

# OPINION

## Kashmir A Paean for my Pir Dastgir

Riyaz Punjabi\*

[The historic monument of revered Sufi-Saint Pir Dastgir located in Srinagar city in Kashmir was destroyed in a fire in June, 2012. The following narrative is a homage to the Sufi Saint. It equally highlights the ethno-cultural and heritage significance of the site. Ed.]



The magnificent *Dargah of Pir Dastgir* has been reduced to shambles in a devastating mysterious fire. As we mourn the devastation of this bastion of our spiritual and ethno-cultural heritage, many of our friends from without are unable to comprehend the significance of this multi-dimensional edifice of our spiritual and cultural ethos. *Dargah* it was, but it was equally an institution, which epitomized our historical, composite social and cultural value system.

Heritage conservationists would

describe the shrine as a great architectural marvel incorporating ancient Buddhist, Central Asian particularly Uzbek, Tajik, Turkmen and local architectural style and traditions. The craftsmanship exhibited in the decoration of the interiors of the *Dargah* prominently projected the local and indigenous traditions with an Iranian imprint, which developed in Kashmir in 15th century during Zain-ul-Abidin Budshah's time. In sum, this great architectural heritage had been a great attraction for the visiting tourists from within the country and abroad. From another perspective, it was a sacred shrine, which housed the relics of great Sufi, Sayyed Abdul

*\*Padma Shri Professor (Dr.) Riyaz Punjabi is former Vice Chancellor, University of Kashmir. He is the first Asian Awardee of the European Socrates Award and is the Hony. Professor, University of Vienna.*

Qadir Jeelani. He lived in Baghdad in Iraq in 12th century and was tied to the chain (*silsila*) of most revered Sufi order of Junaid Baghdadi. This order of Sufis is known as *Qadiriya* order of the Sufis. The *Dargah* of *Pir Dastgir* was built in the center of old Srinagar city at Khanyar about two hundred and fifty years ago in the year 1767 A.D. It gradually acquired the estimation of a renowned place of worship (*Ibada*) where devotees would pray five times a day and special congregations would be held on Fridays and on other auspicious occasions. The relics of the revered Sufi Sayyed Abdul Qadir Jeelani would be displayed on some special occasions in a year. Thus, the *Dargah* served as a version of a bigger mosque where devotees would come and pray. This profile of the shrine would be a routine description of *Dargah* of Sayyed Abdul Qadir Jeelani popularly known as *Pir Dastgir*. Be that as it may, the issue is how did the shrine become the abode of a 'Pir' (Guide, a spiritual being who envelops you in his blessings) and 'Dastgir' (the one who holds your hand when you are in distress)? It is equally pertinent to comprehend as to how did the shrine become a part of our ethno-cultural identity and entered our primordial consciousness. The answers to these issues would provide a clue to the grief, pain and anguish on the devastation of this

sacred shrine. In this behalf, the four distinctive dimensions of the shrine are noteworthy.

First, the shrine would reverberate with the recitations from the holy Quran from very early morning post *Namaz-i-Fajjar* and continued intermittently for the entire day and concluded with the last prayer of *Isha*. On some special occasions the recitations and devotional verses specially composed in veneration of *Pir Dastgir* Sayyed Abdul Qadir Jeelani were rendered by the devotees in unison (a classic cultural tradition specific to Kashmir), which would continue past midnight. The entire area would resonate with these loud renderings instilling a sense of bliss among the people particularly the common folk. The shrine would be thronged by people from different areas across the valley and even from other parts of the state seeking the blessings of the *Pir Dastgir*. This pattern continued throughout the year. It is customary in Kashmir that a student leaving home for attending school or college, an official leaving for office and a businessman proceeding to attend his work, a bride leaving her home with the groom – all are seen off with the prayer 'I entrust you to *Pir Dastgir*' or 'May *Dastgir* protect you'. Thus, the perception of *Pir Dastgir* as a protector and a savior has entered the

recesses of our minds and has become an inalienable part of our collective psyche. No wonder our relatives and friends, doctors, engineers, scientists and academics settled in far off lands of the world would request us to visit the *Dargah* on their behalf and seek the blessings for them.

