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The Period of 90s and Kashmiri Pandits: A Study of *Our Moon Has Blood Clots* by Rahul Pandita

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Abstract:

The dawn of 90s is crucial in the context of the history of Kashmir since it marks the onset of mass political rebellion and the horrible ethnic cleansing of Pandits from the Valley. While the Muslim majority of Kashmir was struggling for independence from the Indian nation-state at the same time Pandits also got involved as it led to their exile. Kashmir has by now produced many able writers who have produced a plethora of good quality English writing that cover the period and its conflict. However, in terms of English prose writing the torch-bearer was Basharat Peer, whose masterpiece *Curfewed Night* (2008) provided a track for others like Mirza Waheed, Siddhartha Gigoo, Rahul Pandita, Shahnaz Bashir and many more. Their works highlight the voices and aspirations of a suppressed nation whose lives have been cast into silence. The focus of this paper is on Rahul Pandita's memoir, *Our Moon Has Blood Clots*.

Keywords: Kashmir, Kashmiri Pandits, Conflict, Exodus, *Our Moon Has Blood Clots*.

But I have made in my mission to talk about the 'other story' of Kashmir. ... I have reduced my life to names and numbers. I have memorized the name of every Pandit killed during those dark days, and the circumstances in which he or she was killed. I have memorized the number of people killed in each district. I have memorized how many of us were registered as refugees in Jammu and elsewhere.

Pandita 220

Rahul Pandita (b.1976) is a Kashmiri born writer and journalist who is based in Delhi. He is a 2015 Yale World Fellow. He is the author of bestselling *Hello, Bastar: The Untold Story of India's Maoist Movement* and the co-author of critically acclaimed *The Absent State*. Pandita has also received the International Red Cross Award for conflict reporting. His book, *Our Moon Has Blood Clots* (2013) is at first a memoir, that covers the ethnic cleansing of Kashmiri Pandits from the Valley during the 1990s. The eruption of armed struggle in 90s was the struggle and demand for freedom and self-determination. The conflict is due to the non-resolution of the Kashmir

issue which by now has spanned about seventy years. The insurgency and the counter-insurgency of the early 90s in Kashmir is undoubtedly unrelenting and has led a heavy toll on almost the entire population of the Valley. The proportion of the suffering that the conflict has brought on its people is beyond imagination. This paper attempts to analyse Rahul Pandita's memoir titled, *Our Moon Has Blood Clots* and look at the homelessness of Kashmiri Pandits from the valley.

Rahul Pandita at that time was a 14 year old boy witnessing Kashmir becoming increasingly agitated with the cries of *Azaadi* (freedom) from India. *Our Moon Has Blood Clots* is written in a memoir format that throws a bright light on one of the most tragic conflicts in the modern world. The book is set in the Kashmir of 1990s when the region was resisting and struggling with an armed uprising against the Indian state. Pandita writes about the times as:

But this word, Azadi, it frightens me. Images of those days return to haunt me. People out on the roads. People peering out of their windows. People on the rooftops of buses. In shikaras. And in mosques (9).

Agha Shahid Ali, a renowned Kashmiri American poet, mirrors the catastrophic times and events of the 90s in one of his poems:

...Empty? Because so many fled, ran away,
and became refugees there, in the plains,
where they must now will a final dewfall
to turn the mountains to glass. They'll see
us through them-see us frantically bury
houses to save them from fire that, like a wall,
caves in. The soldiers light it, hone the flames,
burn our world to sudden papier-mache... (*A Country without a Post Office*, 26)

Our Moon Has Blood Clots is divided into five parts that chronicles a poignant tale of both the period and its events. The book was shortlisted for The Crossword Book Award, 2013. "The book cannot be ignored. It is powerful, painful – and revealing" writes *Hindustan Times* (Jacket). In his interview, Rahul Pandita talks about his book as:

My book is called *Our Moon Has Blood Clots*. And it's a memoir on growing up in Kashmir as a religious minority, essentially, Kashmiri Hindus, also known as Kashmiri Pandits—a small, miniscule community that lived in Kashmir for hundreds of years and were forced into permanent exile as refugees in their own country in 1989-90, when an Islamist movement broke out in Kashmir Valley. (*Forbes India*)

