

VITASTA

A PART OF OUR IDENTITY

by

CHANDER M. BHAT

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THE GODDESS WHO CAUSES HER DEVOTEES TO LIVE
TOGETHER FOR MUTUAL BENEFIT AND GUIDES THEM
TO FINAL BEATITUDE OF LIFE IS NAMED VITASTA.
SHE IS WORSHIPPED AS THE GODDESS OF BENEFACTION.

BHAVANI NAMA SAHASRA STUTHI

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River Jhelum, commonly known as **VITASTA**..... and further transformed into *Vyth* in Kashmiri parlance, runs a length of 203 kms and meanders through the Valley in artistic zigzags. The Greeks have referred the river Jhelum as "Hydaspes" and in Persian; it is called "Behat". When it leaves Kashmir near Baramulla is called the "*Koshur Derya*". Vitasta is the most important river of the Kashmir Valley and it gives the valley the appellation "*Vaitastika*". In other words Vitasta is the lifeline of Kashmir Valley and is main drainage artery in the valley. After leaving the Indian part of Kashmir, joins the great river Indus in the Punjab State of Pakistan. The river takes its name "Jhelum" from the town of Jehlum, in Pakistan Punjab, beneath which it flows. Magnificent and wonderful temples are situated on its banks right from its origin at *Vitasta-Srota* transformed into *Vethavorthur*. According to *Nilamat Puran*, it is regarded as an incarnation of *Uma* who at the request of *Kasyapa*, came bubbling forth as a river from a hole as big as a *Vitasti* made by *Siva* with his spear. Vitasta divides the valley into two equal parts. It originates from Verinag, (*Varnag* as mentioned in *Rajatarangini*) a big octagonal spring about 26 km away from Anantnag. The spring becomes a small canal outside its bank and from there begins the river Vitasta. The spring is situated at the bottom of a hill covered by pine trees, evergreen plants and Chinars which stand even today along the spring in magnificent size. Further to the east of the spring lie the remains of a pavilion and baths built during the Mughal period. The constructions on the banks of the spring as well as its surroundings are of rare design. The Mughal Emperor Jahangir constructed it, and slabs for the purpose were brought all the way from Iran. Construction date of the spring e.g. 1029 H is duly inscribed on a stone installed at the western gate of entry towards the spring. Emperor Jahangir loved the place so much that on the eve of his death he asked to be brought here. Kashmiris especially the Pandits are not only proud of the Vitasta but they virtually worship it as the manifestation of the goddess, *Uma*. *Vaitha Truvah*, which falls on the 13th day of the lunar fortnight of *Bhadon* (August-September), used to be celebrated at Verinag, and on this occasion Kashmiri Pandits, coming from all parts of the Valley, used to participate with all religious fervour and devotion. On this occasion earthen lamps, set afloat on the river, bedecked with floating and flickering lights presented a captivating and memorable spectacle. *Vaitha Truvah*, also known as *Vaitha-Vatur-Truvah*, literally means: "*Vaitha*, for the Jhelum-source-thirteenth day". A *mahayajna* used to be performed on this occasion. Verinag is also the birthplace of a mystic-saint *tapaswani* Mathra Devi born in the house of a noble Kashmiri Pandit family of Pandit Hari Koul. Born on *Shravana Shukla Ashtami*, Samvat 1935, corresponding to 1878 A.D., Mathra Devi, after practising her spiritual *sadhana* and *tapasya* along with her younger brother Pandit Gobind Koul, blessed Verinag for another seventeen years, after returning from Durga Nag, till she became one with the One above on the *triyodashi* of *Pausha Shukla Paksha* of *Samvat* 2041, corresponding to January 5, 1985. There is also a Shiva Temple with seven feet long Shiva *Lingam* situated at village, *Voomoh*, and it is said that the Shiva *Lingam* fascinatingly changes colour each day during the week.

