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Kashmiri Pandits: From Roots to Routes

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Abstract:

Kashmiri Pandit community has suffered a huge loss due to armed insurgency, political turmoil and repetitive eviction. Thousands of them perished dreaming of their homeland. They could not go back to their native place even after twenty seven years of exile. Some writers have raised this issue through their writings. In this succession, Siddhartha Gigoo and Varad Sharma have recorded their haunting memories, agony of staying away from their homeland and their disgraceful life in banishment adroitly in their compilation of memoirs *A Long dream of Home*. In spite of unremitting and tireless struggle, negligence of their demand, and consequent dejection, they are still hopeful to get back their lost paradise. They are looking forward to a conducive atmosphere to be created for their return.

Keywords: Kashmiri Pandits, exodus, terrorism, homeland, Kashmir issue.

There is a prolonged history of persecution, forced and organized conversion and exodus of Kashmiri Pandits to which they have been subjected. According to mythology, they are descendants of Rishi Kashyap; the creator of Kashmir and have been living there since time immemorial. Awarded with the terrestrial epithet 'the Paradise on Earth' and 'the Crown of India,' Kashmir is well-known not only for its scenic landscape but also for its glorious history; spiritual, cultural and educational excellence.

This paper attempts to explore the endless pain, sufferings and trauma the exiled Kashmiri Pandits went through. It is based on recently appeared anthology *A Long Dream of Home*, a revealing book on their plight, the untold and unforgettable stories which have left unfading scar on their psyche. It chronicles their irreparable losses due to their forcible exile which is one of the most heinous and gruesome incidents in the history of mankind and a blot on the serene culture of India. They had been ethnically cleansed seven times from their motherland. Their recent exodus occurred in 1990 and was the second largest exodus after partition of India.

This book comprises twenty-nine narratives of Kashmiri Pandits writers of four generations who suffered, witnessed and endured one of the most turbulent periods of the history of Kashmir. They have documented their poignant, heart-wrenching stories of their expatriation, bitter experiences of their journey from ancestral homes to camps and other parts of the

country as refugees, subsequent struggle for education, employment and settlement of their unsettled life. In recent years, many Kashmiri and Non-Kashmiri writers have written their novels exhibiting ongoing conflicts and unrest of Kashmir. Siddhartha Gigoo's *The Garden of Solitude* and *A Fistful Earth and Other Stories*, Jagmohan's *My Frozen Turbulence in Kashmir*, Rahul Pandita's *Our Moon has Blood Clots*, Basharat Peer's *Curfewed Night* are powerful depiction of the complicated situations and hardships of Kashmiri people.

Siddhartha Gigoo along with Varad Sharma has compiled and edited this book. In this momentous effort of preserving their history and demanding for their homeland, they display their deep involvement with the subject and record various narratives of theirs which are deeply associated with personal experiences and nostalgic remembrance.

A few historical accounts of Kashmir are illustrated in the paper as it is replete with a long series of barbaric and brutal incidents committed to them which are inimical to human dignity and ethos. Social, political, religious and cultural degradation of Kashmir was on the wane during the rule of fanatical ruler Sikander Butshikan who was extremely brutal to Hindus. He desecrated hundreds of temples which were not only places of worship but also outstanding monuments of sculpture and supreme heritage of Kashmir. He threw away significant manuscripts and books of historical importance into Dal Lake. Gigoo has mentioned a deeply traumatized and murky event in the preface of the book, "Those who didn't leave or refused to be converted to Islam were burned alive a place near Rainwari in Srinagar." (VIII) He was the culprit of causing the first exodus of Kashmiri Pandits from the valley with the intention of wiping out Hinduism from there. Staying in their homeland, survival of culture and living a peaceful life had become a challenge for them.

