

## HONOURING IRON MAN

Every year on October 31, India comes together to celebrate the birth anniversary of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, the architect of modern India, through the nationwide event "Run for Unity." This day, observed as Rashtriya Ekta Diwas (National Unity Day), is not merely a commemorative occasion but a living reminder of Patel's enduring vision of a strong, united, and inclusive India. The Run for Unity symbolizes collective strength, determination, and the spirit of togetherness that Patel so passionately championed throughout his life.

Sardar Patel, fondly remembered as the "Iron Man of India," was instrumental in transforming the dream of one independent nation into a political and geographical reality. After Independence, India stood fragmented, with more than 565 princely states existing as separate entities. Through his unmatched diplomatic skill, patience, and foresight, Patel succeeded in persuading and integrating these states into the Indian Union-an unparalleled achievement in world history. His clarity of purpose and belief in the power of unity laid the foundation for a cohesive and resilient nation.

The Run for Unity serves as a powerful tribute to this extraordinary legacy. It transcends the boundaries of age, region, and community, drawing together citizens from all walks of life-students, professionals, defense personnel, and everyday citizens-who participate in solidarity to reaffirm India's unity in diversity. The run is not just a physical activity but a symbolic march toward the ideals of integrity, inclusion, and national harmony. It reminds us that unity is not inherited but nurtured through shared values, civic responsibility, and mutual respect.

In today's rapidly changing socio-political environment, Patel's vision holds even greater relevance. The challenges of regionalism, communalism, and divisive politics test the very fabric of the nation he so carefully wove together. The Run for Unity thus becomes an appeal to every Indian to rise above narrow identities and contribute to the larger goal of national integration. It calls upon the youth-the torchbearers of India's future-to uphold the principles of oneness and equality that Patel embodied throughout his public life.

The celebration also reinforces the importance of strong leadership, grounded in honesty, courage, and selfless service-qualities that Patel personified. His life teaches us that unity is not merely a political slogan but a moral force built on trust.

## PM's Employment Package for Kashmiri Migrants

■ VIVEK KOUL

The Prime Minister's Employment Package for displaced Kashmiri Pandits, launched in 2009 and implemented in 2010 with the promise of 6,000 jobs, was conceived as a landmark initiative aimed at facilitating the dignified return and rehabilitation of the exiled community to their homeland. It was seen as a symbol of hope - a bridge between exile and return, between loss and renewal. Yet, more than a decade later, what was envisioned as a measure of reintegration has, for many, tragically turned into a package of separation and alienation. When the scheme was announced, its intent was clear: to restore a sense of belonging to the Kashmiri Pandits displaced from the Valley in the 1990s, and to anchor them back in the socio-economic landscape of Kashmir. In its initial phase, 3,000 appointments were made under the package, followed by another 3,000 in subsequent years, notably in 2014 and 2017. The government assured prospective employees that they would be provided with secure and adequate housing before joining their posts. This assurance was not just administrative; it was a moral commitment - one that would enable families to return to the Valley with a semblance of stability and safety.

However, the ground reality tells a starkly different story. Even after 15 years, only about 3,500 of the promised 6,000 employees have been allotted government accommodation. The construction of transit quarters, meant to be a temporary but safe dwelling arrangement, has been marred by interminable delays, substandard infrastructure, and bureaucratic apathy. Many of these accommodations remain incomplete, with poor-quality materials, broken roads, and inadequate facilities. The connecting roads to several of these quarters are in deplorable condition, often non-motorable, and riddled with potholes. In some cases, the government has made symbolic allotments of quarters - often highlighted for publicity - but posses-

sion has not been granted. Reports suggest that these announcements are made for mere public relations optics rather than genuine relief to the employees. Boundary walls are missing, basic amenities like water and electricity are inconsistent, and most importantly, there is no provision for security - a vital requirement given the region's volatile situation. Further, The employees appointed under the PM Package are required to vacate their allotted flats or quarters upon retirement. Consequently, they must return to Jammu after completing their service. Therefore, this arrangement cannot be termed as true rehabilitation; it merely serves as a temporary settlement rather than a permanent resettlement measure.

The irony is bitter. The very employees who were promised rehabilitation are now living in rented accommodations in Kashmir, often in unsafe localities, while their families continue to reside hundreds of kilometres away in Jammu. For them, this package has translated into years of separation, loneliness, and psychological strain. The lofty objective of "return and rehabilitation" stands hollow when the beneficiaries themselves describe it as a "punishment package." Life for these employees is defined by constant anxiety and emotional dislocation. Living under the shadow of militancy, their existence is fragile and uncertain. They go to work amid palpable fear, return to empty quarters, and live with the constant worry for their families back in Jammu. For many, this forced separation from their loved ones has taken a toll on their mental health. The inability to care for ageing parents or share family responsibilities has compounded their distress. What was meant to be an employment and rehabilitation package has instead fragmented families and deepened their sense of exile.

