



General Assembly

Distr.: General
9 September 2016

English only

Human Rights Council

Thirty-third session

Agenda item 3

**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development**

Written statement* submitted by the Himalayan Research and Cultural Foundation, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[22 August 2016]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

GE.16-15684(E)



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Destruction of Cultural Heritage: Threat to Peace

Culture and cultural heritage binds different peoples, communities, groups diluting the divisive factors based on religion, class, creed, language, region etc. Cultures and civilizations coexist in harmony and even complement each other, by building economic and cultural bridges. Recurring incidents of systematic attacks on indigenous cultural heritage in various parts of Asia and Africa pose grave threat to peace and security.

Over the past two decades, there have been organised attacks by the extremist militant groups like the Taliban, Tehrik-i-Taliban, Hizbul Mujahideen, Jaish-e-Muhammad, Lashkar-e-Toiba, Daesh and Islamic State to destroy indigenous and composite cultural heritage, value systems and ways of life, which were retained with remarkable continuity through long history of over 2,000 years. Taking the case of Jammu and Kashmir, it has witnessed the orgy of violence, brutal killings, extortions, kidnappings, rape of women, destruction of properties and holy shrines, both Hindu and Muslim, by Islamist terrorists and mercenaries. *Jamaat-e-Islami* and *Jamiat Ahl-e-Hadith* directed their efforts to eliminate traditional social and religious practices prevalent among the Kashmiri Muslims, exhorting them to banish such un-Islamic practices as visiting ancient holy shrines of Sufis and Rishis. The militant groups tried to stop the celebration of annual *Urs* (festival) at Batmol Rishi. Then a part of Baba Rishi shrine near Tangmarg was burnt. In Aish Muqam, there was a bloody clash in which few people got killed, when militants tried to prevent the local villagers from celebrating the *Urs* of Baba Zainuddin Rishi. On May 11, 1995 the mercenaries from Afghanistan and Pakistan led by Mast Gul, destroyed the ancient holy shrine of Sheikh Nooruddin Rishi at Chrar-e-Sharif, 35 kms. from Srinagar. This shrine has been a centre of pilgrimage for millions of devotees both Hindus and Muslims, over the past 600 years. In early July 1998 the terrorists made an abortive attempt to blow up the nearly 700 years old shrine of Naqshband Sahib in Srinagar. In June 2012, over 200 years old khanqah of Sheikh Abdul Qadir Jeelani, popularly known as Dastgeer Saheb was gutted in mysterious circumstances. Soon after in October 2012, another Sufi shrine of Hazrat Baba Reshi in Dabrana village was set on fire. *Hizbul Mujahideen* and other militant groups in Kashmir have been holding out public threats against participation by Hindu pilgrims to the annual pilgrimage of the holy Amar Nath cave. They even resorted to mine blasts and firing upon the Hindu pilgrims on numerous occasions. Hindu temples have been routinely destroyed or vandalized and their landed properties encroached upon. The Jammu and Kashmir government in its written reply to the State Assembly admitted in 2012 that “of the 438 temples in the Valley, 208 had been damaged. However, Kashmiri Pandit Sangarsh Samiti disputed the government figures and stated that around 550 temples were damaged and 50,000 kanals of land encroached upon”. (Peerzada Ashiq, 208 temples damaged in Kashmir. *Hindustan Times* 4 October 2012). Raising the issue of demolition of temples in Kashmir in Indian parliament in December 2015, Bhartruhari Mahtab, Member of Parliament of Biju Janata Dal pointed out that at least 80 temples were missing now, as there were 436 temples in Kashmir before 1989. These holy shrines and Hindu places of worship in Kashmir have been targeted by the Islamist terrorists and mercenaries in order to obliterate the indigenous ethno-cultural and spiritual heritage of Kashmir and the traditional ethos of religious tolerance, harmony and peaceful co-existence, and to usher in the fundamentalist and radical Islamic practices. Even the Valley’s first all Muslim girls rock band was forced to stop performing, after a fatwa was issued against the three Kashmiri Muslim girls - Noma Nazir, Farah Deeba and Aneeka Khalid in early 2013, who went into hiding after receiving a threat of social boycott from the militant women’s outfit Dukhtaran-e-Millat.

