

Will They Ever Return to the Valley?

The Predicament of Kashmiri Pandits

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Kashmiri is a dying language; despite the fact that the language is ancient with a rich tradition of poetry and—in this century—a burgeoning tradition of prose, it is facing obliteration. The middle class parents of Kashmir do not speak to their children in Kashmiri, but in Hindustani. There are grown-up Kashmiris who have lived their entire life in Kashmir, but can hardly speak Kashmiri. The main reason is that Kashmiri is one of the few recognised languages of India that is not taught in schools. And the reason for this is one of those things that Niels Bohr said are so serious that you have to laugh at them. For 50 years, the Hindu and Muslim scholars have not been able to decide what script the Kashmiri language should use. The Hindus felt that Devnagari should be the script since it was the original one, and the Muslims felt that the Persian script should be adopted because it would be convenient for the majority of the people. In the process, the loser has been Kashmiri culture.

This fact, cruel in itself, serves as a metaphor for the bigger tragedies that were to visit Kashmir. Most people agree that the roots of the present situation in Kashmir lie in what has been happening in politics here for half a century and has to be seen in this light. Says a leading Kashmiri Pandit intellectual: “The contemporary history of Kashmir starts with the October 1947 Pakistan-sponsored Kabailli raid of Kashmir.” When the



Kashmiri Pandits holding a *dharna* in New Delhi in protest against Doda massacre, June 22

raiders were a mere 60 kilometers from Srinagar, the Dogra ruler, Maharaja Hari Singh, and the man who was leading the agitation against him, Sheikh Abdullah, both asked Jawaharlal Nehru to help Kashmir in repulsing the Pakistani attempt at annexing Kashmir. Nehru wanted an accession in return for military help and both the Maharaja and Sheikh Abdullah agreed to it.

Beginnings of a Deadlock

Pakistan, of course, did not accept the accession. A cease-fire was reached between India and Pakistan in 1948 and Pandit Nehru took the Kashmir issue to the United Nations. He told the world body that the accession of Kashmir to India was subject to a plebiscite and thus opened a Pandora's box for India. Nehru was sure that

secularism would triumph and in a fair plebiscite, the people of Kashmir would opt for India. However, the plebiscite was never held. Among other reasons, Pakistan was not willing to fulfil its part of obligation under the UN resolution, which included the withdrawal of its armed forces from the part of Kashmir which it held. If a plebiscite had been held at that point of time, Pakistan would have had to give up on the idea of making Kashmir a part of Pakistan.

However, the spectre of the plebiscite soon began to become a problem for India and, after a few years, Sheikh Abdullah himself began to demand it. He certainly reflected in this demand the wishes of a good number of Kashmiri Muslims.

The Kashmiri Pandits remained firmly loyal to India and were

naturally opposed to any idea of Kashmir becoming part of a theocratic Pakistan. Dr O.N. Wahklu, who opted to stay in Kashmir despite having been kidnapped by militants for 45 days, states: "If Pakistan were a secular state, the Kashmiri Pandits would have had no problems with Kashmir becoming a part of it. However, it would have been impossible for us to live with dignity and equality in an Islamic theocracy. For this reason, the Kashmiri Pandits were opposed to a plebiscite—a plebiscite would have meant a theocratic state." Thus, by and large, the Pandits were willing to live in a Muslim majority Kashmir, but dreaded the idea of Kashmir becoming a part of theocratic Pakistan.

Kashmir has a rich tradition of cultural syncretism and this is reflected in many aspects of Kashmiri culture. Sheikh Noor-uddin, who is called the standard bearer of Kashmir, is revered both by the Hindus and Muslims of Kashmir. The Kashmiri Pandits were ardent supporters of these traditions of Kashmir and worked for the emphasis of such ideas in Kashmiri culture, controversies like the language script notwithstanding. Says the editor of a local Urdu daily: "I was taught the elementary Arabic needed to study the Quran by a Hindu teacher and he was willing to teach me the Quran itself as well." Kashmiri Pandits visiting the shrines of Muslim saints was a common sight and the harmony between the two communities was held up as an example by Mahatma Gandhi who said in 1947 that he saw a ray of hope for all of India coming from Kashmir.