The government's repeated assertions of successfully rehabilitating Kashmiri Pandits ring hollow in light of these realities. If it has been unable to ensure the secure resettle-

ment of just 6,000 employees, how plausible is the claim of facilitating the return of the entire displaced community - estimated to be around four to five lakh people? The gap between policy proclamations and ground realities is glaring. Equally concerning is the choice of locations for the transit accommodations. Many of the newly constructed flats are situated in remote, isolated, and mountainous areas, far from the main towns and administrative hubs. Some are even located near riverbeds and springs, exposing the residents to potential flooding during the rainy season. Such planning raises serious questions about the government's understanding of both the geographical and psychological dimensions of resettlement. For a community already grappling with trauma and insecurity, isolation in such areas only deepens the alienation. Despite these challenges, the official narrative continues to portray the PM Employment Package as a success story - a narrative that contrasts sharply with the testimonies of those living its reality. For the media, the package is often a convenient symbol of "return," but for the employees on the ground, it represents a painful contradiction: a policy that has brought them closer to danger and further away from their families.

The broader implications are worrying. The package, which could have been a model for gradual and voluntary resettlement, has instead become an example of administrative failure and misplaced priorities. In its current form, it neither offers genuine rehabilitation nor ensures dignity and safety. It has become a token gesture - one that looks good on paper but collapses under the weight of its own contradictions. Over the years, these employees have repeatedly appealed to the authorities for secure housing, relocation to safer zones, and the option of working from Jammu until conditions in the Valley improve. Their pleas, however, have been met largely with silence or bureaucratic indifference. While governments change and rhetoric evolves, the lives of these employees remain

trapped in limbo - caught between duty and despair. The emotional toll of this prolonged uncertainty cannot be overstated. Many employees narrate stories of missing family milestones, of elderly parents living alone and unwell in Jammu, of children growing up without the daily presence of a parent. Their lives have become a constant oscillation between hope and disillusionment. The package that was meant to reunite families with their homeland has ended up dividing them further. The government must recognise that rehabilitation is not merely about employment or infrastructure - it is about trust, dignity, and security. It cannot be achieved through symbolic postings or incomplete housing projects. True rehabilitation demands empathy, sustained engagement, and a realistic understanding of ground conditions. Until these principles are internalised, policies like the PM Employment Package will remain hollow gestures - promises made to a displaced community that continues to wait for justice and belonging.

Fifteen years on, the package stands as a sobering reminder of how a well-intentioned scheme can lose its essence in the labyrinth of bureaucracy and political optics. What was supposed to be a bridge back to home has, for thousands of Kashmiri Pandits, become a wall of separation. The tragedy is not only in the failure of infrastructure but in the failure of imagination - the inability to translate a promise of return into a lived reality of dignity and safety. In the final analysis, the so-called rehabilitation has turned into a cruel paradox. The employees who symbolize the government's claim of "return" live in isolation, fear, and disillusionment. Their story is not one of homecoming but of continued exile under a different name. The Prime Minister's Package for Kashmiri Pandits, intended as an instrument of hope, has instead evolved into a package of separation - a poignant metaphor for a policy that began with promises of belonging but ended in alienation.

## Beyond the Scroll

■ ANUSHREE BHATTACHARYA

Today, where fifteen seconds is enough to make someone famous or break someone's opinion, it's easy to forget the legs that walk miles to uncover real stories. Social media is full of trending reels, catchy sound bites, influencer's commentary that turn every story into click-worthy content. The quiet work of our local journalists may get unnoticed sometimes, yet, they play a crucial role in credible storytelling in India. They are the most trusted pillar of our democracy that brings out the community voices into the spotlight.

**The Changing Media Landscape: Reels, Virality and Their Limits**

We are well aware that in just a few years, especially from the lockdown era, the process of content has been changed totally; from making, to editing, distributing, consuming, and feedback giving, all processes are developed. Content nowadays isn't just created for a group, they're crafted according to an individual's perspective. Platforms like Instagram, FaceBook, YouTube, TikTok, thrive on personalized, quick and attention-grabbing content. A thirty-second clip can reach thousands, sometimes millions, of viewers. The appeal is simple: fast, visual and share-

able. However, those contents don't provide context, continuity or accountability all the time. They may cover an incident as a reel but stop at a point to make it clickable and the audience curious for the next part. That's where local journalism comes to rescue the audience from the reel cut and cover the whole story. They connect the dots and present the full picture that algorithms and influencers cannot.

