

22 YEARS – A KASHMIR STORY

Preface

This book tells an inspiring true story about a Kashmiri boy who defied numerous odds to survive and find his way back into the world.

He survived a difficult caesarean childbirth, being a breech baby; grew up as the only child of his parents; saw his family being excommunicated and ostracised when his eldest aunt married a Muslim when he was just about eight years old; could not spell a word of English or know the tables till the age of ten, but still figured amongst the rank holders in his Year 10 and Year 11 Examinations; miraculously survived an acute gastroenteritis attack barely two days before his *viva-voce* examination for admission to an engineering college when he was still shy of his 16th birthday; got uprooted from his homeland (Kashmir) due to an unprecedented political upheaval when he was about 27 years old, following which he took a vow that he would never return to his homeland; moved between three countries between the ages of 32 and 40, starting from the scratch five times during that period of eight years.

And it so happened one day, as destiny would have it, he returned to his homeland, albeit for only a couple of days, after a period of 22 years.

The reasons underlying his sudden, unplanned and unexpected flying return visit to Kashmir illustrate the nature and the state of his mind, which over years has changed from a sad and rather despondent childhood, to relative happiness and promise during his teenage years, to a heartbreak as a young man; to extreme anxiety, fear and depression during the months leading to the mass exodus of his community from Kashmir; back to utter despondency and extreme

anger in the period immediately following the mass exodus; to anxiety and continued struggle in life for achieving some dignity and stability in life; and finally to compassion and empathy for the world community. Such has been the life journey of this rather enigmatic person, an absolute rollercoaster. And that person is the author of this book.

Life is full of surprises. With age, generally, people become nostalgic about their childhood world. I am no different. The memories of my childhood, and my world during those precious days, my grandparents and the family home, relatives, neighbours and friends, often transport me mentally back in time to the land where I was born and raised, and where all my ancestors were born and raised. With time, the nostalgia has grown and with that my newly-found attachment and the affinity to that land has also grown. That land is Kashmir, my homeland. I am a son of the soil, similar to my father and grandfather, and all our ancestors. I believe that I owe a great deal to my homeland and her people.

This book is not a work of fiction. It is based on my own observations, thoughts, life experience and real events. This book has not been intended to contain any significant political content, whatsoever. However, for the completion of my memoirs, reference to the political uprising in Kashmir, in 1990, has been deemed necessary and unavoidable. Similarly, the basic philosophy in support of the return of Pandits to the valley has been included in this book.

I lived with my family in Kashmir till our sudden and painful migration from the valley in December 1989. The book has been inspired by my sudden and short return visit to Kashmir in April 2012. This book illustrates my story—the story of a migrant Kashmiri Pandit now a citizen of the world.

The first draft of the book was titled *Twentythree Years* to mark the time period of my absence from Kashmir. However, my last visit to Kashmir, in July 2016, and the volatile conditions that I witnessed there, made me to change the title to *22 Years*. In my opinion, Kashmir is suffering and bleeding from a *Catch 22* situation. The new title of the book also fits in well with my passion about the game of cricket, where a bat battles with a ball over a distance of 22 yards and 22 players play the game.

The mass exodus of the Pandits from the valley in 1990 physically separated the two Kashmiri communities, the Hindus and the Muslims but not their memories of each other. After all, they are one ethnic Kashmiri people, who share a common ancestry, speak the same language, eat the same food and are related by blood.

However, our younger generations have been left deprived of that life experience of having to live in an interwoven social fabric, which was characterised by a considerable interdependence of the two communities. The younger generation of the two communities, born in the valley and outside it, cannot be blamed for being generally ignorant about how the life of the two communities was intertwined in the past. People born after 1986, especially during 1990 or 1991, will have absolutely no memory of the sudden exodus of the Pandits, the indigenous people of Kashmir. That means Kashmiri youth will currently have only a transmitted memory but not a real memory of the pre-1990 interwoven social fabric, including my own children. My story may provide them with a glimpse into our past life in Kashmir. I hope and pray this story helps to stitch the social fabric of our Kashmiri community back together and produce a beautiful tapestry about a land which was once called 'heaven on earth'.

The first half of the book provides a glimpse into my personal life experience.

