CHAPTER - III

DEIFICATION OF A GURU: DEVOTION AND SPIRITUALITY IN THE BHAGWAN GOPINATH ASHRAM
Plate V

Photograph of Bhagwan Gopinathji
INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I shall discuss the activities of the 'Bhagwan Gopinath Ashram'- set up after the first Kashmiri Saint whose statue and relics have been enshrined in an ashram, built in Kharyar, Srinagar. He alone was called the "Bhagwan", the glorious lord, in his lifetime. In this chapter, I shall sketch the biography of this spiritual preceptor, who for his devotees occupies a place at par with God, to look into the nature of his concerns, the significance of his miracles, the character of his following as well as the sect and the light all this information throws on religion among Kashmiri Pandits in the contemporary situation of migration and diaspora. Gopinathji, an introvert and an evolved being who attained 'Shivahood' by an intense sadhana, was flocked by the seekers of enlightenment as well as those who sought alleviation of their miseries, during his lifetime. The ashram was set up after he gave up his mortal frame although the devotees believe that he is still alive, living simultaneously in the astral plane and in the ashram made in his memory. From here Gopinathji directs his devotees by appearing in their visions and dreams. As he is believed to be alive, the group rules out the possibility of his successor, brought out by the fact that since its inception in 1968, the sect has faced no schism. The dominant mode of worship is the 'unconditional surrender' by which the
devotees partake in Gopinathji's anugrih or miracles. These miracles are the central focus of Gopinathji's personal charisma, which continues to prevail among the members, although the group has been performing varied functions under a formal trust since 1968.

SECTION - I

THE PERSONAL CHARISMA OF GOPINATHJI

The Bhagwan Gopinath Ashram at Udaiwala Road, Bohri, Jammu was alive with people on 30th December 1993, as on this day a life-sized marble statue of the guru, Gopinathji was installed inside the freshly decorated prayer hall in the ashram. The ashram at Jammu was set up in 1991, after the migration of Kashmiri Pandits, on a piece of land purchased by the Bhagwan Gopinath Trust. Initially the ashram functioned in a make-shift shed, while the construction of a double storeyed L shaped building was in progress. The ashram was formally inaugurated on 23rd July, 1991 on the birthday, Mahajayanti of the guru, Gopinathji. The ashram complex comprises a big Hawanshalla where Vedic fire rites are held, another big prayer hall for the daily evening prayer or aarti, a big hall where food is served on functions, a library, a big kitchen-cum-store area and a big lawn. Apart from this the ashram has some rooms which are used for the office purposes as well as for over-night stay by the devotees on various occasions.
On the day when the statue was installed a big ceremony of fire rites *hawan* had been organised according to the vedic rites. The devotees who had gathered in large numbers chanted "Om Namo Bhagwate Gopinathaye". Recitations were held from various texts like the *Guru Gita*, *Sandhiya Vandana* and *Ashtotar Shatnam Stotram* which are published by the Bhagwan Gopinath Trust. It was an evening of emotional fervour as they welcomed their preceptor to his new abode.

Gopinathji is known to his devotees as 'Bhagwanji' and is acknowledged as a great *Siddha* who achieved the highest spiritual stage by an intense *sadhana*. He is the only Kashmiri saint who was given the title of *Bhagwan*, the glorious god, during his life time. Gopinathji left his mortal coil on 28th May 1968. Although some of his devotees had seen him in his physical form, as well, for most of the devotees who have known him only after 1968, he lives in the statues, photographs, 'Visions' and dreams where they see him.

In these statues and photographs he appears sitting with one knee up to his chest wearing a long cloak, *pharan* and a turban, *safa*, on his head. He appears dressed up as a typical Kashmiri Pandit householder, rather than a spiritual mentor or a *Yogi*.

All the devotees present in the *ashram* were congratulating each other on the auspicious occasion of
Murti installation, as the event was seen as yet another miracle, anugrih, in the series of miracles that are associated with Gopinathji. People recalled their days at Kharayar Ashram, Srinagar, the first ashram of the group, which was set-up way back in 1969. The last public function that had been celebrated there was the Smriti Diwas on 25th December 1989 when all the devotees had gathered before the statue of Gopinathji and offered their prayers aarti, together. From then till now the devotees have passed through a lot of turmoil, both in their personal lives as well as in the events related to the activities of the ashram. Most of the devotees of Bhagwan Gopinath Ashram have migrated to Jammu after 21st January, 1990, when the Kashmiri Pandits as a community came under the onslaught of militancy.

A large number of devotees said that they received indications from Gopinathji to leave Kashmir, which helped them to take such an important decision. One of my informants Rajni Kaul, is a 42 years old housewife, who lived with her engineer husband and three school going daughters in their ancestral house at Fateh Kadal, Srinagar. Her parents-in-law are dead and the house was divided among the four brothers, each living separately. Recalling the events that led to the migration she said:

"In November 1989, the political situation had gradually become bad in the valley. My youngest
sister had to be married in December at Jammu, for which we all had to come here. As the situation was getting worse day by day, we decided to spend the entire winter months at Jammu and to return to the valley only in April 1990, for, we thought till then the situation there would become normal. Meanwhile my parents had booked a truck for carrying the luggage needed for the marriage at Jammu. However, due to some misunderstanding regarding the day of departure, the truck driver did not turn up on the right day. Anyway my parents had to leave as it was fixed as an auspicious day for leaving for the wedding. An alternative was quickly sought and they left as scheduled. Two days later my brother called me up to inform me that the original truck driver had arrived to go to Jammu. As the driver had been paid in advance, so my brother loaded the remaining part of the luggage, but found enough space left in the truck for my luggage to fit in as well. Initially I had packed very little luggage, just some utensils and beddings which could be used in the wedding as well as for our stay in Jammu. The truck was to leave at 10 AM next morning. That night after I slept off, I had a strange dream. In my dream I saw that my house is totally empty while I leave for Jammu, when
suddenly Bhagwanji calls out of the Thokur Kuth, the home shrine and asks me to take him along with me to Jammu. I woke up feeling very strange and like a woman possessed began to pack up everything I could lay my hands on. I rolled up my carpet and emptied my store room, I even picked up Bhagwanji's photograph from the Thokur Kuth and sent it all to Jammu. We came to Jammu after a week to attend the marriage but never went back again. Before we knew, the situation went out of control and all the Kashmiri Pandits came fleeing. I am the only one in my in-laws family who was able to get things out of that house. When the others left subsequently, after receiving the threats from the militants, they barely managed to get themselves out - our house was burnt down in April 1991.'

In another case, Ushaji, a 52 years old School teacher who lived in Habbakadal, Srinagar with her executive engineer husband and two sons said:

"We had made our new house at Natipora (a new suburban colony) and were to shift into it before March 1990. However, the incident of 21st January 1990 made the general situation so bad that our shifting was postponed. Due to my pre-occupation with the preparation for shifting and the
imposition of curfews every now and then, I had not visited the ashram for more than a month. While praying in the Thokur Kuth, home shrine, one day I thought I saw Bhagwanji's hand move, as if he was calling me. At the same time a thought crossed my mind that very soon I shall go to Natipora which is situated farther away from the ashram than my present residence. Also the situation is so uncertain due to bomb blasts and curfews that it may take months before I visit ashram from there, so why not visit the ashram before going to Natipora. By Bhagwanji's grace, the very next day the curfew was lifted and I went to the ashram with my husband and son. It was a Sunday and since the curfew had been lifted after a week or so, many devotees had come there. Everyone was talking about the various incidents of murder and loot around their neighbourhood. Many were also talking about the exodus that had begun. I came to know that many of my acquaintances had left the valley. As most of the devotees went away, we stood talking to some of our close associates. One of them suggested that we draw lots before Bhagwanji's statue and ask him if we should leave. We did so and the chit saying, "Yes leave the valley" was picked up. We were dumb
struck. In my house there was a big discussion. This was indeed a difficult situation. My younger son who is an ardent devotee of Bhagwanji opined that we must heed the orders of Bhagwanji. I too recollected how Bhagwanji had called me to the ashram to tell me to leave. When we finally left the valley, things went well for us. We were one of the lucky few who by Bhagwanji's grace were able to sell off our house at Natipora and get a good sum for it. With this sum we later built our own house at Jammu. Bhagwanji showed us the right path at the right time, for, although we lost in terms of place, we could have been worse off like most of the migrants."