From Verinag, Dooru village comes to its way. Dooru is the birthplace of great Kashmiri poet, Roosal Mir, who died at a young age of 33 years but left a big mark on the Kashmiri literature. From Dooru, Vitasta flows through the plains of Mahmudabad, a small village on the left bank of Vitasta. Mahmudabad is the birthplace of great poet and writer, Mahmud Gami. Mahmud Gami was a prolific writer in Kashmiri. His metrical versions of such Persian romances of *Yusuf Zulaikha*, *Laila-Majnun*, and *Shirin-Khusro* as borrowed themes present him a poet endowed with a fine descriptive and narrative quality. He wrote a large number of *ghazals* also. Maqbul Shah composed his *Gulrez*, a narrative poem on a love theme also borrowed from the Persian romances. He also wrote a satirical account of Kashmir peasant life known as *Guristnama*. From Mahmudabad Vitasta flows through Lok Bhawan (Larkhi Pora). Here again the Vitasta showers her blessing on the village called

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Gosayeen Gond. This village has been pilgrimage centre from ancient times and is situated on Anantnag-Verinag road. An attractive neat and clean Ashram is found here. This village was the abode of mystic saint Swami Aatmaram ji. Many saints and sages have meditated in this village and attained *Moksha*. A *Siddha*, a Mystic, a man with lots of spiritual attainments, Pandit Keshav Nath Koul, popularly known as Kish Bab also shifted to this village from Khah Bazar, Anantnag and practiced spiritual disciplines in this holy village. *Hara Baah* festival is being celebrated here at Lok Bhawan. From Lok Bhawan, Vitasta flows through Daligam and then to Anantnag. At Anantnag the river *Candravati* or *Diti*... the mother of the *Daityas* is stated to have assumed the form of this river and later called *Arapath* (or *Harsapatha*) joins Vitasta. *Candravati* and *Trikoti* may be the designations of some rivulets meeting the Vitasta not very far from its confluence with the *Harsapatha*. *Caturvedi*, another tributary joins the Vitasta after the latter's confluence with the *Visoka* at Anantnag. Anantnag is an ancient town of Kashmir, about 65 km to the north of Srinagar. Anantnag literally means "countless springs" and it has another meaning of *Shesh Nag* on whose hoods is seated the god Vishnu alongwith his spouse Lakshmi. Environed by mountains, enriched with myriads of trees and plants laden with loads of fruits and flowers and studded with so many rivulets, this beautiful city offers breath-taking natural views all around. At one place two exquisite cascades can be seen gushing out of a mountain and falling into two different ponds. Nearby lies a beautiful garden-house of the then Maharaja of Kashmir with a temple standing not far off. The city can boast of many other water cascades, one of them being sulphureous. The famous *Nagabal* in the lap of the hillock, with some ancient temples, also forms a part of Anantnag. Annual festival of *Ananta Devata* is held on the fourteenth day of the dark half of *Bhadra* month.

From Anantnag, Vitasta flows through Khannabal, a small town in the outskirts of Anantnag. The river is navigable from Khannabal to Khadanyar. Khadanyar lies at a downward distance of about 07 km from Baramulla town. It is at Khannabal that three separate rivulets, *the Arpat*, *the Bring* and the *Sadrine* join to swell the waters of the river, Vitasta. The arpat flows through Kothar, the Bring through Kokernag and Sandrine through Shahabad. The arpat joins the Bring at Mir Danter, which then join with Sadrine at Hanz Danter. These tributaries run from Kothar and Kokernag. The distant source of river Jhelum is in the lake of Sheshnag at the head of Lambodari or Lidder river, which flows through famous Pahalgam valley and joins the vyeth below Khannabal at Gur, on its right bank. The Lidder flows for a distance of 69 km from Sheshnag to Gur. After flowing with a gentle murmur, Vitasta passes the ancient *tirthas* of *Vijayesvara* (Bijbehara) and *Cakradhara* (Chakdhar); both these temples were ravaged and destroyed by Sikandar Butshikan. Bijbehara was an ancient seat of learning and in ancient times there was a University where learners flocked to satiate their thirst for learning and scholarship. The dome of the temple at Bijbehara was so high that its shadow was believed to be fall up to Srinagar city. After Bijbehara the river flows through *Sangam* to Awantipora. At *Sangam* it receives the united waters of the *Veshav* and the *Rambiara* both of which flow, down from the Pansal mountains. Veshav a considerable river is always full of water and the water of this stream is very cold as maximum water in this freshet rises due to melting of snow in the upper reaches of the mountains from where it originates. Its source is in the Kramasaras or Kongsrnag lake. The stream forms the famous waterfall of Ahrabal. The Veshav flows for a distance of 72 km. The Vishav is said to be a slow, calm and full flowing river depicting the character of a women. This stream irrigates the entire Kulgam area, which is referred as the "Rice Bowl" of Kashmir. The Rambiara that joins the Vishav, at Nainah (Sangam) has its source in the Pir Panjal range at Nandansar and the Baghsar lakes. The Rambiara after leaving the mountain below Hurpor flows divided in many channels within a wide and mostly dry bed of rubble and boulders. The stream flows for a distance of 64 km from Nandansar to Sangam. The Sangam bridge on Srinagar-Jammu National Highway is a little

