

Narrating the Pandit Exodus: A Study of Indian Administrative Kashmir

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Abstract

The rigging of the 1987 elections in Jammu and Kashmir Legislative assembly led to huge unrest among the youth and it gave rise to the armed struggle and consequently led to the forced migration of Kashmiri Pandit community. There are different views about the pandit exodus in Kashmir. There were few who held Jagmohan responsible for the exodus. Some people said Pandits left on their own because of the frightening situation in the Valley. Such people naturally emphasized how sponsored armed militancy destroyed peace and ruined communal harmony. A few said Kashmiri Muslims did nothing to prevent the Pandit exodus, although many felt the majority community was itself scared and it was impossible for them to stop the exodus. In this regard, the paper aims to provide different narratives to the Pandit exodus.

Introduction

After 1989-armed conflict in Kashmir valley, the place became insecure to live for many communities and consequently they left the valley for the reasons of security. Many Muslims migrated to Pakistan occupied Kashmir and settled there in refugee camps. These refugee camps became the space for both providing the relief to displaced people and for organising insurgent groups with the aim fighting in Indian Occupied Kashmir in the name of Kashmir Jihad-freeing Kashmir from the rule of India. The other communities of the valley which include Kashmiri Pandits and Sikhs and other Hindus in general migrated to Jammu, Delhi and other parts of the country, where most of them settled in the camps established by the government at Jammu (Robinson, 2013). The two major communities of Kashmir-Pandits and Muslims started blaming each other for their sufferings. Both communities suffered a lot but in different ways. The Kashmiri Pandits suffered from the agonies of exile while the Muslims have been living in a prison which at times turns into a torture cell for them. The

Kashmir Pandits who migrated from the valley were welcomed by the whole country whereas the Kashmiri Muslims had no such choice as they were viewed as suspicious and were easy fodder for the security forces. Hence any discourse that blames either community for the wrongs suffered by each of them is inimical to reconciliation and will not only increase alienation between the two but the two will also lead to further victimization of both communities (Ahmad, 2016). Different organisations, NGOs and people have different views about the displacement in Kashmir valley. A monthly magazine-Kashmir Ink in its March 2016 edition tried to examine the root causes of the migration of Kashmiri Pandits. In this regard they interviewed most of the members of the Pandit community, civil societies, NGOs and people from different ideologies and their opinions were published in the sixteenth issue of the magazine which was published in March 2016. The different views provided by different people about displacement are divided into following sections.

From Kashmiri Pandit's Point of View

Sanjay Moza who is the General Secretary of Panun Kashmir- an organisation of migrated Kashmiri Pandits, is of the view that the targeted killings of his community members forced them to leave the Kashmir. The main reason he has given for their migration is the killing of his cousin Anil Bhan who was shot dead by gunmen. However, Moza is of the view that Kashmiri Pandits should be resettled back in Kashmir but in separate townships in order to prevent history from repeating itself (Kashmir Ink, 2016).

Sanjay Tickoo is the Chairperson of Kashmir Pandit Sangharsh Samiti-an organisation of Pandits who did not migrate in 1990 has an interesting story to tell. He says that it is the fact that in 1989 there were many significant changes in the valley. The state government collapsed, thousands of people were participating in pro-Azadi marches and people used to listen to BBC and Radio Pakistan and it were believed that the Azadi is approaching.

Tickoo makes an interesting statement by saying that it is known fact that Kashmiri Muslims were Pakistanis and Pandits Indian as it proved when the latter left the valley and sided with India in 1990. He believed that the Pandits did not migrate due to any security threat but to save the honour and chastity of their women folk. He raises two important questions regarding the migration of Pandits. First the migration could have been prevented had the majority community taken out a solidarity march against the killing of Pandits and had the religious clerics intervened. On the other hand, he adds, "history stands witness to the fact that had the Muslims wanted, they could have killed all the pandits in Kashmir in 1947. But that did not happen as we Kashmiri have a very close-knot society" (Kashmir Ink, 2016).

Civil Societies View on Displacement

Hameedah Nayeem is the Chairperson of the Kashmir Centre for Developmental Studies, a prominent civil society group, has a different perspective on the displacement in Kashmir valley. She blames the government for the exodus of Pandits. She argues that there is no doubt that a fear psychosis prevailed in Kashmir during 1990s and there were political killings too. She argues that the first killing of the 1990s was that of a political worker Muhammad Yusuf Halwai, who was a Muslim by faith. She is of the view that it is a fact that besides Muslims, few Pandits were also killed. She blames the then Governor Jagmohan for the displacement of the Pandits. She says that the Governor capitalised the fear psychosis and asked the pandits to leave the place temporary and they will be resettled back in valley after the situation becomes favourable. Hameedah blames the Governor for his Hitelarian designs as there were several massacres of Muslims during his tenure.

Regarding the returning of the Pandits, Hameedah is of the view that the Pandit community has every right to return but she is against settling them in separate townships. Further she says that there are thousands of

Muslims living in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir which were forced to migrate in 1990 due to exchange of firing and shelling between the Indian and Pakistani armies and have every right to be resettled back in Valley (Kashmir Ink, 2016).