Sohanji works as an accounts officer in the Accountant General's office. He is around 50 years old, married with two children. Sohanji has been a devotee of Gopinathji since his boyhood and says that he owes everything he has to him, including his life. According to him:

"After the 21st January episode, life for us became a nightmare. I used to live in Rainawari in an area where Muslims were more in numbers. Infact my entire neighbourhood had Muslims houses. Although we have had good relations with our neighbours, but as the slogan shouting and stone throwing at the Kashmiri Pandit houses began, we
became terrified. The whole family was confined inside the house. No one went out even into the verandah. Bomb blasts and firings had become everyday phenomenon. One evening as usual the whole family, me, my parents, wife and children sat inside the house, with curtains drawn and only one bulb lighted on the table lamp. We were listening to B.B.C when someone came knocking at the door. We all froze. My mother and wife began to cry. We all felt they (the militants) had come for me. The knocking was persistent but not loud. I went to the outside room and peeped out of the window. I saw an old man wearing a pharan. As he knocked he kept looking over his shoulder as if making sure that no one saw him. I felt confident and opened the door. He was my neighbour, a Muslim man who lived a few houses down the road. He was scared and told me that the militants had put my name on the hit list and would kill me very soon. He had been told this by his son who knew the Area Commander of a particular organisation of our area. I thanked him with tears in my eyes, as he had risked his life for me. He said he had to do this as he had the order of Bhagwanji. I could not understand this, so he explained that he had seen a dream that my house had been put to fire and out of the burning house Bhagwanji came out with a
burning log of wood which he threw at the neighbour's house. Immediately thereafter the neighbourhood is reduced to ashes while the fire of my house is put out. This had shaken the man and he set out at the risk of his own life to warn me against the impending danger. After the neighbour left, I told my family about what he had said. They became hysterical with fear. I rang up my brother-in-law who is in the police. He sent us police protection and we ran off in the middle of the night. We were still at my in-law's house, in Natipora, Srinagar, when the militants had attacked my house and set it on fire in the early hours. Although we could not save our belongings but our lives are a prasad we have from Bhagwanji*.

The devotees believe that the indications given by Gopinathji are his miracles. To some Gopinathji appeared in dreams and visions, while others drew lots before him. Either way they were saved only because of his miracles. In some cases the devotees and their families had escaped to safety just in the nick of time as gun-toting militants had raided their house, a few hours after their departure. For others the timely and orderly exit along with their families and worthwhile belongings (including post office and saving bank accounts) was possible because they heeded Gopinathji's
indication. These people escaped the fate of most others who had to leave at short notice, often in the clothes that they wore. These people landed up in the various migrant camps near Jammu where they are leading a miserable life.

The greatest miracle for the devotees relates to the ashram itself—that Bhagwanji himself joined them in the new place. During the days of turmoil devotees could not visit the ashram regularly. Bomb blasts and curfews prevented people from coming out of their houses. The militants had even fired rocket missile towards the ashram, which is said to have deflected right at the gate, burning down the neighbourhood while the ashram remained safe. When the priest, Rattanlal, along with the caretaker finally left the ashram to go to Jammu, they simply locked the ashram and gave the keys to one of the devotees who lived next door. Thereafter, a local Muslim woman, Fazi, who lives nearby, reportedly saw Gopinathji on many occasions moving about in the ashram premises.

Although the devotees fled the valley separately, in one instance, families of four devotee-office bearers coincidentally left on the same day. These are the families of Pran Nath Kaul, secretary, M.K. Ticku, organiser, J. Patwari, librarian and Satish Razdan, cashier of Bhagwan

1 Fazi is an old widow who is given monthly pension by the Bhagwan Gopinath Trust.
Gopinath Trust. These families met enroute at Banihal from where they travelled together to Jammu. These people had not been in touch with one another for last four months in the valley. By this sudden meeting (ascribed to as Gopinathji’s miracle) not only was the contact re-established but the initiative to observe the next important function of the group was also taken. The first function of the year, Navreh, had not been celebrated because of the turmoil of guns, bomb blasts and exodus. In Jammu where most of the people had taken refuge, the attempt to come together was thus made. First of all these four persons contacted a Jammu based old devotee, Dr. Kaushilya Wali, who was the president of Kashmiri Pandit Sabha, and got her permission to hold the celebration of Mahayagna, at the premises of Kashmiri Pandit Sabha. They also sought her help in providing infrastructural support including manpower, needed for the performance of such an event. Advertisements were put in the local newspaper, inviting people to attend the function. The function was a big success, as a large number of people attended it, including the other devotees in exile who were now staying in and around Jammu. For them it

2. Banihal is 65 miles away from Srinagar on the Srinagar Jammu Highway Road.

3. The Kashmiri Pandit Sabha is a social and cultural organisation of Kashmiri Pandits of Jammu.
was a big reunion. What was remarkable about the gathering was that a very significant number of those who came were the non-devotee Kashmiri Pandits, both from the Valley, as well as from Jammu. Interestingly many of them were to become ardent devotees of Gopinathji later on, so much so that Rajaji Kaul, the younger son of the Secretary of the Trust, asserted that as of now almost 38% of the total number of devotees have come into the fold after 1990.

Before 1990 there were very few families of devotees in Jammu. These people performed their religious activities privately at home and made yearly visits to Kharyar Ashram at Srinagar. These devotees were too few in number, so scattered that they lacked initiative as well as means to engage in elaborate institution building. But after the devotees from Srinagar came, they were able to form a proper organisation and build an ashram like the one at Srinagar they were forced to lock up and leave. After the success of the Mahayagna celebrations, the Mahajayanti and Guru Purnima festivals were also organised at the same place with the help of increasing number of devotees. Several meaningful fund-raising campaigns were embarked upon which led to the next important step - the construction of an ashram. The land for it was bought through one of the office bearers, Satish Razdan, who said, "This place seemed to be sent by Bhagwanji himself. It had proper boundary walls and a shed built in it. This shed could be used as a prayer hall. So we collectively and decisively moved forward towards our
resolve to make the Bhagwan Gopinathji Ashram come back in reckoning with a bang." The social network between the old and new devotees, was responsible for the setting up of Bhagwan Gopinath Ashram in Jammu.

A profile of the ashram at Jammu from the data in the questionnaire completed by 60 persons on the occasion of Murti Sthapna confirms that about 98% of the devotees had migrated from Kashmir in 1990. All of them are Kashmiri speaking, Pandits. Although many Muslims came to seek blessings from Gopinathji, when he was alive, only some poor Muslim families and individuals visited the Kharyar Ashram at Srinagar before 1990. At Jammu no Muslim devotee is seen. Among the non Kashmiris, there is one sadhu, who had been living in Srinagar for the last 35 years, before he was asked to leave by the militants of his area. He came to Jammu and began living in a local temple, though he did not feel comfortable. On the Mahajayanti celebrations of Gopinathji at the premises of Kashmiri Pandit Sabha, he met the office bearers and narrated his tale of woe. Thereafter, when the ashram was set up at Bohri, this sadhu was asked to come and stay there permanently. He has been given a room to himself and is a part of the organisation now. The sadhu can understand and speak Kashmiri properly. Most of the migrant devotees were employed with the government in various departments or in institutions like banks, Life Insurance Corporation etc. As they migrated
without any formal arrangement, most of them get the relief — initially a sum of Rs.1000 and free rations per family, on monthly basis from the government. Those who could, have started to work privately as well, to provide for their families. Though educated and fairly well-to-do in Kashmir, for most of them, life after migration is not so easy as it was in the past. There is a significantly higher number of young boys and girls in this group. Most of these are young school or college going students, who can often be seen in uniform or carrying books and bags, when they come for the aarti. These students usually come directly to the ashram from their schools or colleges or from their tuition classes, before going back home. They are the worst affected by the migration and seem dedicated to help in the growth of the sect, as they believe that "Bhagwanji's anugrih, alone can help us out of this situation". (Veronica Teng in the questionnaire). Many of the informants said that they have become more religious and spiritually inclined after the migration (28%) and about 24% said that they had become Gopinathji's devotees through their children. Among the new comers to the group about 18% are from the camps at Muthi, Mishri Wala, Purkhoo and Nagrota. These people are from rural Kashmir and had not heard of Gopinathji in Kashmir. In Jammu they came in contact with the ashram through their children. Except for a handful (2%) of the devotees, no one is formally
Plate VI

Yearly Calendar of Celebrations: Bhagwan Gopinath Ashram
initiated. Most of the devotees follow personal devotion and unconditional surrender to Gopinathji. On the whole this is a group of young and dedicated people who possess the skills to manage this growing religious organisation.

THE BHAGWAN: TRADITIONAL CHARISMA OF GOPINATHJI

Who is Gopinathji? The answer to this question lies at the basis of religious experience followed by his devotees. To his devotees, Gopinathji is not any ordinary human being nor do the strict facts related to his life have much significance unless they are understood and explained within the devotional paradigms. This view may contrast with an outsider's viewpoint for whom facts about real Gopinathji are difficult to find as they are hidden beneath the layers of hagiography. I will now give a short biographical outline of Gopinathji and thereby situate it in traditional charisma. All the accounts written on Gopinathji's life are hagiographic descriptions (S.N. Fotedar 1974, S.N. Katju, 1977, K.N. Dhar 1981, G.N. Raina, 1992); all that is available here are the public images, his self as formally presented as an object of devotional attitude of his followers. However what is of interest to the present study is not the man Gopinath, but that Gopinathji who is worshipped by his devotees. This Gopinathji is known as the
Bhagwan 4, a living deity or a God. He is accepted as a divine person within common understanding of religious symbolism. The story of his life is a tale of his evolution as a Siddha (one who has attained spiritual self realisation) of tallest order, born of Goddess Ragyana 5 who incarnated to be his mother. From this perspective his life is full of miracle performances, be it healing an individual of his illnesses or protecting the frontiers of his motherland.