Second, on specific occasions the relics preserved in the shrine would be displayed to the spiritual delight of the masses. This practice of preserving and displaying the relics of holy men is rooted in the ancient history of Kashmir, which at times is enigmatic to our west Asian friends. This practice attracted non-Muslims to the shrine and gradually they too became ardent devotees of *Pir Dastgir* and would visit the place with veneration and reverence seeking the blessing of the revered *Pir*. This bestowed the shrine with an aura of a pan religious institution transcending the religious barriers.

Third, the specific celebrations of the *Dargah* prescribed well in advance, which the common folk described as *urs*, would be a season of festivities which would run for several days. In the backdrop of illuminated *Dargah*, magnifying its grandeur, the people from urban and rural settings, men and women, children and adults would enjoy this

season making the occasion a great social event. The small time vendors would decorate their makeshift stalls and hawkers would be seen around selling their goods which were an attraction for visiting devotees particularly women and children.

The shrine was an ideal locale for the average people, particularly the women, to meet and interact. They would firstly beseech the *Pir Dastgir* to alleviate their sufferings and then discuss their personal or domestic problems and seek each others advice in dealing with them. Thus, the shrine was a convenient venue for social interaction.

Fourth, the people would flock to *Dargah*, during the natural adversities of a famine, epidemic or excessive rains seeking the divine intervention with the blessings of the *Pir Dastgir* to relieve them from their suffering. However, the shrine equally provided a platform for the people to challenge the despotic and autocratic rulers to end their oppression and suppression of the average common people of Kashmir.

The *Dargah Pir Dastgir* and the traditions and practices associated with it provided a solid block to the edifice of our ethnicity and identity. This is how, as social anthropologists aver, that ethnicities and identities are

formed and sustained in societies.

We are suffering from the agony of the devastation of this spiritual-social-cultural symbol of our heritage. Let us seek the divine intervention to forbear the loss. We seek the blessing of our Pir Dastgir to help us and as Faiz Ahmad Faiz wrote in his noted poem '*Mori Araj Suno*' (Listen to my Appeal):

“ Mori Araj Suno – Pir Dastgir  
Maye Ri, Kahoon Kaa Sey Mein  
Apney Jiya Ki Peed  
Naya Bandhoo Rey  
Bandhoo rey Kinarey Darya...”

(Listen to my appeal, O' *Pir Dastgir*  
Whom shall I narrate my tale of woes  
Take my boat to the shore and  
Tie it down there).

## II

### ***A Clairson Call***

The tragic incident of the destruction of the shrine has invited our attention that a special care and professional approach and management are needed to conserve and preserve our heritage sites. There is equally an urgency in raising our consciousness, particularly among our younger generation, towards the preservation and conservation of our heritage sites in

their pristine form.

It needs to be recognized that our living and dwelling patterns have drastically transformed during the last three or four decades. The over reliance on electric and electronic gadgets has increased dictating a professional and expert handling of these devices. However, this handling, particularly in the case of our heritage sites, cannot be left to technocrats and engineers alone; they have to work under the watchful eyes of heritage conservationists and experts of Kashmir's cultural history.

These experts have to be experienced persons with the knowledge of archeology, anthropology, environment and lore of Kashmir. Their engagement is not merely a need but it is a desideratum to save our symbols of spiritual and cultural identity.

We are no more living in the times when a *Khwoja* (a term for a well-off person of the locality, perhaps originated from Central Asia) would donate a couple of dozen candles or send a kilogram or two of cooking oil to keep the earthen lamps alight to keep these sacred locations illuminated). The more resourceful *Khwojas* would donate a quintal or two of firewood to keep the *Hammam* (a specific space in a

mosque or the shrine where an underground dungeon would be prepared to place the firewood and burn it to keep the surface above, warm; again a Central Asian innovation which with local modifications became indigenous to Kashmir). In later times, *Khwojas* started donating expensive rugs and upholstery items, and electronic gadgets particularly halogen lights (a replacement of candles and earthen lamps). These donations would be acknowledged publicly through microphones on specific occasions indicating the devotion and concern of the devout *Khwojas*.