However, it should be mentioned here that several Muslims believe that the loyalty of the Kashmiri

Pandits to India was born not so much out of secular persuasions, but because they stood to gain from a Hindu-majority India. Says Mehmood Bedar, a right wing Muslim journalist: "Though the Kashmiri Pandits comprise only 5 per cent of the population, they held about 25 per cent of the state government jobs and an astonishing 90 per cent of the central government jobs held by Kashmiris were held by Kashmiri and non-Kashmiri Hindus." Whatever degree of truth there is in this allegation, it expresses the sentiment of the Kashmiri Muslims that they have been discriminated against in favour of the Hindus.

Reaction to Militancy

The Kashmiri Pandits attach a good deal of significance to the fact that the first victim of the militants was a Muslim. Initially, militancy in Kashmir was totally a JKLF phenomenon and the Pandits as a community did not feel threatened. In fact, the JKLF ideology was professed by several Kashmiri Pandits and many Kashmiris in the past decades felt quite compatible with a separatist group that was advocating Kashmiri nationalism, though the killings of people associated with the Indian state and those doing "Indian politics" did arouse fear among Pandits. However, overall, they did not feel threatened as a community and no one could have guessed what was coming next.

In 1989, the year the militancy started, several Kashmiri Pandits took part in anti-India processions and expressed support for the separatists. The fact is that the militancy was an avowedly anti-India movement, but it was not communalised. Both the communities seemed to feel that they had genuine grievances against India and there seems to have been an agreement between them that the

JKLF was articulating these grievances in a manner to their liking, despite many people feeling that the killings of pro-India politicians was pure terrorism. But Kashmiri society had not been divided along communal lines and the two main communities were still living in harmony.

However, this changed with the advent of militant groups like the Hizb-ul-Mujahideen. Then with the wanton killings of Hindus began the nightmare for the community. The central government's reaction was to appoint Jagmohan as the governor of Jammu and Kashmir for a second time, with the hope that he would be able to control the situation and "save" Kashmir. Mr Jagmohan made his well-known remark that he had come as a "nursing orderly" and virtually took the patient to the point of death.

Exodus and its Causes

One of the favourite myths several Kashmiri Muslims have is that the Hindus left at "some nod from the governor, Jagmohan". Says Dr Wahklu: "The Kashmiri Hindus are not such fools that they will leave their motherland in a huff or on the prompting of a higher-up without assessing the situation for themselves." Another Kashmiri Pandit who chose to stay on says: "A relative of mine came to me trembling in 1990 (the year the exodus took place) and told me that he feared for his and his family members' lives." They had received a letter that they should leave Kashmir or "face the consequences". The Pandits feared they would be murdered, and their daughters raped. A Pandit told me: "The fact is that the militants do rape women." The allegation is that this happened especially in the villages, where the official machinery is hardly visible. This is another of those charges that is so

difficult to ascertain. However, what appeared in print in local Urdu dailies like *Al Safa* is something that no one can deny. Notices appeared in this paper and in some others demanding that the Hindus should leave Kashmir or be ready to face the consequences. A fear psychosis gripped the entire community. There is little doubt that the exodus of the Hindus was the result of Muslim fundamentalist terrorism and the total breakdown of the law and order machinery. Policemen went from door to door telling Pandits that they would have to fend for themselves as the police could no longer provide them security. And the head of the administration was the man whom the central government had thought would be able to make the administration effective. It is worth considering the fact that among the Hindus who fled Kashmir, there were four police officers of the rank of commanding officer and many others of junior ranks.

Thus, in 1990, one year after the militancy took roots in Kashmir, there was an exodus of over 2.5 lakh Hindus from Kashmir in buses and other vehicles, some provided by the state road transport corporation. The most terrible—and the most difficult to reverse—fallout of the Kashmir issue took only a few weeks to be enacted. However, some Hindus, about 20,000 chose to stay behind. Perhaps it should be added here that this is not the first time in Kashmir's history that the Hindus have participated in an exodus—they have fled to escape tyrannical regimes in the past.