Bhagwan Gopinath was born as Gopinath Bhan on 3rd July 1898 A.D. at Bhana Mohalla, Srinagar. His father Narayanjoo Bhan came from a rich and influential background. However Narayanjoo’s father had got married again in his old age to

4. According to one of his devotees, K.D. Shukla, "Bhagwan is not a very befitting reference to him, as anyone who controls the worldly powers of 9 Siddhis and 9 Riddhis is Bhagwan. Gopinathji is nearest the Almighty, almost His part, His active swaroop" (Saint of all Times, K.N. Dhar 1981, 80)

5. A form of Durga worshipped by Kashmiri Pandits, whose temple is at Tulmula in Kashmir.
a greedy woman. Narayanjoo could not get along well with his step mother, so he left his father's house and gave up his claim to his wealth. Along with his wife Haara Mali and children, Narayanjoo had to lead a humble life. They lived in the houses of others as Wangijwor. Haara Mali, Gopinathji's mother was the daughter of a saintly person called Prasadjoo Parimoo. Prasadjoo was a devout follower of Goddess Ragyana of Tula Mulla. It is believed that the goddess appeared in his dream and informed him that she would be taking birth in his house. Soon afterwards Haara Mali was born. She is reputed to have been a pious and noble lady who remained in purdah, seclusion, throughout her life. After her marriage to Narayanjoo Bhan, she was a devoted wife who stood by her husband in his troubles courageously. She lived for a short while only and when Gopinathji, her fourth child was only twelve years old, she died. It is believed

Wangijwor is a kind of tenant who lives in the house of others without paying any rent. The system prevailed in Srinagar in early 19th century. In those days, everyone had a house of his own, especially in Srinagar city. People lived in joint families in their ancestral house. If one house became overcrowded then another house would be constructed near the old house, but in the same compound. In some cases, several houses were built in the same compound, which is called the Kotumb (details T.N. Madan, 1965). By and large, everyone lived in a joint family near their agnatic relatives. Only exceptions to this would usually be villagers who came from outside the Srinagar city. These people stayed with either distant relatives or known people, as Wangijwors, till they made their own house or moved to other house. As no money transaction took place, the whole arrangement was based on compassion on the part of the house owner towards them.
that she came to the world with a mission - to give birth to Gopinathji (Simpfendorfer n.d., 82).

Gopinathji's childhood was an ordinary one. Although he did not perform any miracles in his childhood, but his inclination towards religiosity was evident from a young age. Gopinathji went to school and studied till class 8th. After the death of their mother, Gopinathji with his elder brother Govindjoo and younger sister Janki Devi lived with their father. Around the same time, Deva Mali, their elder sister was widowed. Along with her two daughters she returned to her father's house to live there forever. Although Prasadjoo was a small time businessman, his income soon became insufficient as the number of dependants increased. Janki Devi's marriage was an additional liability. As a result the elder son of the family, Govindjoo Bhan took up employment with the Custom and Excise department and began to support the family thereafter. Govindjoo remained a bachelor and looked after the family till his death in 1946. Meanwhile to help in financial matters at home, Gopinathji dropped out of school after class 8th and took up employment. To begin with he worked as a compositor at a printing press for three years and later he ran a grocers shop for ten years till 1925.

Gopinathji was well conversant with Sanskrit, Urdu, Persian and English. He had been, since early childhood,
close to his maternal uncle and aunts, who were deeply religious. In course of time, he too became involved in spiritual matters. From his boyhood he started to visit the shrine of Goddess Sharika at Hari Parvat, Srinagar, and continued to do so for the next fifteen years. Here he would circumbulate the hillock daily and meditate. Apart from this, Gopinathji actively participated in other religious activities like organising trips to various sacred places in Kashmir, such as Tula Mulla, Hari Parvat, Pokhribal, Mahadev and Vicharag. He would be the group leader and would arrange yagnas and satsangs in these trips. As he had interest in the Sanskrit language, Gopinathji memorised and recited from texts such as Panchastavi, Vishnu Sahasranama, Bhawani Sahasranama, Indrakrakshistotram, Mahimastotram, Shiv Stotrawali and Bhaqwat Gita. Gopinathji also made frequent visits to mystic saints such as Zanakak Tufchi, Balakji Kaw and Jeewan Sahib. He would physically serve them by pressing their feet as well as preparing tea or hukka for them. Nothing is known for sure about who Gopinathji’s spiritual preceptor was. Since he visited more than one saint and served them with devotion, it could be that he learnt something from each of them. When asked who his guru was, Gopinathji had pointed towards the book, Bhaqwad Gita and said anyone of those seven hundred verses, shlokas, can be ones guru and in reality, God, is one’s guru (Fotedar 1991, 10).
From his early youth, Gopinathji was reluctant to take up any job although family responsibilities forced him to do so. In 1925 Gopinathji was blessed with a darshan or divine vision of Goddess Sharika whose upasana or meditation he had been doing for the last fifteen years. This made him eager to attain spiritual perfection and he lost interest in worldly ways. He gave up his job and retired into seclusion for seven years from 1929 to 1936. During this time he underwent an intense spiritual sadhana or discipline as he lay in one room with only a small wick lamp burning in a corner. No one except his niece, Chandaji, was allowed inside the room. He spoke to no one and met nobody. The room remained untouched and unkempt for seven years, with layers of dust and cobwebs in it. It is said that a rat bored a hole in one of Gopinathji's heels while he was not conscious of it. He was usually on fast those days, at times for months together but sometimes he would eat large quantities of food at a time. His body became swollen and at times he would spit blood. On occasions he would eat handfuls of Datura or Cannabis and other lethal intoxicants. After the sadhana ended Gopinathji emerged a Siddha, who had full vision of past, present and future. Although his body was badly mauled, his soul was shining radiantly (Fotedar 1991, 38). This paved way for his further ascent in the practical path of spirituality.

In coming years Gopinathji gained mastery over the
various Tatwas or elements. To gain mastery over the fire element, Gopinathji would regularly offer oblations in his Kangri, or the fire pot which is commonly used by people in Kashmir to keep themselves warm in winters. From 1957 onwards, he started the practice of lighting a dhooni or the sacred fire in a sigdi or iron receptacle using firewood and offered oblations into it regularly. These oblations consisted of sugar (brown in colour), rice, barley, dry fruits, flowers, mint (Methna Leaves), skimmia leaves etc. The dhooni would keep burning from morning till evening, while he would sit smoking his chillum, a receptacle for tobacco and other intoxicants and live coals, from which he took intermittent puffs. Sometimes, he would fill a big iron tray with tobacco, sprinkle a layer of turmeric over it, followed by layers of sugar, rice, maize and wheat flour. Then he would set fire to it. This would continue for two or three days till everything was consumed. During this time, he would eat nothing but keep absorbed in smoking chillum. He would say this was to propitiate Mahakaal, the God of Death, to save somebody’s life. From 1946 onwards, Gopinathji had began to live with relatives, first at Rishi Mohalla and later at Chandapora. Here he would sit on an asana, a special seat, smoking his chillum, with his eyes transfixed towards the sky, totally absorbed with the infinite. Gopinathji would sit like this for hours together, emitting vibrations from various parts of his body. As his biographer writes, "He would sometimes raise his shoulder or
some other part of his body and it seemed that he was reacting to some vibrations received by him". (Potedar 1991, 40) For spiritual elevation and meditation, Gopinathji followed this method of emitting and receiving cosmic vibrations, for awakening power within the body. Through this method of inducting vibrations, the limited mind becomes inspired by the universal mind.

Gopinathji never went out of Kashmir during his lifetime, though he would often visit sacred shrines of Devis or Goddesses in and around Srinagar. Here, too, he would sit in a hut, emitting vibrations and receiving them. Gopinathji believed that these Devis are Chetan or conscious units of Teja or effulgence that come down to the earth from the skies and remain there at various sites for a thousand or two-thousand years and then revert to the source they come from (Sky). These are the stores of conscious effulgence, chetan bhandaras which in the shape of Devis, are full of energy and by emitting and receiving the vibrations, people receive power.

During this period people began to come to him for material gains like cure for ailments or getting employment, in which Gopinathji often helped them. Some of

7. This practice of emitting vibrations is very common among the Sufi Saints in Kashmir and is known as "Zikri-Haq"
these people became devotees through Gopinathji's initiation. He initiated a devotee by a mere look or by sharing his chillum with him and rarely by word of mouth. In fact all those who came for spiritual advancement received his grace according to their capacity and learning. Devotees usually came and sat in front of him and if they had any question to ask or problems to tell, they did not have to speak aloud. He would give appropriate answers or make necessary statements to the satisfaction of all present there. Gopinathji attained Mahasamadhi, i.e., passed away on 28th May, 1968, at the residence of his nephew, Jawaharlal Malla, at Chandapora, at about 5:45 PM. after having spent a normal day. He had been giving hints to his devotees of his giving up of gross body, although in his usual unconventional style.

According to Simpfendorfer, "among the vast spectrum of characteristics in Bhagwanji, four qualities seemed to predominate. He ranged the gamut of altered states of consciousness, he lived harmoniously with the powers of nature, he lived a commonplace life and he had an overwhelming concern for human welfare. It was because his devotees saw this in him that Gopinathji was given the title "Bhagwan"-Glorious Lord! The secret of Gopinathji's power is the joining with God's vibratory conscious power, his own energy source, his body. This he did by spending time at the various power points of Kashmir (the Devis) as well as
emitting impulses from various parts of his own energy source, his body." (Simpfendorfer n.d., 50).