The generosity of these devotees has needed expert hands to accommodate these donations, which has been generally absent from the management and upkeep arrangements of these holy sites. This apathy is visible in all these sites across the J&K state in general and Kashmir valley in particular. This indifference may be attributed to many an accident in our heritage sites.

Be that as it may, it was shocking to see the 'renovations' including extension patterns applied to our signs and symbols of spiritual-cultural heritage locations. It was a disturbing sight to see that the open space outside the tomb of our revered

saint *Sheikh Hamzah Makhdoom* popularly known as *Makhdoom Sahib* has been covered so shabbily that the glory, grandeur and entire ambience of the shrine has been destroyed.

No one is aware whether it was done at the behest of a *Civilian khwoja* or a *Sarkari khwoja*; the apathy is profound. We do not attribute motives; may be the intentions were right but the long-term consequences deserve a serious consideration. (May the Almighty reward these 'devout' souls for their contributions).

It is equally a fact that with the rising population, the number of devotees visiting our shrines has increased considerably, and there are persistent demands to enlarge the facilities in these places. However, a great care has to be taken in maintaining the historical and traditional ambience of these sites.

### **Look Inward**

The foregoing analysis, which is specific to heritage conservation, prods us towards another direction in examining and critically analyzing our changing dwelling patterns. We are facing a grave energy deficit, which has assumed the proportions of a crisis. However, not much

attention is being paid to comprehend the basic source of this crisis, which is closely linked to our changing dwelling patterns. For the last three to four decades we have taken recourse to a wanton and unnecessary utilization of cement and iron and steel in constructing our dwelling places.

This architectural pattern is not in harmony with the typical climatic and environmental conditions of Kashmir. Many a splendid mansions in Srinagar city for instance, in *Zaina Kadal*, *Mahraj Gunj*, *Gojwara*, *Nowhatta*, *Nawa Kadal*, *Fateh Kadal* and *Habba Kadal* etc which may be designated as heritage buildings have been constructed in our traditional composition of mud, brick and wood.

These structures are resistant to cold weather, apart from being in harmony with our environment.

This pattern has been equally followed by people of all the sections of society. Kashmiris, rich and poor, all are conscious to have a proper and efficient dwelling place to live in accordance with the climate and environment. It is a marvel to see such structures also existing in Western European countries like Switzerland, France, Vienna, Belgium etc. Their architects have used modern

gadgetry in the interiors of these dwelling places without compromising their traditional architectures.

Moreover, these countries are abound in resources like electric, solar and thermal energy which keeps their homes, places of work and shops, warm enough and enables them to meet the challenges of harsh winters. It is not possible for us to reach that level of sufficiency. We have to be conscious that the seasons in Kashmir have been categorized in three phases, *Sonth* (Spring), *Harud* (Autumn) and *Vanda* (Winter).

In fact, spring and autumn seasons are the extensions of winter season except that the temperature does not go down to horrible levels. We use the generic term *Retakoul* to indicate a season without snow which would include, spring and autumn both. The concept of summer is absent in our calendar of seasons. It is in this context that our patriarchs had adopted a dwelling pattern, which would make their lives less miserable, at least on account of climatic conditions.

It may be recalled that the first monolith of cement and concrete was built by the great builder of modern Kashmir, Bakhshi Ghulam

Mohammad, in the form of what is known as Secretariat in Srinagar. From a social and political science perspective, it seems that the idea of raising this structure was to create an *awe* signifying 'a great seat of power'. We have no documentary evidence, but it is believed that some non-Kashmiri Kashmir lovers confronted Bakhshi Sahib about the non-compatibility of the structure with the ambience of environmental specificity of Kashmir. The ironical consequence of this first breach of environmental and architectural fundamentals of Kashmir has been laying down a pattern, which is being followed in raising private, public and governmental structures.

Government officials take refuge during harsh winters and operate from Jammu but average mortals like us have to face the onslaught and watch helplessly, the frozen Dal Lake and meditate during nights without electricity. It is equally an irony that our architects are trained in the plains of India and they carry the inputs from their training and juxtapose them in Kashmir. Their genius would lie in modifying their knowledge and expertise to suit our climatic conditions. However, in addition we, as a social entity, have to get rid off the side effects of amphetamine of aping and copying, which is the bane of our many a social and existential problems. ■