Migrants in Jammu Camps

The conditions in the camps where migrant Pandits are staying is horrible. They contain about 70 per cent of those who have fled



Widowed bridehood : The newly married widows of massacre victims

Kashmir. When the Pandits arrived in Jammu. They were put in make-shift tents and many are still living in them. The climatic conditions alone would have ensured that their lives would become miserable. Several have died of the heat in Jammu. Others have died of snake-bites. The frustration and mental agony have been unbearable, and several have lost their sanity. It is reported that a few of the younger generation have taken recourse to drugs to escape the agony that life has become for them. Some of the displaced Pandits have been provided with GI sheet sheds, but this is hardly an improvement over the tents.

The camps are located at various places like Muthi, Bantalab, Nagrota and Udampur. Those who visited these places testify to the fact that conditions there are not fit for human beings. People in these camps live a family to a room and share common bathrooms. Married couples find it impossible to have privacy. This has led to increased frustration. Pandits also point out that their birth-rate has

significantly dropped. A small percentage of the Pandits do live in somewhat better conditions. A few have their dwelling places in Jammu and Delhi.

While the initial reaction of the people of Jammu to the Hindus arriving there was one of sympathy and help, the fact is that now other questions have started to come up. The Pandit community has an almost 100 percent literacy rate and they pose challenges to the Dogras (the people of Jammu) for jobs and admissions to educational institutions. Also, the possibility that they might become permanent residents of Jammu has its own socio-economic, and cultural implications. The displaced Pandits have already begun to be seen as a separate class and it is not unusual to find newspaper headlines like: "Migrant woman raped" and "Migrant cheated of Rs 500". Indeed, the condition of the Pandits who have been exiled is a human problem of huge proportions. And most of them are unwilling to return to their homes in Kashmir under the prevailing conditions because of threat to their lives.

The worst-hit, of course, have been the ones from the rural areas. The ones who fled from Srinagar have several advantages over those who lived in the villages in Kashmir. For instance, a large percentage of them have sold their properties in Srinagar and are thus economically better placed than their counterparts from the villages. Also, those who had government jobs continue to be employed by the government and most of these are the ones from the city of Srinagar and the towns.

Organisations of Exiles

However, a Kashmiri Pandit is nothing if not resilient. The community has responded to the challenges before them as well as many other communities could have and have left no stone unturned to organise themselves and improve their lot as much as they could.

There are several organisations of Pandits working for improving their lot. Perhaps there are too many organisations. Dr Wahklu says with a wry smile: “There are as many groups of Pandits today as there are Pandits.” The major Pandit organisations operating are Panun Kashmir, All India Kashmiri Pandit Samaj, Kashmiri Pandit Sabha and the US-based Indo-American Kashmiri Forum. These organisations work in various ways to highlight the plight of the Pandits and to get governments to help them. And they have succeeded to some extent.

Several state governments have made gestures towards the Pandits and have offered them considerations of various sorts. The BJP government of the state of Delhi, has, for instance, provided some exiles with kiosks and this has helped in the rehabilitation of several families. Similarly,

the Himachal Pradesh government has offered to rehabilitate Pandits in the state by giving them plots and incentives. But the Pandits seem to be happiest about the announcement of the Maharashtra government that they will be considered for admissions to educational institutions in the state. For, in the words of a Kashmiri Pandit: “Education means everything to a Pandit.”

While all the Pandit organisations do not have an overtly political agenda, some, like Panun Kashmir, are demanding a separate homeland for the Kashmiri Pandits within Kashmir. However, such a demand seems to constitute a denial of ground realities and increases the schisms between the two communities. In fact, some Muslim intellectuals see the identification of the exiles with the Hindu right as a reflection of what the Pandits really felt in their hearts all along. Says a poet who prefers not to be named: “Why did the Pandits play the BJP game as soon as they left Kashmir?” The purpose here is not to slur the BJP, but to express the sentiment in Kashmir.