The book opens up by giving a brief picture of the death of an old man in a refugee camp in Jammu with a packet of chilled milk holding tight to his right cheek. It was his way to beat the scorching heat of the plains. With this the writer gives a brief history of Pandit community, their culture and related myths. Pandita refers to a few instances from history when the Kashmiri

Pandits either migrated in order to save their lives or were forcibly evicted from the Valley. While reading these initial pages of the book it appears that Rahul Pandita is full of praise for the Hindu rulers of Kashmir like Lalitaditya and Avantivarman but according to him the Kashmir history seems to enter an uneasy state with the arrival of Islam in the valley. In this regard, Gowhar Fazili, beautifully writes in his review of *Our Moon has Blood Clots*:

[T]he other hand the book presents Pandits as politically benign throughout history, while the period post the arrival of Muslims on the scene is spoken of as ‘Islamisation’, implicitly as though Islam were something essentially vile. ... The ascendance of Islam in Kashmir is at least as much to do with its civilisational appeal, its novelty as a spiritual experience, its relative egalitarianism and the realignment of hierarchies that result with any major socio-political change; as to the superior military and administrative prowess of the kings and queens who took over from Pandit or Buddhist Kings. ... The book elaborates on the bigotry of Muslim regimes over many pages but shrinks the hundred plus years of appalling, communal atrocities by the Sikh and Hindu-Dogra regimes that preceded 1947 into a few token sentences. (Kafila blog).

The author then recounts memories of his early childhood days at home in Kashmir; his house and the books on its wooden shelves, nearby orchards, his school days, childhood friendships, his visits to cinema halls and temples, feasts and rituals on ceremonial occasions. Pandita mentions about the significant bond between the two communities who lived peacefully and affectionately prior to 1990s. He writes, “At our marriages, Muslim women celebrated with us by linking their arms and singing traditional songs to welcome the groom and his family and friends” (Pandita 39-40). Likewise on festivals both the communities would share the joy and celebrations. Pandita writes:

On Eid-ul-Zuha, we would go to our neighbours’ homes to wish them happiness. One of my father’s Muslim friends lived nearby and when father would be out on long official tours, he would stop by, knocking gently at our door, refusing to come inside, and asking if we needed anything. My sister sometimes taught his children, and on Eid-ul-Zuha I would slip out and visit his house to watch their family sacrifice sheep. A piece of lamb’s meat would later be sent to us ... Our neighbours wished us on Shivrarti, and we would offer them walnuts soaked in sweet milk and water. (34-35)

However, with the coming of 90s, a sudden changeover took place in the events. In this regard, Sumantra Bose writes in his *Contested Lands*:

The explosion came in January 1990, when massive demonstrations for *azaadi* (freedom) broke out in the city of Srinagar and other Valley towns, and panicked federal paramilitary police sent by New Delhi to contain the unrest opened fire, killing hundreds of protesters. ... in 1990 the conflict came home to roost with a vengeance as thousands of Kashmiri Muslim young men picked up the gun to fight Indian rule. (178-79)

The harmonious bond between the two communities was jolted and underwent strains. Pandits suddenly got overcome with fear and Muslims too started to suspect them. This fear and insecurity of Pandits escalated and forced them to leave their homes for safety and survival. In his another interview, Pandita speaks of this divide as:

I think the essential thing I want to portray is that in 1989-90 there was a deep divide between two communities in Kashmir – the Muslims and the Pandits. And the Kashmiri Pandits became victims of the brutal ethnic cleansing which was perpetrated by the majority community backed by Islamist militants, not the other way around. That is one distinction that has to be made very clear. (Wall Street Journal)

Rahul Pandita takes the readers through those alarming times when there were bomb blasts, killings and oppression on both the communities. The writer mentions about a Pandit woman who was killed in a blast in early 1989 and later in the same year a political activist named Tika Lal Taploo was shot in his home. Satish Tickoo, Ashok Kumar Qazi, and Naveen Sapru were killed next year. His cousin, Ravi to whom Pandita has dedicated this book also gets killed. It is his killing that has left an indelible scar on him. A Hindu shrine was gutted. Cinema halls were attacked and burned down. Pro-freedom slogans become audible like:

Hum kya chaahte: Azadiiii!