THE MIRACLES OF GOPINATHJI

Over the years Gopinathji's reputation had begun to grow. The main basis for his fame was the anugrih or miracles which, to this day, remain central to the group. He must be, perhaps, the only one of his kind who performed a miracle by appearing in the vision of a devotee to help him, just as he was giving up his gross body. The following passage from the biography reveals what happened with one of his devotees, Makhan Lal Tutoo, on 29th May 1968, a day after Gopinathji gave up his mortal body. "On the morning of 29th May, 1968, I wanted to have Bhagwanji's darshan, not knowing that he had passed away the previous day. As soon as I heard about it, I was smitten with grief. I proceeded to his residence and joined the procession to the cremation ground. I am a businessman and used to go out of Kashmir to sell some Kashmiri handicrafts. I had returned from Delhi about a month before and was on a look out for a shop at a good shopping centre in Srinagar. In spite of great efforts, I had failed, in fact my contemplated visit to Bhagwanji on 29th May was for his help in getting a shop on rent. While the last rites were on at the cremation ground, I was feeling terribly dejected and forlorn, thinking that the very source of my divine help has dried up. Beset with grief
and anxiety, I lay reclining on the turf-covered ground. Soon I fell into a sort of trance in which Bhagwanji appeared before me and directed me to follow him. He took me to Lambert Lane (A market in Srinagar) opened the locks attached to a shutter of a shop, raised the shutter, and signalled to me to enter the shop. Thereupon I woke up from the trance. Three or four days later, I went to Lambert Lane. While I was sitting in a shop, a man came up and informed me that a shop was to let. I approached the manager of shopping centre at once. He handed over to me the keys of the shop there and then though he had rejected many prospective tenants. Bhagwanji is very benevolent and helps his devotees in difficulty, even if he is not physically with us." (Fotedar 1991, 63).

The literature of the group gives details of the incidents in which Gopinathji is said to have left his body to give aid in distant places. This is significantly so in the case affecting the country. In 1947, when the raiders from Pakistan had attacked Kashmir, they were committing rape, murder and loot. As panicky devotees rushed to Gopinathji for help, he assured them that the raiders would not enter the Srinagar City. Miraculously the raiders were stopped just outside the city by the intervention of Indian Army. During this attack the enemy had occupied large areas in Ladakh region to which access lay through the Zojila Pass. The Indian army had to negotiate the pass. Initially
they met with repeated reversals, but finally with the help of Gopinathji they were successful. This was told by an army officer, who was with the front commander in this operation, to a devotee of Gopinathji. According to him, a mysterious person dressed up as a Kashmiri Pandit, guided the operations and gesticulated to the army men at the battle front, to fire in certain directions, which proved correct militarily. As the description of the mysterious man fitted that of Gopinathji’s, the devotee took the officer to meet him, where the officer identified Gopinathji as the person. Amazingly the family members and regular visitors of Gopinathji swore that Gopinathji had not left his house during those days. He would sit bolstered up with pillow by the window side, though some times gesticulate with his hands as if to direct someone invisible.

Among the other miracles include those where he brought the dead back to the world, cured people of cancer, removed stones from kidney and other such ailments, saved the devotees from landslides and natural disaster etc. The miracles of Gopinathji are quite varied. The most remarkable thing about the miracles is that the physical presence of Gopinathji is not necessary for them to take place.

Although Gopinathji left his mortal frame in 1968, he has been appearing in dreams and visions of his devotees. In some instances he has personally inducted new members into the organisation. These new members were subsequently
responsible for the spread of the fame of the group outside Kashmir. In one incident Gopinathji suddenly began to appear in the visions of Justice Shivnath Katju of Allahabad. Although he did not know Gopinathji before, yet he became attracted to him and soon visited the Gopinath Ashram at Kharyar, Srinagar, and is now the chief patron of the Bhagwan Gopinath Trust. On his invitation members of the Kharyar, Srinagar Ashram visited Allahabad in 1977 to attend the Kumbh Mela. At Allahabad these members set up a Satsang Mandli or the spiritual centre, at the Prayag Raj, where daily aarti is now performed by the local devotees. In April 1978 another spiritual centre was started at Varanasi under the auspices of Bhagwan Ram, a great Tantric Saint who runs leprosy mission in various parts of India, who too said that Gopinathji was in touch with him in his dreams. In yet another similar incident, Gopinathji appeared in the dreams of an Australian native Philips Simpfendorfer who had come to visit the Amarnath Cave in Kashmir in 1978. Gopinathji established contact with him in visions and directed him towards the Kharyar Ashram at Srinagar. In 1979 Philips along with three other Australian devotees, Red Mitchell, Jaan Steward and Ted Thomson set up an 'Ashram' in the residential area of Winmalee, New South Wales, Australia. Here they perform daily meditation for the unity of a true spiritual community.
It gives us immense joy and happiness to intimate that “MURTI SATATHAPANA” of Bhagawaan Gopi Nath Ji at the Ashram’s own premises has been fixed on Thursday, the 30th Dec., 1993 at 9 a.m

His Grace and His Blessings will see us through our present troubles and travails.

Please join us in the prayers for Peace and Prosperity on this occasion

VENUE: Udaiwala Road, Borhi, Jammu Tawi, India

PRAN NATH KOUL
Secretary
Bhagwaan Gopi Nath Ji Trust

Plate VII

Invitation: Murti Sthapana at Bhagwan Gopinath Ashram, Jammu 1993
THE MEANING OF MIRACLES

Whenever the devotee informants talk about Gopinathji, what one hears is an account of their personal experiences as devotees; and above all what one hears about is the miracles. Miracles are the staple of any conversation about Gopinathji among his devotees and are the principal topic of the literature concerning him as well. The miracles therefore are the central focus in the personal charisma of Gopinathji. Although Gopinathji has long ago given up his mortal body, the devotees believe that he is not dead - that he lives in his ashram(s) and communicates with them from there. For example the most important way in which he makes clear that "he knows to find you" and "is working on you" is by appearing in visions and dreams. Or, whenever a person comes to the ashram, it means that the time is ripe for his or her spiritual development. The devotees reinforce their belief in Gopinathji's immortality by recalling Gopinathji's words, 'Amar Chhaa Maraan' i.e. Does the immortal die?, uttered before he gave up his mortal frame. (Fotedar 1992, 48). Moreover, it is significant to note that the option of succession has been categorically ruled out. Devotees narrate the incidents where one of Gopinathji's disciples, Dinanath Ticku of Rainawari Srinagar, having almost attained god-realisation through Gopinathji's anugrih, proclaimed himself a 'Bhagwan'. Although he made predictions which came true and hence attracted people to himself, Gopinathji
said in a sad tone, "Light has come to Dinanath but it is such that it will kill him". Dinanath Ticku died of cancer after some time!

All the experiences of the devotees are seen by them to be caused by Gopinathji's. The devotees see all happiness and unhappinesses, illnesses and almost all happenings in the light of his divine influence and explain it in this way. An important characteristic of miracle is its indeterminance. Though most of the devotees have had experience with Gopinathji's miracles, yet, when where and for whom the miracle may be performed can not be predicted. A close look into the group's understanding of this phenomenon shows that as Gopinathji is believed to be all knowing he alone can determine what is good for the devotee. The miracle is viewed with reference to a particular situation, having a deeper inner meaning. His power to perform a miracle depends on his discretion, which he uses in a particular situation because he alone is believed to know the past, present and future of his devotees. That all illnesses are not cured or all problems are not solved, is understood in this very context. In the Hindu karmic theory all human beings in the world are governed by karmic cause and effect which extend beyond single earthly life span. For these karmic debts of previous births one had to experience suffering in the present birth: the heavier the burden the greater is the extent of suffering for the individual.
Following this, therefore, it is occasionally desirable to repay these karmic debts by undergoing the suffering. The devotees believe that in such situation, Gopinathji does not perform any miracle (though he can), but allows the person to lighten the load of the karmic debts for the good of the person. The indeterminance of Gopinathji’s miracles seems to be futuristic; one can never be sure of what he is going to do next (though he knows). But looking back at the act, one can certainly find an explanation. Thus in the life of a devotee Gopinathji emerges as a supreme lord - Bhagwan (and not a mere magician), who not only has the power to perform a miracle but also the discretion to use or not to use this power in a given situation.

This phenomenon of 'making of God' (Bhagwan) and interpreting all their experiences of everyday life as Gopinathji’s miracles (anugrih) can be understood through the term ‘deification’. Deification is the way in which devotees talk about, interpret and thus shape their identities. This means it expresses what they experience in relation to Gopinathji and what they would like to experience on following this devotional way. Deification, then is the other side (the adjudging devotees) of personal charisma. This process of deification is a link in a chain that propels Gopinathji’s charisma, even though Weber situated charisma within the personality of the charismatic. Charisma, within its context contains another factor that
forms and strengthens it. This factor is the interaction of the process of deification; of course, in the end this interaction is due to the personal charisma but it can be seen independent from Gopinathji. Deification can be seen to be a reaction to the unfamiliar communication with Gopinathji and coming forth from a social-psychological need, such as the crisis due to migration etc. Seen in this way, Deification is the effect of participation and thereby a serious attempt to bridge the distance between man and God. Deification bridges this distance because it is mediated by the social process: mediation for a meaningful communication and foundation for the possibility to change. Through this process God becomes more charismatic and man more spiritual.