From Government's Point of View

Wajahat Habibullah was a bureaucrat and served in Kashmir during 1990s and has something to say from state's point of view. He says,

“In early 1990s, slogans started reverberating from the mosques that people who do not support the Kashmir movement should leave. Slogans and selective killings triggered panic among the Pandits, and they requested their friends as well as the security forces for vehicles to facilitate their movement. The Pandits moving in the vehicles of security forces created an impression that the government was facilitating their migration from the valley. But the fact is that during that period, administration in Kashmir had broken down and there was no government in place” (Kashmir Ink, 2016).

Wajahat further says that the government later discovered that the slogans from the mosques were not raised by the people, but tapes were being played on loudspeakers. The slogans did not create fear psychosis only in the Pandit community but in Muslims too. The members of the Muslim community who owed alliance to mainstream parties were forced to flee from the valley as well. Recollecting one incident Wajahat says, “that when he was posted in Anantnag district of the valley, a group of people led by the brother of a senior separatist leader approached me that why the government is not doing anything to avoid the Pandit migration. The group also told the Wajahat that they came to know from the secret sources that the Pandits were leaving because the government was planning to finish off the Muslims”. For this Wajahat says “that he assured the group that the government had no such plans and suggested them why the Muslims are

not making small groups and visit the areas where Pandits live and reassure them that nobody would harm them". After meeting the delegation, Wahajat says, "that he called upon the Raj Bhawan and spoke to governor about the meeting and suggested him to appear on the TV and make an announcement that the Muslims of south Kashmir have decided to reach out to the Pandits to assure them that no harm would be done to them but the governor did not appear on TV that day and the message could not go out to the People". Regarding the return of the Pandits, Wahajat believed that the Pandits should be allowed to decide on their own. He says that many Pandits have returned to valley and are living in mixed neighbourhoods. He suggests that the government should provide them special incentives to set up industries and business in Kashmir as idle sittings in the separate townships could not provide them enough to make ends meet. However, he argued that their return should not be linked with giving them state jobs as many of the migrants after getting jobs in valley managed to get them transferred back to Jammu or other districts (Malik, 2016).

Saifuddin Soz in his book, *"Kashmir: Glimpses of History and the Story of Struggle"*, describes that he was offered credible evidence to assert that the mass exodus had occurred because of Governor Jagmohan, who had been appointed on 19th January 1990 for the second time, though it prudent to organize the exodus for two reasons: one, that way alone Pandits would feel safe and secure and further sectarian killings would be stopped; second, he would be able to deal with the situation better where stringent laws to curb militancy were already in force and these laws could not be used freely on a mixed population. Many believed this approach was not ethically sound and he had faltered. Some people suspected that he had been sent to Kashmir to teach the Muslims a lesson. In fact, Jagmohan's dispensation was greatly flawed because of his perception on things, particularly, for the fact he treated the crisis in Kashmir, broadly as a law and order situation created by members of the majority community. It was

the design of the dispensation from the time he was appointed in January 1990 till he was removed in May the same year. He had thought that his strong methods would work, and he would be able to restore peace within a short time. Even after his removal, a situation of chaos remained on the ground which got deepened by the day and more lethal laws like the AFSPA (enacted on 6 July 1990) had to be imposed (Soz, 2018: 182).

Pro-Freedom Organisations Point of View

The different factions of the pro-freedom groups blame the government for the exodus of Kashmiri Pandits from the valley in 1990s. The most important groups of pro-freedom include Hurriyat conference led by Geelani and Mirwaiz Umar Farooq, JKLF headed by Yasin Malik. These groups argue that the Pandits are part and parcel of the Kashmiri society and nobody can stop them from returning to their home land, but they are against settling them in separate colonies. With regard to their return and rehabilitation Geelani argues, "We are in no way against the return and rehabilitation of the Pandit community in the Valley but the Indian government and its policy makers want to play a very dangerous game under its grab and they not only want to divide the Kashmiri society on religious lines but they also want to harm the freedom struggle of the Kashmiris" (State Times, 2016: May 05).

Yasin Malik who heads his faction of JKLF is of the view that the Kashmiri society is a mixture of both Hindus and Muslims, and they have been living in harmony for centuries and the sudden exodus of the Pandits was a hard blow to the society. He is of the opinion that the Pandits should return to their native places and should live within their communities to maintain the age-old harmony and is against the settlement in separate colonies. He says, "We will not allow the government to build separate settlements for Kashmiri Pandits. This is an Israeli ploy and RSS has taken inspiration from that. They want to create walls of hatred here, spread fire and divide the people"(The Tribune, 2015: April 08).