**India's Local Journalism: Why It's Especially Important**

India is vast in territory, languages and regional diversity. Here, regional journalism means presenting news in local languages like Bengali, Tamil, Marathi, etc. It is considered essential because the national media is unable to cover all the news from each and every locality, so local communities voices and issues are most probably ignored by the national media. Then the local journalists hold the power to make their audience informed with their surroundings like road repair delays, panchayat decisions, small-town protests, local artisans, in which they find their interests and also which is useful for them because local stories serve the richness and depth of the region.

Another reason why localization mat-

ters is because many readers/viewers are much more comfortable in their local language or their mother tongue. So they prefer to get informed with their preferred language only as it helps to attract their attention, builds trust with the audience and there will be a chance to convert them into loyal customers.

**Civic Engagement, Accountability and Democracy**

Local journalism matters in terms of democracy also. So, the citizens get to know what services their local government is providing, or which promises fail. So, whenever their public meetings happen, they are informed enough and in a better position to act according to their opinions. This can be vice versa also, before elections the ruling party read local news to learn more about that region they get to understand what development that region required and promise the people to fulfill their needs. Many studies have shown that strong local reporting correlates with higher civic participation and voter turnout.

In other words we can say that local journalists showcase the workings of democratic governance at the ground level. Without them, we have only fragmented or social-media-driven noise

that lacks follow-up, fact-checking and accountability.

**The Pressures Facing By Local Journalists**

The importance of local journalism is crystal clear but still they face significant constraints in India. Some key facts:

According to a study by NewsLaundry, 423 criminal cases against 427 journalists across India from 2012 to 2022, which means 58% of journalists in small towns were arrested, compared to only 24% in major metros. Only 3% of them got protection from arrest in small towns, compared to 65% in major cities. India ranked 151 out of 180 countries in the World Press Freedom Index in 2025 reported by Reporters Without Borders after slight improvement from 159th in 2024. A survey by Lokniti?CSDS in 2023 found that 75% of Indian journalists believe news channels are "less free" to do their job and 82% of the journalists believe that the media favour the ruling party according to a NewsClick published article.

The economic and structural pressures also hit the local outlets, especially in declining ad revenue, competition from digital platforms, and owner consolidation. These pressures challenged

the journalists double, as they have smaller staff, fewer legal resources, less visibility to the national/international watchdog community and thus potentially more vulnerable.

**Why This Still Matters In The Age of Reels**

In this era of digitalization, where attention spans are just fifteen seconds and virality of content is the craze but it rarely dives into the depth, the role of local journalists becomes more vital. Because:

Reels and short?form videos give snapshots. Where local journalists turn those snapshots into narratives by linking causes, consequences, local histories and context.

In most of the cases, misinformation spreads faster than facts. Here local journalists hold the power of accountability to help the viewers to combat that by providing fact-checked, specific and verified information to them.

Local communities are always under-represented or often get ignored by the national digital media. Small-town news may not be covered by the national outlets. So here local reporting can expose everything at the micro level, which matters because cumulatively these affect the larger democratic pic-

ture.

Where nowadays trust seems a fading term in the media, local reporters are well known personally to their communities which offer a trusted bridge between the media and mass. The community read reports from people they know and respect.

**Conclusion**

In a media environment where reels sparkle for a few seconds and then disappear within minutes, local journalists anchor us in a deeper and more sustained narrative. They are the watchers of local government, narrators of communities, the voices for people often unseen. In India where 78% of people rely heavily on local sources for news, and where press freedom shows strains these journalists are not just relevant, they are essential. Without them, our democracy risks losing its local eyes and ears.

As digital content keeps shifting, we need not just more clicks but more clarity, more presence and more stories from the ground. The day we stop valuing local voices is the day we stop understanding the real India.

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## Scared Shine of Sukrala Devi

■ G.L KHAJURIA



The Union territory of Jammu & Kashmir is beset with a land of the Gods and Goddesses in the greater part of Himalayan and sub-Himalayan region of the Indian landscape. Mal Mata Sukrala Devi occupies its unique and prominent place of devotion and revelation.

The Devi Maa Sukrala is also most reverentially addressed as Jagat Janani, Rajarjaswari Mata where devotees Throng in thousand to have holy darshan, pay obeisance for blessings.

Sukrala or Sukral is a small village located in Billawar in district Kathua. The spot is located amidst dense chir pines forest intermingled with other borad - leaved trees, bushes, shrubs and herbs. The village is located aside river Naaj where a big slab of rock of historic time exist which is having an engraving of Lord Hanuman which is regularly besmeared on every Tuesday and Sunday both by the locals as well as the outsiders who throng over this sacred spot. Sukrala Mata shrine is reachable by road around 80 Kms from Jammu and about 30 kms from district headquarter. It is situated at a height of about 4000 ft from mean sea level (MSL) and commands an idyllic view of mountains and cliffs all around of the vicinity of the Shakti shrine. Both the roads from Jammu and Kathua are well metal and are conveniently approachable by regular buses, private or hired vehicles. The sacred shrine from other destination, Like Bani Basohli and other areas of the country are also reachable through these routes.