The Wundhama Massacre

Late in the evening on 25 January, 1998, armed men entered the homes of Hindus in Wundhama, Ganderbal, and massacred four families—a total of 23 people, including several women and children. These families had chosen to stay behind in Kashmir when a majority of their community had decided that it was no longer safe for them to live in Kashmir. They had learned to survive by not questioning the militants in any manner and, in fact, served their killers tea and snacks before they were all done to death. *India Today* rightly called it a “sinister strike” and it

is quite obvious that the purpose of the massacre was to send a message to the Pandits about the fate that awaited them if they dared to come back. Most people believe that it was done by Afghan militants of a fanatical Muslim group. However, at least some Pandits speak of the possibility of a more sinister reality and point out that the testimony of the lone surviving boy has not been made public. The fact is that the massacre was made to coincide with the international conference organised by Panun Kashmir and other such meetings by Pandit organisations. The reaction to the killings by the Muslims of Kashmir was one of outrage and a total *bandh* was observed against the killings all over Kashmir. Significantly, Pakistan was the only party that did not condemn the incident in unambiguous terms, just as they did not express condemnation of the killings of nine Pandits in Sangrampura, Budgam, in 1996.

Post-Wundhama Scenario

There is no doubt that the terrorists achieved their aim in the Wundhama massacre. The simple idea behind the killings was to further alienate the Hindus and to make sure that those outside Kashmir did not return. The immediate fallout was that 20 families of Pandits fled Kashmir after the incident and it became clear that the situation would not significantly improve in the near future. However, says a Kashmiri Pandit: “Whatever these terrorists do is not going to alienate the Pandits. The word “alienation” is alien to us. Even when Kashmiri militants were killing Hindus, we did not get alienated. The best thing to do is to ignore the fascists and focus on the positive things.”

Fine words, these, but the fact is that the return of the exiled Pandits to Kashmir looks as difficult today as it did four years back. More than 50 percent of the Pandits who lived in Srinagar have sold their houses and lands and have given up the idea of ever returning to Kashmir. The government has now issued orders banning the sale and purchase of migrant property. As usual, the reaction has come after a significant number of Pandits had already sold their property.

However, there is no doubt that most Pandits — especially those from the villages — want to return to their homes. Of the 20 families who fled after the Wundhama massacre, it is reported that three returned to Kashmir after a few weeks. Similar returns of Pandit families takes place from time to time and they are helped by their Muslim neighbours in getting rehabilitated. A Muslim man of letters called the return of the Kashmiri Pandits a “pious dream of the Muslims”. It goes without saying that it is such sentiments and their translation into concrete action that will bring about a change in the situation in Kashmir. The fact is that most Kashmiri Muslims consider the Pandits an important part of their society and want them to return home. The problem is that the two communities have become too estranged from each other and that the Pandits are soft targets for terrorists who are bent upon dividing Kashmiri society along communal lines.

Possible Solutions

It is clear that the fate of the Pandit community is linked to how the overall situation in Kashmir unfolds. The first big question from the Pandit community about the Kashmir problem obviously is: Can they return home? If so, when? The answers to these questions depend



A sarkari performance : Kashmiri girls doing a folk dance at the opening ceremony of Gulmarg winter sports in January , 1998

on political factors — the biggest factor might well be the relations between India and Pakistan, for the militancy in Kashmir is Pakistan sponsored. For all practical purposes, the militant outfits depend upon that country for logistic support and Pakistan encourages only those groups that toe its line. It is for this reason that the pro-Pakistan groups were able to replace the pro-independence political elements as the most influential in Kashmir. The return of the Pandits to Kashmir will, thus in the final analysis, depend on India and Pakistan reaching an agreement on the Kashmir issue. As the two countries play realpolitik, an entire community lives in limbo.

However, there is also an urgent need for the two Kashmiri communities to engage in a dialogue. Most people in Kashmir are of the opinion that the dialogue should be at a non-political level. Khemlata Wahklu, an ex-minister and an activist of the newly revived Awami National Conference says: “The entire society of Kashmir is wounded. People have become

very cynical. If Kashmiri Pandits are told Muslims have died, they respond by saying that they had a “cause” and their own persecution has no justification. On the other hand, Kashmiri Muslims say that Pandits have been given all kinds of benefits by the government and even say that the migration to Jammu has proved beneficial to them. What is needed is a dialogue between the two communities with the aim of bringing about reconciliation and union. This should be outside the ambit of politics.”

The situation in Kashmir today is better than it was a few years ago. But a real solution will come about only when Kashmiris know where they want their society to go. Unfortunately, many are pessimistic about the prospects of a resolution of the problem, and, for example, would conclude that a people whose language dies because they can’t agree on a script probably deserve to have it happen. □

This article was written and sent to us before the massacres in June '98.