Eiy zalimon, eiy kafiron, Kashmir humara chhod do.

What do we want – Freedom!

O tyrants, O infidels, leave our Kashmir. (Pandita 76)

While narrating the wild chaotic situation of that era, Pandita writes:

With every drop of bile coming from Benazir Bhutto's mouth, the mammoth crowd's cheers grow nosier until they turn into a stormy sea...

'Har eik gaanv se eik hi awaaz buland hogi: Azadi! Har eik masjid se eik hi awaaz buland hogi Azadi! Har eik school se baccha-baccha kahega: Azadi, Azadi, Azadi!'
(From every village will rise a cry: Azadi! From every mosque will rise a cry: Azadi!
From every school, every child will let out the cry: Azadi, Azadi, Azadi!) (71)

The entire Valley was burning and struggling to free Kashmir from the Indian siege. "It was an earthquake. It toppled everything in Kashmir in the next few weeks. Within a few days the whole scenario changed" writes Pandita (66). The period of 1989-90 is the time when the truths and opinions differ. Pandita acknowledges this fact that both the communities have their own version for the period and the changing of events. While for Kashmiri Muslims it was the beginning of a freedom movement, for Pandits, it was the beginning of exile. He writes:

They had to live through this every day. But we did not share sadness beyond this. Because then the topic always veered towards the events of 1989-90, and that was the point at which our truths became different. For them, the events of 1990 were a rebellion against the Indian state. For me, these same events had led to exile and permanent homelessness. (Pandita 45)

By late 1989, the whole valley was in the grip of war against the hegemonic power. The power of narration is the best part of this book. Pandita mentions about the governance of the then governor – Jagmohan and believes that Jagmohan was helpless and whatever he did was to control the situation. “Jagmohan was not in a position to help them at all. The administration, he knew, had collapsed completely” writes Pandita (79). Meanwhile, Pandita’s family leaves behind their home, relatives, belongings and everything and move to Jammu. The author’s father, says to him, “We cannot live here anymore” (Pandita 92). “It was quite sunny the day Father finally decide that we should move to Jammu” writes Pandita (96). Pandita narrates how difficult it is to leave behind one’s home and loved ones. He writes, “In constructing the house, my father had exhausted his entire Provident Fund; whatever little jewellery my mother possessed was also sold to help finance the construction”(Pandita 21). Even after having a flat in Delhi, the author’s family is not satisfied and still wants to go back to their own house at Kashmir. The author writes:

That is the habit my father’s generation has: calling Srinagar ‘Shahar’ – the city that is home. And when I gently remind father of his mistake, he smiles an embarrassed smile. ... I can only imagine what images the mere mention of Shahar evokes in him. Shahar was our home. Shahar was our *shahrag* – our jugular. Shahar was us. (Pandita 33-34)

Likewise, more and more Pandits start fleeing from their ancestral land in order to save their lives. “In truck after truck, there were Pandit families escaping to Jammu” (Pandita 98). After leaving Kashmir, the author narrates how his mother can’t stop telling people, “Our home in Kashmir had twenty-two rooms” (Pandita 10). A trauma of being homeless in a new environment made her to take pride of the past all through her life. Subhash Kak, a Kashmiri poet has touched the same feelings in his poem, “Snow in Srinagar” as:

Who knew then that decades later a terror will come to
Srinagar
and I will be unable to see my home where I was born
where we had played cowries on many new snows.

Rahul Pandita, then recounts the adversities met by his family and other Pandits in the refugee camps after leaving Kashmir. About these refugee camps, a prominent Kashmiri Sociologist and researcher, Bashir Dabla, maintains “one room that is used as the living-room-cum-bedroom-study-cum-store for an average family of five members” (78). Rahul Pandita in a passage

narrates how difficult it was for Pandits in Jammu to gather the basic commodities of life like rice. He writes:

Around this time, all the refugees who had fled from Kashmir had been asked to register their names, and each family was provided with a ration card. It was like a document of citizenship, identifying one as a 'migrant' and enabling government employees to collect salaries, or a cash relief of five hundred rupees in the case of the non-salaried families. ... It was just not possible to support a family on the meager stipend of five hundred rupees doled out by the government, and the small monthly ration of rice and sugar. Every ration card had to include a photograph of the male head of the family, along with his wife, so in some cases, husbands and wives made separate ration cards to ensure that more money came in. (Pandita 122-123)

Further, in Jammu there was a no welcome for them. People there insulted and made fun of their conditions. Pandita writes:

Initially like us, the Jammuites thought our exodus was temporary. Though they benefitted economically because of us, they developed an antipathy towards us. ... The most popular among them was:

Haath mein Kangri munh mein chholey

Kahan se aayey Kashiri loley

Kangri in hands, chickpeas in their mouth

From where did these Kashmiri flaccid penises come? ...