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above the confluence of Jhelum, Vaishav and Rambiar. The river Jhelum also receives the waters of Arpal tributary on its right bank at Chraligund near Chursoo, collecting waters from different streams flowing through Tral area. The total length of the Arpal stream is 30 km from where it originates. The 9th century Kashmir ruler Awanti Verman, who reigned from 855 to 883 A.D., founded Awantipora as his capital city. Here he built two temples, *Avantiswar* and *Avantiswamin*, consecrated to Siva. The remains of the temples are still located in this village, which is 28 km from Srinagar. Excavations at this village can bring to light the ruins of many more temples lying buried underneath the ground. It was all due to the efforts of Mr. Jagadish Chandra Chatterjee, the great archaeologist, under whose directions the excavation work was completed at Awantipora in 1908. The excavation work further took place in 1914-16, under the supervision of Sh. Daya Rama Sahni. Some coins of the Hindu rule were unearthed. According to Henry Cole, the temple must have been constructed between 852-54 A.D. According to the Koshur Encyclopedia, though presenting a distorted picture of ancient Kashmir the temple, *Avantiswamin* is a Vishnu temple.

About three miles further down near present Kakapora, the waters of freshet *Roomsh* mingles with it. Romshi, which has its source in the Pir Panjal at Kacchgalu Pass, wherefrom it flows from a distance of 54 km and joins the master stream at Kakapora. The Romshi divides itself into three streams at Danzab, which are called Mamshi, Kamshi and Romshi. At Kakapora also, there are ruins of some ancient temples, and it is generally believed that King Awanti Verman, who was a patron of art and temple architecture, built the temples. Then Vitasta passes through Pampore, the land of Lal Ded and Saffron. About 03 km from Pampore, lays the temple of *Rudresa* at village Ludov. It is a mode of the Hindu architecture bearing the stamp of Gandhara type architectural developments. It also bears a close resemblance to the *vihara* at Buniyar in Swat valley. Legendary mystic poetess Lal Ded, was born at Padmanpora now Pampore. Her verses taught monism and religious tolerance. Lal Ded's poetry, translated in various languages, transcends the boundaries of Kashmir when it gives a universal message.

After touching the holy land of Pampore, Vitasta further proceeds towards yet another village known as Pandrathen (*Puranadhisthana*). In ancient times it was the capital of Kashmir, situated at a distance of three miles to the south of Srinagar. The *Rajatarangini* mentions that in 50 B.C. two temples of Siva, called *Bhim Swamina* and *Vardhamanesa* were built at this place. This undoubtedly testifies to the antiquity of the town. A Siva temple in this ancient town is the only historic relic here that has survived ravages of the past. The stones in the temple are found placed side by side without any use of mortar. The temple was built sometime between 913 and 921 A.D. by Partha, the then king of Kashmir and its ruling deity Siva was called *Meru-Vardhan Swami* after the name of the king's Chief Minister. The capital stood on the left bank of the river Vitasta at the beginning of the reign of king Pravarsena II who later shifted the same to the south of the Vitasta. Swami Vivekananda on his second visit to Kashmir has visited this temple on 19th July 1898, describing thus: "The temple consisted of a small cell with four doorways opening to the cardinal points. Extremely it was a tapering pyramid with its top truncated, to give foothold to a bush...supported on a four-pierced pedestal. In its architecture, trefoil and triangular arches were combined in an unusual fashion with each other and with the straight-lined lintel. It was built with marvelous solidity, and the necessary lines were somewhat obscured by heavy ornament..... In the centre of the ceiling was a large sun-medallion, set in a square whose points were the points of the compass. This left four equal triangles at the corners of the ceiling, which were filled with sculpture in low relief, male and female figures intertwined with serpents, beautifully done. On the wall were empty spaces, where seemed to have been a band of topes. Outside, carvings were similarly distributed. In one of the trefoil arches...over, I think the eastern door...was a fine