SECTION II
THE INSTITUTIONALISATION OF CHARISMA

Gopinathji is the first Kashmiri saint whose statue and relics have been enshrined in an ashram. The first ashram was built in 1971, at the Durga Mandir, Kharyar, Srinagar. In his lifetime Gopinathji had been an introvert who did not expostulate his profound spirituality in either lectures, discussions, writings, sermons or interviews. Instead he used unconventional modes of communication such as glancing,
inexplicable utterances and actions, emitting cosmic vibrations and performing miracles, which by and large dazed and puzzled those who interacted with him. However some of his close associates and ardent devotees sought to consolidate the faith and learning that they had imbibed during their lifetime association with Gopinathji. These devotees such as Late Shankarnath Fotedar, Late Shridhar Joo Dhar, Gopinath Malla, Prannath Kaul, Jai Kishori Patwari etc., formed a trust in 1968 and set up an ashram in 1971, to consolidate itself as a spiritual group.

The Bhagwan Gopinath Trust is a registered body which works towards the spiritual advancement of people, by undertaking the following work:

1. To build and establish proper centres for a meaningful spiritual activity.

2. To motivate and assist people on the path of spiritual progress even in the normal course of their day to day actuals.

8. The only indication Gopinathji gave of his role as world teacher was during the last period of his stay at Chandapora. A gentleman wished to take a photograph of Gopinathji, his elder sister, of her own, came to pose with him but he brushed her aside, admonishing her that his photograph will rotate throughout the world and she need not be there. (Dhar 1981, ix).
3. To help, physically and financially, the needy and the destitute as far as possible and also help the needy and deserving students in furthering their studies.

4. To make all possible efforts for the preservation of our religious and cultural heritage.

5. To arrange discourses and exchange of views on matters relating to our history and culture, tradition and value.

6. To procure, produce, publish, distribute and sell much valued and out of print books and documents relating to our religion and culture as well as sayings of our saints, poets and sages.

7. To organise free medical facilities for the poor and to establish old age Homes and schools for the poor.

8. To propagate the "Bhagwan Consciousness" and promote universal brotherhood, love and purity of life.

The Trust comprises thirty one members, which include five office bearers, President, Vice-President, Secretary, Treasurer, Cashier and Librarian. There are various committees, which are set up from time to time, of which some are even of permanent nature (eg. the publication committee). The post of a Trustee or office bearer is for a life time. Although the criteria for being selected a member
of the Trust are dedication and devotion to Gopinathji, however, in the post-migration era, selection is also on the basis of influence and power. This is not to say that the person has no faith in the spiritual endeavours of the group, but that recent devotees with high level influence have also found their way into the Trust. All the Trustees are Kashmiri Pandits, with most of them residing in Jammu (16), Delhi (8), Udhampur (22), Srinagar (2), Faridabad (2), Canada (1). None of the members of the Trust accepts donation in his name. All donations are accepted in the name of 'Bhagwan Gopinath Trust' and all the properties are held by this legal entity. Donations to the trust can be made at any branch of the Punjab National Bank. Details about the finances are kept in secrecy and I could not get any access to this information.

The trust engages in a number of diverse activities, including the support and management of the sect's various devotional epicentres.

i) MANAGEMENT OF ASHRAMS

The group has three ashrams at Srinagar, Delhi and Jammu which are managed by the Trust. Although there are spiritual centres within the country eg., in Allahabad, Banaras, Bangalore and Bombay, these are looked after by the local devotees of the respective places. There is an ashram built in Winmalee, New South Wales, Australia too, started by Gopinathji's Australian devotees and spiritual
centres in Canada and U.S.A.. The Trust is in touch with all these places but does not have any direct control over their functioning. The direct management is done only for Srinagar, Jammu and Delhi ashrams. Of these the Kharyar ashram at Srinagar was built in 1969 inside the premises of the Durga temple. A double storeyed building was constructed with a big satsang Hall and a life size marble statue of Gopinathji. Apart from this the ashram had a library which had around three hundred books and journals. However, after the migration, the ashram was simply locked. At present therefore nothing is done there. However the other two ashrams need a lot of attention. At the Jammu ashram there is an evening aarti, prayer service, which is performed everyday. On the first Sunday of every month, a homa or name recitation is performed before the usual aarti. The Delhi ashram is yet under construction. The ashram was established in 1993 but is still incomplete. A marble statue of Gopinathji is yet to be installed before his 98th birthday in July, 1996. Both the ashrams of Jammu and Delhi are non-residential. Care takers have been employed in both the places who are paid a salary by the Trust.

ii) SOCIAL SERVICE

Social Service is another major focus of this sect. The Trust sponsors a variety of charitable and philanthropic activities, such as financial aid to the poor people for medical purposes. Right from the inception of the Trust, it
has sponsored major treatments like heart operations, kidney transplant and such expensive ailments. Monthly pension is provided to poor, widowed women. Even now when the organisation has shifted to Jammu, those women who were paid pension in Srinagar and are still there, are sent their money regularly. Other activities include feeding the poor, visiting the sick in Migrant Camps and assisting the authorities in relief work during disasters. For example, the members of the organisation assisted in relief work; like help to riot victims in Anantnag in 1986, monetary help was sent to Uttarakashi Earthquake Victims in 1992, relief to victims of Babri Masjid riots in December 1992 etc. The organisation also assists national organisations, like All India Kashmiri Pandit Samaj and international organisations like Panun Kashmir in distributing financial help to the Kashmiri Pandit migrants in the camps around Jammu & Delhi.

iii) **EDUCATION AND YOUTH PROGRAMMES**

Education is another field where the sect is quite active. In fact the group laid great stress on the proper education for the all-round development of the youth. According to the President of the Trust, "Youth is the most impressionable stage of life. If they are not attentively nurtured they may go waste and in later life hardly bear good fruit. In case the youth are well nurtured and take advantage of the advice of wise ancestors, they will have a smooth, peaceful and progressive life. It is the youth,
young men and women, boys and girls, young spirit and young action that work well for protection and progress of a society or a community." (BGT Patrika, 1995, 4) The group organises various programmes for the youth such as debates, competitions, essay-contests etc. The theme is spiritual, invariably related to some aspect of Bhagwan Gopinathji's life. The purpose of these programmes is to supplement the secular education of children with 'spiritual' instruction. The sect has kept two festivals, the Navreh' and Baal Diwas for the youth - on these days the focus is on the youth and students. The trust gives scholarships to those who excel and financial aid to the needy, as well. The trust also takes the responsibility of a particular school and aids in its financial aspects, like giving free uniforms and books to the students of such a school. The financial aid to the students has increased in the post-migration period, as many poor children are sponsored for private coaching especially for their preparation for entrance tests in technical colleges and competitions. The attitudes towards the youth and the programmes implemented for them, exemplify the general outlook of the sect. The sect interprets the massage of Gopinathji as religiously universal. Therefore all the youth programmes are deemed to be universal and non sectarian. However the symbolism deployed are distinctly Hindu and Kashmiri. The debates are held in Kashmiri or English. The programme includes the traditional aarti and
lilas sung by these children in Kashmiri. The food, rituals and language are all Kashmiri, and locked into the sects devotional pattern.

The sect does not make great demands on its adherents. There are no impositions of rigid rules regarding food etc. Unlike the other two sects, there is no demand for becoming vegetarian, although non-vegetarianism is not prescribed. It follows the gurus attitude of tolerance and acceptance towards all things in life. Though Gopinathji was a celibate, the group does not advocate celibacy for the followers. It is a householder's sect and detachment within the worldliness is preached to all.

THE THEOLOGICAL SPHERE

Although Gopinathji did not give any lectures or write any philosophical treatises, the group has, over a period of time, constructed a theological domain of its own. This theology does not deal with an elaborate and internally rationalised doctrinal system, as perhaps the other two sects do. In fact the group does not have a meditational system of its own. No one is formally initiated by any particular person, neither does one have to follow a secret formula (mantra). In fact, although due respect is paid to the matters of salvation, the atmosphere of this sect is really not very soteriological at all. The literature of the sect even says that Gopinathji was against the practice of Kundalini awakening, as done in pranayam etc. (Fotedar
Questions of ultimate salvation are not so important for the devotees, in fact what really matters to them is Gopinathji himself and what he does to alleviate the misfortunes of life in this world. Nonetheless most of the followers engage in *sadhana*, spiritual discipline, by means of repetition of Gopinathji's name (108 names of *Bhagwanji*) and meditation (*dhyan*) on his form. The devotees usually meditate in the mornings in their home shrines, although certain devotees come to the *ashram* at 5 A.M. for meditation. By doing so they seek to remove the effects of the past *karmas* and directly experience the true reality of the self within. The final goal for these devotees is the merger with God, who is, in fact Gopinathji. The result they seek is the eradication of the harmful motives and tendencies and feelings of deeper inner peace. (*Sokh-t-Sampada*). The doctrine of the Bhagwan Gopinath Ashram, is basically an eclectic blend of elements drawn from the philosophical tradition of Kashmir Shaivism as well as the devotional tradition of Kashmiri Pandits, in general. William points out towards four interrelated spheres which form a structure for the apprehension of the manifestation of God in religion: the theanthropic sphere which is the identification of the physical form with one or more of the divine beings; the cosmological sphere which provides the conceptualization of the heavenly states or abodes of the Gods, the devotional sphere which charts the stages of
development of the individual towards release and the iconographic sphere of the images in the temples (Williams 1984, 61).