The second half of the book presents my political, philosophical and spiritual perspectives about Kashmir and the world at large, as well as a commentary on a wide range of issues, which in my opinion, currently confront Kashmir and the wider world such as:

- Why is it important to address Kashmir's ecological, environmental, cultural and political issues?
- Why is it important to expand love and universal brotherhood to combat the current menace of hate and violence around the world; and how daily practice of meditation by the people can help to achieve a much desired state of world peace and stability?
- Why is it extremely important to address the gender bias in all communities around the world and why women must have equal representation in each and every walk of the life?

In the last chapter of this book, I have reproduced my recent conversations, on a popular social media application, with a number of people from both Kashmiri Muslim and Pandit communities. The intent is to provide a snapshot of an average current Kashmiri mindset.

I believe that numerous violent incidents and human deaths that are currently occurring around the world, almost on a daily basis, are the result of a dire paucity of love which the humans are currently experiencing. By nature, humans strive for love and attention and, if they do not receive that, they react with hate and anger. I consider that, before it is too late, both women and men of substance and those in power must consciously put in a coordinated and determined effort to bring all women at par with their male counterparts where they live and work. Full empowerment of women is the call of the hour.

A man generally symbolises physical strength and anger, whereas a woman generally symbolises love and nurturing. In my strong opinion, the key to world peace, stability and sustainability is the empowerment

of the women to bring them at par with their male counterparts in all aspects of life. Women represent half of the human species on this earth. Without them, life on earth is not possible. They are biologically stronger than men in terms of their longevity, resilience and tenacity. As long as women, who are considered the embodiment of love, care and nurturing, are not treated with full dignity and respect, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to expand universal love and harmony between various people.

As for Kashmir, I believe that, for peace to return to Kashmir, the present day inhabitants of the valley must reconnect with their roots in Sufism and Kashmiri Shaivism thought. The key to the return of peace to the valley is in the return of Pandits to the valley. The Pandits are the original inhabitants of the valley and have been living there long before the advent of Islam. The Pandits that lived in the valley up to 1990 are the direct descendants of those Kashmiris who had stuck to the original faith of their ancestors even though many of their Pandit ancestors had converted to Islam during the last half a millennium or so, for a range of reasons.

Contrary to a popular thought in modern day Kashmir, Pandits are not, and have never been, cowards. Instead they were peaceful, soft and gentle. None of these qualities reflects weakness; these terms reflect virtues, which were their strengths. To show one's strength, one does not have to carry a gun or a sword or shout abuse! They and their Pandit ancestors had historically survived in Kashmir against numerous odds. Conversion to Islam would have always been an easier option for them; however, they had always chosen the harder path sticking to their roots and the faith of their ancestors. Cowardice is not saving one's life and honour in the face of an armed aggression; cowardice is to show aggression to unarmed peace-loving and virtuous people.

I liken the various Kashmiri communities to the branches of a tree, including the grafted branches; all of which receive nourishment from the common roots of that tree. Alien trees generally don't bear fruit in Kashmir; it is prudent to replant and nourish the native trees instead. For their peace, survival and growth, Kashmiris must look for their roots and nourish themselves with traditional Kashmiri values and spirituality.

The roots of spirituality in Kashmir lie in Kashmiri Shaivism, whose proponents and practitioners are Kashmir's Pandits. It is very important, therefore, to recognise that the much-needed role of Kashmiri Pandits in Kashmir will be to provide the hyphen Kashmiris with a connection with their original spiritual roots. Therefore, so long as Kashmiri Pandits don't return to Kashmir and reinstate the tapestry of Kashmiri culture and spirituality, the return of peace to the valley seems to be remote. A piece of cloth cannot be stitched without a thread. Similar to a thread, Pandits will help to reinstate the unique Kashmiri tapestry.

Well, it is another thing if the Pandits will ever return, given the level of distrust in their mind! Pandits are not, and have not, been at the mercy of anyone; they chose to leave the valley out of their own volition and their decision to return to the valley will always be their own.

Historically, Pandits have never followed any religious or a political leader slavishly. Being an extremely intelligent, evolved and proud community, Pandits are characteristically individualistic. Therefore, they follow their own judgement and act individually. In some extreme situations though or in scenarios of common interest, their actions may coincidentally appear to be aligned and synchronised.