Predicament had worsened after the partition of India in 1947 as the majority community had intense inclination towards Pakistan and wanted Kashmir to be a part of it. Meenakshi Raina writes in her narrative, "Nights of Terror" that expressing extreme solidarity with Pakistan, they, "would write on the blackboard 'Happy Independence Day,' August 14, which marked the Independence Day of Pakistan" and "there used to be forced blackouts on 15 August, the Indian Independence Day." (64)

Pakistan's former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto's tirade addressing the Kashmiri Muslims to move towards freedom from India instigated them. Consequently, cross border terrorism erupted in 1989 with force. Pakistan unleashed blatant militancy under the cover of freedom movement and provided them with weapons and ground for militant training camps. A number of terror outfits emerged out in the pursuit of freedom movement. Separatists and various terrorist organizations of Kashmir joined hand with terror outfits of Pakistan for the accomplishment of their crooked mission. They provoked youths of Kashmir in the name religious crusade of Islam well known as 'Jihad' and Kashmir became the ground of unending conflicts. Pakistan played a gloomy role in ethnic cleansing of Kashmiri Pandits. Gigoo writes, "Hartals, 'civil curfews,' mass protests, stone pelting, bomb blasts, encounters, strikes, violent clashes between the militants and the security forces, army crackdowns and detentions, became a way of life in Kashmir." (XV)

Indu Bushan Zutshi writes in his memoir entitled, “She Was Killed Because She Was An Informant, No Harm Will Come To You” that the daughter of his neighbor, Sarla Bhat, was abducted, detained for four days and then mercilessly killed by the militants of a terror outfit Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front. Her dead body bearing multiple signs of torture was found in Srinagar. They put hurdles during her cremation. Zutshi narrates, “As we were rushing through the rites, two youths came to the spot and instructed us to stop the cremation and go back to our houses. These youths told us that Sarla Bhat was a police informer and militants didn’t want anyone to cremate her.” (7)

After repeated threats and ultimatum, Kashmiri Pandits did not quit the valley. They began to kill the elite and the commoners of the community in order to terrorize them. Tika Lal Taploo, a lawyer and a leading Pandit politician, was killed in broad daylight. Soon after, a prominent and renowned member of the community and judge Neel Kanth Ganjoo, who earlier imparted capital punishment on Maqbool Bhat , a hard-core terrorist and one of the founders of Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front and convicted of the murder of an intelligence officer; was killed. These brutal murders shook the community and instilled huge negative impact, fear and insecurity in it.

Government failed to control over the prevailing mayhem which led to uninterrupted anarchy and lawlessness. Due to incapability to curb the insurgency, there was an abrupt rise in the reign of terror and thenceforth traumatic elements and their cynical actions were on the rampage:

Fear of law and authority didn’t exist; it was evident from the killings in broad daylight. Militants had gained control over the press, the local police, doctors, teachers and lawyers; all of them were at their service. (67)

Kundan Lal Chowdhary recounts the dreadful night of 19th January 1990 that the fanatics in the form of infuriated, violent and unruly mob surged forward in the street of Kashmir raising anti- India and pro- Pakistan slogans; threatening Pandits to quit or be ready to face dire consequences:

On the long, dark, wintry night of 19 January, when the whole world was asleep, thousands of loudspeakers hoisted on as many mosques through the length and breadth of the valley suddenly boomed ‘Azadi’ slogans and war cries, exhorting the masses to come out of their homes and march to Srinagar to capture power in the valley. They were urged to cleanse the land of kafirs, to subdue the Pandit women and drive their men out of Kashmir. (21-22)

This bizarre and harrowing happening existed till midnight causing great fear in them. They felt that their genocide was imminent because, “they were witness to the acme of religious frenzy, a flagrant exhibition of mass hysteria.”(22)

They were stupefied to see that their compatriots were hell bent to erase them from their home and hearth. They were their colleagues, neighbors and friends with whom they had shared their moments of sorrow and joy. Tehreek had created great rift between the age old traditions

of brotherhood of the two communities for no good reason. Pandits who still nurtured the hope to stay in the valley even at the peak of prevailed militancy, the horrific incident of 19th January made them think to abandon their native land for safeguarding the life and dignity of their family:

The macabre happenings during the night of 19 January have proved to be turning point in the exodus of Kashmiri Pandits, as it has unleashed terrible forces against, making it impossible for them to stay back in their homeland.
(22)