This was the mainstream India for us. Our own Hindu brothers and sisters who took out a aprocession every Basant Panchami to safeguard Hindu rights were turning into our oppressors as well. (123)

In yet another passage he writes about the crimes that were rampant in Jammu and how difficult it was for the Pandits to escape them or face them. He writes:

The Jammu of early ninties was in the grip of criminal elements. Each area had its don, and some of them had links with arms and drug smugglers. Every day, the newspapers would report a stabbing or a shootout. Some untruly elements thought that since the Pandit community was in distress, their girls would be freely available for exploitation. (Pandita 125)

Pandita writes that while living away from Kashmir, his heart was never apart from it. He mentions that how Pandits living in Jammu would eagerly wait for the news on Kashmir Doordarshan channel to telecast and learn about the happenings in Kashmir. He writes:

During those nerve-wrecking days, the only thing we looked forward to was the evening news bulletin on the Kashmir Doordarshan channel. Bereft of its experienced news

anchors, Doordarshan had hired a bunch of inexperienced presenters to read the news. (Pandita 95)

The last part of the memoir relates the contemporary situation like the state government's claims of taking the responsibility of selected Pandit-owned lands "for public purposes" (Pandita 133) and the experiences of those who choose to return to the Valley under the PM's resettlement plan of 2008. Pandita criticizes these attempts and calls them "a deliberate plan to thwart their chances of return by "finishing [off] their immovable property"" (Pandita 133). On the other hand, Rahul Pandita writes about their exodus as:

We have been in exile for more than two decades. Kashmir is a memory, an overdose of nostalgia. But beyond this, there is nothing. Kashmir means a calendar hanging in our parents bedroom, or a mutton dish cooked in the traditional way on Shivratri, or a cousin's marriage that elders insist must be solemnized in Jammu. (209)

Many a time, while reading the book, it seems that the writer has lost his hope to return to his homeland. Like Pandita writes, "And I don't think we realized then that we would never have a home again" (4). Again it is quite evident in a passage like:

Over the last few years, I have often thought about exile, and about the displaced Pandit families, especially those living in big cities like Delhi. I began to worry that the story of our community would be lost in the next few decades. It was only because of the previous generation that our customs and traditions were being kept alive. It is people from my father's generation who know how to consult an almanac and keep track of festivals and the death anniversaries of ancestors... We are losing our tradition, our links to the place where we came from. (Pandita 210-211)

Pandita speaks thus, "It has been almost thirty years since that trip, but I still hold my bag when I visit Delhi. Though it does not matter where I live now. Delhi or the Deccan, it is all the same to me. No land is my land. ... Sixty years later, I am a refugee in my own country" (Pandita 155). Despite of it, Pandita ends the book with a positive hope of returning back. He writes "I will come again. I promise there will come a time when I will return permanently" (Pandita 253).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it can be said that *Our Moon has Blood Clots* is a powerful story of Kashmiri Pandits. The narration is vivid, and brings forth the devastation experienced by a nation because of turmoil. However, there were many real life episodes of the same period, place and history which are missing in the book. For instance, there is no place for the Gaw Kadal massacre, Kunan Poshpur episode, mushrooming of bunkers, curfews that stretched for months, missings, thousands of half widows, search operations and much more. The fact remains that both Kashmiri Muslims and Pandits have proved to be the victims of the same turmoil. Despite these limitations the tale of the conflict which this book presents is moving and haunting.

Rahul Pandita has shared his memories of troubled past and the pain of Kashmiri Pandits, out of which the most heartbreaking fact is how personal well-built relations between the Kashmiri Muslims and Pandits known as Kashmiriyat gets shattered to bits and pieces.

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