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image of the Teaching of Buddha, standing, with his hand uplifted. Running round the buttresses was a much-defaced frieze of a seated woman with a tree...evidently Maya Devi, the mother of Buddha..... The masonry of this temple was superb and probably accounted for its long preservation. A single block of stone would be so cut as to correspond not to one brick in a wall, but to a section of the architect's plan....."¹ Great poetess of repute with melodious women sensibilities, Habba Khatoon who rose to be the queen of Kashmir after her wedlock with king Yusuf Shah Chak also belonged to Pandrethan.

After Pandrethan Vitasta enters the land of Srinagar. According to Kalhana it was Emperor Ashoka who in 300 B.C. built the city of Srinagar, which later on came to be the country's capital during the reign of king Abhimanyu who assumed power in 960 A.D. The Srinagar of Ashoka stood on the eastern part of the present Srinagar. King Pravarsena II founded the new capital Pravarapur near Hari Parvat. He built the first bridge of boats across the Vitasta and also many temples and palaces. In the sixth century A.D. king Gopaditya had his capital in Gopakar, a name that derives from Gopadiriha. Srinagar is the prime city of Kashmir described as the heaven on earth by poets in one voice. At present there are seven bridges in all across the river Vitasta within the Srinagar city. The names of the seven bridges can be cited seriatim: Amira Kadal, Habba Kadal, Fateh Kadal, Zaina Kadal, Ali Kadal, Nawa Kadal and Saffa Kadal. On the eastern side of the city is a conspicuous mountain, called Sankaracarya hill. There is an ancient temple of Lord Siva on the top of this mountain built by king Gopaditya in the sixth century A.D. Shankaracharya temple commands a magnificent panoramic view of the Srinagar city. In the capital city of Srinagar, the Jhelum receives the surplus water of Dal Lake by a canal called *Tsunth Kul*, which flows from Dalgate to Zero Bridge on one side and from Dalgate to Maisuma on the other side. At Srinagar, *Sumeri Mavas* was being celebrated and it was a routine to take a bath on this day near Soomyar Temple Ghat which during militancy was burnt to ashes. There are many temples on the bank of Vitasta in Srinagar city like, Barov Mandir, Hanuman Mandir, Ganpatyar Mandir, Kharyar Mandir, Bhagavan Gopi Nath Ji Ashrama at Kharyar, Soomyar temple, Drabyar temple, Raghunath temple, Kali Mandir, to name a few and sorry to say, that most of them have been desecrated and burnt.

Just before reaching Srinagar, the Vitasta is joined by the Mahuri. After flowing over three miles within the city, the river flows at first to the north and then turning to the south-west, it receives the river Dudh Ganga. Dudh Ganga rises on the eastern slopes of the Pansal Mountains; also known as Mount Tutakoti, near the Choti Galli, pass known as the Sangsofed stream or *Chat Kul*. Dudh Ganga joins the river Jhelum on its left bank at present Chattabal. The total length of Dudh Ganga is 63 km from Choti Galli to Srinagar. Here at Srinagar, Vitasta continues to flow with calm even when it is brimming. At Srinagar, there was an octroi post near Chattabal called Abi Guzar and in olden days octroi was collected, here, as the Vitasta was the only means of transport. In ancient times, the river Jhelum served as the most important highway of Kashmir. The importance of river traffic in Kashmir may be estimated from the fact that the number of boatman engaged in it was about 3400 according to 1891 census. The boats were the ordinary means of travel in the valley. At present, people in some areas use boats, for crossing the river. Swami Vivekananda accompanied by a party of Europeans and disciples, on his second visit to Kashmir via Rawalpindi also preferred this mean of transport and from Baramulla to Srinagar he hired three Dungas (houseboats) to reach Srinagar. It took three days to reach Srinagar from June 20 to June 22, 1898.

