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Swami Laxman Joo Nurtured Kashmir Saivism Out of Dormancy, But It May Die with Him

Over the past 18 months Kashmir has been a volcano of socioreligious violence. Hindus poured by the thousands out of Kashmir Valley like human lava flows. For many, fear is a stronger presence than the beauty of the rising sun casting golden nuclear fire on the Himalayas. And the legacy of Siva yogis voyaging into the inner mind from aeries in the Kashmiri wilderness is nearly forgotten.

Still, there are refuges of mystic stillness in this furious Kashmir karma. Near Srinagar in a hamlet called Ishber is a two-storied brick house nested in flower thickets and ancient trees. It is the ashram of Swami Laxman Joo, who could well be the last living master of pure Kashmir Saivism, the 1,300-year-old group of four meditative systems that cognize that one's Self is the "Being of Siva that has expanded His Body of Consciousness in names, forms, space and time."

For six decades Swami Laxman Joo has been spinning a web of Siva consciousness within himself at the Ishber ashram, and capturing many seekers in its sticky strands. A few - including American disciples - are tenderly cocooned by the swami's inner charisma and his exacting grasp of the liberating teachings of Kashmir Saivism. He has been a navigator to yogis and swamis first voyaging into the kundalini universe of Kashmir Saivism. Scholars from European and American universities have visited and lived with him, attempting to intellectually probe this Siva mind system, which the old master patiently told them couldn't be merely rationally grasped. But the scholars wrote books on it anyway. Kashmir Saivism is now at its height of scholastic investigation. Ironically, the living Kashmir Saivism

is ebbing away.

Laxman Joo is truly the fabled guru now, the Star Wars character Yoda for Kashmir Saivism. "Everybody knows him in Srinagar. Everybody loves and respects him," says a Kashmiri devotee who now lives in the US. His body is bony lean which his Kashmiri tunic billows down over like winter clouds. He doesn't wear saffron orange. The close-cropped hair - a life-long habit - is white. He likes to cover his head with a gray woolen cap that accentuates his bronze skin and inturned eyes that see much further into the Siva universe than they do our earth horizons. His students say he practiced kayakalpa "body rejuvenation," through meditation and looks younger now than 20 years ago.

Adjacent to the brick house in Ishber is the swami's personal temple. Inside, a Siva Lingam. A new satsang hall, havan hall and Bhairav temple were recently constructed. Laxman Joo developed a love of design and construction when he occasionally supervised his father's houseboat factory. After his breakfast the master toils in the garden or works on an architectural project. After lunch, he rests for an hour, then sits in the garden. He loves beauty in nature and people, and out among the seasonal shrubs and Florentine flowers visitors sit with him. Three times a week in the morning he discourses on his Bhairav school of Kashmir Saivism. But over the past few months the Ishber ashram has been empty of his meditative presence.

In mid-March this year the swami disembarked at the Los Angeles Airport after a series of flights from Kashmir - the first time he has been to the West. His adoptive ashram is the L.A. home of John and Denise Hughes. They have been intimate students of Laxman Joo since 1971, when John was a graduate student of Indian philosophy. John says, "Swamiji epitomizes the rightness of dharma to the core. He is soaked in God consciousness." John had a choice to continue his doctorate quest in America or stay in India with "the perfect master." He chose India and the Saivite guru and "I became a scribe recording Swamiji's teachings." It is a crucial, even historical, function, particularly as the Saivite guru is now 84. Swami Laxman Joo's mission to America is simple: help catalyze the visas needed for the Hughes family to return to Kashmir. Up to 1985 the Hughes lived in Ishber and ran an upholstery fabric export business. Swami saw in John a depth into which he could sink "Saivism's secrets." John became the principle recorder of the master's teachings. The Hughes' 13-year-old son Viresh was born in Kashmir. Swami Laxman Joo indicates Viresh will be his successor [see sidebar below].

Denise Hughes says the swami, who is normally reclusive, has been more talkative in America than he was in Kashmir. In the meantime John succeeded in getting his guru's book Kashmir Shaivism, The Secret Supreme published with State University of New York Press [see excerpt below]. The swami says he vows not to return to India without the Hughes. His 84th birthday was celebrated April 11th in Los Angeles. HINDUISM TODAY correspondent Archana Dongre spent a day with the swami and his disciples. He speaks softly, sometimes barely audibly. Several of our questions he simply remained silent on, and other answers were beautifully enigmatic, much like a Zen koan. Rest periods punctuated his day and he likes to go on short car drives, a habit from Kashmir. Often he speaks from a point of reference of being Siva, "I am Bhairav and the entire world is my offshoot," he exclaims. "Siva is the only great God and all others are His manifestations. God is the inner being, the entire world is his external being." With these three tight statements he has summed up the enlightened mind of Kashmir Saivism, including his personal identity as Siva. This monism is such a bedrock state that he forecasts, "The religions that do not believe in oneness will vanish."

His sense of Sivaness trickles down even to physiology. When we asked him if he took any medicine, he replied, "The ayurveda came from me. I created all the medicines. The human heart is produced by me which can remain healthy for 125 years." He says he will live 15 more years, attaining mahasamadhi in year 2006.

Swami Laxman Joo was born as Laxman Raina in 1907, one of eighteen children to a wealthy Kashmiri brahmin who owned 100 Himalayan hardwood houseboats on Srinagar Lake. There was some spoiling. He was the first youth to have a motorcycle in Srinagar. "As a child I was very strong and beat everybody. I liked other beautiful children, never ugly children" he gleefully recounts.

"I used to faint a lot as a child," he says. Devotees say he was going into samadhi. His parents took him to Swami Ram, a powerful Kashmir Saivite guru in Srinagar, whom Laxman Joo's father had built a house/ashram for. Swami Ram called the youngster Swami Laxman, as if he were his younger brother. And the name stuck. The joo is the Kashmiri form of ji. Swami Ram became his first guru in Kashmir Saivism, but he died when Laxman was 7. At age 12 he came under Swami Ram's disciple, Swami Mahatabakak, gaining an expertise in Sanskrit and doctrine that he still utilizes today. The swami is reluctant to talk with us of his guru lineage. He mysteriously says, "Some people called me crazy. People trapped me but I made myself," referring to his mostly self-propelled odyssey into Siva identity.

His parents arranged a marriage for him, but he hid out, saying his life was for God. So they established him in the Ishber house. He has remained celibate for life. His students say in his middle age he was more fiery and reveled in exacting Bhairav elucidation.

Swami Muktananda, the founder of Siddha Yoga Dham which uses Kashmir Saivism as its basis, spent several summers with Laxman Joo. And Gopi Krishna, the Kashmir brahmin kundalini savant, sought Laxman Joo's authentication. He didn't give it. Other notables received Laxman Joo's instructions, including Jaidev Singh Thakur who wrote an early work on Kashmir Saivism. Swami used to pilgrimage to Benares every year and he says that mystic scholar "Gopinath Kaviraj, who is no more, was the greatest being of that place. He was secretly my disciple." As to the surge of Western scholastic interest, he lucidly observes, "These people only talk, they do not live it. I talk less, but I live religion."

The swami tells us he sleeps only one hour a night and travels more mentally and spiritually to some 60,000 devotees. Over the past few years he has visited Nepal, where the Hughes made a valuable video tape of him.

The blood of Kashmir Saivism could dry up with Laxman Joo's death, yet he is unconcerned. He observes it has come close to extinction before. He says it will go on of itself, "like the sky goes on of itself." He believes in 15 years there will be peace and prosperity in Hinduism.

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