In the wake of this gloomy and frightful night, they had to desert their homeland; their paradise for no rhyme or reason leaving behind their jobs, landed property, orchards, established business, ancestral homes in which they had been residing since the days of yore. It was neither flood, nor earthquake but terrorism, a man-made disaster, which turned them homeless, rootless, jobless and sans property and made them itinerant. They became camp dwellers from landlord. On the following day, multitudes of Kashmiri Pandits were viewed going not towards Kashmir but away from it. "Some even barefoot with hardly any belongings-- caravans of men, women and children running away from their homes and hearths." (22) Siddhartha Gigoo in his debut novel *The Garden of Solitude* describes the tragic and horrific moments of mass extermination, "Each truck carried a home, and hopelessness." (Gigoo 66)

Central and state government failed to protect their lives and homeland; and the land of Rishi Kashyap became devoid of His descendants. They were left high and dry and forwarded towards alien land in search of new abode. They parted with their relatives, friends, neighbors without any intervening time. Their address changed overnight and, "The exodus gave rise to pain agony and misery." (66)

Pakistan sponsored terrorism engulfed the peace and normalcy of the life of Kashmir. It brought hard times to both the Pandits and the Muslims. Though Muslims did not lose their homeland, they suffered equally. Around one lakh Kashmiri Muslims lost their lives in this turmoil. Prevailed rampant pandemonium disrupted their lives. Presence of militants, their encounters with security forces, frequent shutdown, processions, clashes; search- operations and stone-pelting make their lives miserable. Children grow up under the shadow of guns for it has become one of the most conflicted zones of the world.

Basharat Peer, an Indian journalist, was a teenager during the peak period of militancy. His forceful memoir *Curfewed Night* reflects the pain, persecution, loss of valuable lives and dignity due to protracted terrorism. He writes in his novel:

By February 1990, Kashmir was in the midst of a full-blown rebellion against India. News on the radio became the news of defiance and death. Protests followed killings and killings followed protests. (Peer 16)

Separatists have played illegitimate role in enhancing militancy and bloodshed in the valley. Leading a peaceful life seems a distant dream for Kashmiri people. Syed Ali Shah Geelani, a

descendant of an Iranian intruder and an ex- Member of Legislative Assembly of Kashmir, rebels against India flagrantly. They carry out massive campaign to persuade youths to join militancy. Kundan Lal Chowdhury writes, "Some have volunteered, others are being lured with incentives, yet others though coercion." (19) At the age, when they must go to schools and colleges; and strive for their brilliant career, they plunge into the trap of militancy; a fierce battle against their own country at the behest of their higher-ups, "If a family has two or more sons they have to donate at least one of them for the Tehreek, the freedom movement." (19) Disappearance of youths, thousands of half- widows waiting for their husbands; orphans, wailing mothers and their moving accounts are outcome of perpetual militancy and are bound to be heard and heeded. If they disappear or are killed, millionaire separatists do not take care of their families. Their lives are left in the limbo as they lead a life of utter distress and desperation.

Sushant Dhar, an emerging writer, expresses his embittered memories of camps in his evocative narrative "summers in Exile." He was one of those infants who were in the lap of their mothers while leaving the valley. He writes, "my ancestors were the children of winter, of snow, of mountains. I was new to summer. We both were new to each other." (81) Overcame with the sense of nostalgia, he expresses his outpouring of emotions, immense love and pining for his lost paradise in a poignant way. Scorching heat of sun makes him and others uncomfortable and unpleasant. They were used to live in a cold climatic condition. Sweltering atmosphere of Jammu gave them unfriendly and disagreeable feeling:

I cursed the sun, I curse the heat. I always dreamt of watching the snowfall, dreamt of snow, of touching it, walking on it..... I longed for snow. For many years before sleeping, I imagined myself walking through a land covered entirely with tress and snow, walking through the fields and reaching the top of a mountain this helped me sleep in the summer. (81-82)