Through legends and historical record, the name of Sukrala is derived from Sharikalaya,



the abode of Sharika which though, of course is another revered name of Mata Sharda. The historical records reflect the narration as to the origin of the sacred spot of Mata Sukrala Devi. The story goes that used to live a renowned saint at Basohli who had received his education in Kashmir and Kashi there he visited many shrines including those of Shri Amarnath ji, Sharda, Hari Partvati etc. He was a strong devotee of Gods and Goddesses. During his arduouspenace and devotion, the mother goddess was very pleased and so he had holy dream. When asked by Mata ji as to what he wanted. The devotee prayed that he wants that she should be at his place so that with locals can be relieved of the pains and agony and are blessed by her Shakti. Mataji granted him the boon that

she will appear at the time of his grandson and so the devotee disclosed to the locals. The devoted Brahmin had number of sons amongst whom two most pious and learned were by name Amolak Ram and Mahadev Shiv Nandan. They preferred and adopted Billawar and Basohli as their residence.

Exactly in the time of Mahadev (Shiv Nandan), a shila (stone slab) miraculously started emerging out from a spring at Sukrala. The people of the area eftsoonly started realizing the prophecy of the grandfather as had earlier been disclosed. They (the inhabitants) accepted it as an emblem of the goddess and as such started worshipping it regularly. With the passage of time, a prince from Chamba by name Madho Singh exiled by his elder brother

was wandering desperately and reached Sukral area. The story further goes that Sukrala village was having dense forest with abundant wild animals and birds, the prince started hunting wild animals and birds but with the passing days, the prince fell seriously ill.

Despite application of all treatments, the prince could never be recovered. Ultimately, as suggested by the locals, he approached Shiv Nandan who had a good spiritual reputation and so he asked one of the devotee (Chila in local parlance) of the goddess by name Hira Thakur to dance (locally spoken as Chauki) and when the devotee (disciple of goddess got into trance (a Shakti dance), He was asked to let know the malady of the prince Madho Singh. As a result, the disciple stated that goddess was very annoyed as the prince had hunted many animals and birds of the forest. Further, the disciple told the prince that he would not recover unless a temple of the goddess is built with material from Chamba.

The exiled princee was perplexed as how he could manage to build the temple of Mata for he was ill and far away from Chamba, his native place. He expressed his inability to both Shiv Nandan and Hira Thakur. But the dancing devotee (disciple) replied exiled prince to proceed Chamba immediately and nothing on towardness would come in his way by the grace of the Shakti of Mal Mata.

A few days later, the prince was well and after vowing before Mal Mata footed towards Chamba, while waying towards the desired destination, he came to know enroute, about the demise of his brother who had exiled him. Reaching Chamba, all the inhabitants of the vicinity embraced the prince and accepted him as the ruling prince. In due course of time, the prince became obsessed with the routine care taking and administration of his kingdom and in the process, he forgot the promise he had made before Sukrala Mata to build a temple there. One night, when the prince was comfortably sleeping, he felled down from the bed and remembered the promise he had made before

Mal Mata and so as such he resolved to make good the promise.

On the next day, the prince started for Sukral with a large entourage carrying all short of building material. The temple was as such constructed and an image of Mahishasurmardini was installed in the spacious temple Chamber in later stages a temple was constructed by Raja Brajraj Singh, son of Ranjit Singh Dev around 1755 AD and so such the promise made by the prince redeemed. Later onlot of springs and baolies were constructed in and around the temple complex.

Mal Mata Sukrala Devi is very benign goddess who fulfills the wishes of his true devotees. According to a popular belief, all wishes to the extent of the birth of child, securing Job for livelihood and for the curing of chronic diseases are fulfilled by the shrine Shakti of Mal Mata.

The images of Mata Jiis a Shila (Piece of rock). It is seated on a brass lion with a silver mounted head. And in its backdrop is a figure of Mahishasurmardini (Maa Durga) standing on Mahishasur. The goddess is chaturbhuj, the goddess with four arms with a sword in one of her hands. The eyes are of silver inlaid with dark vermillion.

Lord Vishnu is shown reeling under the hoods of Sheshing with Maa Lakshmi pressing lords lotus-like feel. From the navel spring a lotus, on which is seated a four headed Brahma and a five - faced Shiva and the lord Ganesh. There are two images of the lion in front of the temple complex.

Mal Mata Sukrala Devi is an important Shrine being revered and venerated by almost all over the state, particularly being a Kul Devi. The devotee across the state also visit this sacred Shrine of Shakti around the year, particularly during Navratras on both occasions. There are huge Bhandaras and Langars arranged by the locals and other devotees and the social activists.

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