Following the above, we see that in the theanthropic sphere Gopinathji is considered to be Lord Shiva himself who was born of Goddess Ragyana who incarnated as Haara Mali to bring him forth.

The followers conceptualise that the cosmos has heavenly abodes where Gopinathji resides after having given up his mortal frame and directs the devotees from this astral plane. Here, he is not subject to the currents of cause and effect, which bind the ordinary mankind. He is law unto himself.

The devotional scheme reflects the inner world of the spiritual devotee in which he moves through stages to a higher understanding. Some devotees, as we shall see in the next section, are categorised as having reached a higher stage of spiritual development, than the others. Anyone who comes to Gopinathji has to have certain degree of spirituality and as this rises, he comes more and more in contact with Gopinathji, through dreams, visions, miracles etc. For this it is important as to how the person views Gopinathji. The literature states the purpose of his coming to the world for the redemption of individuals and the establishment of a moral social order. Whereas from the
standpoint of society at large Gopinathji is a reformer who has come to establish peace and dharma, from the perspective of a devotee he is a redeemer who has come to lead the individual to the perfection of his divine abode.

The iconographic scheme is the way a person sees the image of Gopinathji in his ashram. This is determined by the way the image fits into the theanthropic, cosmological and devotional schemes seen above. The ceremony of the installation of the 'murti' in the ashram builds to the climax when the supreme person or the manifestation of the supreme person takes up permanent residence in the statute in the shrine. Thereafter the 'Murti' is the appropriate object of devotion by the followers because it is the manifestation of the eternal reality which nonetheless is never absent from the heavenly abode or astral plane.

SECTION - III

THE SACRED WORLD

William observes that each religion presents a particular constellation of things set apart as sacred which locate the religion in a social and historical tradition (Williams, 1987, 86). This in other words is the sacred world. In the last 28 years, the members of the Bhagwan Gopinath Ashram have re-established the sacred world by associating with the life and theology of Gopinathji. The members of the group give a systematic and sustained understanding of Gopinathji's profound spirituality and his
role as a world teacher, awakening an individual's superior consciousness, to make life on the earth more rewarding. By inhabiting and sharing this sacred world, the devotees enter into a learning process which must finally result in union with God, described by the words *moksha, nirvan, apor*. By participating in the sacred world the devotees attain spiritual maturation which is a prerequisite for experiencing Gopinathji's miracles. These miracles serve as a stimuli to the devotee to choose himself the inner mystical role (*sadhana*) and so discover the 'divine self' within him or herself. In the *ashram*, the devotee learns what he has to do for this. eg. the work that is freely done for the community and therefore for God, teaches the devotee the inner attitude to life wherein the ego is slowly broken down. Devotees cook, serve, feed and keep everything clean with the intention to cultivate an unconditional love identical to God.

These ideas and directives are disclosed in Gopinathji's sayings and statements which are available in printed form either on the back side of the books and magazine printed by the Trust, or as stickers or on small plates which are hung on the walls of the *ashram*. For example One can realise the Self by discretion (Vichar) or *Mehnat Panin Te Guru Kripa* i.e. Hard Work and "the blessing of Guru are essential for any success" etc. Another way to learn Gopinathji's message is in the library cum bookshop of
Milton Singer says that whenever Madras Brahmins wished to introduce him to some aspect of Hinduism, they took him to see some cultural performance (Singer 1972, 64). These performances became the basis of his analysis of the cultural system. Similarly whenever my informants of the Gopinath group wished to illustrate some aspect of their religion during my field work, they took me to meet the learned members of their group, or asked me to attend some religious festival at the ashram, or gave me the books on Gopinathji from the ashram library or their personal collections. These sacred persons, sacred festivals, sacred places and sacred literature are the phenomena which provide a starting point for understanding the religious experiences of the followers of Gopinathji’s group.

**THE SACRED PEOPLE**

In the group, some individuals are considered as special and contact with these individuals is an important and even essential step in the religious development of the devotee. There are at present three such persons who hold important positions in the Bhagwan Gopinath Trust as well.

1. **JAIKISHORI PATWARI**

Jai Kishori is forty years old, unmarried and works as a Principal in The Government Senior Secondary School in
Jammu. Jai Kishori lived with her parents and married brother at their ancestral house in Ganpatyar, Srinagar, before migrating to Jammu in 1990, where they live in a rented house at Talab Tillo. She has been an active member of the group and is the librarian of the ashram's library. Jai Kishori recalls that in her childhood she was close to her grandmother with whom she went often to the Ganesh Temple at Ganpatyar, bare-footed, to offer the *nirmal jal*, water, to the idol. She came in contact with Gopinathji in 1964, when she visited him with her sister to ask him for his blessings to get a seat in a medical college.

"I went with my sister to Chandapora where Bhagwanji lived in his niece's house. His room was on the first floor. As we entered the room, it was full of people. Bhagwanji was seated in a corner with a *sigdi* lighted in front of him. He sat wearing a *pheran* and *safa* and was smoking a *chillum* with eyes closed. I sat in a corner and prayed in my mind for the medical seat I eagerly craved for those days. Suddenly Bhagwanji opened his eyes and looked at me with a strange smile on his lips. Then he went back to his smoking. The glance and the smile had a strange effect on me. I came back to see Bhagwanji the next day. As soon as I sat down, Bhagwanji picked up his pincers and banged it loudly on the *sigdi* kept in front of..."
him. Then he looked at me and smiled. It sounds strange, but from that minute onwards I just forgot about my medical seat or about asking anything. There was only one thing on my mind—Bhagwanji. After that day, I would come to Bhagwanji everyday, at times I would even leave my college early to be there. At Bhagwanji's house, satsangs and musical concerts were held regularly and I always attended these. Although, I did not get into the medical college, but I did my M.Sc. in Zoology and got a job too. Slowly I was totally in the grip of Bhagwanji. Once I fell very ill as I had a stone in the gall bladder and the doctors said that I had to be operated upon. Everybody was upset at home. Then I had a dream, Bhagwanji gave me water to drink, which I drank for a long time. When I got up, I felt better. Next day I was much better. I went to Bhagwanji and he told me that he had cured me. When I went to see the doctor next, he said my stone had cleaned out on its own and the operation was not needed anymore. There have been so many miracles that Bhagwanji has performed on me. After Bhagwanji passed away, I thought it would be difficult to carry on. But, Bhagwanji kept on appearing in my visions and I feel secured. In fact I remember the day Bhagwanji passed away. As I was leaving for home, Mr.
S.N. Fotedarji who is Bhagwanji’s biographer and close associate, called me, he said nothing has changed, keep coming to my house, Bhagwanji is there too. As I had been meditating according to Bhagwanji’s orders I agreed to go there. One day while meditating on Bhagwanji’s photograph I thought that Bhagwanji has left without helping me fully. Then I saw Fotedarji’s in Bhagwanji’s heart. I knew at once that Bhagwanji wanted me to go to Fotedarji in case of any problem in my sadhana. I did so and after that day I have been having no problems till now. (Personal Conversation, Jai Kishori Patwari, June’ 1994).

Jai Kishori is highly respected in the group. Women, men and children usually touch her feet when they see her. In fact touching of anyone’s feet is not a Kashmiri Pandit tradition, the gesture therefore puts her at a special level—that of sacred. In her attire and day to day dealing, Jai Kishori is like any lady of her age and status. However, she does act as a guide to women devotees or even to young men and helps those who need guidance in spiritual as well as personal life.

2. PRAN NATH KAUL

Pran Nath Kaul is the Secretary of the Trust right from its inception in 1969. Pran Nath knew Gopinathji since the
former's boyhood days.

"My uncle, Govindjoo Kaul had been childhood friend of Gopinathji. As I was attached to my uncle, I would go with him to Bhagwanji, almost everyday. As a child I would go for some sort of sweet or something to eat which Bhagwanji would give me. As I grew older, I began to understand the subtleties of his personality. Bhagwanji would communicate with me more often than he did with others. He would often ask me to run errands for him. It was in this fashion, in the indirect way that he even initiated me into the Vishnu Upasana i.e. worshipping Lord Vishnu for meditation. One day he brought out a photograph of Lord Vishnu on Seshnaag and asked me to get it framed. I did so and returned the photograph to him. On seeing the photograph, he looked up at me and said with a smile, "See what a beautiful picture this is!". I understood at once that he wanted me to start on the meditation of Lord Vishnu. During the last seven years of Bhagwanji's life, I would go to his house daily, directly from my office and spend around three to four hours there. There I would attend to his personnel comforts as well as his dhooni for which he needed things regularly" (Personal Conversation, Pran Nath Kaul, May 1994).
Pran Nath Kaul is called 'Boitoth', ie big brother (an endearment in Kashmiri) by everyone. He is the eldest member of the group - more than 60 years old and a retired government officer who lives with his wife and married sons, now in Jammu as a migrant in a rented house at Dalpatian. He comes to the ashram everyday to conduct the aarti the daily evening satsang as well as to look after the accounts and other official matters. He is the only one who touches the Murti of Gopinathji, as he dusts it daily before the aarti. He communicates with Gopinathji, as well. A day after the Murti was installed in Jammu ashram, Gopinathji appeared in his dream and told him that his pheran was tight. Next morning when Pran Nathji went to the ashram, he saw a tear under the arm on the pheran worn by the Murti. A new pheran was immediately made.