In his autobiographical delineation, Dhar reveals how painful reminiscences of the past, extant dilemma and uncertain and doubtful future trail the sufferer consciously, sub-consciously and unconsciously. They have been subjected to a series of oppression, suppression and maltreatment. He recounts the sorrowful plight of Pandits residing in various camps in Jammu. Life in camps was hard for them as they battled for everything there. Living in constant state of outright denial and extreme deprivation, thousands of them died due to sunstrokes and snakebite:

Each day was an ordeal; a fight every moment, a fight within. Survival became a struggle; living through the days became a nightmare. The living conditions, the dark locales, pallid days, scorching heat, constricted lanes, mobile water tankers, the din of utensils, long queues for water, verbal spats among the migrants, a tap of water for 200 families. (76)

Arvind Gigoo evinces in his composition entitled "Days of Parting" a series of incidents in the form a dairy. He states a number of esoteric and obscure events during the period of turmoil that he observed. Speculation and dark interpretation on any fracas was rife. Cinema halls, beauty parlors, shops which sold cassettes were closed down as these practices were anti-

Islamic. Kashmiri Muslims were made to dream of having Utopia and they were inculcated hatred for India. Political instability, social unrest, bitter relation and booming rift between the two communities, rampant terrorism, economic disaster, worsening social milieu convert the heaven into hell. For Pandits, who had still stayed back in the valley, terror outfits published an ultimatum in an Urdu daily which read as, 'Pandits are directed to leave the valley in 36 hours.'(147) Another article appeared with the title, "The Kashmiri Pandit is a poisonous snake."(147) These published threatening terrified them to the core. They felt alienated and marginalized in their own homeland.

The writer conveys a message through a letter inspiring Kashmiri Muslims with a view to shun terrorism at any cost and express public dissent and denial to separatists with utmost priority; and expand their mental horizon to discern their evil deeds. They must do considerable attempt in restoring cultural enlightenment in Kashmir else ambivalence and indecision will keep them in the same place. They should evade their vicious propaganda and nullify their terror agenda in order to keep their lives in order. Separatist leaders in collusion with Pakistan have been befooling them and they are as victims of terrorism as Pandits are. They have lost their valuable lives, peace and dignity with no result.

Arvind Gigoo's letter written to his posterity with a view to be read on 19th January 2090 is immensely overwhelming, exclusively expository and remarkably imaginative for the whole community is filled with apprehension of losing its language, festivals, traditions, rituals and celebrations:

You are rootless, you belong to no place. The base of your life is a vacuum. The language you speak is not your own. Your festivals are borrowed. You live by proxy. You are half machine..... You don't celebrate memory because you have none. Your life is some digits and speed. What do you want? You will never know. You are unpersons. (160)

Gigoo seems to have qualms about the existence of the community and concludes his narrative without any conclusion:

I don't know whether Pandits shall prevail or perish. (160)

The book contains several photos of deserted and dilapidated houses, desecrated and worn out temples which are pictorial manifestations of the tyranny, nasty and inhuman acts done to them. There are some pictures of Muthi camps of Jammu illustrating their woebegone plight struggling for life and survival in great odds. Four thousands Kashmiri Pandits were provided with flats in 2011, a temporary settlement at Jagti, Nagrota after a long time.

Namrata Wakhloo in "The Pomegranate Tree" describes how her life was full of joy with her family, relatives and friends. She used to live in a large house in a joint family, "As kids, we live a very sheltered life" (228) but prevailing militancy and displacement shattered their lives. She states, "common people were leading a fearful life while volunteers from tanzeems like Al Umar, Allah Tigers, Al Badr, Harkat-ul-Ansar, Hizb-ul- Mujahideen and JKLF roamed around freely."(232) Their lives were confined to their homes due to encompassing commotion.

