

Crafting Resilience: Basanti's Journey of Healing and Empowerment



“Basant” – a name that signifies spring, and saffron – a symbol of spirit and sacrifice. Together, they carry the power to endure, to fight, to heal, and to bloom.

This is the story of an ordinary girl from the beautiful valley of Tangmarg in the district of Baramulla, Kashmir. Little did she know the many tides her life would face. Born into a modest Kashmiri Pandit family, her father was a police officer, her mother a housewife. Basanti was the eldest of five siblings: three brothers and one sister.

Growing up, she watched her mother expertly manage the household, including knitting and embroidery. Though she only studied up to class eight, Basanti

developed a keen interest in needlework. Her mother nurtured this, teaching her knitting, and later encouraging her to join a nearby embroidery center where she learned the intricate art of Aari and Sozni embroidery. There, she made friends, including two Muslim girls who became her close companions. Unfortunately, the training center shut down prematurely, and she continued crafting quietly at home.

At the age of 20, she married a kind and supportive man from Balhama, Srinagar, and moved in with his family. She briefly worked as a nurse at Lalit Hospital but had to quit after marriage due to a lack of support from her parents' in-laws. Life was stable, even happy. Her father-in-law and husband managed a prosperous family business, and they owned large tracts of land.

But soon, the environment in the valley began to shift. Tensions grew, and the air filled with fear. After only 1.5 years of marriage, Basanti lost her mother. Around the same time, the political climate in Kashmir was deteriorating rapidly. One horrifying day, widespread violence erupted. Families barricaded themselves indoors. The streets of her town, once peaceful, turned into a war zone. Pandit families began fleeing, but some, like hers, held on, hoping for calm.

Then came the news that shattered her world—her elder brother, a police officer in the Crime Investigation Department, had been killed, allegedly by militants in Tangmarg. She rushed to see her family, only to find them gone. Her brother's body had been taken by the militants. She returned home devastated. Soon after, she and her husband fled to Jammu, which she had never even visited before—carrying nothing but uncertainty.

In Jammu, they first stayed at a hotel near City Chowk, the heart of the city centre. With no belongings, no money, and no plan, they eventually secured a tent in a refugee camp. Life in the tent was harrowing: no food, no utensils, no clothing. After two months, her remaining family members joined them. However, her ordeals did not end. “Every day brought new struggles, and the haunting chants of “Kashmir chhodo kaafiro-Infidels leave Kashmir valley kept ringing in my ears. I felt isolated, and my mental health deteriorated. I could not continue my craft. My

hands used to shake if I picked up the needle and thread. I slowly lost interest in it”, she says with a whisper.

Basanti gave birth to her first child in that same tent.

Later, they were allotted a single-room quarter through a chit system and moved from Mishriwala camp to Muthi camp. The room was no more than a dungeon: no windows, just a door and a tiny mesh opening. Eventually, they were relocated to Jagti Camp, where she lives now. “I have lived a life of multiple displacements, from one camp to another”, she said with a painful sigh.

However, despite years of hardship and displacement, Basanti never gave up. She educated her daughter, saw her get married, and kept her family afloat through sheer will. Her husband, now older and unable to work, relies on minimal government relief, but Basanti has remained resourceful. She found small jobs and worked with various NGOs, producing embroidered goods, knitting, tailoring, soap-making, and more. Although many organizations came and went, extracting her labor without offering real support or fair compensation, she persevered.

She turned her childhood hobbies into survival skills. Even when the work brought no real profit, she continued—just to make ends meet. Never did she imagine that her embroidery would one day become the thread holding her family together.

Through skill and resilience, she has become her family’s backbone—not only meeting their needs, but giving them dignity.

In 2019, she heard that an NGO would be visiting the Jagti camp to interact with women skilled in Kashmir’s traditional crafts. “I was wary of NGOs, but I went out of curiosity to find out more about them,” she smiled. The NGO was named *Yakjah*, and they explained the idea behind their project to the women. Basanti joined the initiative and underwent training to upgrade her skills and knowledge.

“We are a community of women from different parts of Kashmir. In Kashmir, we may never have met each other, but in Jagti, through this project, we have found a sense of solidarity. I wish I had met *Yakjah* when I was young and

struggling—emotionally, mentally, and physically,” she says, her voice tinged with deep regret.

For refugee women like Basanti, community bonding is not just emotional support—it is a lifeline. It helps rebuild identity, restore dignity, and foster mutual resilience. Such grassroots collectives are crucial to achieving sustainable development goals: they promote economic empowerment, preserve cultural heritage, and create safe, inclusive spaces where women can thrive. Supporting and investing in these community-led groups isn’t charity— it is essential to building long-term peace, equity, and sustainability from the ground up.

Basanti today embodies resilience and transformation. With renewed purpose, she practices her craft—carefully stitching intricate patterns and bringing designs to life with vibrant threads. Her commitment to improving her skills and producing high-quality work sets a powerful example for younger women in the group. In preserving this traditional art form, she has not only safeguarded cultural heritage but also redefined her future. Her journey reflects how skill development, when supported through community networks, can become a catalyst for economic empowerment and psychosocial healing—especially for women who have experienced displacement.

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