3. SHIBEN KISHEN TURKI

Shiben Kishan is forty years old married man, who has been a very important member of the Trust especially before the migration. Shiben Kishan went to Gopinathji as a young man and it is said that Gopinathji was very fond of him.

"Bhagwanji taught me a lot in life - at times he would even rebuke me to bring sense into my wrong thinking. From my childhood I have been attracted towards saints- Bhagwanji was easily the best among them, having reached the final stage in his sadhana".
Shiben Kishan is considered to be a sacred person too, as he is said to have been loved by Gopinathji. However, apparently the members of the group treat him a little less formally than the other two. Shiben Kishan is very much involved with the activities of the group. His wife Nancy, too, is one of those few, who work very hard during the celebration of festivals.

These sacred persons hold responsible positions in the Bhagwan Gopinath Trust and perform important roles, such as, offering prayers and performing yagna or perform important functions such as touching Gopinathji's statue. So we see that there are certain characteristics on the basis which the group holds some of the members as sacred. These are:

1. All the members had close contact with Gopinathji during his life time.

2. All these individuals continued to be closely associated with the activities related to the setting up of the ashram, in terms of hours and efforts.

3. All these individuals are spiritually elevated having been initiated by Gopinathji directly or indirectly.

4. All these individuals have been in communication with Gopinathji after 1968 either in dreams or in visions.

All the four of the above characteristics and not any
one in particular, is a necessary condition for being considered sacred.

**GOPINATHJI'S RELATIVES**

Interestingly none of Gopinathji's relatives comes under the category of sacred persons. These relatives include Gopinathji's nieces, nephews and grand nieces and grand nephews from his sisters' side. Triloki NaTh Kachru who is the son of Gopinathji's younger sister Janakidevi, is an accountant by profession, who also helped in the consolidation of the accounts of the ashram in the past. According to him, since Haara Mali, was Goddess Ragnaya herself, all her children were saints. Elaborating on this, Kishaniji who is the grand niece of Gopinathji, said:

"**Bhagwanji** loved us all and transmitted to us all that he had received from goddess Sharika. Although his devotees would be with him throughout the day, it was in the nights, that goddess Sharika came to him. At that time he would wake us (his family) up and ask us to partake in darshan. I cannot say more than this, as I do not have the permission of Bhagwanji but one thing I will say, all of Haara Mali's children were saints, Bhagwanji just became famous that's all". (Personal Conversations with Kishiniji, June 1995).
Jawaharlal Malla, the grand nephew of Gopinathji, in whose house Gopinathji gave up his gross body had retained the relics including Gopinathji's asana in his own house, although an ashram had been built in Kharyar. The claims of the family members of being sacred are not acceptable to the members of the Gopinathji's group, however, there is no apparent hostility or breakup in the group. The relatives of Gopinathji attend important functions of the group - Triloki Nath Kachru is the member of the trust too.

THE SACRED LITERATURE

The Bhagwan Gopinath Trust has published many books from time to time to enable the devotees and newcomers to understand philosophy and life of Bhagwan Gopinathji. These books are:

1. JAGAT GURU BHAGWAN GOPINATHJI

The biography written by Pandit Shankar Nath Fotedar, a long-time associate and devotee of Gopinathji. The biography is written in English which was later translated into Hindi by another devotee Pandit Janki Nath Sharma. The biography is based on the observations made by Pandit Fotedar during his twenty-two years close association with Gopinathji, as well as the information collected from Gopinathji's close relatives, disciples and close associates. The book deals in detail with the various aspects of Gopinathji's life from early boyhood till his death in 1968. The book brings out
clearly the evolution of Gopinathji as a Siddha of tallest order who ceaselessly worked towards the betterment of humanity by raising the level of consciousness of the masses through his anugrih. The book was first published in 1974 and its reprint was brought out in 1991 after the migration.

2. THE SAINT OF ALL THE TIMES

A sequel to the biography, this book has been written by Prof. Kashi Nath Dhar in 1981. The book covers a wider canvas (of Gopinathji's life and philosophy), 'condensing and co-ordinating' all the relevant information pertinent to spiritual resurgence as also to locate the contours on which Gopinathji's 'Bhagwanhood' stands. The book deals with philosophical aspect of Gopinathji's life and biography.

3. THE INIMITABLE SAGE

By G.N. Raina is yet another biographical sketch published in 1992, which shows Gopinathji as a perfect Shaiva according to the philosophy of Kashmir Shaivism.

4. ASHTOTAR SHATNAM STOTRAM

Written by T.N. Bhat and relates the 108 names of Bhagwan Gopinathji in which he is called the perfect being or the supreme reality.

5. THE GURU GITA

Written by Prof. J.N. Sharma, is the explanation of the verses compiled in Sanskrit. The Guru Gita is said to be from the Agamic or Tantric source and is a highly valued
Sanskrit text by scholars and devotees alike in this country. Throughout the country Guru Gita is used but it has many versions, used at different places by various spiritual orders among the Hindus. The version which the Bhagwan Gopinath group uses is based on the Sharda manuscript which was owned by the Late Swami Aftabjoo Wanganoo, the senior-most disciple of Swami Janakak Tufchi (who is also taken to be one of Gopinathji's preceptors). The Guru Gita celebrates the essential qualities of an ideal Guru, spiritual master, who is equated with God himself. No advancement in spirituality, the text emphatically declares, is possible without the Guru's grace.

6. SANDHYA VANDANA TATWA GITANJALI

Is the book which contains the religious verses as well as devotional lyrics, which are compiled together to be read in the evening aarti which is held everyday in the ashram. It has the hymn to Dakshinamoorthi which has been compiled by Vedanta philosopher Shankara. It also has hymns in Sanskrit as well as Kashmiri.

SACRED SPACE

Not all space is the same. Some locations are sacred as they are associated with someone or something special. In this case, the ashrams of Gopinathji are held as sacred not only because they have his statues enshrined inside them, but because they are sites of universal cosmic vibrations.
Every evening vibrations arise from the holding of aarti in which there is repetition of mantras and chanting by the devotees. The evening aarti is an hour long programme where recitations are held from the book entitled Sandhya Vandana. All the devotees sing it together. In the main hall, men and women sit separately, facing the statue of Gopinathji, while the young devotees play the musical instruments to the accompaniment of which the people sing and recite. The atmosphere is very musical, where everyone sings in a chorus. After the aarti is over, the priest comes to everyone present to sprinkle the sacred water - with which the statue is washed earlier in the day - prasad is then served to people. The prasad consists of whatever offerings devotees get for the ashram. Usually people bring yellow rice and meat which is mixed in a tub and kept in front of the statue. The ashram, built in a residential colony, non-residential, where only a caretaker lives. Iconographically the only representation is that of Gopinathji himself - statue and photographs.

**THE SACRED TIME**

The devotees of Gopinathji follow a religious calendar in which some of the festivals are in common with the festivals of Kashmiri Pandits. The group accepts the traditional Kashmiri Pandit lunar calendar, which has 354 to 360 days with 30 Lunar days to a month. The lunar month is divided into fortnightly halves. The dark half Ghatpach or
Krishna Paksha follows the full moon and is relatively inauspicious time. The bright half, Zoon Pach or Shukla Paksha begins on the new moon. The events from the annual ritual calendar are given below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MONTH</th>
<th>DAY</th>
<th>EVENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chaitra</td>
<td>Shukla Paksha Prathma</td>
<td>Navreh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeshta</td>
<td>Shukla Paksha Dwitiya</td>
<td>Mahayagna (Shrada)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashad</td>
<td>Shukla Paksha Dwadashi</td>
<td>Mahajayanti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashad</td>
<td>Shukla Paksha Poornima</td>
<td>Guru Purnima</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maagh</td>
<td>25th</td>
<td>Bal Diwas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Falgun</td>
<td>Krishna Paksha Ashtami</td>
<td>Hur Atham</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Falgun</td>
<td>Krishna Paksha Trayodashi</td>
<td>Herat (Shivratri)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. **NAVREH**

Navreh is the new year day of Kashmiri Pandits which falls on the first day of Shukla Paksha (The bright half) in the month of Chaitra. This day is celebrated by the group as Samman Divas in which the focus is on the children and youth programmes, such as, essay competitions or debates and declamation are organised in which young students are encouraged to participate. As the secretary of the Trust said, "Such activities are helpful in the development of
sound mind and sound body of the children." The participants are first asked to hand over their entry forms and the copy of their presentation. A screening process then takes place. Out of the finally selected group, first, second and third prizes are given apart from the consolation prizes to all participants. The selection is done by a group of judges. In November 1994, the Bhagwan Gopinath Trust organised an essay competition on the Topic 'Sankata Mochak Bhagwan Gopinathji'. Fourteen students read out their essays. The first three positions went to Sharmishta Kaul, Nidhi Khazanchi and Jharna Jalali respectively. Each of them was given a memento of Gopinathji as prize. The events of the evening focused on the need for ethics, righteousness, morality and spirituality in the minds of the young devotees of Bhagwanji.