The present confluence of the Vitasta with the Sind takes place at Shardapur, which was changed to Shadipur. Sind is considered the largest tributaries in the valley. The river Sind rises near Zijila and the Amarnath peak. The Gangs Lake on Mount Harmukh is often

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referred as its traditional source. This largest tributary of river Jhelum has a course of 95 km and drains the largest and the highest portion of the mountain chain in the north. Its ancient name was Sindhu, which means the river. The river after leaving Lar territory reaches Duderhom and spreads out in numerous branches. These form an extensive Delta covered in its greatest portion by shallow marches known as *Anchar*. The Sind after leaving the Anchar joins the Vyeth. The sand and bajree of river Sind is of standard quality for building purposes. Mortar remains used to be immersed in the Vitasta near Shardapur. Shardapur was also known as Paritranpur in the days of yore. It was the capital of King Lalitaditya in the eight century. Later, king Shankarvarman shifted the capital to Pattan. At Shardapur one finds high mountain peaks clad in snow dazzling with the sunlight on them while birds of a myriad variety flew overhead. The Chinars with their leaves of various hues seemed to emit a wonderful light. In other words Shardapur is said to be the Haridwar of Kashmir and after passing the villages of Uchakundal and Marakundal, the river enters the outskirts of Vaskur village. Rupa Bhawani is said to have lived at Vaskur for about 25 years in a small hut. She had a well dug here by a blind potter whose eyesight was miraculously restored as soon as the water level reached the well. Even today the water of this well is being used by the inhabitants of this village irrespective of caste and creed and is considered pious for all purposes. The hut and the well were being maintained by the Kashmir Pandits of this village called Mattoo's. Annual festival is held here on *Sahib-Saptami*, the seventh day of the dark fortnight of *Magha*.

The river then further passes through village Sumbal. There is an *asthapan* of Nund Ki-Shvar, one of the brothers of *Aasth Barov*. The details of eight Bharova with the places of their residence are:

1. Shri Jagan Nath Village Achan
2. **Shri Nandkeshvar** **Village Sumbal**
3. Shri Ganganand Village Mattan
4. Shri Kakvishal Village Pargachu
5. Shri Jeevan Nath Village Ladhoo
6. Shri Moonglesher Village Sirnoo
7. Shri Omkar Nath Village Drussu
8. Shri Neilkanth Village Murran

It was a routine in every village of Kashmir valley to offer a *Razakath*, when the wish made by any member of the villages gets fulfilled. At Sumbal there was a routine to offer a *Razakath*, when a new bride enters this village or any other surrounding village. Muslims of Sumbal were also taking the *prasad* of Razakath and they would often shout outside the temple, *YA NANDRAZA, KHAEW KATHA MAAZA*. From Sumbal, the Vitasta flows through Hajan village into the Wular Lake and then to Sopore, the apple town. On the left side the river Jhelum receives the tributaries of Sukhnag, which is joined by Ferozpur Nallah. They rise at Palas to Samadian of the Pir Panjal. These tributaries join the mainstream at Trikulabal. The Sukhnag stream flows from a distance of 62 km from its source to Trikulabal while Ferozpur Nala measures 43 kms from its source to Trikulabal. Besides, the Ningal, which rises in the Apheravat peak above Gulmarg, the stream joins the Vyeth at Ningal village soon after it leaves Wular Lake. The total length of Ningal from its origin is 40 km. On its right bank, the river Jhelum receives the tributaries of Erin and Madhumati, which rises from Harmukh mountain and empty itself into the Wular Lake near Bandipora. The total length of Erin is 30 km while Madhumati is 35 kms long. The famous Azinagir Canal