Earlier in 2001, the Taliban rebuffing all international appeals and ignoring widespread international condemnation, not only went ahead with the destruction of the colossal Buddhas of Bamiyan, but even made a public demonstration of their savage acts. Inside Pakistan, the extremist militants bombed in early 2009, the famous shrine of 17th century Sufi Rehman Baba, the most widely read Pashto poet on both sides of the Durand Line. On 28 May 2010 two mosques belonging to the Ahmadi sect in Lahore were attacked killing 93 persons. At least 42 persons were killed and over 200 injured in blasts at the popular Data Darbar shrine in Lahore on 2 July 2010. On 7 October 2010, two suicide bombers struck at the sufi shrine of Abdullah Shah Ghazi - the patron saint of Karachi on Thursday, when it was packed with thousands of devotees, killing at least 16 persons and wounding over 60 others. On 25 October 2010 shrine of Baba Farid Shakar Ganj, a 12th century Sufi saint in Punjab was bombed, killing 6 persons and injuring scores of others. Two powerful blasts ripped through the shrine of 13th century Sufi saint Ahmed Sultan, popularly known as Sakhi Sarwar in Dera Ghazi Khan district of Punjab province killing 41 persons on 3 April 2011, when thousands of devotees were attending the celebrations to mark the saint’s anniversary. On 22 June 2016, Amjad Sabri well known Pakistani Sufi qawwal, best known for his renditions of mystic poetry, was shot dead by Taliban in Karachi.

Ever since the Islamic State took control of Mosul and adjoining areas, home to thousands of archeological sites, it indulged in organized destruction of the rich and historical cultural heritage. Hatra, 110 kms southeast of Mosul, founded in 300 BC, a Silk Route centre with Greek and Roman architecture and a UNESCO World Heritage site since 1985, was occupied by the IS in mid-2014. In February 2015, the IS blew up with explosives Mosul's nearly a century old Central Public Library, along with thousands of ancient manuscripts and books. In Mosul the IS vandalized the museum having 173 antiquities and also razed the tomb and mosque of Biblical prophet Jonah. In March 2015, IS bulldozed the ancient Assyrian city and its priceless artifacts in Nineveh province, 30 kms south of Mosul.

In August 2015, Islamic State blew up three ancient funeral towers including that of Elahbel, in the ancient city of Palmyra in Syria. The militants also beheaded Khaled-al-Assad, the 82 year old archeologist and guardian of Palmyra's ancient heritage. UNESCO condemned the Islamic State's action as war crime, wiping out evidence of Syria's diverse cultural history. A week later the IS destroyed about 2,000 years old temple of Baal and temple of Baalshamin, also in Palmyra, which were the source of pride for Syrians. In another instance, they attacked the 8th century BC citadel of Assyrian king Sargon II at Khorasabad, 10 miles north-west of Mosul in Iraq. The rich art and architecture of Palmyra, standing at the crossroads of several civilizations, a symbol of diversity of Syrian identity and history, has been destroyed in a determined bid to erase this great culture from our memory.

That heritage is the essential source of identity of peoples, the foundation and lifeblood of their communities and a source of development, is universally recognized. The legacy of shared values and cultural heritage provides a sound basis for sustaining harmonious relations among different countries. An awareness of a shared language, ethnicity, history, religion, and landscape represents the building blocks of culture which needs to be preserved and promoted to achieve enduring peace and harmony. The silent majority of traditional, moderate and liberal Muslims, who practice Islam in accordance with the principles of tolerance and non-discrimination, need to shun their silence and assert and organize themselves against the extremist Islamists. On their part, the governments and secular societies need to help in preserving, restoring and emphasizing the indigenous, traditional and diverse Islamic practices and institutions, as have been prevalent in different parts of the world.

Time has come for the international community to pay attention to the problem of destruction of the historical-cultural heritage, which is being done deliberately to obliterate the indigenous heritage and cultural basis of the identity and self-understanding of various peoples. Some concrete steps at local, national regional and international levels need to be taken for this purpose. UNESCO should take the lead in this regard:

- 1) Safeguarding world heritage and promoting cultural pluralism, inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue as a means to promote understanding and peaceful co-existence .
- 2) Preserving and restoring all kinds of traditional and popular knowledge, languages, oral traditions, customs, music, rituals, festivals, arts, crafts, architecture and monuments.
- 3) Developing appropriate legal standards to deal with such cultural crimes and to evolve mechanisms for monitoring and ensuring safety of world heritage sites.
- 4) Preparing a register of tangible cultural property in the form of monuments of art, architecture, history, shrines and religious places, archeological sites, works of art, manuscripts, libraries, museums, objects or buildings of artistic, historical, architectural and cultural importance .