among the backward sections of the Kashmiri pandit community.

Marriage by the elopement of young couples in consequence of their love affair is rare, though there are stray incidences of such marriages. However, these are formalized by usual religious ceremonies²⁵.

Inter caste marriage

Inter caste marriage are permitted neither by the religion nor by the customs of the pandit community. Majority of the Kashmiri pandits belong the pure Brahman stock, with fine handsome features, where, the lower caste Hindus of the valley did not possess the same features. As the marriages between these two castes, known as pandits and Bohreis is almost non-existent.

Dowery system

The dowery system is prevalent among all the communities living in the Kashmir region. The dowery depends upon the financial position, social status and family customs of a person. Though the presentation of the gifts to a daughter by her parents at the time of marriage is desirable and has beneficial aspects for the couple, but unfortunately, it has assumed menacing proposition and has become a great evil²⁶.

Death Ceremonies of Pandits/Hindus

The dead body of Kashmiri pandit is fully covered, and his head keep a lightened candle and

mantras are recited to the dead person. After a short while, the dead body is washed with soap and some specific herbs. The eldest son or a close relative of the deceased performs this ceremony called *anatsreth* in Kashmiri generally and he alone is entitled to perform the cremation ceremony, then wrapped in white cloth called *Kafan*, which consists of a long tangas, cap and shranpat. The corpse is placed on the wooden plank which is carried by four persons, generally by his near relation on shoulders, keeping the feet of the corpse in front of the plank and taken to the cremation ground²⁷, everyone chanting: Shiv Shiv Shamboo, etc. (O God of Peace, forgive our sin). The eldest son of the deceased carries an earthen pitcher in his hand and leads to the coffin. The eldest son of the deceased and in case of issueless person by his near relative lights the funeral pyre. The performer of the rites lights the pyre with a piece of lighted wood from the head if the deceased is a male and from the feet if it is a female. After the pile is set to fire, the performer goes thrice around the burning body sprinkling water from a water pot placed on his left shoulder. On completing the third round, breaks the water pot on an axe or a stone near the head of the dead body and throws a piece of wood on the burning pile as a last tribute to the deceased²⁸. It is to be noted the work of cremation used to be done by a Muslim known as *Kawij* against payment in cash as well as in kind. In return, they had to supply wood for the funeral pyres. It is worth mention that if the dead body is of women, a few ornaments are kept with her, which is taken by the *Kawij*. After three days, the ashes and the bones are brought home and put in the holy rivers of Kashmir, such as, river Jhelum at Shadipura Prayag. For ten days, the house of the deceased is unclean and no one will eat food cooked there, and all rites are performed at the river bank. The son shaves his head and beard, but receives a new dress from his father-in-law on the 10th day of his either parents. On the 11th and 12th day, *Shardha* ceremony is performed and the meat is again allowed to be served in the house. During the first three months, a *Shardha* is performed after fifteen days i.e. 30th, 45th, 60th, 75th and 90th day of the death. Another *Shardha* is held on the 180th day. After this, *Shardha* is done every year on the death anniversary and one during the *Pitra-Pakash*. The children (sons and daughters) offer water to their deceased parents and three generations of grandparents every morning²⁹.

Conclusion

The above description of various social classes in second half of 20th century Kashmiri Pandits points to the fact that Kashmir society was mainly stratified due to the material resources available to

each of the social classes, all these classes live quite amicably. The social life of Kashmir continued more or less, to be the same as in the past. It did not affect their community relations, traditions, customs, beliefs and even dress.

The society of Kashmir was heterogeneous, stratified into Muslims and Hindus besides a small number of Sikhs who entered Kashmir during the Sikh rule (1819-1846) and some Christians. Kashmiri pandits were divided into three classes, the astrologer clay (*Jotish*), the priest (*Guru*) and those who follow secular occupations (*Karkuns*). Besides, there was a Hindu minority group in Kashmir viz: *Bohras*. This was the only caste of Hindus found in Kashmir who were not Brahmins.

A vast number of rituals are more prevalently practiced in rural areas of Kashmir. The rituals of Kashmir were inherited from the ancestors and are still existent in full sway in the valley of Kashmir. From the birth of a child, marriage and the cremation, number of customs and ceremonies were held on different occasions. The customs and ceremonies connected with birth, marriage and death in Kashmir during the period of our study were elaborate and very expensive.

And it is to be noted that the life of the people of Kashmiri Pandits was ruled by customs and tradition. On the whole the customs and ceremonies related to birth, marriage and death of the Kashmiri Pandits did not undergo much perceptible change. The ceremony of birth, marriage, death and others are ruled by the presence of ritualistic practices of the people of Kashmir. The tradition of Kashmir is retained in the Kashmiri rituals that are practiced by the people. The rituals and customs reflect the culture of the people of Kashmir.

In nutshell it can said that the culture is determined by the customs and ceremonies, which enrich our lives by nourishing our souls and in the process give a purposeful meaning to our time tested traditional values. These customs and ceremonies are helpful for our moral, physical psychological and spiritual well being. Having a strong emotional base, they are interwoven in the matrix of our social and cultural lives.

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