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has been drawn out of Madhuymati stream at Sonawari. The Pohru is an important right bank tributary of Vyeth, which has been referred as Lalakoal by Moorcraft. The Pohru river is formed by the junction of the Kahmil with Lolab streams, near Moghulpur village and joins the Vyeth above the village of Dabgaw about 6 km south-west of Sopore. The river Pohru raises at Kaji Nag, and Kahmil, Talan Manwar and Hamal form it, which joins it at Bamahama Chogul, Dukulabal and Hib Dangarpura. The total length of river Pohru from Kupwars to Dabgaw is 49 km. At Sopore also there is a famous temple of Siva known as *Nandkeshvar Bhairava*, situated on the left bank of the Vitasta. The annual festival is held here at Sopore on *Jyestha Amavasya*. There are also the temples of Rashi Peer, Devi Bal and Shiv Temple on the bank of the Vitasta at Sopore. It is said that Reshi Peer was born here at Sopore in a Shikara when his mother was traveling back from her paternal house Gund Gushi. A beautiful temple was constructed on the spot and all the Pandits living in the surrounding villages used to come here and get the blessings of Reshi Peer.

After flowing about 14 miles further, it reaches the gorge of Baramulla. Like Srinagar city, Baramulla (*Varahamula*) town is also situated on both sides of this river. Here at Baramulla there are many *tirths* on either side of the Vitasta. *Shailaputri* (Devibal) is on the left bank. *Shailaputri* is considered the miniature of Ksher Bhawani. There is a *kund* in the premises of this temple and fresh water gushes out of it. On the right bank, there is *Koti Tirtha*. It is believed that the holy waters of one crore *tirths* reach here through the Vitasta and is therefore considered very sacred. There is a Shiv temple adjacent to *Koti Tirth* and the *Shiv Lingam* is of a unique type, which depicts the full face of Lord Shiva. The river below the gorge turns into a large torrent rushing down in rapids and falls. From Baramulla to Muzaffarabad (POK), the Vyeth is referred as 'Derya'

Near Domel, Krishan Ganga also joins it, which originates from Drass and after passing through the mountains and tracks of Tilal, Guraz, Keran and Karnah. Alexander Cunningham estimates the total length of the river to be 288 km. River Krishan Ganga is famous for its cold water. It is also called Neelam River. Below Muzaffarabad, the Jhelum sweeps suddenly round to the south, and after receiving the Kunihar or Nainsuk River, continues upto the town of Jehlum in Pakistan. The road from Srinagar to Rawalpindi crosses it, near the village Kohala. Between Dangali and Mangla, the Jhelum is joined by Poonch River often called Poonch Toi or Palasta.

The total course of flow of Vyeth from its source in Kashmir valley to its confluence with the river Chenab in Pakistan, measures 992 km.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Chander M. Bhat

Born on 20th March, 1960 in Murran a village in North Kashmir, Chander M. Bhat is presently working as an Assistant Supdt. Posts, in Department of Posts, Govt. of India. His articles regarding Posts and of non-political nature stand widely published in various papers and magazines of the country. A booklet "How to Collect Stamps" published by the Department of Posts, has earned him genuine accolades. He worked on the project of tracing the roots of his co-villagers and of the village Murran, resulting into the culmination of a widely acclaimed book "Murran ...My Village. Man with depth, Chander M. Bhat has also another book, "Ocean by Drops" (collection of poems) in his vase having colorful poems. His book "Ancient History of Jammu and Kashmir", confirms his researching capability. Various research papers like "The Splendor that is Amarnath" and "Vitasta...The Sacred River of Kashmir" are valuable additions to his works that has proved very fruitful and guiding force in the exile period of Kashmiri Pandits community of which the author is also a member.

Presently the author is working on "OOL...THE NEST" - a six volume project [each volume of about 2500 pages] on all the 595 Kashmiri Pandit villages of Kashmir.

E-mail: chander_1831@rediffmail.com

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