

Sarkari Relief Brings Little Relief

The Plight of Displaced Kashmiri Pandits

○ Dr. Anuradha Mathu

It was about 12 years ago that Kashmiri Pandits, other non-islam Kashmiris and even some Muslims were forced to leave their homeland and come to live in the plains, on alien soil. Some have migrated for good. Others still nurse the hope of going back to their 'nests'. Their lives have been uprooted and many live in miserable conditions in relief camps or in makeshift arrangements.

It is really heartbreaking to visit the shabby and unhygienic camps of the displaced Kashmiris. An unusually high number of people living in camps in Jammu have died due to snakebites, heatstroke and unhygienic conditions.

A recent study by Neha Kachroo on the status of Kashmir's displaced families living in government camps discusses the present conditions and overall status of these lives lived in squalor. Kachroo interviewed 110 families through random sampling. A structured questionnaire, along with informal discussions and general observations was used for data collection. According to her findings, a majority of respondents (93 percent) have been displaced from villages and only seven percent of them were from Srinagar city. About 53 percent belong to the age group of 45 to 65 years, with education up to secondary school; 35.44 percent were involved in farming and other allied occupations, besides private jobs,

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business and government employment. Of the group, 98 percent were married; 82 percent of the families were male-headed and only 16.36 were female-headed. The reasons for the deaths of their spouses included lack of amenities in camps and health disorders like kidney failure and snakebites. One person was murdered in the valley. The average family size is eight people and 21.18 percent of the families were nuclear.

The mass migration of Kashmiri Pandits came about in 1990. Ninety-four percent of these respondents were displaced in the same year and started their lives in camps which the government had established in view of the exodus. Eighty percent of the respondents did not have

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Approximately 53 percent of the respondents had lost their houses, of which about 95 percent were burnt down. Five percent of the respondents were forced to sell their houses under pressure, due to financial distress. Nearly 96 percent had possessed houses, of which 57 percent were damaged or destroyed.

Occupational trends of Kashmiri Pandits have also changed due to displacement. Huge losses have been suffered by 35 percent of the families who were in agriculture-related occupations; they are now dependent upon government provided relief. At least 27 percent of the Pandits were in business. Initially, nine percent of the families had private jobs. After displacement, this figure increased to 16.36 percent. Those with government jobs constituted 28 percent of the camp population. However, everyone expressed frustration with the administration's response to their various problems.

The infrastructural facilities at the relief camps are very poor. The rooms allocated to the families have a maximum size of 15ft by 15ft and a minimum size of 8ft by 8ft. These were allocated irrespective of the size of the families. The area of the Multi Camp-Phase Second, where the respondents of the present study reside, had an open type of drainage.

About 71 percent were using community bathrooms and 89 percent were using community latrines; 86.3 percent of these were cleaned only once in a while due to the irregular cleaning by *safai-karamcharis* (toilet cleaners) and shortage of water. Besides, during the rainy season the open drains cause problems, as dirty water enters the rooms of the camp residents.

As far as the health conditions of the migrants are concerned, about 60 percent of them reported that they suffered from numerous ailments such as high blood pressure and psychological problems. After displacement, 87.37 percent of the respondents reported facing health problems due to a change in environment, resulting from the move from a cold to a hot region.

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About 67 percent of the migrants' children go to school, of whom 62 percent attend private schools and about 38 percent go to camp schools. Though sending children to private schools is an expensive affair for parents, sending them to camp schools is a waste of time since the latter lack proper facilities, such as an adequate number of teachers and classrooms, and other infrastructural facilities.

The miserable economic condition of these people is apparent from the fact that 70 percent of the migrants are unable to provide for their financial needs. The migrants are forced to take short-term loans from friends or moneylenders.

What are we to offer our future generations? Cultural loss is a big issue for the community. While living in camps, families find it hard to inculcate the traditional *sanskars* (values) among young people. The emotional attachment of the migrants to their motherland cannot be overlooked, as about 60 percent of them still want to go back to their roots at any cost. □

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