Wakhloo writes, “I would wonder how everybody at home would spend their lives holed up inside with no outings, no cinema, no picnics, no friends and relative visiting.”(234) Living in constant fear, her family decided to sell house and flourishing business. The new landlord made changes in his house to meet his need and she expresses her grief in this way:

Nothing is left there which bears a trace of our existence. A part of our history has been erased. Kashmir just doesn't seem like home anymore. The pomegranate tree still stand in the courtyard of my old house. (235)

Prithivinath Kabu narrates in his stirring account how his son, who was a lecturer, gunned down by the terrorists and consequently he is leading a life of loneliness as his better half passed away a few years ago. His dismal and lonely life and condition mirrors the lives of thousands of Kashmiri Pandits. Terrorism snatched their support of old age; otherwise they would have lived contentedly and happily with their descendants. At the end, he makes an extremely moving statement:

Even after I die, my soul will search for Kashmir and my first home in Varmul.(245)

In “ I established Radio Sharda”, Ramesh Hangloo expresses his deep concern about the purpose of initiating Radio Sharda which is a highly commendable attainment towards preserving their culture and colossal effort for restoring their shattered heritage which is deteriorating and likely to be on the verge of extinction in the long run. He lists about programmes broadcast on it on the latter part of the narrative.

Varad Sharma in “The inheritance of memory”, his touching memoir, writes, “In exile, each day is a yearning for home.” (253) He has never been to the valley due to the adverse situation but nurtures idyllic images of Kashmir what he has heard from his father. He further states, “In my conversation with my father, I realise that there is more to Kashmir which is mysterious yet to be explored and understood.” (253)He insists on the inevitability of generating comprehensive discussion over the issue and find wise outcome. He is of the view when Kashmiri Muslims cease help terrorists and obey their vicious agenda, it will be easy to pave ways towards normalcy. They should develop their own vision instead of borrowed from others and come out of absurd prejudices.

Kashinath Pandita in his memoir “Merge, Leave or Perish” talks about how Pakistan was able to generate hatred in Muslim populace for India and Kashmiri Pandits. The whole community was appalled to mob agitation for no one knew what might happen in the next moment. He writes, “They swore by the might of Islam and proclaimed that the era of Islam had dawned and Kafirs should run away.” (216)..... “and Islam would shine in Kashmir” (217).

Siddhardha Gigoo in his writing “Season of Ashes” recounts his memories living in exile how his grandfather became afflicted with Alzheimer and suffered a lot of trauma. While leaving valley, “he crossed the Jawaharlal tunnel and the tunnel became the tunnel of forgetfulness, not just for him but countless other elders who were leaving Kashmir for an

unknown place.”(106) Many of them stepped out of the valley for the first time leaving behind their eternal habitat. Nearly forty thousand pandits, living in the state of dilemma and suffering a variety of atrocities and ailing; succumbed to early death. Gigoo narrates that his grandmother was granted eternal rest when her son took her to visit their ancestral home in Srinagar where she longed to live and die.

There occurred a series of brutal massacre of those Kashmiri Pandits who did not leave the valley and stayed back there. Sangrampora massacre in 1997, Wandhama massacre in 1998 and Nadimarg massacre in 2003 indicate that Kashmir is not a safe haven for them. Repetitious suffering and killing of thousands of pandits, muslims and security forces have made their memory of homeland haunting.

Kashmir once celebrated for tourism and was synonymous with beauty and elegance; now has shifted its meaning; its identity and has become fertile ground for blatant terrorism. Bitta Karate, mass murderer of Kashmiri Pandits, is at large; and dreaded terrorist Yasin Malik who has played nefarious role in genocidal violence and extermination of his compatriots, is roaming free. These law-breakers not only turn the most picturesque and captivating land into the land of death and devastation but also commit acts of sedition like burning of Tiranga, raising anti-Indian slogans and hatching conspiracy against India residing on its soil.

To conclude, Kashmir issue must be resolved judiciously and head for political solution as violence is not the way to achieve an objective. Terrorism needs to be crushed with stern hand in order to restore peace, normalcy, and harmony so that the people of Kashmir can lead their lives with dignity and Kashmiri Pandits, the aborigines of Kashmir, can get back their lost homeland and revive their vanishing culture. They will find solace in their home which is the loveliest place under the sun and view the mesmerizing views in the vicinity.

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