As such, as far as the matter of Kashmiri Pandits' return to the valley is concerned, the onus should logically be on Pandits, ie. if, when and

how they wish to return. Most importantly, Pandits must never return until and unless all their Muslim brethren and their leadership sincerely and unconditionally request them to do so.

Having tasted freedom after their exodus from the valley, it is inconceivable that all Pandits will ever consider returning to the valley, given a continued strife there. They are currently scattered all over the planet and moving ahead with their regular lives. If anyone actually decides to return, it will practically be a gift for the valley. The present inhabitants of the valley will do themselves and their homeland a big favour by welcoming that individual.

*Life is not fair;
be kind to yourself and to the other person for whom you care.
If you are hard on yourself, you may be hard on others as well,
not knowing how many of them could also be living their own hell.*

—Bill K Koul

This book has not been written without undergoing some degree of scrutiny and challenges from my family. During the early days of my writing this book, my daughter, Deeksha, suddenly commented, 'Papa, I know you are good at writing technical reports, but writing a book of this type is another thing. You don't read much. You may really embarrass yourself. You ought to have undertaken a thorough research before starting to write this book. Writers usually take years to write a book after undertaking a detailed research on the topic they write.'

'Deeksha, fair enough, but I am not writing the history of Kashmir. I intend to write only what is and has been in my head. It is all there (pointing to my head). I am trying to download my thoughts and memories into this book. If I don't document them, we'll lose them and no one will ever know what was inside my head. I am not writing a historical, political or a social commentary. It is my story', I replied.

‘But who is going to read your book?’ Deeksha asked.

‘I expect all Kashmiris to read it, from both Pandit and Muslim communities’, I replied.

‘Why do you try to separate the two communities?’ she asked, sounding somewhat confused.

‘I am not trying to separate them. I am trying to acknowledge both communities for their respective roles, as they comprise the entire Kashmiri community. It is like describing a tapestry which has been weaved using two threads that are made from the same material but differently shaded and coloured’, I clarified.

‘But why should people be actually interested in knowing your story and bother to read this book?’ Deeksha probed.

I replied, ‘Because people are likely to correlate their personal stories with my story. Every individual carries a story in his/her head. There could be possibly hundreds of people out there who may have similar stories, but for some reason they chose not to write them and share it with others. My mother enjoyed listening to sad filmi songs and watching movies with relatively sad and tragic themes, just because she was not very happy inside. Sad songs and sad movies would probably provide vent to her emotions. Similarly, I believe there will be many people who would possibly relate to my story and provide vent to their feelings. Let me write for them, let it be their voice too!’

During the writing phase of this book, the whole world, including myself, seemed to be working against me, with a coordinated and concerted plan, and thwart my painstaking effort. Similar to my life, the writing process of this book was also an absolute emotional roller coaster for me. I relived a concentrated form of my past life. Every time I provided an account of a painful past event, my emotional injuries refreshed. I had to endure and overcome a significant amount of mental pain to be able to finish writing this book.

In addition, I had to battle numerous serious distractions and issues from a number of sources, all beyond my reasonable control. These distractions had the potential to seriously undermine my energy and inspiration to write. I realised that it was a one of those 'now or never' cases, where any disruption or loss of momentum would seriously jeopardise my attempt to complete this work. So I kept inching ahead into a strong head wind, albeit with much lesser momentum at times. I had strong faith and felt that someone was indeed watching over me! This book was originally inspired in late 2015 by ManojKaul, when he was in Perth and before he returned to Houston, Texas, US.

Thereafter, on 17 March 2016, a fellow meditator, RakeshSafaya, encouraged me to write a book on TM and how it had changed my life. Its start was triggered by a gentle reminder at Boston by my cousin, Sanjay Kaul.

Who am I?

In this book, for convenience, I have referred to myself as *Billu*, as a third person.