When it comes to the migration of Kashmir Pandits the name of Farooq Ahmad Dar alias Bitta Karate crops up. He was the former militant and now heads his faction of the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front. To Indian state and rightist Pandit outfits he was the main force behind the Pandit exodus. While talking to a reporter of Kashmir Ink, Bitta Karate responds to allegations of playing a key role in driving out Kashmiri Pandits. He claims that he never killed a Pandit and was compelled to confess by the security forces by being subjected to third-degree torture. He holds the then governor Jagmohan responsible for the Pandit exodus. He argues that they had picked up guns against injustice and not against the Pandits and after leaving the armed struggle they are committed to the Kashmir cause. Regarding the return of the pandits, he is of the view that the Pandits are part and parcel of the Kashmiri society but like others he is against settling them in separate colonies. He believes that any move to settle them in colonies can lead to a Gaza-like situation in Kashmir (Kashmir Ink, 2016).

Role of Media in Articulating the Forced Displacement in Kashmir Valley

Media has been considered as the fourth and important pillar of the democracy after Legislature, Executive and Judiciary. There may be operational distortion in the latter three pillars of the democracy, but the fourth pillar-Media remains the only hope for the development of a country by taking active part in the democracy. It keeps the public informed about the happening around the world and has much influence on the minds of the people. Though the media has been able to highlight various issues of concern but many at times it has been criticised on the grounds of playing a biased role. Sometimes the national security or national interest becomes obstacle in delivering the duties of media. As far as the role of media in highlighting the issues of displacement in Jammu and Kashmir is concerned, it has been much criticised rather than praised for delivering its duty.

The media, be it national or local has been alleged of playing a biased role while highlighting the issues of conflict-induced displaced people in Kashmir Valley. The media has been dominated by a section of people who find it easily accessible. The conflict in Kashmir valley was given a shape of communal violence between majority Muslims who were alleged for the exodus of minority Hindus. The Kashmir Pandits got much publicity as compared to other displaced communities of the valley (Jamwal, 2004). There were other communities like Muslims, Sikhs and non-Kashmiri Hindus but they were neglected by the media. There were Muslim families who had a communist ideology suffered at the hands of militants, army and state supported groups like Ikhwanis. One member of these displaced families argued, "We proved we believe in an undivided J&K and also disproves the stereotype that only Hindus are suffering in my state". Not only the media began to ignore the other displaced groups or the genuine displaced in the camps, but it created strains and made divisions within the Kashmiri society (Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group (CRG), February 2004).

Media also marginalised those Pandits who stayed back and did not migrate and Muslims whether they migrated or not. Apart from the migrants from valley, there were people who migrated from Doda, Rajouri, Poonch and from all along the Line of Control but these people did not receive much media attention as compared to Kashmiri Pandits. Sanjay Tikoo while giving an interview to a local monthly magazine 'Kashmir Ink' talks about the role of media. He says,

"The Indian media is playing a negative role vis-a-vis the return of the Pandit to the valley. Recently, a news channel ran a story on Nadimarg massacre, and they sought my comments on it. I told them that if you are running a story on Nadimarg, run a story on the Gawkadal massacre too". "The media should act as a bridge rather than add fuel to the fire" (Kashmir Ink, 2016).

About the displacement of Kashmiri Pandits, the media made conclusions such as majority Muslims forced the minority Hindus to leave the valley without questioning the basic threat which the whole valley faced. The 'Kashmiriyat' (composition of different cultures and ethnicities) which was the hallmark of the Kashmiri society for centuries disappeared within the days, nobody questioned that. The national media presented it as a Hindu-Muslim conflict, and some argued that the displacement of Pandits happened due to their large presence in the government jobs. The local media blamed then Governor of the state Jagmohan for the exile of Pandits. The media never tried to know the background of the displacement but acted like handicapped. Sometimes there was biasness in the reports of the media and other times, the media was occupied by a certain group of people who were either in politics or easily accessible to media (Jamwal, 2004).

For other displaced communities such as people displaced from the districts of Doda, Rajouri, Poonch and from along the border, the media did not show the same courage as it was visible during the displacement of Kashmiri Pandits. The displacement of people from these regions was generally generated by the government, so media paid a deaf ear to these displacements. One more reason for their negligence is that these people were illiterate and had no elite background and thus were inaccessible to mainstream media. Overall, the media has not been able to articulate the displacement of people across the valley. Sometimes the media has been stopped from doing their duty in the name of national interest or national security and at other times the media viewed the Kashmir conflict from one side (Jamwal, 2004).

Conclusion

It becomes clear from the above different perspectives that the Kashmiri society as whole has suffered being it the militants or by the hands of Indian security forces. As far as the internal displacement in Kashmir is concerned, different people with different ideologies look the phenomena through their

perspectives. They blame each other or government and militants for their suffering. Who was the responsible or was there any conspiracy in the displacement of the Pandits? "There is a need to have an impartial probe into the Kashmiri Pandit exodus. A team comprising members of both the communities must revisit 1990 and unveil the conspiracy" says Sanjay Tickoo. Some Pandit members like Sanjay Tikoo sees the exodus of Pandits as a conspiracy. According to Tikoo something happened in New Delhi around March 15, 1990. Haday Nath jattu, a Pandit leader called on his father and told him to leave Srinagar by March 17, as the Jawahar tunnel, which connects Kashmir with rest of India shall be closed after the said date (Din, 2016). It is a reality that the exodus has taken place but what really triggered it is a mystery.

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