2. **MAHAYAGNA**

This is the day when Gopinathji attained Mahasamadhi. This falls on the second day in the Shukla Paksha (bright fortnight) in the month of Jyesth, and is one of the big functions of the group. A big yagna is performed on the day which goes on for sixteen hours or so. The yagna is performed according to the vedic rites by professional priests. On this day outsiders are also invited to have food, Naveed. Usually around 500 to 800 people participate in the hawan-cum-feast programme. Naturally for a function
to be organised on a big scale, the preparations start at least a week ahead. Invitations are sent by announcement in the local newspapers, asking people to participate in large numbers. Purchases are made for the day beforehand. A day before, close devotees come with their families and stay overnight. The cooking is done by professional cooks who are helped by the women devotees in processing the vegetables etc. The yagna ceremony starts on the previous night with the close devotees in attendance. General public and families begin to come from early morning on the day of the yagna. The yagna is performed in the hawanshalla. At Bohri ashram, the hawanshalla is built on the first floor which is open on two sides - this facilitates the smoke arising from the yagna to move out. While the priests chant from vedic texts and put oblations into the fire, devotees line up in a corner where one of the priests puts Tyok, the sacred mark, on the forehead and ties Narwan (the sacred thread) around the wrist. Some devotees may either sit here or move out below into the satsang hall, where the statue of Gopinathji is kept. Here the devotees sit in groups. In one corner, the chakri and sufiana music, the traditional singing of devotional songs to the accompaniment of instruments is on. Young boys and girls, play these instruments and sing the various devotional songs written on Gopinathji or on the goddesses of Kashmir. Although, some devotees are on fast, tea and lemon water is served to all present. The distribution is done by volunteers, among the devotees -
while some distribute the eatables, others collect the used utensils. The cleaning of utensils is done by yet another group of devotees with the help of servants, who may either be hired or may be domestic helps at the houses of these devotees. Towards the noon or past-noon at 2 PM., the *yagna* ends. At the closing, all devotees are asked to come up and recite the 108 names of Gopinathji from the book. They also read out various hymns like, *Indrakshipath* etc. Then they all bow before the fire altar and the *yagna* comes to an end. Thereafter food, *Naveed* is given to people in separate rooms. Here people are made to sit on the floor with long white sheets spread before them. Food is distributed in *thal* i.e. plates made of steel, which are hired from the caterers (At Kharyar Ashram the Trust had its own utensils, but these were left behind at the time of migration). The menu consists of Rice, Daal, a couple of seasonal vegetables and *kheer*. The meals are served to all those present and usually it takes three to fours hours before everyone is fed. By the time it is evening people begin to return home except for the close devotees who stay back to wind up the whole affair.

3. **MAHAJAYANTI**

Mahajayanti or the birthday celebrations of Gopinathji is yet another big occasion which is celebrated with big public participation. The birthday falls on the 12th day in the bright (Shukla) fortnight in the month of Ashad.
Although like the Mahayagna celebrations, the public is invited for participation in having meals, Naveed, the focus of the day is on Padoka Puja and Sadhu Bhandar.

_Padaka Puja_ is the worshipping of the feet or footprints of the Guru, in this case Gopinathji. Here the devotees worship the _Khraw_ or the wooden sandals of Gopinathji, with flowers. People sit in rows and recite the 108 names of Gopinathji as well as the hymns from the _Sandhya Puja_, while putting flowers on the _Khraw_. The tradition of birthday celebrations was started by Gopinathji himself in 1947. It took place on a large scale, even while he was alive. During those days, more than 500 people were served with a nice meal. He would also invite his family priest who would come to perform the ritual of _Prepun_ according to the tradition. Musical performances with the Santoor and other musical instruments were played throughout the day till late in the night. This tradition has been kept alive by the Trust members. These days too the musical performances take place both by the young devotees as well as professional singers who are invited on the day. The other interesting phenomenon observed on this day is the _Sadhu Bhandar_ i.e. the _Sadhus_ are invited in large number and given a free meal and _Dakshina_ i.e. a decent amount of cash. This is done in keeping with the tradition observed by Gopinathji. Gopinathji had the habit of giving _Dakshina_ of Rupee one to every _sadhu_ who came to his door.
Many incidents related to this are told in the biography. Sometimes people offered currency notes to Gopinathji. He would get these exchanged for coins of one rupee denomination, which he would distribute to the sadhus who came to Kashmir for the Amarnath Yatra or to spend summers in Kashmir. Thousands of sadhus normally came to Kashmir every year and no day would pass without some calling for dakshina. Even on the day of his passing away he paid three sadhus the Re. 1 dakshina. Once Gopinathji's sister complained bitterly at his giving away all the money to sadhus leaving very little to meet the needs of the household. At this Gopinathji said, "These poor men have only the earth to sit on with the open sky as the roof over their heads, and they are naked and starving." Some of the sadhus told the biographer of Gopinathji that after they got a rupee from him, other avenues opened for them automatically. (S.N.Fotedar 1991, 32) Keeping that tradition alive, the Bhagwan Gopinath Trust still gives the dakshina. In 1994, one hundred sadhus were called for the free Sadhu Bhandar and given a dakshina of Rs. 21 each. The celebrations for the birthday begins a week before the actual day and continues for another five days at least, because on the third day from the birthday, falls the Guru Purnima which too is celebrated in the ashram.
4. **GURU PURNIMA**

This day falls on the 15th day of the bright fortnight in the month of Ashad. This day is celebrated by the other Hindus as well. On this day devotees gather to offer devotion to their preceptor (guru). Since the day falls three days after the Mahajayanti, most of the devotees stay back in the ashram to attend this function. Prayers are held in front of the statue which include narrations from Guru Gita, Sandhya Vandana, apart from the musical performances by the devotees who sing in praise of their guru on the traditional chakri.

5. **BAL DIWAS OR SMRITI DIWAS**

This is celebrated on the 25th of December each year. On this day the Trust awards scholarships to meritorious children as well as other financial aid for the well being of children. On 25th December 1994, the Trust gave financial assistance to the indigent patients for their medical treatment. Apart from this, meritorious students were given scholarships as well as uniforms, books and sweets. The celebration of the day was inspired by the Australian devotees who celebrated Christmas on this day.

6. **HUR ATHAM**

This day falls on the eighth day in the dark fortnight of Phalgun just five days before the Shivratri.
Traditionally Kashmiri Pandits celebrated this day by holding *bhajans* and *kirtans* at the various sacred sites of Goddess Durga such as Hari Parbat and Khir Bhawani. The members of the Gopinathji group assemble at the *ashram* instead, where the musical concert, in *Sufiana* style, is held throughout the night. In the morning, they perform the *aarti* and return to their houses with *prasad*.

7. **HERAT**

Which falls on the thirteenth day of the dark fortnight in Phalgun, is the biggest festival of Kashmiri Pandits. On this day, the members come to the *ashram* in the morning and recite from the *Shiv Mahima Stotranama*, followed by the usual *aarti*.

**CONCLUSION**

The 'Bhagwan Gopinath Ashram' is a fast growing religious organisation. It is the oldest of the three sects under study and will observe the first centenary celebrations of its guru, Gopinathji's birthday in the year 1997-1998, when they plan to bring out a postal stamp in Gopinathji's honour. As the sect has been initiating the various social service programmes since 1968, it has connections with many cultural organisations which are secular as well as political in nature. Through these organisations, the sect has participated in many national level religious events where its identity as a regional,
ethnic, religious sect has been recognised. The sect has featured in the National Television Network, as the celebration of its functions in the post-migration times have been covered in programmes such as 'Kashmir File', shown on Doordarshan Channel-1 in June 1996. The President of the sect, Mr. M.K. Pandita, denies any involvement of the sect in the political matters of Kashmiri Pandits, however, there is plenty of scope for speculation regarding this assertion, especially in the light of its projection as a regional, ethnic religious group! The group also voices concern on the matters of youth - being eager to preserve the Kashmiri Pandit identity in order to provide roots to the migrant youth. Through their innovative techniques, the sect is active in attracting new people, especially among the Kashmiri Pandits, to join the sect and so far they have been successful in doing so. At the personal level, however, miracles play an important role in making devotees join the group. Most of my informants while narrating their experiences of how they became the devotees of Gopinathji emphasised the role of miracles in it. Many of them had even been skeptical or indifferent to traditional belief systems before they were transformed by his miracles. Some others had been experiencing serious difficulties in life, like illnesses, family problems, financial crises and more recently the stress and trauma of the migration from the valley. While occurrences of miracles at the inception of
one's life of faith, was regarded as an important event. Miracles helped more importantly in consolidating and fulfilling this newly acquired faith. Miracles usually take place in particular context - which is the relationship between Gopinathji and a particular devotee. Belief in miracles itself is not important but that the miracle was performed by Gopinathji for them, is. In short the significance of a miracle lies in its becoming a vehicle for establishing a relationship between Gopinathji and a particular devotee. The informants found bliss and meaning in "unconditional surrender" in the faith of Gopinathji as a living deity (Bhagwan), with whom they seek to establish a relationship. This relationship conforms to the standard Hindu pattern of hierarchical intimacy.