I have been known by several names. Billu is the original name, by which I have been called by my father's family after my birth and I have known myself before my schooling started. Our relatives from my father's side call me by this name; however, my relatives from my maternal side call me *Gitton*. The name is after a British gentleman, one MrGitton, who was a close friend of my maternal grandfather. Years later, at the time of my school admission, in 1969, I was registered initially as *Deepak Koul*, which was changed to *Kuldeep Kumar Koulin* 1971.

In the Australian consulting engineering industry, I am known as *Bill Koul*, which actually is a shortened version of my original name at home, *Billu*. I am aware about some degree of criticism from some of my orthodox Kashmiri and Indian friends and relatives about my adoption of a westernised name for work purposes. As is a common practice in the western countries, people prefer to adopt short names for ease of communication.

My adopted name has allowed my clients and industry peers to focus more on work related matters with me rather than get curious about my background etc. Also, it has saved me from painful distortions of my registered name, which I had experienced earlier in Malaysia, where I lived with my family for several years prior to moving to Australia. In Malaysia also, I worked in the local geotechnical consulting engineering industry. In business related communications and correspondences, it was not uncommon to find my name being misspelt, rather distorted, such as Kudip, Kudit, Gudit, Gudip etc. Hence, on the back of my Malaysian learning, to save further distortions of my registered name and the pain associated with it, I decided to keep it simple in Australia. It has also given me a more universal identity!

I was born and raised in a Kashmiri Pandit family in Srinagar, Kashmir. Up to 1982, we lived at Alikadal, near Wazapora, in downtown Srinagar and, thereafter, moved to a newly constructed family house within a new residential colony at Rawalpora.

I was born in the Koul family of Malchamar (in downtown Alikadal) in the early sixties. Our family is uniquely nicknamed as *Ladakhi*. Anecdotally, several past generations lived in Ladakh, the northernmost part of the Jammu & Kashmir state. Pandit Kanwal Koul was the first generation of my family who returned to Srinagar on the then Maharaja's invitation. He was appointed as *vazir-e-vazarat* by the

Maharaja. His descendants were PanditChitrajKoul, PanditIshwarKoul and PanditSonaKoul and then my grandfather PanditShamboonathKoul. Our first ancestral home in Srinagar was located at Babapora, in HabbaKadal, where three generations of my ancestors lived before moving to Alikadal. That building was subsequently converted into the Babapora High School.

I am the only child of Jai KishoriKoul (*Rani*) and JawaharlalKoul (*Boba*). Rani was a homemaker throughout her life. Boba is a civil engineer by profession; he retired in 2002 as the Chief Engineer, PWD Kashmir.

My grandmother, DhanwatiKoul (*Amaji*), was born in the Kadalbajoo family of GurgariMohalla, Alikadal, to PanditTikalalKadalbajoo and Zoonmalkadalbajoo. My paternal grandfather, ShamboonathKoul (*Tathaji*), was a high school teacher. He enjoyed great repute in his time as a teacher of Mathematics and English.

My maternal grandmother was LilawatiKaul (*Kaki*). My maternal grandfather, PanditNiranjanNathKaul (*Pitaji*) of GurgariMohalla, Alikadal, worked for the Department of Tourism as a Tourist Officer before his untimely demise, in 1966, at the age of 53 years. I have only a very faint and hazy memory of Pitaji sitting by a window, with a warm smile on his face.

At the time of our departure from Kashmir in 1989, I was about 27 years old and had been married for about three years to RekhaBhan, daughter of Sheilaji and RadhaKrishanBhan, with a two year old son, Kongposh (*Baba*). Our daughter, Deeksha (*Shang-e-Asham*) was born in Jammu on the Christmas Day of 1990.

My life has been full of ups and downs, mostly downs. It has been like a necklace of thorny beads, with occasional rounded ones.

My personal religious philosophy may not be exactly in line with those members of both Pandit and Muslim community who possess and profess extreme interpretations of their respective religious mindsets. I have been susceptible to apprehensions and doubts from the right wing members belonging to both communities to such an extent that some Pandits may currently be regarding me as a half-Hindu and a half-Muslim, whereas some Muslims may be regarding me as an extremely fundamental kind of Hindu.

In practical terms, being a vegetarian / vegan, I don't see much difference between the two communities; both eat and relish non-vegetarian food, speak the same language and share numerous cultural traits, and are related by blood.

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