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PRESS RELEASE

WHEN THREATS RETURN, BROTHERHOOD CANNOT BECOME A SUBSTITUTE FOR SECURITY

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The latest threat communication targeting Kashmiri Pandit employees in the Valley cannot be dismissed as merely another piece of digital noise. It is a disturbing reminder that, although the medium of intimidation has changed, the underlying message remains painfully familiar. A community that was once subjected to threats through walls, posters, mosque loudspeakers and whispered warnings is once again being confronted with a language of fear—this time transmitted through the internet and social media.

A fresh communication dated August 23 and attributed to an outfit calling itself the United Liberation Council (ULC) has reportedly surfaced on social media, carrying names and personal details of Kashmiri Pandit employees. Security agencies are examining its authenticity and origin, while reports have described the ULC as a suspected Lashkar-e-Taiba-linked proxy. Whatever the eventual findings of the investigation, the circulation of such material, particularly when it contains identifiable details of individuals, is sufficiently grave to warrant an immediate, transparent and credible security response.

There is something profoundly familiar about what is unfolding. In the 1990s, intimidation travelled through walls, posters, loudspeakers and whispers. Today, it travels through screens, digital platforms and encrypted channels. The technology has changed, but the psychological objective remains chillingly similar: to make a Kashmiri Pandit feel that his birthplace is conditional, his property negotiable, his presence temporary and his safety dependent upon somebody else's permission.

That is precisely why the present episode cannot be viewed merely as an isolated incident or reduced to the question of who created or circulated a particular poster. The larger question is far more fundamental: why should a Kashmiri Pandit returning to his ancestral homeland still have to contemplate the possibility that his return itself may expose him to danger?

A Kashmiri Pandit does not become an outsider because extraordinary circumstances forced him to leave his ancestral home. Nor does the passage of decades convert ancestral belonging into an act of intrusion. A person does not cease to belong to his village, town, shrine, neighbourhood or property simply because violence compelled him to live elsewhere.

The right to remember one's home cannot be criminalised. The right to return cannot be portrayed as provocation. And the right to live without fear cannot be reduced to a request for sympathy.

It is in this context that the recent remarks attributed to BJP General Secretary (Organisation), J&K, Shri Ashok Koul, reported from Tirth Raj Kapal Mochan Nagbal in Shopian, also merit sober reflection. While speaking about the return of Kashmiri Pandits and the need for social cohesion, Shri Koul was reported as saying that "targeted killings won't stop" and emphasising the need to build brotherhood.

The words deserve neither sensationalism nor selective interpretation. They deserve reflection, particularly because they touch the very question that confronts every Kashmiri Pandit contemplating a return to the Valley: what does security mean if the possibility of targeted violence is accepted as something that may simply continue?

If targeted killings are spoken of as something that "won't stop", what exactly is being promised to the families who are being encouraged to return? If danger is

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accepted as a continuing feature of the landscape, who is expected to bear the burden of that permanence? And if brotherhood is offered as the principal answer to fear, what happens to the Kashmiri Pandit employee who has to leave home for work the following morning knowing that his name, address or vehicle details may be circulating in a threatening communication?

Brotherhood is unquestionably valuable. Social harmony is indispensable. But brotherhood cannot become a substitute for protection; sentiment cannot substitute for security; assurances cannot substitute for intelligence; and appeals to harmony cannot substitute for accountability.

Brotherhood begins where fear ends. It cannot become a ceremonial phrase invoked after every threat or tragedy while the underlying vulnerability remains unaddressed. Nor can the burden of demonstrating faith in Kashmir repeatedly be placed upon the very community that has already borne the consequences of violence and displacement.

There is a deeper irony in the present situation. For years, the return of Kashmiri Pandits has been described as essential to restoring the pluralistic character of Kashmir. Yet when they return, they are expected to adjust; when they seek security, they are reminded that the situation is improving; when they raise questions concerning their ancestral properties, they are encouraged to look towards the future; and when a threat again appears carrying personal details, they are expected to demonstrate patience, restraint and faith.

At some point, society must ask itself a very simple question:

How many times must the victim prove his commitment to Kashmir before Kashmir proves its commitment to him?

The majority community should not be collectively held responsible for the crimes of militants, nor should the actions of a few be indiscriminately attributed to an entire society. But society must also possess the courage to examine the environment in which intimidation can emerge, information about individuals can circulate, and threats can once again be directed at a vulnerable minority. Pretending that every such development exists entirely outside the social ecosystem of Kashmir would be an equally dangerous form of denial.

The real test of a society is not how loudly it mourns after a killing. The real test is whether it recognises the warning before the killing.

The real test is not whether people gather for the last rites of a member of a minority community. The real test is whether that member can live, work, worship, own property and return to his ancestral home without society first having to gather around his funeral pyre to rediscover his humanity.

The Kashmiri Pandit community has repeatedly been asked to believe in the future of Kashmir. That faith should not be mistaken for blindness. Nor should its willingness to return be interpreted as a willingness to accept permanent vulnerability.

Those seeking to dilute the seriousness of the present threat by describing it merely as a poster should remember that intimidation has never depended solely upon the physical piece of paper on which a threat is written. The essential questions are far more serious: who prepared it, who circulated it, how were the personal details obtained, whether the communication represents a genuine operational threat, and whether any local facilitation or network was involved in its preparation or dissemination?

These are not political questions. They are security questions. And they require credible answers.

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Likewise, those who respond to the fear of a minority merely by invoking brotherhood must understand that genuine brotherhood cannot ask the vulnerable to live permanently with the possibility of violence. Brotherhood must manifest itself in protection, institutional accountability, social vigilance and an unequivocal rejection of intimidation.

The Kashmiri Pandit does not need ceremonial brotherhood. He needs the confidence that his life is worth protecting before something happens to it.

He needs the assurance that his ancestral property cannot gradually disappear from his possession simply because history forced him away.

He needs institutions capable of identifying a threat before it becomes an obituary.

And above all, he needs a society in which returning home is considered normal—not an act of extraordinary courage.

The Valley cannot convincingly claim to have turned the page while continuing to encounter the same chapter whenever a Kashmiri Pandit is threatened. The names may be different. The medium may be different. The language may now be digital. But the fundamental question remains unchanged:

Will the Kashmiri Pandit be allowed to return and live as an equal citizen, or will every return continue to carry the silent warning that he is living on borrowed time?

The answer to this question will determine whether the frequently invoked idea of brotherhood is merely a slogan or whether Kashmir is genuinely prepared to reclaim the pluralism it so often celebrates.

The Kashmiri Pandit community has already paid an immeasurable price for the failure of institutions and society to prevent the darkness of the past. It must not now be asked to pay another price merely for believing that it still belongs to its own homeland.

The time has come for words to acquire substance.

Threats must be investigated. Security must be guaranteed. Personal information must be protected. Ancestral property rights must be safeguarded. And the right to return must be made a matter of security and justice—not courage and chance.

That is not a demand for privilege.

It is the minimum standard expected of a society that wishes to call itself secure, pluralistic and just.


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